



Jake Edilyong (left) with friends.

My Fono Experience

By Jake Edilyong

I was thrilled and excited but at the same time very humbled to be selected to go on this amazing trip across to New Zealand, to represent my peers and our very own College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at the University of Otago's (UO) Pacific Island Health Professional Student Association (PIHPSA) Camp.

When traveling to new shores and meeting new people, I have always felt it was important to go with an open mind and an empty cup; know who you are and what you represent, but be able to learn as much as you can at the same time.

It's just as important to maintain respect for the new people you meet, as well as for their culture as it unfolds before you, embracing the Pacific in you and within them. You never really know what to expect when you go to a new place and meet new people for the first time.

However, from being greeted at the airport to meeting the Pacific family at UO, it felt nothing short of meeting up with our own families. I felt at home straight away and the hospitality of the students and faculty made it seem like it was truly a family gathering.

My Colleague, Jeremy, and I arrived in Dunedin just a wee bit after lunch on a Friday (May 03) and went on to meet students and faculty.

The weather was indeed cooler than what we had expected but the warm welcome made up for it. Conversations about origins, life, Pacific communities, health and our careers were in the air. We had the luxury of being toured around the facilities and various learning spaces.

There were huge auditoriums, a two-level anatomy lab, a room with cadavers, a pots museum to name a few.

Seeing these, made me greatly appreciate all the hard work that our College (CMNHS) puts into equipping us with the knowledge and skills.

It also made me realise that some of the doctors we look up to within Fiji and the Pacific went through medical school with perhaps even less than we have today, so it serves as a reminder that you only get as good as you put in.

Following the tour, we met with more students as we hurried onto the waiting bus and off to our campsite. After a while on the road with more engaging conversations and making

acquaintances, we arrived at our destination just after dusk.

And to greet us, the tantalising aroma of scrumptious and delectable delicacies prepared with a zest of love and a hint of Pacific flavor, and we wasted little time to grace the occasion with our new found family.

After which, we settled into our rooms before convening at the main hall in five groups to participate in various ice breakers learning more about each other. Later, we concluded the evening with a devotion. Soon I was in bed on my first night in New Zealand, filled with exuberance.

As cool Westerlies scuffed the morning dew, leaves rustled in motion, Silvereye, Bellbird and Tui were among the native birds singing beautifully, aha! joie de vivre! The first ray of the morning sun slowly spread its arm over the horizon, signaling an entailing Saturday.

I jumped out of bed trying to absorb as much as I could from this wonderful Camp, walking out the door, I was perplexed. Greenery as far as eyes could see! Rolling hills, green pastures, horses in the field, mob of sheep and even a beautiful lake in a distance. It was truly breathtaking indeed!

Soon the other participants joined us for breakfast and the rest of the day was a series of group building activities and games which allowed us to learn more about one another while having fun. I met and interacted with people from all over the Pacific with different struggles, paths, goals, dreams and aspirations allowing me to appreciate this much bigger picture, one bigger than I initially had in mind.

"I wasn't just going to become a doctor for me or family or my people, I was becoming a doctor from the Pacific representing the Pacific."

I was contributing to this larger network of future health professionals from the Pacific for the Pacific. This was an eye opener for me as I felt worthier with added responsibility, I was a small part of this greater picture and it was a beautiful promise for the future.

That same afternoon we were lucky to have

some health professionals within their respective fields from the Pacific come to speak to us in our groups. They gave us advice and we were given a chance to ask some questions. They shared their journey from student days and to becoming health professionals.

This session helped me realise some of the struggles that we as future health professionals may face when transitioning to the workforce. I felt this was important, though my story may be different, being mentally prepared would allow me to manage challenging situations a whole lot better.

Listening to these Health Professionals allowed us, as students with the rich history and culture of the Pacific behind us, to grasp that our trials and triumphs are not for us alone, that many if not all of us have been through that same path at some point in time. It helps us understand that we are not alone and that many of our brothers and sisters out there recognise and understand our struggles.

We wrapped up the evening with a bonfire, huddled shoulder to shoulder under the cool night sky, as we sang songs, laughed, and told stories, only solidifying our bond as future health professionals and as brothers and sisters of the Pacific.

Our last day started off with an early morning dance practice! Yeah! A dance practice—a session in which I think I did particularly well in or maybe not? The Sunday devotion on the hill side with beautiful scenery could not bring me any closer to home.

My take-home message from that morning's teaching was "you carry the prayers, dreams and the face of your ancestors in your success, failure, and everything that you do. You are never alone in your journey."

This weekend filled with joy, excitement, bond and friends that we had just made was coming to an end. I do not know whether I was happier or sad deep within as it was time to say a Goodbye to our new friends.

I had a great time, which sounds a bit of understatement. Meeting new people, learning about each other's differences and similarities and most of all gaining so much professional development.

As we bade farewell, I looked up to the heaven and smiled. I was taking so much with me and I can only appreciate the work of PIHPSA in putting together this wonderful weekend. My sincere gratitude also goes to the University of Otago and Fiji National University's CMNHS for making my involvement in this activity possible

As I sit back in my dormitory and put this piece together, I feel like a different person. There is no limit to what networking can do for us. I strongly believe that allowing students to be part of such events where we engage with other aspiring health professionals has tremendous benefits.

The friends we make now, will soon be our work mates and in such a globalised society we live in, we are bound to stumble upon each other again as we move across the Pacific to provide better health for our people.

Imagine a future where you have doctors and other health professionals across the Pacific who originated from the Pacific, who have similar goals and a thirst and hunger to serve their people, connected as friends and colleagues in this remarkable Pacific Network.

Imagine the magnitude of such an endeavor—the movements that could take place, not as individual fragments but in synchrony and unity within our Pacific community. With these interactions at this level amongst students perhaps one day, we won't have to imagine it as we will become a part of it.

Vinaka!