



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR
P.O. Box 160
Pohnpei, FM 96941



Micronesian Counselor

April 15, 2002

Issue 42



A Leap into the Unknown



"A Short History of Education"



Schools go back a long way in Island history. First missionaries, and then foreign, and finally Micronesian Societies themselves used schools to pass on what they valued. Today schools continue to shape the minds and hearts of the young.

Visit our website at: www.micsem.org for a historical photo essay on education in Micronesia, the second mini-album in our series.

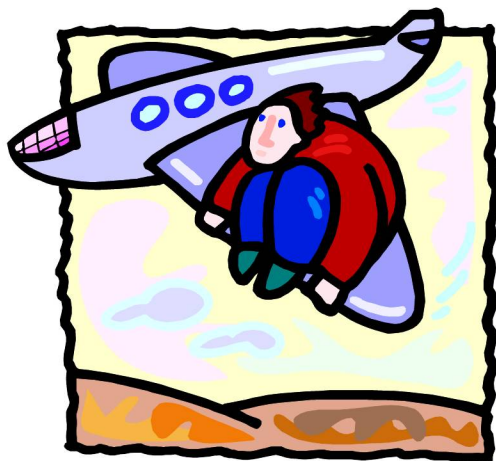
By Augustine Kohler
and
Eugenia Samuel

The Trials of Travel

On the day that he left, the airport was packed with well wishers. You could easily have picked him out from among the crowd because he was dressed in his Sunday best and was adorned with layers of colorful flowers. Having just graduated from high school, he was on his way to college on the US mainland. Bidding his family farewell, he exited the terminal and boarded the plane. He sat down apprehensively, because he had never been on a plane before, but was careful not to reveal it. The flight proved uneventful, and things seemed to be going well, he thought to himself—just like in the movies.

Upon arriving at the Portland International Airport, however, he realized that there was no one there to meet him. He had neglected to make arrangements with the college he was enrolling in to be picked up at the airport. Not knowing where to go or whom to call, he approached one of the taxis parked outside and asked for

directions. Smiling warmly, the cab driver told him that he would be more than happy to give him a ride to the school. He accepted and released a sigh. The ride from the airport to his destination took an hour and a half, a good 60 miles. When the time came for him to pay his fare, the driver was kind enough to settle for only \$200. Even so, he had spent almost all the cash he had brought just getting out of the airport. It wasn't until weeks later that he learned that for less than \$5



Conclusion

If you are a student, make sure you have your school transcripts, acceptance letter, financial aid package, US social security card and health certificate well taken care of before leaving. Have on you the necessary phone contacts, including at least a number for one of the Embassies in the US. Acquaint yourself with where your going and make sure you know exactly how far your destination is from the airport.

If you are seeking employment abroad, have all the necessary documents ready and check to see that proper arrangements have been made before the trip. Seek legal counsel to help review your contract, if you have signed on with a placement agency. Bear in mind that US laws are strictly enforced, and failure to abide by them, will surely get you into trouble. You will certainly be held accountable for all of your actions.

Above all, be prepared for the unexpected. Have extra cash (travelers checks) on hand to help you through the first few months. Do not expect financial assistance from your governments back home. You are on your own, so don't jump on the plane and let things work themselves out when you get to the US. Do some serious thinking and planning. If you're not prepared—with the necessary papers and the proper attitudes and the fall-backs you need—don't go.

*Augustine Kohler and Eugenia Samuel
are staff members of Micronesian Seminar*



because they left their jobs prior to the completion of their contracts. A supposed practice by some agencies is the continuous transfer of recruits to different job sites every three months or 90 days. This effectively prevents the recruits from becoming eligible for certain benefits to which they would be entitled, such as medical and dental insurance or paid vacation time. If these reports prove to be true, then the rights of Micronesian citizens working abroad are certainly being violated. Since any assistance we can expect from our governments will be limited, the individual should be ready to assume the burden of clearly understanding the terms of his or her contract before accepting employment. The final decision to accept or reject an employment offer belongs to the individual. But that choice also entails certain responsibilities and obligations on the part of the individual. The person going overseas should understand full the terms of the contract he or she is signing.

