

## Chief Mate Sitela braves the seas



Asena Sitela with crew members.

Sailing through rough seas, strong winds, navigating around reefs may sound somewhat a risky profession but all of these are all in a day's work for tough sea salt Asena Sitela.

Sitela, 35, is the Chief Mate of a Suva towage company since joining in September 2015. The company services Fiji's harbour's and major ports and responds to emergency and salvaging operations out at sea when required.

"I love what I do. The job means I get to travel a lot to places around Fiji but it also comes with its risks and responsibilities," she shared.

"Apart from some of our normal operations such as berthing and unberthing vessels at our ports, we respond to situations such as when ships go out to sea during rough weather and need help or when the engine breaks down or they run aground."

"You need to always be on alert, especially when we are at sea helping out during emergencies on other vessels."

"As a towage vessel we deal with ropes and you're pulling and there is tension and so many things to consider and be aware of."

Being Chief Mate means Sitela is second in command after the Master.

When quizzed about the riskiest trip she has embarked on, Sitela recounted a trip whereby the tugboat travelled to Ono-i-Lau in the Lau Group to rescue a fishing vessel.

"This is like the last island in the group and then you have Tonga so that meant we were just out there in the open sea where anything could have happened so that was definitely a highlight for me."

Sitela, who hails from Natewa Bay in Savusavu, is a proud single mother of two boys and said she always knew her

career would be connected to the sea.

After high school, she intended to pursue studies in marine biology however programme schedules meant she was unable to start the course immediately.

"I did not want to wait so at Fiji National University's (FNU), Fiji Maritime Academy (FMA) they recommended that I take up the deckhand apprentice programme. I enrolled and was the only female in my stream of Stage 1 students."

"During Stage 2, which is the sea time component, I immediately fell in love with this field. I completed the apprenticeship and worked on Bligh Water Shipping roll-on, roll-off vessels."

Sitela is now enrolled in the Diploma in Nautical Science course at FMA and holds a Class 5 Master license. She plans to attain her Class 4 Master license soon after completing the oral examination.

"I want to complete this so I can become a Master on our tugboats," she said confidently.

Sitela also acknowledged the support of her mother in caring for her children whilst she is on work travels and said she would not have succeeded in life without the backing of her family.

She is one of many Fijian seafarers who will join in the annual World Maritime Day celebrations this Friday in Suva.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has declared the 2019 theme to be "Empowering Women in the Maritime Community", which aims to raise awareness of the importance of gender equality and highlight the important contribution of women in the maritime sector.

FMA staff and current students will also be part of the celebrations tomorrow at Sukuna Park in Suva.



Asena Sitela.