

Copra, rivers and a Uni degree

FROM *humble* beginnings in the remote *north west* of MALEKULA to becoming the leader of *Vanuatu's* Technical and Vocational TRAINING program, Fremden Yanhambath's JOURNEY has *always* been about *education*.

Story by Patricia Gil.

The dirt road winds through coconut plantations, dense pockets of forest, gardens and along the coast. Up and down we go, in the humid heat of February, through forests and across rivers. The journey used to take over three hours but they have recently fixed the road and it is now only a two hour drive to the village of Lekhan. We are driving to the north west of Male-

kula, to the land of the Big Nambas and the place where Fremden Yanhambath, 'Fremy' for short, was born. Growing up in a tiny village, in the shadow of a natural cliff in the remote north west of Malekula, Fremy is a man who embodies the story that every little girl and boy should know. The story that says, no matter how humble your origins, you can achieve your dream if you are prepared to work hard enough for it.

Fremy is the new Team Leader of Vanuatu's national Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Sector Strengthening Program. Funded by the Australian Government and working in partnership with the Government of Vanuatu, the TVET initiative in its current form was born in 2008. Its objectives are to formalise, improve and expand technical and vocational education across Vanuatu. Targeting the outer islands, and

Previous page: Fremy and his grandmother, Eileen, at her village in North West Malekula. *This page from top to bottom:* The Malampa TVET Centre; Fremy and his proud parents in Santo; One of the many cute villages in Malekula; A training session takes place at the Malampa TVET Centre in Malakula. Photos by Patricia Gil.

responding to the needs of people in remote and rural areas, the program has established TVET centres in Malekula, Santo and the Banks Islands, which have now been formally integrated within the Ministry of Education and Training. Each centre helps identify, design, deliver, and coordinate hundreds of training and coaching programs in rural areas, to meet skill needs in all islands across Malampa, Sanma and Torba Provinces. Australian Anna Gibert has been 'on the ground' at the helm of the program for the last five and half years. Anna stepped down from her role at the end of 2014 handing over the position to the new Team Leader of the TVET program, Fremden Yanhambath.

I have come to Malekula to see where the new Team Leader of the TVET program, a man with a Masters in leadership and management, specialising in vocational education, and the first Ni Vanuatu to lead a major bi-lateral aid program established between the Australian and Vanuatu governments, came from. I am on my way to the airport, a little late, at 6.30am for a 7.30 flight, when Fremy calls to make sure I don't miss my plane. I thought we were on 'island time'? Apparently not. Not with Fremy anyway. From the moment I set foot in Malekula, everything runs like clock work. The car is waiting at Norsup, ready to take us north east.

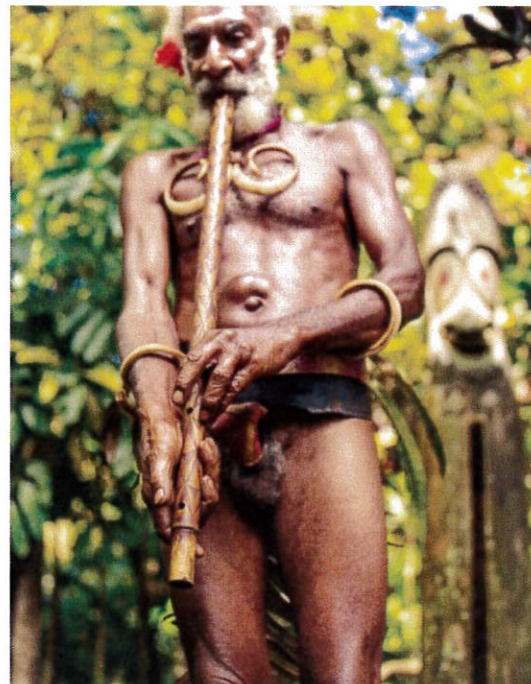
It is Sunday and the TVET centre in Norsup is closed but even without people, the building is impressive. It has a computer room, a training room, meeting room and several offices. It looks new and very well organised. A poster hangs on the wall with the map of Malakula, Ambrym and Pasma, full of green and orange dots showing where accredited training

modules and coaching workshops have taken place. As Simeon Bage, Business Development Service Coordinator for the Malampa TVET centre, happily points at the map explaining what the dots mean, I realise the enormity of the program in the Malampa province. Between 2013 and 2014, the program ran over 50 accredited training courses and coaching workshops in diverse topics such as bee keeping, poultry, tour guiding, first aid, savings and loan cooperative management, food handling, furniture making, basic accounting, and many more, requested by a variety of organisations, from the Chamber of Commerce to the Departments of Fisheries, Agriculture, and Tourism and delivered by a range of industry experts and registered trainers from across all industries in Vanuatu. For people in the outer islands, who do not have the resources to travel to the capital to further their studies or acquire new skills, this program has opened up opportunities that were simply unthinkable a few years ago. The knowledge and training that rural people have received have built their confidence and given them direction and ideas. As a result, new small-scale businesses have appeared and existing businesses have seen a growth in their operations and income.