To assure suitable working conditions, recruits are urged to carefully review their contracts before signing on. What kinds of benefits are you eligible for or entitled to? Are you, for instance, guaranteed 40 hours of work a week? If required to work overtime, are you eligible for overtime pay? Who pays for housing or transportation? Will this be provided by the company or will these expenses be deducted from your salary? If so, how much will be deducted a pay period? How about insurance? Will you need to provide your own or will it be offered by the company?

Keep an eye out for these provisions. Don't be so dazzled by the salary that you fail to notice other provisions. How long, for example, will you be working for this particular company? Is it part-time, full-time or seasonal work? What happens if you quit before the time is up? Can you be sued for breach of contract? If you don't understand the legal language of the contract, seek assistance. It will be in your best interest to check out the terms of your contract beforehand with someone who can explain to you in simple language what you're signing.



he could have caught the Greyhound bus to Salem, and for an additional \$3 he might have taken a taxi to his final destination, Western Oregon State College in Monmouth.

Then there is the story of the man who got stranded at the Honolulu airport because he had difficulty completing the required Immigration and Customs forms. He had hopped on the plane with his wife and family to find employment in the US. The man had heard from family and friends who had traveled abroad that the US offered many employment opportunities, including jobs for persons without a great deal of education. These jobs, he was told, pay at least the U.S. minimum wage, which is nearly four times as much as he could earn on his island for similar work. This was all he needed to know. Believing that his smattering of English was sufficient to get him through, he boarded the plane bound for the land of opportunity. But when he got to Honolulu, he soon discovered that with his limited English he was unable to complete the required entry forms. Furthermore, he had no US address and so was detained by Immigration officials for more than three hours until someone from the FSM Consulate came to help him out.

Then there was the boy who had grown up on an island where there are no cars or electricity. When he found out about the jobs available to Micronesians in Florida, he decided to sign up along with some of his friends. The boy was hired and took off soon afterwards with his friends for the US. By the time they arrived in Honolulu, they found that they had missed their connecting flight. His friends were all picked up by relatives, but he found himself stranded in the airport. A cousin who was supposed to pick him up never showed up, and he didn't even know how to make a phone call. After trying 330 or 320 and the next four digits, he gave up. He tried to dial 0, since he remembered "0" is for the operator, but he couldn't understand the operator when she answered. So he gave up. He spent the rest of the night at the airport until his



friends came back the next day.

It only got worse when they finally arrived in Florida. He became the butt of his friends' jokes about the mistakes he made. Since he had never used flush toilets before, he always left his mess behind for his friends to take care of. When he used the shower, he burned himself with the hot water because he never figured out how to adjust the nozzle. Once, when he was invited by his supervisor to go and eat at a restaurant, he had to take his plate from the table and put it on his lap to shield it from others in the restaurant. Since he had never used a fork before, he picked his food up with his fingers as he used to back home.

Countless stories like these, about the adventures or misadventures of Micronesians traveling overseas for the first time, have made their rounds in the islands. Ask any islander who has been abroad and he'll certainly have a tale or two to tell. While most of these stories are humorous and may make good conversation pieces, they point to a problem that needs to be addressed: the total lack of preparation of some people for the great leap they are making when they move abroad.

The Dream of a Better Life

There is no denying that migrating to the US is a dream harbored by many Micronesians today. And as they Migrate overseas, whether intending to resettle or as temporary residents, they will either easily adjust into their new environments or they will find the adjustment period a difficult and painful experience. Among these are those few who either end up in jail or prison, or



her situation. Although her family wanted her home immediately, they couldn't afford to pay for her plane fare. Once again, they sought assistance from their government, but were told again that there was nothing the government could do.

The recent tragic death of three young FSM citizens in Milwaukee is further testimony to the limited assistance we can expect from our island governments. The three Pohnpeians were part of a recent wave of islanders who have been recruited to work abroad. They died in the early morning of February 13, victims of a fire that was apparently caused by an unattended burning cigarette. When the question of repatriating the bodies arose, the recruiting agency that had placed them there refused to pay for transportation expenses, claiming no obligation on their part since the three were on probationary status. The FSM National Government was no help either since they have a policy against paying for repatriations. Pohnpei State has not yet even formulated a policy to deal with such emergencies. The fact is that neither the state nor the national government has any means of monitoring citizens who have been recruited to work overseas. Fortunately for the families of the deceased, the US Red Cross stepped in and helped cover the transportation expenses.

