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JAPAN



MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Sewing and singing

For the past few months, I've been working on a multimedia project funded by the Regional Arts & Culture Council called "Migrations," which features immigrant and refugee artists in Portland. Through the project, I learned about a Pacific Islander sewing circle, a program of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) and the IRCO Asian Family Center (AFC). Sewing is considered a folk-art form in many cultures, especially quilting, which reflects the quilter's personal experiences and traditions. I also heard that many of the women currently participating in the sewing circle are Tongan and they sing traditional songs. After learning that, I had to check it out.

The sewing circle met weekly this summer at George Middle School in north Portland. I attended a couple of meetings. What

I discovered was a group of about 10 to 18 women gathered around tables in a large classroom while their school-age children drew pictures or played with wooden blocks in other parts of the room. Most of the women, ranging in age from 30 to 80 years old, were hand stitching various quilts in colorful patterns that reached out like sunrises.

One of the women, Kato Kakala, was using a sewing machine. Kakala, a widowed mother of three children (one in college), serves as the instructor for the sewing circle. She seemed an expert hand on the sewing machine and created a beautiful Tongan dress during the first meeting I attended.

When I asked if the women could sing, they all broke out in beautiful harmonies singing a Tongan "call-and-response" song. A lead woman would sing one phrase and the others responded with a complimentary musical phrase. They had beautiful voices and sang while working on their quilts. The children, who are used to the sounds of their mothers' singing, continued to play in a corner of the classroom, but I noticed they were listening. It seemed like a good way for the kids to stay in touch with their Tongan culture and language.

Kakala told me she learned to sing as a child, listening to elder women sing while doing their work. Singing in church and at school is another

way, too, she said, while accompanying themselves on ukulele, guitar, or piano.

It's been a long time since most of the women in the sewing circle emigrated from Tonga. Kakala has been in the U.S. since 1987, when she and her husband moved to Portland to raise their three girls and give them a good education. Because the Tongan constitutional monarchy has made education

free and mandatory for all citizens, people there have a nearly 99 percent literacy rate. Quite often, Tongans come to the U.S. with their children after they've finished secondary school, because they want access to a good higher education.

Kolini Fusitua, an academic achievement specialist for AFC, started the sewing circle in 2012 to help families connect with the school system. The group meets at different schools so the women can become comfortable with

school buildings and staff. He mentioned that the children accompany their moms to hear stories about Tonga. Current events within the Tongan community are also discussed. Fusitua says some of the moms have gone on to volunteer at the school or in the library, and one has even become president of the Parent Teacher Association. With a great measure of pride, he told me one of the parents was honored as volunteer of the year at Portland Public Schools.

Fusitua explained that education is a top priority for Tongan parents because in Tonga, the whole community is responsible for children staying in school.

"It's mandatory that all the children be in school up to 12th grade," Fusitua said. "In Tonga, you have the school system, your parents, watching over you. You have nowhere to go even if you do want to skip school. They'll put you in their canoe — some of our schools we have to canoe to — and get you there. It's not a metaphor!"

Because Tongans cherish education, many families go overseas to find employment so they can afford to send their children to college. Fusitua's own parents immigrated to America in 1975, when he was nine years old. After he earned his college

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