

Posted on: Tuesday, September 12, 2006

## COMMENTARY

## Rekindled memories of long ago on Majuro

By Leslie Lang

Four years ago, I found myself in a rented, silver Mitsubishi with Marshall Islands plates, the choppy ocean at my left, the calm, jewel-colored Majuro lagoon at my right and Bob Krauss at the wheel.

Bob and I had never met before. We were there as part of a media trip, both of us invited by the Outrigger Marshall Islands Resort, and one morning he told me he wanted to return to a beachfront Marshallese church he'd visited 35 years before.

Back then, he'd journeyed to a tiny island off Majuro and gotten stranded there. Late at night someone had agreed to row him back to the village called Laura, and told him he could sleep at the church and ride back to Majuro in the morning with the pastor after the services. And that's what he'd done.

He told me he wanted to see if breezes still wafted through the church windows that had no glass, and whether dogs still slept in the aisles during the service. He invited me to tag along.

We picked up the rental car and careened down the narrow, coconut-tree lined road to Laura, where we finally found the church, which had been rebuilt.

With great enthusiasm and no hesitation, Bob told people there about having visited their church in 1967. When the very friendly pastor, Rev. Alik, arrived and heard Bob's story, he and his wife invited us into their office for some fresh coconut milk. We each had our own coconut, the bottoms trimmed so they would stand.

While we waited for the service to begin, we watched little girls sitting on the floor between pews playing a complicated jacks-like game with white coral rocks. As I was observing that bottles of ketchup and shoyu and bags of sugar lined the front of the church, a woman walked up and generously stuck a beautiful, hand-woven flower behind my ear.

We stayed for the Laura Protestant church's morning service, which was in Marshallese. Bob paid attention to every word and sang from the hymnal, his voice strong. He was delighted to be there and had a big smile of his face. People responded to his enthusiasm warmly.

I loved watching how he operated. No hesitation, no shyness. He went in assuming friendliness and that's what he found. He was sincerely interested. He watched and asked questions and he didn't hesitate to take close-up photos. I learned from him.



Krauss jots down notes after services in the Laura church. He went in assuming friendliness and found it.

Photos courtesy Leslie Lang



Krauss on a beach in the Marshall Islands with his yellow lei. His trip to Laura was a journey back through time.

After the service, as he sat perched at the edge of a pew jotting notes in the tiny notepad he held cupped in his hand, a woman jammed onto his head the bright yellow lei she'd been wearing.

There were no dogs in the aisles this time, but after the service people with bags of frozen chicken starting dancing up the aisle to an old-style Marshallese song, which a young man played on an electronic keyboard. The frozen offerings explained the odd food items lined up across the front of the church.

Bob didn't hesitate to dart through the line of people dancing down the aisle in order to position himself to take better photos. I watched as he asked permission of someone and then joined in as they snaked toward the collection plate, where he added a donation beyond what he'd given during the regular service. This special collection, we learned, was for a church maintenance fund, for repairs such as to the now-louvered windows.

It was a different building than the one Bob had fond memories of, and was no longer open to the sea breezes. Yet he enjoyed everything about the journey to the rebuilt church, his journey back through time. I enjoyed watching him take it.

*Leslie Lang, a Big Island resident, is a freelance writer. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.*

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