As sad as these stories may seem, they should serve as a reminder of the limits of our government's assistance to its citizens living and working abroad.

Contracts

Allegations of abuse by placement agencies are starting to circulate in the islands. There are reports of Micronesian recruits having their passports withheld by their employment agencies





commit felonies, the immediate consequence is deportation. Once deported, it is highly unlikely that you will ever be allowed to reenter the US and its territories again. Additionally, you will be restricted from passing through Guam to get to another one of the islands in Micronesia.

Realistic Expectations

Keept handy the address and phone number of your government's embassy or consulate just in case you need it, but keep your expectations modest. Don't expect your government to provide for you if you run into trouble. There's a limit to what your island government can do.

A young girl who had been recruited by a placement agency in the US to work for nursing homes found this out the hard way. She had been a promising student and was just about to be admitted to College of Micronesia-FSM when she applied for work in a nursing home in New York. The first few months were great; her family was very happy because she regularly sent money back home. Then, all of a sudden, the money stopped coming in. The family panicked but did not know what to do or even whom to call in the US. When they approached the state government for assistance, the government couldn't help them because they had no idea of her whereabouts in the US. Nor did they have any connections to this particular recruiting agency.

Apparently, the girl had left her job because she was unhappy with working conditions, but since she did not have enough money to pay for her flight home, she found herself stuck in New York. Fortunately, she was taken in by an American friend who helped her out for a couple of weeks until she was able to locate relatives in a nearby city. It was only then that she was able to call home and inform her family of



worse yet, are deported. As the above stories indicate, we are at times unprepared for such journeys.

How then can we best assist other Micronesians thinking of leaving for the US from avoiding such pitfalls? Certainly we could provide them with an idea of what to expect and what is expected of them once they are there. It's not enough that we trust solely on the experiences of our family and friends to help guide us through. Each trip is, in a sense, unique and brings circumstances and challenges of its own. Above all, preparations are the key to a smoother transition. Not unlike voyagers in seagoing canoes who must painstakingly ensure that all the necessary provisions are provided for before venturing out to sea, those traveling abroad are well advised to ascertain that the necessary arrangements and precautions are taken before embarking on their trips. Fortune may indeed favor the brave, but it certainly frowns upon those who are ill prepared for such journeys.

Micronesians began settling in the United States and its territories even before the signing of the Compact of Free Association between the US and the Freely Associated States—Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau—but the outflow was sporadic and the numbers small. Palau, the first of the island groups to send out people in any significant numbers, had an emigration stream to Guam of perhaps 40 or 50 persons a year as early as 1950. Twenty years later, over 200 persons a year were leaving Palau to take up permanent residence in other places.

In the FSM and the Marshalls emigration began much later. The first significant emigration from these tiny islands began in the years following the implementation of the Compact, for the Compact permitted, among other things, free entry for Micronesians into the US and its possessions. Hundreds of FSM citizens left for Guam and Saipan, while the Marshallese streamed into Hawaii and the US mainland.



About 2,000 people a year have been emigrating from the islands to live abroad. At present an estimated 30,000 Micronesians, or one out of every seven, is now living overseas, most of them in pursuit of the jobs that they cannot find in their own islands.

What You Need Before You Leave

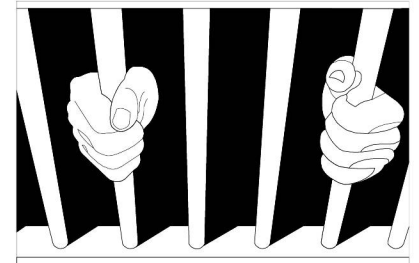
A few basic steps, if followed, may well help for a smooth transition. Before leaving, for instance, familiarize yourself with where you are going. Obtain a map before getting on the plane to find out exactly how far from the airport your house is. You can avoid spending \$300 or \$400 cab rides to your destination, as others have done because they had no idea of the distances in the US.

