



Pacific Islander Voices



Compiled by the
National Asian Pacific Center on Aging



Introduction

THIS IS THE SECOND oral history-based publication compiled by Chew Communications for the National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA). Featured here is the Pacific Islander experience. Through the collection of interviews with seniors and other community members, we hope to illustrate the diversity of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) experience as represented by the older adults served in the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP).



The participants, host agencies and staff of the NAPCA SCSEP program reflect the varied experiences within our AAPI aging population. Whether arriving as new immigrants or relocating from U.S. territories in the Pacific Islands, common challenges include language learning, cultural adaptation and economic survival.

The stories of how our participants arrived vary considerably – though they have much in common: a desire to celebrate their culture and traditions, contribute to their local communities and create a better life for themselves, their families and the next generation.

To this end, NAPCA has operated the SCSEP program since 1989 and has a current active enrollment of over 1,000 participants nationally. The interviews included in this publication represent some of our strongest Pacific Islander participants, host agency staff and young leaders who support us in our outreach and service to Pacific Islander elders.

We hope you enjoy their stories and the richness of the heritage that they bring to our program and to our society.

Christine Takada
President and CEO
National Asian Pacific Center on Aging

Finding Home: Pacific Islanders on the U.S. Mainland

by Bob Shimabukuro and Edward Echtle

IN THE LAST 50 YEARS, the migration of Pacific Islanders from their homelands to places on the U.S. mainland – especially Hawaii, California, Washington, Utah, Nevada and Texas – has steadily increased. As Pacific Islanders have re-established themselves in these new settings, their families have followed, creating a pattern of “chain migration.” Taking root on the mainland, these transplants have grappled with getting an education, finding jobs, adjusting to a different climate, overcoming linguistic and cultural hurdles and creating a social support structure that ensures the health and vibrancy of their extended community. Sustained by deeply held values – including a profound religious faith, respect for elders and a holistic culture of sharing – this richly diverse population continues to expand its presence on the mainland, address new challenges and enrich the cultural fabric of this nation in which they have chosen to put down roots.

Diverse Communities

The U.S. Census defines Pacific Islanders as people with Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian ancestry. Polynesians include Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Tahitians and Tongans. Micronesians are primarily Guamanians and Chamorros of the Northern Mariana Islands. Melanesians include Fijians and others. While Pacific Islanders make up less than one-half of one percent of the U.S. population, they represent an incredibly diverse array of cultures. Of these groups, Native Hawaiians, Chamorros and Samoans constitute over 71 percent of Pacific Islanders in the continental U.S.

Currently, more than half of all people of Pacific Islander ancestry identify themselves as multiracial. According to recent estimates, over 400,000 Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders live in the U.S., in addition to another 340,000 Pacific Islanders who have identified themselves as “mixed.”

The varied histories, backgrounds and cultures of the Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI) population make broad generalizations problematic. However, these

groups share similar experiences as transplants, especially those who have settled on the mainland. Their experiences, struggles and achievements in making a new home far from their lands of origin shows the resilience and sustaining power of traditional values, even as some of those traditions have evolved under the influence of a younger generation adapting to the complexities of American society.

Legacy of Colonialism

Prior to European contact, many Pacific Islander cultures shared a tradition of communal access to food, water and other necessities of life. At the same time, hierarchies of status, hereditary village chiefs and family elders helped preserve order within these societies. In comparison with life on the U.S. mainland, Pacific Islanders recall island life as slower paced and less hectic. Paid work was scarce in the islands and often unnecessary because people shared necessities and other commodities.

The common experience among the groups settling or temporarily living in the U.S. is that they come from islands “claimed” by outside nations. For 300 years, French, English, Dutch and German explorers mapped and divided the Pacific Islands into colonial possessions. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States, New Zealand and Japan also ruled without the informed consent of the inhabitants.

These foreign powers used the islands for international commerce, trading in spices, coconuts, fish, pineapple, sugar and whale oil; as refueling stations to support military operations and commerce, exploration and whaling and as strategic bases protecting the interests of the colonial powers. The imposition of outside values was devastating to traditional economies; most Pacific Islanders were



From left: Evile Pule, Linda Jane Guevara and Pesefea Gaoa outside Guam Communications Network office.

unprepared to deal with the European traders and capitalists. As a result, outside rule pushed aside local cultures and infrastructures with little regard for the islands' original inhabitants.

In 1898, at the end of the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded control of Guam to the U.S, and in 1899, Britain, Germany and the United States settled their power struggle over Samoa with the Tripartite Treaty, dividing the islands into Western Samoa controlled by Germany and American Samoa. In 1914, New Zealand seized Western Samoa and ruled it as a colony for several decades.

Hawaiians suffered a similar takeover, brought about by foreign sugar growers. The growers, the U.S. minister to Hawaii and the U.S. Navy conspired to overthrow the native government of Hawaii in 1893, establishing the provisional Republic of Hawaii. In 1898, President McKinley annexed Hawaii to the U.S. This, too, was done without the consent of, or compensation to, the Native Hawaiians or representatives of the Kingdom of Hawaii.

With the colonial countries concerned mostly with their own economic and strategic interests, the welfare of the islands' populace turned to missionaries. From the mid-1800s, Christian missionaries from Spain, England, the U.S. and elsewhere helped with the work of providing for the needs of the native population. Islanders found the missionaries' message of sharing and goodwill a good fit with their traditional values of respect and communal ownership of land, food and shelter.

The disruption of traditional leadership through outside rule, death by disease and outmigration increasingly made churches a new center of community life. Among Samoans, for example, well over 90 percent claim some form of the Christian faith. Missionaries, especially Mormons and Catholics, were embraced as Pacific Islander cultures struggled to maintain and rebuild community-centered life.

Out Migrations

During World War II, the U.S. and its allies invested massive amounts of capital and materials in the Pacific Islands in the effort to defeat Imperial Japan. The influx of troops and their supporting infrastructure, while it accelerated the disruption of traditional life in the islands, also created ways for Pacific Islanders to find outside employment. Additionally, many Pacific Islanders saw enlistment in the armed forces as a way to "see the world" and better their economic chances. Many young men joined the military and served all over the globe.

After the War, Pacific Island economies slumped due to the military pullback

and remained sluggish throughout the latter half of the 20th century. While a reduced military presence and tourism still provide some employment, many young Pacific Islanders felt “trapped” on the islands and began looking elsewhere for work.

