

The conference experiences of a new Pacific kid on the block

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Introduction

In pursuing a fruitful life worthy of the sacrifices that many Pacific parents have made for a new and better future, it is not uncommon to find high expectations placed on a generation who have spent all or most of their lives here in New Zealand. New Zealand epitomises the 'promised land' of milk and honey where the opportunities are plentiful and endless. Many a prayer of the heart has been that of prosperity, stability, and solidarity. Answers to such prayers take on a variety of forms often with a hefty price tag. It is a cross to bear at where one thing is forsaken or overthrown for another, loyalties and allegiances are challenged, and some things just come to an end. It is a journey, a lifelong process wrought with challenging adventures, big decisions, and grand achievements. Feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness, loneliness and isolation, and fear of failure are also part and parcel of such a journey.

As a budding Pacific health researcher, the journey is spiralling into new zones and new worlds: one of them being the world of conferences. It is a world of close encounters of the terrifying kind. Public speaking is a terrifying experience. This paper serves two purposes. Firstly, learning how to swim also means knowing how to sink; as you get better at it you know what not to do. Secondly, they have got to know to understand - so go and tell it on the mountain; tell them what's going on and how it's done.

The first time ever you saw my face...

Nervous and shaking at the knees she slowly rose to make her inaugural presentation at the Third International Conference on Injury Prevention and Control in Melbourne (18-22 February 1996). Preparation for this momentous

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occasion had taken its toll and you could see it in her face. Black rings with accompanying bags sat beneath her eyes, heavy creases lined her forehead, and her stained teeth could have been mistaken for some fashion statement - but no ... untold cups of coffee could not be consumed without leaving visible marks. Darn! Among the audience were some familiar faces smiling encouragingly. Support. It's good to have the support, she thought, so far away from home and the food is terrible, God knows I need it.. the support that is. The Samoan sisters from the Pacific Safety and Prevention Project, the Whariki bros', the Tangata Whenua, and other intrigued persons turned up to hear her about the 'Evaluation of Child Car Restraints Promotion among Pacific Islands Communities'. Decked out in the traditional puletasi '90s style and matching shoes she proceeded with the task at hand - but not before clipping the microphone to her puletasi. She acknowledged, greeted, and presented using overhead transparencies. As she clarified, specified, and verified the microphone fell mercilessly to the ground. Oh..oh no! Silence. Apologies were made, then blank. Just blank. Panic ... what comes next..damn! I should have said no to using that unfamiliar contraption.. I've lost the audience for sure. Attempting to recollect and retrace her steps she slowly came back, made her final comments, and answered some questions. Afterwards the supporters comforted and gave reassurances 'don't worry, next time' before shouting her to a cup of coffee.

Important lesson: Go with what is comfortable for you.

Talofa teine!

Following her debut in Melbourne in 1996, the Public Health Association Conference in Hamilton (1-3 July 1997) provided an opportunity to speak about her current project 'Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in the New Zealand Pacific Communities'. Without a doubt this presentation would be delivered with great style and panache not only because she possessed these attributes, but the presentation itself would be a visual delight of colour and creativity. Impressed by powerpoint presentations she decided to use this tool for the conference. What had stood out for her with the powerpoint program was how visually stimulating it is ... Lord knows my attention span is short when the speaker merely reads the paper to an over enthused crowd.. music can be incorporated into the presentation..Choice!..music has played such a big part in my upbringing - oh those days in the church choir..and powerpoint is very interactive.. That's right, a two-way conversation. Lacking in experience and technical ability she sought the help of the Whariki bros' who graciously showed

her how to put together a powerpoint presentation and how to run it on a data projector. Those words rung in her ears as she proceeded with preparing the presentation 'go with what is comfortable for you'; well she could certainly get comfortable with using powerpoint – and there is a first time for everything.

The day of the presentation arrived and she was first up in the child health stream. A panic attack, the remote control isn't working so she'll have to remain fixed at the computer for the whole time. Not to worry, next time she will know how to make it work. Launching into the delivery of her paper, she showed each slide and spoke confidently about each point. In the presentation however she got a bit trigger happy and lost a few slides, oops! What was on that slide? Stay calm, it'll come back to you. Another slide! Dammit I know I'll say this.. laughter.. Good that's the response I was looking for. I'm coming down the final stretch now. Hooray, any questions? The presentation could have been much better. Those blank stares in the audience told her that she assumed too much. More background information was needed at the beginning, and there were other keypoints she forgot to talk about. Feedback from her colleagues were warm and affirming as they reiterated a number of points like having overhead transparencies with you in case the equipment broke down, provide background information about the topic, and learn how to read your audience.

Important lessons: Provide sufficient background, know your audience, ensure that you have overhead transparencies with you as a back up.

Third time around

There was a sense of anticipation about the next conference, the Australian Tropical Health and Nutrition Conference in Brisbane (17-19 July, 1997) The run in Hamilton was still fresh in her mind and the lessons learnt there would certainly be noted and acted on. Presenting 'Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in the New Zealand Pacific Communities' to an international crowd required more background information about SIDS, its existence in the Pacific communities, and an overview of the diverse Pacific Communities that reside in New Zealand. A decision had to be made about the choice of visual aids for the presentation and in this instance overhead transparencies were most likely. Careful thought was needed however with the composition of each overhead, its sequence, and its visual appeal to the eye of the beholder. The slides used in the powerpoint presentation could be transferred on to overheads – colour overheads for a more resplendent and impressive allure. These overheads, which subsequently cost an arm and half a leg, could and would be used for other

presentations in the future so that this wasn't simply an expensive one-off exercise.

On the day, she was quite calm and relaxed .. maybe too relaxed especially because her family had come to see her in action. But no – she was simply thankful that they were there; this was the first time anyone in the family had come to see her present at a conference. She knew that it was the first of several forums that would see her family and friends congregate to show their support and warmth for the work that she did...health issues and problems were becoming all too common in her family, extended family, and circle of friends. With clarity and composure (and some nervousness), she began her delivery starting with the Pacific map and proceeding with each overhead about SIDS, and its prevalence and impact. At times she was a bit repetitious and talked too quickly. Slow down girl, what's the rush? Pause to let people absorb your material. Don't fear the silences; allow the message to sink in. Wrapping up, she answered the questions put to her as best she could. Overall, she was very pleased with the presentation; it went well.

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There was a certain knack about talking to people and she was beginning to develop it. Alright NF – No Fear. Feedback from family was positive and they reiterated what she had already gauged from this presentation. Perhaps the most valuable lesson here is the power of positive people who affirm, give support, and endorse the direction of the journey as it unfolds bit by bit, and step by step..How equally humbling that those who affirmed, supported, and endorsed were also her worst critics – they were sure to keep her feet on level ground, and her mind attentive to the task at hand and the work to come.

Important lessons: It is okay to have pauses of silence, develop the knack to master the art of public speaking, the platform of praise is positively propelling – and humbling.

Conclusion

Taking a deep breath and looking towards the hills she could sense the reality of her parents' toil now bearing fruit although the journey was far from over. New zones and new worlds were constant features of a journey to which conferences was one such example. The best that one can do and hope for is to experience and learn from these zones and worlds. As you take from these experiences that which is significant to you and your journey, in turn you impart to others a gift of knowledge, inspire courage, and motivate the fulfilment of aspirations. □