



Alumnae Spotlight



*Phyllis
Fong*
Class of 1970



Each month we shine the spotlight on one of our Alumnae.

Our guest this month is Phyllis Fong. Having achieved great success in her career whilst being grateful for her foundation growing up and learning life lessons in Fiji, Phyllis has been kind enough to share her journey with us.

Here's what Phyllis had to say

WHAT MEMORIES OF YOUR CHILDHOOD YEARS REMAIN WITH YOU TODAY?

Playing outdoors - climbing trees and having rain baths.

Also skipping and hopscotch, and playing marbles and tops.

We did not have television and the internet back then, so I was an avid reader growing up - books opened up the world to me! I'm still an avid reader now and often finish 1 to 2 books a week.

Can you share a significant experience during your SJSS high school years and, on reflection, why was this impactful?

I would say my involvement in sports - I ran for SJSS with others like Moira Wendt, Dorothy Shanker, Rosie Gwilliam, Monica Watson, and others. I ran mainly in the 50m and 100m races plus 4 x 100m relays for the red team in SJSS and I also participated in the Fiji secondary schools inter-zone meets.

In addition, I played netball, but was never very good in swimming!

My involvement in sports was impactful because I learned to be a team player, recognising that everyone has a role to play in running towards the finish line in a relay and in working towards a goal in netball. I also learned that it's ok to lose and that we can do better the next time.

The side benefits of my involvement in sports are that I continued to run and play netball after I left SJSS, and I still run now when I can. I also retain a love of the sun and outdoors!

WHAT INFLUENCED YOUR CAREER PATHWAY AND HOW DID YOU GET TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY?

My career is a bit of a ramble. We could not afford to study overseas, so I joined my sister at the only university in Fiji at the time, the University of the South Pacific. During my university holidays, I used to work in the Department of Social Welfare in Nausori, where I grew up. The head of the office was Marama Sovaki and she taught me that it's possible to be tough but kind.

I would take minutes when she met with cases that came into the office. That's where I first learned about domestic violence - like the pregnant woman reporting that her husband had punched her in the stomach and stomped on her when she was on the ground. I also used to prepare and distribute the monthly welfare payments.

Here, I learned how people in the community made do with very little from month to month until they received the next welfare payment. So, my working holidays were an eye opener to the importance of social justice and working in the public interest.

On graduating, my first inclination was to work for the Fiji Government, which I did, in the Ministry of Urban Development, Housing and Social Welfare, where I ran into Marama Sovaki again. By attending board meetings of the Fiji Housing Authority as the Ministry representative, I also came to know the CEO, Utkat Naicker, who subsequently moved to the United Nations Human Settlement Program, or UN-Habitat, my first understanding that it was possible to work for the UN.

My next position was as Protocol Officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, working with Nat Uluiviti. His generosity in sharing his knowledge and patience in showing me the ropes taught me what

it means to be a good manager and motivating leader. Jioji Kotobalavu, whom some of you may know, was the Secretary for Foreign Affairs at the time, and other staff included an ex-SJSS/USP colleague, Koila Mara, now Nailatikau.

There were many state functions at the time, such as State dinners for visits by heads of state like Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), and the EU meeting of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (EU-ACP). I remember I would be called to the Prime Minister's residence to meet with Adi Lady Lala Mara to discuss the order of the program, invitation list, seating arrangements, menu etc down to the very last detail. This experience taught me how the most complex events can be made so simple through good organisation and attention to detail.

My next stop was with the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation, SPEC, now the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, PIF. There were some clever people working at the Forum. While I was there, we had staff from 10 of the 16 member countries: Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Tonga. The 6 countries that did not have staff there at the time were Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

There were many firsts for the Pacific region while I was with SPEC - the first South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) was signed in 1981, the first South Pacific Telecommunications Development Program was set up in 1983, and the first nuclear non-proliferation treaty for the Pacific was signed in Rarotonga in 1985.

My next stint was with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) where I was responsible for managing the Pacific regional program. This included programs totalling some 30 million USD for projects implemented by ESCAP, FAO, ILO, IMO, ITU, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNIDO, UNIFEM, WHO, WMO and WTO. There were also collaborative projects with other aid donors to the Pacific like Australia, New Zealand and the UK, as well as ADB, EU and the World Bank.

I was a local program officer at UNDP and, without a post-graduate degree, this meant I could not become an international staff member. Some other local staff were being funded to undertake post-graduate studies in Australia, but I was not one of the lucky few. I had to find my own way to Australia and complete a post-graduate degree in the one year I was permitted, returning to Fiji to work during semester breaks. While I was successful in gaining my MA at the UNSW in 1989, I found the inequity in the international civil service to be too great, including my first taste of bullying by international colleagues, to continue to be a staff member in the UN system. So I decided to activate my permanent residency visa in Australia in 1991.



I recall applying for about 30 jobs at the time. It was not a very buoyant employment market, but I was lucky to be shortlisted for 6 interviews. I was successful in 3 of the positions and eventually had to decide between a position with Greenpeace or the Australian public service. I chose the latter and quickly progressed in the Department of Health and Community Services in both Sydney and Canberra, then back to Sydney with the Commonwealth Ombudsman's office, before joining the Australian communications and media regulator (ACMA), the Australian equivalent of FCC in the US or Ofcom in the UK. I am still at the ACMA as it enables me to keep up with technology!

So, to date, my career has spanned 47 years. A question I'm often asked is when I'll retire. I do enjoy working as I like the intellectual challenge and it also keeps me engaged with what's happening in the community. Perhaps I'll call it quits next year, but when the time comes, I might decide to go on a little longer. We'll see - I may have a 50-year career!

What worldly guidance can you share with the current student of SJSS?

I don't think I'm in a position to give advice to others. There may be parts of my story that resonate with some of you, but I think we generally have different stories to tell, based on our varied experiences at different points in time and place. I believe that each of us try our best to make the most of our skills and abilities,

and while some of us are fortunate to have help along the way, some of us do not have the same opportunities but we all get there. Isn't that the motto of the XSJSS Sydney group? Many paths one spirit? We've travelled different paths since St Joseph's and yet here we are reconnecting decades later

- Suffice to say that wherever we land, an education and good health provide us with a sound base on which to build our careers and to live our lives in a satisfying way, and SJSS certainly gave us a sound education. I was probably one of the last SJSS students to learn Latin with Sister Dismas. As the St Joseph's motto goes, Pietas cum Scientia - piety with knowledge, or as I would say, respect wisdom.



**WHAT
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I recall coming to Sydney and having the support of friends. I first stayed with Jill for a couple of weeks - she later returned to the UK and we lost touch. I was still in touch with Bernadette Filippo (Nicholls), an XSJSS classmate in Suva, who put me in touch with Bernadette Choy (now Desmond), an XSJSS classmate with whom I had lost contact. Bernie Choy put me up until I found my own accommodation. I am forever grateful to Bernie for her generosity, and we now see each other regularly. I also catch up every so often with other XSJSS classmates in our year who are in Sydney - Karen Macalister-Hohnen, Anne Johansen-Lehmann, Bernadette Heritage-McNulty, Cecilia Rakai-Muller, Yvonne Osborne, Maureen Allen, Agnes Cheer-Foon, Carol Cheer-Patterson, Lilian Mar. And I now also see others at XSJSS Sydney functions like katis and other fund raisers. So I think I'm doing very well on the reconnecting front! 😊



xSJSS Sydney Reunion - 2018

SJSS
class
pictures -
1970's