Legislation in 1950 granting citizenship to Guamanians/Chamorros and in 1951 making Samoa an unincorporated U.S. territory and Samoans U.S. nationals also spurred off-island migrations. Guamanians/Chamorros and Samoans were free to move anywhere in the U.S. while Tongans, Fijians and others, driven by limited opportunities, also chose relocation to the U.S. mainland. After years of protest by Islanders for independence, Western Samoa also won independence in 1962.

In 1986, the U.S. granted sovereignty to the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau, nations formerly administered by the U.S. Navy from 1947 to 1951 and by the United States Department of the Interior from 1951 to 1986 (to 1994 for Palau). Under the agreement, the U.S. provides financial assistance in exchange for maintaining strategic military access to the Islands. Since the late 1980s, out migration has increased from these nations, mainly to Hawaii, the West Coast and Arkansas. Today, the U.S. mainland is home to a large and diverse Pacific Islander community. Thirty percent of all Pacific Islanders in the U.S. reside in California alone. Pacific Islander populations are still concentrated in areas close to military installations, which continue to act as conduits for off-island migration.

Pursuit of higher education remains another major factor in choosing to come to the mainland. Lack of opportunities for advanced degrees, coupled with a general belief that education is better on the mainland, attracts young adults and families. In Samoa, education is highly valued and over 80 percent of all Samoans have at least a high school diploma. Among those who go away to school, many decide to stay after graduating, feeling that opportunities are greater on the mainland.

While many intend to “return home” later in life, most do not. First-generation arrivals often find the mainland “too fast-paced,” but lack the means to return to their homeland. Over time, many older Pacific Islanders have abandoned their plan of returning permanently to the islands, especially as their extended families – children and grandchildren – become rooted in mainland society. Today, there is a substantial population of Pacific Islander elders living in mainland communities.

Resettlement and Challenges

Although there are many success stories, living on the mainland makes maintaining traditional culture and values a challenge for Pacific Islander communities. Loss of customary roles has disrupted traditions of deference within families. High rates of unemployment and poverty, particularly among those with limited English language skills, is an ongoing problem. Second and third-generation Islanders struggle with higher dropout rates as traditional “group-centered” pressure to succeed for the family is diffused by the complexities of life in cities where the effects of illegal drug use and violence have exacerbated social problems.

Numerous health issues, brought on by poor diet, lack of access to traditional natural foods and less active lifestyles, have caused an explosion in diabetes, heart disease and cancer within the Pacific Islander population. Among elders who speak only their native language, isolation and depression are on the rise, further impacting opportunities to work outside the home. The community-centered island life where houses were geographically clustered is dispersed on the mainland. The elderly often live in low-income urban apartments or suburban tract housing, isolated and stripped of opportunities to enjoy the traditional respect and camaraderie that they were accustomed to in the islands.

Additionally, many Pacific Islander elders serve as free childcare providers for their grandchildren while parents work during the day. This responsibility represents a break with traditional roles and further serves to isolate elders from their peers.

Community Outreach

Despite the challenges brought on by life on the mainland, Pacific Islander communities continue to protect and express their traditional values. Christian churches continue their central role as bridge organizations, helping new arrivals adjust to U.S. social norms, rules and laws. Today, churches still provide a shared space where personal interactions that replicate traditional community life can occur. Churches also conduct their own social service outreach programs as well as provide space to house such programs.

Originally, mainland churches served as the primary social safety for Pacific Islanders. The social activism of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to independent secular social service programs intended to help community members, especially elders. As political empowerment became part of the struggle, young educated Asian Pacific Americans, inspired by the idealism of the civil rights movement, returned to their

communities of origin and founded numerous grassroots outreach programs to help community members. These programs helped community members navigate the maze of forms and regulations required by government and employers.

The National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA), founded in 1979, is one such umbrella organization. From its inception, NAPCA has coordinated closely with numerous local community organizations to connect Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) elders with services they need. Since 1989, NAPCA has been the administrator for the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) for AAPIs and has since helped train thousands of AAPI seniors to gain skills and make a new start in the work force.

Preserving Culture

As intermarriage and job opportunities draw younger, college-educated Pacific Islanders away from the early centers of mainland settlement, many elders express concern that important traditional values brought from their homelands are in danger of being lost. However, in recent years, a broader U.S. appreciation for diversity – and a growing recognition of America’s rapidly changing demographic profile – has sparked the interest of younger Pacific Islanders in the traditional churches as well as newer nonprofit cultural, professional and student organizations that often reach across boundaries of ethnic origin.

Community festivals celebrating traditional culture are also increasingly popular. Events such as the Tafesilafa’i Festival in Long Beach, California attract thousands to experience Pacific Islander dance, music and cuisine. The festival is conducted as an interfaith event. The organizers and participants in Tafesilafa’i, which means, “culture informed by theology,” believe it helps cement respect through the sharing of cultural heritage. Tafesilafa’i and similar celebrations reaffirm communal connections and serve as a touchstone for elders and youth to celebrate their shared heritage.

Samoan adherence to *fa’a Samoa* – a belief that all are descended from one family, making everyone a relative – still informs their values. Chamorros embrace *inafa’ maolek* or “making it good” for one another so that community can be sustained. Hawaiian ideals are reflected in the saying, “*Aloha mai no, aloha aku,*” which means that when love is given, love should be returned. Guided by these sacred core values, Pacific Islanders work to nurture community and a healthy environment where seniors and young people alike have the opportunity to pursue their dreams of a more abundant life.

Pesefea J. Gaoa

Born 1936, Fitiuta, Ta'u, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1962

Outreach Aide, Guam Communications Network, Long Beach, California

I GRADUATED FROM JUNIOR HIGH school in American Samoa and my uncle wanted to bring me down here. I lived in Hawaii about two or three years and then my uncle moved down to California and brought me down over here. I did not finish high school. I started working.

When I moved here, I did not speak enough of the language, but the main thing is the climate. Samoa is not so hot, not so cold. Over here, sometimes it's real hot or so cold I can't stand it. I like the people over here, but I still think about my country. I miss Samoan food like taro. Over here – oh my God, I don't want rice and potatoes. I want Samoan taro and bananas and breadfruit. But now, I like whatever – rice,

potatoes, bananas.

