



Jeremy Paris (right) with his new friends.

One People, Different Islands

by Jeremy Paris

A big Bula and Ciao Fiji National University family!
My name is Jeremy Paris and I am a final year Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) student at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS). This is my 'one people, different Islands' experience.

Being part of the FNU delegation to an international medical student's camp was a humbling privilege and an equally sublime opportunity to network with fellow Pacific Island colleagues.

The camp took place from May 3-5 and was organised by the University of Otago's (UO) Pacific Island Health Professionals' Students Association (PIHPSA). This was done under the guidance of the University's Pacific Islands Research & Student Support Unit (PIRSSU).

The camp venue was the cold and chilly city of Dunedin in New Zealand's South Island. There, situated roughly 25 minutes South-West of UO is the Waiholo Christian Youth Camp. The event aimed to unite young medical minds in the hope of building closer ties to each other and eventually strengthening the care of Pacific communities in New Zealand and abroad.

Upon our arrival to Dunedin, after almost 10 hours of travelling, we were warmly received by the students and staff involved in the organisation of the camp.

In the typical island way, my FNU colleague Jake and I were immediately bombarded with discussions on our cultural backgrounds, on life in Fiji, and on whether we had eaten. This level of the Pacific kindness would be the norm for the rest of the trip as we set off to kick-start the camp in Waiholo.

Our first night was filled with a lot of introductions and island greetings. It was the first time an international group had joined the camp, and we were easily the most noticeable and questioned set of students. Questions regarding our wellbeing, how we were finding the weather and what were some of the challenges we faced learning in a relatively resource-limited setting were in the air.

Personally, this gave me time to reflect on my own medical journey and made me realise how fortunate I am to have studied at home under FNU.

A ruminating thought that came to mind was the privilege of having so much hands-on experience, coupled with the many outreach programs that helped me understand and engage with the community.

In summary, this was a learning encounter that pushed the scope of my clinical acumen, while also reminding me of the struggles many others face in many parts of my country.

This notion was further emphasised when meeting a fellow final-year medical student delegation – our friends from Samoa. They shared similar sentiments with our New Zealand colleagues and it was refreshing to hear the accounts of their medical journey.

I realised that even though we are separated by thousands of kilometers and international borders, we all had a common aim.

That aim was to do our best with what we have to make the best change for our people. With this thought, I was reminded of a question posed to the final year MBBS students some months ago at our Year 6 orientation – Why are we in this programme? What has brought us here? Why do we want to be medical professionals?

I realised that it had taken me four odd months and a trip to a very chilly Dunedin to add one bullet point to my personal answer.

I do this because I want to help our people and because helping our people gives me an immense sense of joy. As I near the end of my MBBS programme and take on an extra ounce of responsibility with every passing day, I'm filled with an ever growing awareness of duty as well as happiness when that duty is fulfilled in the best way available.

Thanks to my new-found Samoan friends, this thought was a wonderful reminder for me to reflect on my purpose over the last (almost) six years.

Our second day arrived within the blink of an eye (quite literally because all the excitement meant that we had barely slept 6 hours). The entire camp was divided into teams and would compete in a series of games for a prize at the end of the day. My team comprised of students from Tonga, Tokelau, Samoa, Tuvalu and Fiji. Their fields of study included medicine, physiotherapy, sports medicine, and we even had one research student. Over the course of the day, the games would transform these strangers into friends as we worked our hardest to top almost all of our events.

Of particular mention was a game of touch rugby – which of course caused all the Fijians in the team to become overly competitive and then later absolutely devastated when we lost by a try at the last minute.

The games were followed by a talk with a group of Pacific Islander PIHPSA alumni. The team (comprising of two doctors, one dentist, one PhD student and a physiotherapist) addressed each group.

This provided an excellent opportunity for us as young Pacific students to learn what it's like to progress through University and transition to the medical workforce. A lot of the discussions were centered on their struggles and the mechanisms they used to overcome and cope with the stresses of student life – with the addition of being a Pacific Islander navigating western systems.

I found this dialogue particularly insightful as it opened my mind to the challenges faced by my counterparts. A common sentiment shared by most of the speakers was that we should never forgo our identity when pursuing our goals. This is because our culture and religion make up the fabric of our being.

Our final day in Waiholo began with a church service. In a proud moment, the opening hymn was a Fijian song "Oqo Na Noqu Masu". This was followed by a sermon delivered by Mr Ala'imalo Falefatu Enari – or Fatu, as he referred to himself.

The ideas shared by Fatu during his address encouraged us not to forget who we bring to work, to school and to our studies every day. The "who" signifying our ancestors who worked tirelessly for a better future for their children – a profound way to think about what motivates us to study and hustle towards our individual goals.

Following this incredibly invigorating homily, everyone was divided to perform a short dance item that we had been practicing since the night before.

Luckily, I have erased all evidence of my item as I was at least two moves behind the rest of the group and despite being placed in the back row; I still managed to stand out. A subtle reminder that once I start working next year, I will need to invest in some dance lessons— if I ever want to be invited to another camp (again).

By mid-afternoon, our time in Dunedin was coming to an end. We left the camp and said goodbye to our new friends before being hosted to one last meal with two of our PIRSSU supervisors, Associate Professor Faafetai Sopoaga and Dr Malama Tafuna'i.

My experience would not be complete without a mention of these two incredible women who paved the way for our visit.

Our recap of the weekend and discussion on the capacity building in Pacific Island students that was yet to come concluded our experience with a great sense of hope for the future.

On the whole, I believe this experience would be an immense boost for any student looking to re-invigorate their medical studies. I'll continue to be awestruck with gratitude to all those who made this visit possible.

The opportunity to network, learn, appreciate and reflect with fellow students and mentors alike has been greatly enlightening and I hope more students from FNU and abroad will be involved in similar events in the future.
Vinaka!