

HĒMI WHAANGA INTERVIEWS ECI NABALARUA

Eci Nabalarua arrived from Fiji early in 2001 to take up a position at the University of Waikato. She quickly made such a positive impression on staff and students that Hemi Whaanga, Assistant Production Editor, decided to interview her to see whether he could discover the secret of her success. His conclusion: She genuinely likes people and really believes in what she's doing.

Background: Eci Kikau Nabalarua is an indigenous Fijian who is currently a senior lecturer and Head of Department of Development Studies at the University of Waikato in Aotearoa, New Zealand

When did you begin your new job as senior lecturer in Development Studies?

March 2001

How well did you know Aotearoa/ New Zealand before you applied for the job?

Only what I read from books and gleaned from the media.

What attracted you to this particular job?

The fact that they were looking for someone who had had experience in the area of indigenous development.

Would you tell us a little about your origins, your own culture and your previous teaching and learning experiences?

I am an indigenous Fijian. My three brothers and I are the offspring of a traditionally arranged marriage. The genealogical tree of both my parents incorporates men and women of important bearing and leadership stature in the community: while they have been of the chiefly class, their strengths lay in the values of service and of serving which has always been the basis of our own upbringing at home.

I did much of my schooling at Levuka Public School and at a very young age I was sent off to board with the European headmaster and his wife during the school week and then taken back to the provincial compound to spend the weekend with my parents. You can imagine what it was like to spend this time away from my parents especially when I was only six. But I was told by my father that it was important that I learned to read and speak English properly. That was it!! Since then, I've been around. I did my first degree (BA) at USP in Suva, my MA at the University of Reading in the UK and my PhD at ANU, in Canberra, Australia.

I know that you are married and have children. Could you tell me how your husband and children are settling in to life here?

My family is settling in well. We're slowly acclimatising to NZ and the two girls have adapted well too to the schools over here.

I understand that you were made Head of Department shortly after you arrived. It must be very difficult to cope with administrative responsibilities of this kind in a new institution whose procedures you are unfamiliar with at the same time as coping with a new teaching job. How is it going?

Well the demands of the job are not totally new to me. Although I've been in this particular job for less than a year, I've actually been involved in university teaching for just over twenty years so I have some experience of senior university management work and of the administrative duties that come with it. Many of the procedures are generic in nature and it does not take long to come to terms with any local differences. In terms of teaching, the undergraduate and postgraduate development studies courses available here at Waikato are similar in nature to those I have taught before. In short, so far, so good.

All of the students seem to agree that your lectures are exciting and thought-provoking. Where did you learn your teaching skills?

My own philosophy in life is based on a couple of core values. Firstly, I believe in value added education. I like to start from where the students are at and move them forward from there, treating each student as an individual. Secondly, I am a people person who values interpersonal and communication skills: both of these are reflected in my methods of teaching and styles of delivery. My years of experience in university teaching have given me the opportunity to try out new forms and new techniques in the search for ways of enhancing the skills and knowledge bases of the students as well as ways of building positive attitudes towards learning and intellectual development.

Could you tell us a little about your research (past and present)?

I have previously worked in the area of rural women in development: socio-economic audits of communities and traditional sayings of Fijian culture have been fundamental to this work. I am currently interested in gender, governance and economic empowerment, traditional leadership and social change, HRM and productivity in the workplace, sustainable community development, migrant communities in NZ and leadership and strategic management.

Working in the School of Māori and Pacific Development means that you are surrounded every day by Māori language and culture. Although you yourself are a member of an indigenous society, this must sometimes be challenging as well as exciting and interesting. Are there any specific challenges relating to coming to terms with working in a Māori context that you would like to share with us?

The greatest challenge for me is being able to find appropriate ways of serving in a Maori context. While I may not speak the reo, there are common threads that bind us in terms of our united stand on what it means to be *tangata whenua* and our perception of our role in bringing about the fulfilment of the dreams and aspirations of *tangata whenua*. Out of this common vision arises a sense of solidarity. If there is a piece of advice that has kept me going and which I'd like to share it is this: Know

yourself and be proud of who you are. Never try to be what you're not and don't assume things that can never be. Only take what is rightfully yours and never give what was never yours in the first place. Always be humble because humility is an act of courage not cowardice and reflects great strength, never weakness. Be thankful for each new day that dawns on the horizon, and always be prepared to serve and to give from the heart.

What do you miss most about life in Fiji?

My family and working with the *tangata whenua* in my province, especially the rural women.

What has been your happiest or most rewarding experience in life?

My family and the many blessed opportunities that have come my way.

If you could have exactly what you wanted in life, what would it be?

To see world peace and a more human(e) approach to the protection of our environment.