Double-check before departure that your portfolio is complete. Among other things, you should have a valid passport, a social security card, police clearance, and a health certificate. You should also have on you the contact numbers and addresses of people who can help you out once you get there. These should include friends and family, and also the phone number of your nearest consular office or embassy. If you fail to do so, you'll be sitting around idly, when you ought to be earning money to support yourself. We have for instance, the story of a recent migrant who, shortly after joining the "Voluntary Early Retirement" program, sold his home and took his wife and five children with him to the US mainland. After arriving in the US, he started searching for schools in which to enroll his children. Unfortunately, in his haste to leave the islands, he failed to ensure that all the necessary school transcripts and birth certificates were available. So he had to write back home and ask for his relative's help in obtaining the transcripts and birth certificates, without which they couldn't apply for US social security cards. It took about a month just to get a response back from the islands. In the meantime, while awaiting the papers to be processed, he had spent



example of the husband who came home in a drunken stupor and beat up his wife because dinner wasn't ready. In both cases the men ended up in jail. Unbeknownst to them, they had broken the law and as a consequence were incarcerated.

Remember that things are different in the US, especially when it comes to law enforcement. We should always bear in mind that in all matters, the Micronesian custom and traditional methods of forgiveness are not accepted and not recognized by law enforcement authorities in the US. You may know the police chief in your own island and so feel safe, but things will be different in the US. It is important that we be mindful of the fact that As we enter the US or it's possessions, we do so as "guest" and are therefore obliged to follow their laws and a host of other invisible "rules" that guide cultural behavior. The advice given by the FSM Consulate Office in Washington that "FSM citizens must keep in mind that FSM laws, customs, attitudes, and way of life do not apply in the US and its territories and possessions," should be heeded. We would do well to remember that the privileges and benefits accorded us by our host country, when abused, can be limited or taken away.



Deportations are now becoming common occurrences among Micronesians abroad. Micronesians caught in such situations are at a loss for what to do or what their rights might be. In most cases, alcohol seems to be the common denominator. The consequences of alcohol use or abuse are numerous. Accidents happen and fights are wont to erupt among Micronesians when intoxicated. All of these entail a criminal record, which can and will profoundly effect employment, school, and family. For those unfortunate few who



much for most Micronesians to bear.

In most cases, the islanders end up pleading for the government's assistance in financing the repatriation of the body back to the islands. For those lucky few who either have influential families or the right connections in the government, this may not present a problem. But for the rest, it is a financial burden they simply cannot afford.

The Risks in Breaking the Law

Heavy drinking and public drunkenness is much more frowned upon in the US than it is on the islands. Drinking and driving, for example, is against the law in the US, its territories and possessions. Driving under the influence of alcohol carries with it a severe penalty. And offenses committed while drunk such as fighting, destruction of property, malicious wounding and sexual misconduct are not forgiven.

Domestic violence is another matter in which Micronesians are prone to run afoul of while living in the US. Although regarded as a family affair in most island communities, the beating up of a wife is against the law in the US. Even if the defendant forgives the offender, some states will nevertheless proceed in prosecuting the offender. Disciplining a child (including your own) by whacking him or her with a belt may be a practice condoned in Micronesia, but it can get you into a lot of trouble in the US. If you are suspected of child abuse or neglect, the state can and will remove children from your custody. People convicted of abusing children, including parents will be thrown in jail. There is, for example, the father who disciplined his twelve-year-old daughter with a belt. When the child went to school the next day, she was immediately taken into custody by social workers. Apparently the spanking had left some belt marks on the little girl. The teacher who saw it, fearing child abuse, called social services. Or there is the

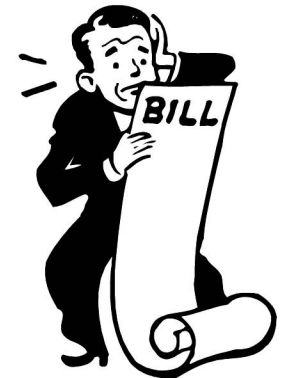


nearly half his early retirement fund on food, clothing, housing, and a used car he had bought.