I still work because I want to get out from the house and do something. I don't want to stay home. That would make me feel like I'm getting old. But I like being a senior. If we go somewhere, everybody has fun. We share. Joy for everybody.

The first thing in my life is God. Everywhere you go, God helps you with whatever you need. Don't spend your time for something that is no good. I even tell this to my kids. I have four boys and two girls. I go to church every Sunday. Seven days a week – only one day a week, I go to church. I go to work and I pray.





Tuu Lokeni

Born 1954, Upolu, Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1984

Receptionist, Taaao Ole Talalelei Congregational Christian Church, Carson, California

IHAD MY SCHOOLING in Samoa. My husband was a minister and he got the call from a church over here. The Samoan people called for a minister, so that's why we came down. The hardest adjustment was the lifestyle, the language. The Samoan people over here don't speak the language. So we have to re-educate them, try and teach the Samoan language to them. Some of the older people don't speak English. Some of the younger people don't speak Samoan. So there's a language gap. But the kids growing up, they can still learn their Samoan language.

I miss the fellowship in Samoa. It's like one family in a big area like a village where they all stay together in the neighborhood. It's like one family. If you are

hungry, you can go anywhere – to any house. You can get food from any family. If you need something, you can just ask them and they give it if they have it.

I like a lot of the opportunities here for you to advance, not only for kids in school, but in the career. More opportunities for you to look for further enrichment in life, whatever you want.

I have three kids. This is what I always tell them: “You are lucky that you grew up here in the States because back home, we don’t eat breakfast. You go to school in the morning, you don’t eat breakfast. Only when you get home. After school, then you find something for yourself. It’s not like here. You have breakfast. You ask for lunch money. You have school milk.” Everything is like hand-given to them.

I like my NAPCA position. I like to work. You learn some more things. I learn some corresponding and meeting people-to-people. Conversation. It’s a good fellowship with other nationalities and with my own Samoan people.

Young people – their pace is much faster than ours. They think we’re slow. But, no, it’s just because we’re getting old and they talk faster. Sometimes, we try to pick up what they think. So we ask them to slow down and they say, “You have to pick it up.” We are just taking our time, slowing down. The things you used to do, you can’t do anymore. Now, you’re slowing down. Then you know you’re getting there.

Pupaia Mason

Born 1952, Fagali’i, Upolu, Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1973

Office Assistant, Samoan Federation of America, Carson

I CAME HERE IN 1973. I was looking out for my future. My uncle brought me over here. I wasn’t working at home in the Island. I was 21 years old. The first time I came here, it was hard for me. I wanted to look for some money to give back to my parents, to help my parents. I didn’t speak much English. I told my uncle, “I want to find some job, whatever job I can find.” I’m single at the time.

I finally got a job. I work in a hospital, a convalescent nursing home. I don’t have a license. I don’t have nothing, but I try because my cousin worked over there. I told

them I want to work in the kitchen, start in the kitchen washing dishes. Then I look at helping the patients. I ask, “Can I go try that?” More money for that, higher pay.

In 1974, I went back and applied for my green card. I come back over here. I go back to work in the hospital. Then I marry in 1975 and I was still working til ’78 when I take my mom back to the Island. Then I come back and I work til ’91 or something. My husband told me I am too old to work. I said, “No, I don’t care if it’s hard.” But we don’t have a car. So I thought, “Okay, I’m going to stay home and take care of my husband.”

Last year, my friend called me and said, “Hey, come over here. They have an opening through NAPCA.” Now, I love my work. I’m happy. I enjoy my friends. I answer the phone, get out of the house. I don’t want to be a headache for my husband and my kids. When I come here, I don’t want to go home. I want to be here because when you go home, you just go to sleep. When I work at NAPCA, I have a lot of friends. It’s a lot of fun over here.



Chief Loa Pele Faletogo

Born 1945, Tutuila, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1966

President/Executive Director, Samoan Federation of America, Carson

THIS IS MY HOME away from American Samoa. This is where I came because there were families here. This organization was started by individuals who migrated from Samoa during the 1950s. That's a period known as the greatest migration of Samoans into the United States, 1950, 1951, 1952. That's the year that the United States Navy left the islands.

When the Department of the Interior came in '51 and took over the islands, the Navy has to leave. And when they left, they brought three-quarters of the Islanders with them. There were transport ships that brought everybody: a soldier and his parents and his whole family because now they are military families. They dropped off a lot of them here on the West Coast. Most of them got off here because of the Long Beach base and San Diego. Samoans don't like cold weather, so they stayed on the West Coast, especially in California, all the way up to Seattle. That's the reason you're not going to find a lot of Samoans in Minnesota.

The Samoan Federation was started in 1965, housed right here. Before that, it was a field office for a Los Angeles County Supervisor. The Samoan community worked with him, doing outreach. When the County office left, the Samoan Federation remained here. The Federation bought the building in 2000.

I am retired from the United States Army. I started volunteering here, working with people who, most of them, have already passed away. The NAPCA program has been a blessing.

The older generation are usually homebound. They stay home and take care of kids and grandchildren. It creates problems for them mentally, healthwise, because they are active people in the Island. But when they came here and they retire from a job, the next thing you know, you are now just staying home. Here, you don't just walk to your neighbor because your neighbor may be someone you don't even know.

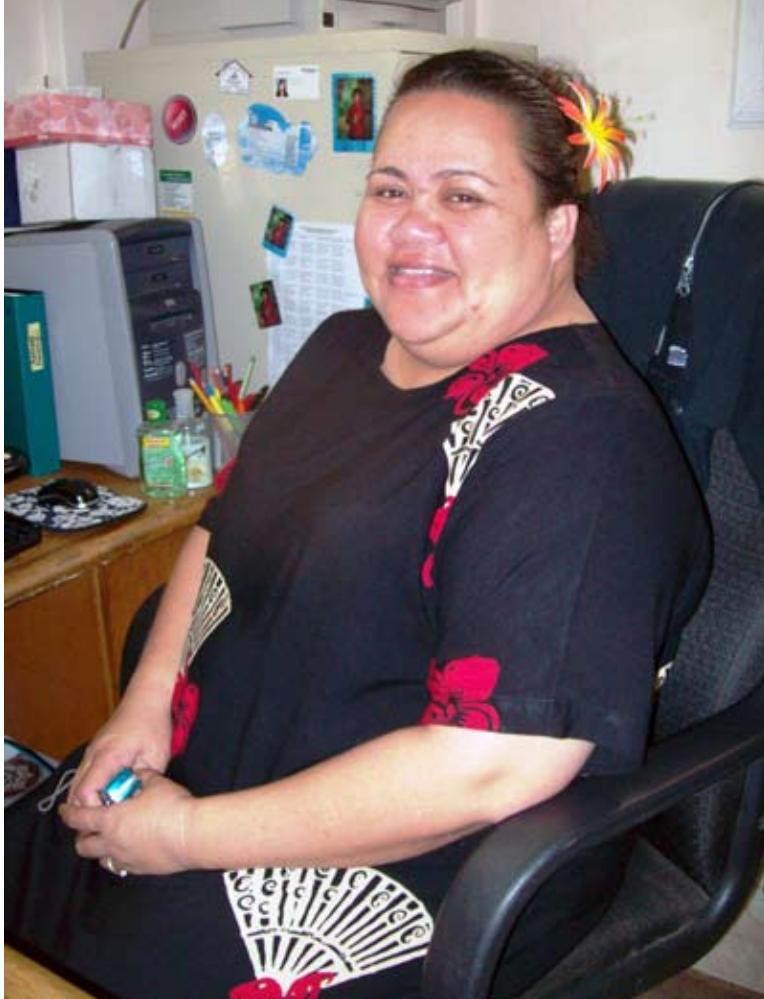
Since the inception of the SCSEP program, a lot of Samoan seniors have gone through and move on to get jobs. Most of them are single, their spouse has passed away. It's very good for them to come in and just socialize with others. We also do



an ESL (English as a Second Language) program. A lot of people don't know how to speak English. This is why it is so helpful with the ESL class that we have here. There's also a health education program and a cultural transfer program where we bring the seniors and we bring the high school kids and they tell stories. They have fun. They laugh and have fun with them.

Seniors from Samoa are very outgoing, very open, but they are so contained here. We live in open houses in Samoa. You see everybody walking down the streets, yelling and saying hello. Here, you lock your door. It's like you're in a prison. A lot of these seniors don't know how to drive because there was no need to drive in Samoa. It's walking everywhere. That's why they were healthy. When they came here, if you want a license, you got to pass that test. It becomes a frustrating thing after five or six times, so they give up. Now, a lot of people are beginning to understand that we need to look at our health. But a lot of these seniors, they don't understand what you are trying to tell them. It is so hard to tell them not to eat taro, not to eat salty, not to eat this and this and this. All these things that Samoans love to eat.

Samoaan culture is a culture of respect, but it's so misinterpreted here because, like in any other culture, one person screws up and outsiders judge the whole community. So we're constantly trying to send the message that we're not violent people. Just because somebody did something stupid, it doesn't mean that the whole race is like that. We also have a couple of football players that are very renowned in the NFL, but that doesn't mean we're all NFL players. We also have our doctors and lawyers.



Mareta Tagaloa

Born Nua ma Seetaga, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1985

Administrator, Second Samoan Congregational Church, Long Beach

I **KNOW THE HISTORY** of the Second Samoan Church. We've been here since 1994. People come and go, but I've been here and I support the ministry and I love this place. We've invited two other churches to be here, too – City Lights Community Church and Victory Outreach. That's the difference in our approach. We work together.

I like the freedom of doing a lot of different things. We're involved in broader justice and peace issues. We believe strongly in the work that we do in the community. It makes a difference.

Luz Ramos

Born 1933, Quezon City, Luzon, Philippines

Arrived U.S. 1995

Office Assistant, Second Samoan Congregational Church, Long Beach

IF YOU JUST WORK hard in the U.S., you can earn a living. In the Philippines, it's very hard to get a job if you are not in the civil service. I moved here first, and then I petitioned for my family back in the Philippines to come over. When I landed here, I got a job in a bakery because the owner of the bakery is the niece of my husband. I had a job as a cashier. You do all the things there. You have to mop

the floor, you have to wash all the cookware, everything. But I said, "Oh, it's okay. I have a job." It's a very little amount of salary, but you have to adjust your living – not like the Philippines.

When my husband passed away, my friends told me, "Why don't you apply at NAPCA?" I said, "Oh, yeah. I will try it." I don't want to stay at home because I just remember my husband. I am an office assistant here at the Second Samoan Church. I enjoy my work. I help everyone who needs help who comes here.

I don't feel like a senior. I just go with the younger people, older people. I feel happy. I am also fond of going to parties. I engage in a religious organization. Every Tuesday, I go to Bible studies. I was elected treasurer of the organization.

I am happy with my life even



though I am living alone in my apartment. I have a daughter who has four kids. My daughter said, “Why are you always going out? You have to take care of the kids.” I said to my daughter, “When you were small, I was a babysitter. Now, you will make me a babysitter again? No. I don’t want it.” Besides, they are big enough to take care of themselves. So I don’t stay with my daughter here.

I met many kinds of people here. Not only Filipinos, but also any nationality. I am comfortable working with the Samoans. They are good. They treat me as their family, so I enjoy working with them. My goal is that maybe I will retire here.

Evile Pule

Born 1934, Lotofaga, Upolu, Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1987

Outreach Aide, Guam Communications Network, Long Beach

AMERICA WAS THE COUNTRY that I always dreamed I had to visit. My mom doesn’t let me come because I’m the only one in the family that has a job to look after her. She doesn’t even let me go to New Zealand first because she said if I go, there is nobody to look after her. She is relying on me. That’s why I came over here too late. I start here in old age.

My parents have passed away. No one – even my brothers and sisters – are living in the Island now. To me, because I’m still single, I don’t need to go back because I don’t have any family.

I used to be a school teacher back home in Samoa before I came. I also did dressmaking. Back home in those days, you find anything to get money to help your family. I learned by seeing. I learned all those types of stitches. I start from that until I can sew. Women come to me and say, “Do you like to make my baby’s dress?” So I cut and I sew by hand. Those days are very bad, very poor. During my time, you used the treadle machine and you used the hand sewing machine. During the school holidays, that’s my job to do to get some more money to feed my family.

I like the work at NAPCA very much. Over here, we learn how to talk on the phone with people. I learn to make copies. I learn faxing. I said to myself, “Oh, if I



don't join NAPCA, I don't think I can touch the computer.” But from now on, I can touch the computer. I'm very pleased that I can do all these things for my time and my education.