The importance of having some cash to fall back on, especially for the first few months, cannot be stressed enough. You are not guaranteed a job upon arrival, and it may be weeks or even months before you are gainfully employed. The sun, not unlike on the islands, doesn't always shine so it's best to always be prepared for that rainy day. By law, FSM citizens are required to file an Employment Authorization Document (EAD). You will need a valid EAD card prior to employment and so it is recommended for those who are intending to live and work in the US, to apply for the EAD as soon as possible after arrival.

Eye-Popping Salaries and Hidden Costs

One migrant to the US left his job as an elementary teacher because his salary of \$350 monthly was not enough to build himself a new house. When he checked in with his boss at his arrival in the US, he learned that he would have to rent an apartment of his own. He had expected that the company would provide free housing for its employees. He and a friend of his were assigned to janitorial duties and outdoors maintenance work, even though the weather had turned cold and neither of the Micronesians had winter clothing. The boss advanced them some money to cover these needs, but the man still had to pay for utilities, health insurance, and payments on the loan from their boss, to say nothing of food and other expenses. Before he knew it, his salary of \$1000 a month looked very meager. Even if it was three times what his salary back home was, he found that he was saving





more in the islands than he was in the US.

Certainly the allure of higher wages is incentive enough for most Micronesians to just get up and leave for the US. But as attractive as US salaries may seem, at least by Micronesian standards, they can be deceptive. True, wages are higher, but the salary has to go a long way in covering lots of unanticipated expenses. Food for instance, is cheap compared to store-bought food on the islands. But at the same time, of course, one cannot just walk about picking anything of trees or dig in the fields or fish in the streams. All food that is needed will have to be purchased.

Health insurance is another necessary expense. Even the most basic of services will cost you. Expect to pay up to \$50 or more for a doctors visit in the US, instead of the \$3 you are normally charged at local hospitals. And prescriptions have to be paid outright. Unlike our relatively cheap and accessible hospitals, US hospitals or clinics may demand proof of coverage before treatment. Although by law US hospitals and clinics are required to provide treatment, without proper medical and dental insurance, you will only be given the minimum or basic services. Furthermore, you will still be billed for services rendered, and failing to fulfill these financial obligations will effect your credit. If you're planning to move to the US, be sure to budget for health insurance, which can cost \$200 a month or more.

Owning a vehicle also entails certain expenses and responsibilities. Besides yearly registration and maintenance fees, you will need to purchase auto insurance. Although cost may vary, depending on your age and driving record for instance, expect to pay up to \$400 every three months for auto coverage. In most states, it is illegal to operate a motor vehicle without proof of insurance. Additionally, you become solely responsible for the safety of your passengers and for understanding and following traffic laws and regulations.



While in Guam, I ran into a young man who is now serving 25 years for involuntary manslaughter. On his way home one day, from drinking with friends, he had stopped and offered a young lady and her daughter a ride. Unfortunately, he got into a wreck and the little girl was fatally injured. What he thought was a good samaritan act, that of offering a ride to a mother and her daughter, turned into an hellish experience and his eventual incarceration. Unlike in Micronesia, you are not forgiven because you happen to be "drunk" at the time. You are held accountable for all of your actions.

Housing is another expense that needs to be taken into account. Even if one plans to rent, there is still a substantial amount of money involved. Aside from the normal monthly payments, you are expected to come up with both the first and last month's rent plus a cleaning deposit before moving into the apartment or house. If, for example, the monthly rent is \$450, expect to pay about \$1,200 in deposits. Prospective tenants should also be aware of existing US laws governing sanitation and housing that might limit the number of people living in a place. Extended family living arrangements and practices found on the islands do not apply in the US. You cannot, for instance, have more than three people in a single bed-room apartment or more than six in a two bed-room complex. For those intending to settle permanently, it is recommended that they purchase a home. In the long run, this will be a wise investment. This, however, may require a mortgage and a loan.

Be prepared for the unexpected. When a citizen dies in the US, for example, your embassy and consulate offices can assist in preparing the necessary paperwork for the repatriation of the deceased, but will not be financially responsible for funeral or transportation expenses. The immediate family is responsible for all costs associated with the preparation and shipment of the remains back to the islands. The astronomical cost, estimated at between \$6,000 and \$7,000, is just too