In Samoa these days, the young generation now, they have a good education. But before, like my time, they mix up the English and your own language to learn in school. I'm glad I came out so I can speak English. But it's not very good. I can understand and speak the language. But before, in Samoa, we just spoke a few words and that's it. And most of the time, we used our own language.

I think my life as a senior is very different from when I was young. People respect you as a senior. The only goal for me right now is just to bring God to give me life and get strength and keep up with the church. I keep focusing on my family. My nephew and sister – I respect them a lot. And they respect me because I think they know that I am the only old person in the family around them. I would like to continue to have a good relationship with them.

Mary Salas

Born 1935, Guam

Arrived U.S. mainland 1955

Project Coordinator, NAPCA Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California

THE TRANSITION IS QUITE different because we are U.S. citizens. When we come here, we don't feel really like a foreigner because we are citizens and Guam is just like America. We do grow up in an American way and so it's not hard for us to get established when we come here. It's a little different because of the climate, the way of life and everything else is so different. But as far as living conditions, Guam is like the U.S.

Coming from the Philippines or Samoa, it's quite different because with them, they are trying to become citizens and so the American life, it's hard for them to tackle, to handle. They need time and they need someone, someone like me probably, to help them through this trouble. I do this by really talking to them, just like I'm



with them in their own country. When I assign them to an agency, I tell them to just be yourself. Relax and try your best and do whatever you have to, but don't go back to the Philippines or Samoa. Just remember that you're here and it's important to follow the rules and regulations because this is the American way. I know it's hard to probably file names and all that, but this is why you're at the agency, so we can help train you. It's not that we're assigning you because you know the job. No, you're there for training only. And once you're trained, then find yourself a good salary.

I've been doing this for maybe about 17 years. I dedicated myself to this position strongly because I see the needs of the seniors. They do need help, especially immigrants, where they just come to this country without any knowledge of the American style, American way. This is my pride and joy, to really help them out. And it seems like the seniors are very happy. They're willing to work. Seniors are dependable. They're good workers and they dedicate themselves. Younger people just do whatever they want to do, but seniors are responsible.

I look at the seniors and I'm so happy that I am doing this for them. My goal is to help them, get them established and keep going, keep moving, keep getting busy so that their lifestyle would just continue to change. Soon, they will be successful and I'll probably be working for them. I'm just so proud of them. I'm just so proud.

Shawn Sargose

Born 1971, Fairfield, California

Media Director, Guam Communications Network, Long Beach

THE BIGGEST ISSUE for the Chamorro community here is cultural identity, understanding the history and who you are and respecting that as you move forward. Being raised out here in the States, you don't have the kind of connection that my parents – or the older generation that came here – have. When you travel back, you understand a little bit more. But if you've never traveled back, you don't have that sense of connection to that place.

A lot of us are here because our fathers were in the military. We're here because my dad was a Vietnam vet. That's how you get off Island. I don't speak Chamorro. I



can understand okay. My parents stopped speaking it when I was a child because I was having a hard time with my English. I had a little speech problem, too. I was a first-born, off Island. So they stopped speaking to me in Chamorro. But when I used to go back to Guam, if I was there for an extended time, I started to understand what people were saying and started picking it up.

I've gone back to Guam enough to where I now have an understanding of home there. We have a unique situation being that we're a U.S. territory. So it's not like I'm leaving anywhere. I don't have to get a passport or anything. I just fly over there.

I'm married out and a lot of my cousins and my generation are marrying out. Before he died, my grandfather used to tell me that our people – eventually, we're not going to be around no more. I used to say, "You're crazy. What are you talking about? Whatever." And now I understand what he means. I used to not get it. I'm older now. I get it. Over the last 50, 60 years, people are leaving the Island. We're such a small community, but I think if people can continue to latch onto the culture, we can connect through that. That's what I hope.

Pat Luce

Born 1944, Fagatogo, Tutuila, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1952

Executive Director, National Office of Samoan Affairs, Carson

I WAS BORN IN American Samoa and adopted at the age of two by American missionaries. It's been kind of a back and forth journey to the islands and here during my younger years. I did graduate school in the Sacramento area. I met some chiefs from the San Francisco Bay area and they were the ones that really inspired me. They were very passionate about the message of communicating with the political people who make decisions about programs for our community. That's what generated my interest.

We needed to communicate the needs of the community. We incorporated the National Office of Samoan Affairs in 1976 to be the technical arm between the community and the agencies, to connect it to the universities, with researchers who could provide that kind of assistance for us.

Health issues are a very sensitive area. Diabetes in our community is really prevalent. Heart disease, too. Hypertension is prevalent and certain types of cancer. We're trying to deal with cancer early on, for prevention and intervention. So the education part is very, very important for our people. Sometimes, if they know that some of our people have a background in the area of nursing, they will be more open to listen to them and work with them. But it is a challenge. Normally, they wait until they are very critically sick and then they go in.

There's also some generational issues. The very young – sometimes, they see culture as a conflict because traditionally, the focus is on the community and the family setting. They go to school and the individual is highlighted. Young people sometimes find peers who don't really relate to the total community setting or the total family. There is still respect there, but it can be challenged.

Employment for seniors is difficult. Just to say, "Go out and look for a job" at that age, the concept almost sounds too threatening. They have to learn new skills, like copying, answering the phone, basic computers. They've never done that before. Once they are encouraged in those areas, they can be matched with that kind of job.

Many seniors need the financial support. They are coming forward and making



those requests more readily now than before because of the exposure – they’ve heard of other individuals that participated in these programs and have been successful.

Many seniors are stuck at home taking care of kids. That was not their role in the islands. There, they were taken care of. Now, it’s reversed because mom and poppy – they are working or they are elsewhere and the kids are there with them at the house. Sometimes, you find just the seniors are there by themselves fending for themselves.

In the islands, village life was the center. There was a hierarchy

of village chiefs, family chiefs and so forth. Everyone knew their roles. Here, churches not only became a spiritual setting, it also became a place where everything took place, in reference to culture, in reference to exchanges of traditions. If you look wherever our Samoan people are, there’s always churches, not so much social service agencies. We try to work very closely together.

Sometimes, the centrality of churches keeps our communities isolated and then problems arise. As much as you can try to isolate and protect, it’s important to have that extended arm outside. We have a program that deals with foster care because many of our kids are being pulled away and parents don’t understand why. They feel that God gave them the kids. “Who has the right to come and take my kids away?” So we deal with the laws and regulations of this country that protect the children.

We need new leaders from the youth to be able to be the voice for our people. Sometimes, our young ones are very ambitious and have schooled well, but they also need to recognize the community itself and the proper protocol that still exists there. I want to see that transition because they are the ones who will help make the proper decisions for us.

Fiapito Leota

Born 1951, Nu'uuli, Tutuila, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1963

Office Assistant, Tafesilafa'i Festival, Long Beach

IN SAMOA, EVERYTHING is free. You have your own land, you have food. You have the plantation around – bananas, taro and everything. But here, you have to work to have food on the table. You have to sweat over here. I came to this country to get a good education and a good job. My parents came out here because my dad was in the Service. So when my dad came to California, I had to come along with him. He was in the Army.

Learning the English language was the hardest thing because when I was back home in Samoa, I spoke my own language. When I was going to school, it was hard

for me to communicate with people because I didn't know how to speak English at all. I was only 10. After about six months, when I hung out with the people at school, I got more comfortable with the language. I speak the English language now. When I go home, I speak my own language.

Tafesilafa'i is the organization I work for. Every year during the last week in

July, we have a Pacific Islander festival at the Aquarium of the Pacific. That's where we go from Thursday to Sunday. We have all the vendors. Tafesilafa'i has their own booth – the Bread of Life. They sell drinks, banana, poi, pineapple.

I love my work. I love the people. I like to help out everybody, volunteering and helping the needy. That's what I like to do. I meet a lot of homeless people here – people that are needing food and clothing. They also ask for a roof over their heads,



but we don't have that yet. I always tell myself, "If I hit the Lotto, I'm going to build shelter for the homeless." It will be nice. One of these days, I hope I will hit it.

My advice to younger people is for them to stay in school and to get their education. Nowadays, when you go to look for a job, they always ask you about the highest level of education you have. Get the training. That's real important now.

Simamao Lee Casper

Born 1947, Tula, Tutuila, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1958

Outreach Worker, Samoan Federation of America, Carson

I WAS I I WHEN I came here. My mother said it was a better place for us – for education and job. I came with my brothers. I was the only girl at that time. When I first came here, sometimes people talk to you and because I speak with the accent, they say, "Where are you from?" I say, "Oh, I'm from the Island." "What island?" "American Samoa." And I say to them: "There are two. There is Western Samoa and American Samoa." Then they ask me, "Why is there two?" I say, "Western Samoa used to belong to the British. American Samoa belongs to the United States." They say, "Oh, wow. We didn't know that." I say, "Well, at least you know that now."

It's funny because I was never around my Samoan people. The only time I'm around them is when I go to church. I go to church – with my mother and my brothers – and then we go back home. The way I was brought up, the church comes first. Six days you can work. Seventh day is church and a day of rest. And to this day, I still carry that – what I was taught. And I was taught respect. It doesn't matter what color. We are all God's children.

NAPCA – I love that place. I started here because of my sister-in-law. I was kind of embarrassed to get out and go over there. But then, she brought me over. If it wasn't for NAPCA, I wouldn't have the opportunity to work here and meet other people and to learn.

This is my first chance to work and I'm very proud of it. I'm not embarrassed.

I'm happy to have this work, especially at my age. I want to learn the copy machine and they taught me how. Answering the phone – they also told me how to do it. I listen and I take the message. They told me: “See this paper here? You write down the person’s name, his or her name. Write it there and say what they want. You say where they’re from, what business or what office. And the phone number, don’t forget to write the phone number. That’s the most important. When you finish, tear it out. And do you see the names up there?” “Yes.” “You pick out the right name and put it in there.” “Oh, thank you so much, ma’am!” “Call me by my name.” “Yes, Florence.”

Me, I just want to help people. This is what I do here. I talk to people. I ask them, “What about your life?” And I tell them about my life. I am so happy that NAPCA gives me this opportunity to learn and to talk to people. I’m supporting myself with this money I receive. It helps me pay my rent. I don’t want to apply for the SSI (Supplemental Security Income) now. Other people need it. As long as these legs can take me and I can do my work – my arms, my hands, my fingers still move – I’m not going to retire. I’m going to work.



Linda Jane Guevara

Born 1948, Sinajana, Guam

Arrived U.S. mainland 1981

Case Manager, Older Adults Program, Guam Communications Network, Long Beach

I WAS BORN AND RAISED in Guam. I attended schools in Guam. I was a brat when I was growing up, that's for sure. My husband worked for Pan-Am back in Guam. We moved here in 1981 when he was transferred out here. I worked for the federal government and I was fortunate enough to transfer out here to Long Beach Naval Shipyard.

I didn't have any transition issues, but it was difficult for my oldest son. He stayed back for a couple months until he decided that he was ready to come out. He took it the hardest because he had to make new friends. But the other three – they were fine. They were okay.

There are a lot of Chamorros in the Long Beach area and some of them have been here since the 1950s, maybe earlier than that. Maybe their move out here was because of the husband being in the military or them moving out here to attend schools or universities. But there are plenty of Chamorros out here.

I think the biggest barrier for Islanders is health for sure. I am a case manager and I have seen a lot of our Islanders suffer from diabetes, heart problems. We don't have the infrastructure back in Guam – hospitals – to treat these heart patients, so they're either medivaced or referred out to the hospitals here in L.A. and Orange County for treatment. I've seen a lot of by-pass surgeries, a lot of cancer, too.

A lot of our elders don't take care of themselves. The diet is high in fat and a lot of our Chamorros back in Guam and here, they still eat what they're not supposed to be eating. Spam, for example, is commodity. Corned beef. I don't buy those things – I try not to, at least – because I know the dangers behind them. But our people eat what they want to eat.

We talk out of our heads, trying to entice them to eat healthier. It's hard for a younger person to actually tell an elder what they're not supposed to be doing. That's a no-no in the Pacific Islander community, right? You don't tell your elders that you shouldn't be touching that, you shouldn't be eating that kind of food. They'll snap



back at you and tell you that they'll eat what they want. They've always eaten it, so why should they stop now? They might be diagnosed as diabetics, but it's still not going to stop them.

I have outlived my mom. My mom died when she was 59. And I just lost my sister two years ago to cancer. I lost my brother last year, to cancer again. I have watched them and I don't want to be in the same boat that they were. So I am very, very mindful of my health status. I go in every year for my physical.

I have a goal to reach 100 if I can, to see my children get married. My goal is to be able to spend the rest of my life with my husband – I've been married almost 42 years, come September – and to be with my children. My children live in Las Vegas.

Faith and family, that is most important to me. I have very strong beliefs in my faith. I am a practicing Catholic. One of the things I've really kept up is during the Christmas time, back in the Islands, we have what we call a nine-day nobena to the baby Jesus. That tradition I still carry. It starts on the 17th of December and it ends on New Year's Day. So I value that in my life – and my husband and my children.

Petelo Ta'avaomalii

Born 1944, Apia, Upolu, Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1972

Office Support, National Office of Samoan Affairs, Carson

WITH MY LUCK, I can't go to school. I am a farmer in my country of Samoa. I support my family: my mother and my father and my sister and my brothers. I grow taro, bananas, coconuts, cocoa. I have the cows and the horses, chickens and everything.

First time, I came to the United States because of my talent. I am a comedian in my Samoan language. I take a big group – over 40 people. The group sings and my position is comedian. I make people laugh. I stay here looking for a job for my family and my kids.

My first job over here was the steel company. I work there over 12 years. Pour the steel, hot. I left the company when I go to Samoa to help with my family's problem



and I come back and they never hire me back. I stay there one year, four months. I work now because I need the money. I take care of my wife from Samoa over here. I send the money over for my wife and my kids. This is very important to me.

I liked working as comedian. It's been a long time, maybe 18 years of my life. I started the young groups for the churches and Samoan associations. I learn to be a comedian from the movies – Jerry Lewis and Bob Hope and Three Stooges. I try acting like Jerry Lewis. I showed my father and my mother, and my mother laughed at me and my dad, too. All the young groups, people laugh at my jokes. And I try it again and again and again. People hired me, it's the church and the schools and every Samoan group.

People know me as a comedian. I went around to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii for the people who invited me. Also Alaska, Seattle, Utah. I have talent to change the sound of my voice when I tell the Samoan folk stories. It is part of my play-acting. Sometimes, I bark like a dog. It depends what I am trying to do. The Samoan people really like what I do. It is a talent given to me by God. I share it with old people, young people and the sick ones. It makes them relax. They laugh. They are happy. It makes me happy, too.

I enjoy being at the Samoan Affairs office now. I never work in the office before. I answer the phone. There is a copy machine. I try the computer. I give help for my Samoan people. My English is not good, but my Samoan is good. I talk to them in their language. I can help them.

Monique Matautia

Born 1990, Paramount, California

Office Intern, Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum, Long Beach

MY MOTHER IS FROM Guam. My father is from Samoa. I was born actually in Paramount, but we moved out to Long Beach and we stayed ever since. About identity – I guess it's kind of like there's two things: an Islander aspect and then there's just the genetical aspect. My mom was telling me, "Every time people see you, they don't see you. They see me. They see your father.

They see your grandparents. When they see you, first they see everyone else that came before you.” So that just meant to me that I’m basically representing my family. So I have to keep myself up. Keep on track. Do good in school. Go to church. It’s not a bad thing. I like it. I’m glad she told me at a young age. It was good for me.

But also culturally, I’m Polynesian and Micronesian. My grandma is one of those stubborn old Samoan ladies and she always says, “Samoa for Samoa. Samoa is best.” If you’re Samoan, then you’re better than everyone else, basically. She was born on the

Island, as you can tell. It’s just like my grandma tries to brainwash us: “You should take more pride in your Samoan side.” Like when we would come over to the house, me and my brother, they would literally call us “Guamese” all the time. At first, I would say, “Whatever, whatever.” But then, when I got older, I thought, “That’s mean!” Because I’m both things.

And even when it comes to identifying myself on a form, I used to think, “Oh, what should I put? Should I only mark one? Should I put Samoan? Should I put Chamorro?” But I usually put Chamorro because not many people know about Chamorros. Most people know about Samoans. I’m not putting down my Samoan side, but it’s just a balancing act.

I’m very close with both sides of my family. I don’t know the full language of both of my cultures, but I know the main things. Wash the dishes. Be quiet. Hello. Goodbye. Stuff like that. I know the dances, the songs. Yeah, it’s pretty cool.



Moana Auelua

Born 1946, Faleasao, Ta'u, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1980

Office Assistant, Taea Ole Talalelei Congregational Christian Church, Carson

I BROUGHT MY KIDS here for the education. I believe there are better opportunities here because I always come and go, and that's why I went back and brought my kids here. I know that over here, they have a chance for a good education. The hardest thing for me is raising my kids as a single parent. That's the problem. I came by myself. I brought four kids. Time is running along and some of the things I see is really hard for me, raising my kids by myself.

California is so beautiful, the lights and all that. More places to go and have fun. I can have a lot of friends over here. A lot of good places to go eat. The island where I'm from we only have one restaurant at that time.

I always come here and go home. I figured out: I got to go back to the United States and raise my kids over here. But I miss my own customs and I miss my food,



traditional food. For example is breadfruit, taro, yam. I eat a lot of that. And when we go fishing, everything is fresh. Very fresh. No refrigeration.

One of the friends of my relative told me to come to NAPCA. I kept ignoring it. But when I was 55, I come and apply and work after that. I am an office assistant. Like when things need to be filed, I do that. It reminds me of all the jobs that I used to have. In Samoa, I used to work in a library.

Even though I am old, I have a chance to do all this. I am working and I feel young when I get into this kind of job. Look, I'm 65. When you apply for a job, they look at you, they look at your age. They won't accept you. "What are you doing here?" But thank God I got NAPCA giving me a chance. It's so nice.

I don't feel like a senior. Right now, to me I feel young because of the work I have here. Every morning, I shower and come here to work. Even though we are old in age, thank God I get to work and get out of the house.

Eseneiaso Malieitulua

Born 1941, Pago Pago, Tutuila, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1963

Office Assistant, Samoan Federation of America, Carson

WHEN I FIRST CAME here, I started working. I wanted to be self-supporting and look for more education. But I was trying to get some money to help myself out, so I couldn't go to school. I worked in a nursing home, taking care of old people. I was a nurse's assistant. I didn't have any experience at all.

The hardest thing about adjusting was English. I didn't have enough education. It was hard to speak out. I learned English at school in Samoa. But here, you use it all the time. Back home, you only use English at school.

I miss my family. I can stay there free. Nothing to worry about back home, like paying the rent.



Being here at NAPCA has really helped me. I didn't know anything about how to answer the phone or doing the paperwork, filing. They showed me. I learned a little bit of computer. I'm trying and I'm getting it.

I'm working because I still need to learn and my finances is really bad now. The Social Security check goes to your house and there is nothing left. So I don't care how much I make in here, it helps me.

My goal in life is I want to raise my family, supporting them – my kids, my grandchildren. There's a lot of difference between my life and my children's life. Their lives here is not the way I was raised. I was raised in a poor family, open house. My parents – they both didn't work. We were raised in the farms. My children – they don't have that kind of life. They just want to snap their fingers and everything is there. They don't want to work hard. Their lives is easier than ours.

My advice to younger people? To love each other. Try to help people out. Help everybody who needs help. Tell them to pray to God. That's the main source of everything. Make them go to church and believe there is a God. It helps. I give them that advice. That's the way we were raised.

Rev. Dr. Misipouena Tagaloa

Born 1965, Aua, Tutuila, American Samoa

Arrived U.S. mainland 1984

Senior Pastor, Second Samoan Congregational Church, Long Beach

WHEN WE BOUGHT into this community in 1994, it was predominantly African American. But now, it's mostly Hispanics. And now that we're here, we're beginning to bring in the Pacific Islander component.

Before we were here, we didn't have any families. After we bought the church in '94, there were about 18 Samoan families that raised their heads and said, "Hey, this is our community."

I hear the Samoan elders say that their families are being split apart. Their kids – after they go to college – somehow the Samoan-ness has been educated out of them. The elders say, "Oh, I sent so-and-so off to the university and now she can't live in the community."



Rev. Dr. Misipouena Tagaloa with Luz Ramos (left) and Fiapito Leota outside the Second Samoan Congregational Church in Long Beach.

You know, in Samoa, it's just a small island. If you make it big, what you do is you come back and build the biggest house on the block, right? You don't move out to the suburbs and then build your castle surrounded by a moat. So that seems to be the challenge for our elderly people. I'm not sure whether that's generational or economic disparity.

A lot of our families don't live here. The folks that are left behind are the renters, the elderly on fixed incomes and the elderly on fixed incomes that have been displaced by their stronger counterpart family members that are living out there in the suburbs. So you rent a place and you take care of your grandkids all week and during the weekends.

What we've done is that we've set up the National Pacific Islander Community Development Corporation. Part of their charge is to build communities. Not just building housing, but bringing back that notion of caring for one another that is so absent in these urban surroundings. It's so much a part of who we are as Pacific Islanders. We want to be able to capture that.

The second piece of our wanting to build communities is this festival every year called Tafesilafa'i. It is our own little piece of the world. One week, downtown Long Beach at the Aquarium of the Pacific, we invite our community to come and have fellowship with everybody through dances and songs and faith and food. The festival is now in its 14th year.

Maria Luna

Born 1947, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico

Arrived U.S. 1961

Office Assistant, Samoan Federation of America, Carson

I CAME TO THE United States because, as I remember it, I was 12 years old and I had a boyfriend and I wanted to get married. My mom said, “No, you are going to your sister-in-law’s house in California.” I stayed and I didn’t go back. My sister-in-law – she didn’t have a car. So I had to take the bus. It was hard because I

didn't know California. I didn't know the streets, but I'm still here. I love California. These people here are wonderful. I know more Samoan people than I do Spanish-speaking people.

I had a granddaughter. She was 14 years old. I came to pick her up from school, but she didn't wear her seatbelt. So the police saw her and they gave me a ticket. When I went to the court, I told the judge. I said, "I'm sorry, but I don't have no money to pay this ticket." So they sent me for community service and they sent me over here to the Samoan Federation. And I'm still here.

Now, I'm assigned to the Samoan Federation through NAPCA. I'm an office assistant. Here, we have community service. If they don't speak English or they don't understand, I will help them. We do a lot of activities. They need help over here; they need help over there, I'm always helping.

I am a senior. I'm going to be 63, but I don't feel old. With these people, I feel young. They are nice people. We learn everything. This is my first time with



the computer, and I'm learning. This was hard for me because I never touch it before. My girls – they had a computer, but they never let me play on the computer. They said, "Grandma, you're too old!" I said, "I want to know what it is like to put my name there." They said, "No, Grandma, you're too old." But right here, we have a chance to do it.

Fran Lujan

Born 1963, Tamuning, Guam

Arrived U.S. mainland 1981

External Communications Representative, Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum,
Long Beach

I WAS BORN AND RAISED in the island of Guam. I first came out here for undergraduate school when I was 17, and then I came back when I was 30 to go to grad school. I've been out here for 16 years now. The goal of my mother and my dad was, "You need to take care of yourself."

My mother was one of those women who left the Island when you could only do that by becoming a nun or marrying a man in the military. My mother actually became a model for disobeying because she said, "Whatever your dream is, and God willing, you follow your dream and it will take you places." She wanted to be a beautician and she went and lived in Colorado, New Mexico, and then she came back home. She taught me that my identity is not necessarily a geographical location. Identity is experience.

She has set the standard for me of who I am as a Chamorro. Faith is important, but wherever I am, I bring a sense of her and her courage. She followed that dream. I don't have this trouble because I have a role model. How lucky I am! I continually honor her legacy by following my dreams.



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Interviewed June 3, 2010
Location: Samoan Federation of America, Carson, CA

Pesefea J. Gaoa

Interviewed June 4, 2010
Location: Guam Communications Network, Long Beach, CA

Fiapito Leota

Interviewed June 4, 2010
Location: Second Samoan Congregational Church, Long Beach, CA

Tuu Lokeni

Interviewed June 3, 2010
Location: Samoan Federation of America, Carson, CA

Maria Luna

Interviewed June 3, 2010
Location: Samoan Federation of America, Carson, CA

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Interviewed June 3, 2010
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Interviewed June 4, 2010
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Cover photos

Top, from left: Simamao Lee Casper, Moana Auelua, Pupaia Mason, Tuu Lokeni, Eseneiaso Malieitulia and Chief Loa Pele Faletofo. Bottom: Fran Lujan (left) and Monique Matautia.

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