Going to school takes more than a bus

After a quick stop at the TVET centre office to get some water for the journey, Fremy and I set off. The further we drive north, the more aware I become of how remote these villages are. There is hardly a car around, and we only meet two vehicles on the road. Later, I hear that yesterday the local truck, a Toyota Hilux, coming from Lakatoro was carrying 25





Left: Lakatoro Palms Bungalow, photo by Valerie Lebeau. **Middle:** Naomi Malau and Gloria Jeremiah at the Lakatoro Handicraft Centre, photo by Patricia Gil. **Right:** The chief of North Ambrym Fanla Rom Dance, one of the many cultural tours available in the Malampa province, photo by Valery Lebeau.

people. "When I was a child, sometimes we needed to wait a couple of days for a truck to go past, that is why we had to live next to the school," explains Fremy. Fremy has a whole collection of schools behind him. In year one, he left his parents to attend his first year of school at Matanvat where he stayed with relatives. In year two, there were so many children from his village needing accommodation close to the school that the parents came together to build a house for the children to stay together. "There were about ten of us, staying in the house. I was with my elder brother who was nine and our younger brother who was six. In Vanuatu, elder siblings look after the younger siblings. There were children from a few families in the house and no adult supervision. The house was split into two rooms, one for the girls and one for the boys and each family of children had its own cooking space outside. In the morning, we would build a fire and cook some manioc or yam for breakfast before school. After school, we took our pots to the beach to wash and went to the river to fetch water for dinner. At the weekends, we would go back to the village and get more food for the following week. If we had enough time, we would go fishing." The 'wild-children house' as I came to call it, conjured images in my mind from the Lord of the Flies. But the

children in the house had their rules and routines, everyone helping each other, the bigger kids looking after the little ones. The following year Fremy's village decided to try a different approach to the challenge of getting an education for their children. The village came together to build a classroom and bring a teacher over for the year. Unfortunately, this initiative only lasted one year as the school fees paid by the families were not enough to support the teacher. In year four, Fremy was once again 'on the move' to the Maluabay School and yet another village. The school Fremy would attend depended on which relatives could host him for the year. In year five, it was Wora Primary. Then back to Maluabay School for year six. Meanwhile, his parents were struggling to pay for the education of their children cutting copra, the only activity they could undertake to fund the children's schooling. In year seven Fremy went to boarding school in Rensarie, one of the biggest schools in Malekula, with over 400 children attending, where he stayed until year ten. His parents moved to Aore Island, off Santo, to work in the biggest copra plantation in the island. "Cutting copra is not an easy job," explains Fremy. "The family used to work from morning to night, six days a week, for very little money, just to try to make enough money for the fees."

Every so often, a village pops out the bush along the road. These are very pretty villages, with paths fringed by lovely gardens and cute little square bamboo houses with Natangora roofs. Between the villages, children swim across several river crossings, on which concrete platforms are being built so areas do not become cut off during big rains. "The rivers flood regularly," explains Fremy. "When I was young, I remember once when the river became impassable and I had to get back to Vila. A truck drove us to the flooded river where another truck was waiting on the other side. A rope was tied between two trees, one each side of the river and we crossed the river, fighting against the current and holding onto the rope with one hand while we tried to keep our belongings dry by holding them over our heads."

After a few more rivers we arrived at the village where Fremy's grandmother lives. The old lady, Eileen, is barely a metre tall and looks at once fragile and incredibly resilient. Her eyes sparkle, full of life: she is overjoyed to have him there and she brings us some *simboro* to eat while we take a break from the driving under the shade of the bamboo awning in the lovely courtyard. This is the land of the Small Nambas and soon, we will be crossing into Big Nambas territory.

Fremy's mother is from the Small Nambas tribe while his father is Big Nambas. There was a time not so long ago when the Big Nambas regularly attacked the Small Nambas and ferocious tribal wars took place. Nowadays, thankfully, things are a little more settled.

After a short break, we resume our drive past a cave next to the beach where Fremy tells me that the Big Nambas used to go and feast and celebrate their victories. "You know, there was a lot of cannibalism around this area," he tells me. Fortunately now is a thing of the past but visitors can get a 'taste' of it through the 'cannibal tours' offered in the area. Cultural tours such as the Nambas Amokh Tribal Tour, Amelbati Cannibal Site & Chiefs Grave Tour or the Big Nambas Tour at Mae, have opened Malekula's rich culture to visitors and the flourishing local tourism industry, much of it created through the help of TVET program initiatives, is paving the way for cultural and adventure tourism in the island.

Soon, we arrive at Fremy's village, located in a wide bay at the foot of a steep hill, with a long, sandy beach. Rainwater tanks at the top of the hill feed water to the village below. "We are lucky to have this set up," Fremy explains. "Before, it was hard work to have to go to the river for water."

After finishing high school, Fremy's family could only afford to pay for one child to attend university. His elder brother, Jackson Yanhambath, now chief of their village, decided to give the opportunity to Fremy. As is kastom in Vanuatu, Fremy repaid the favour by taking over the care of his brother's first born son, who now lives with him

and goes to school in Port Vila. His university years in PNG were paid by the family's work on the copra plantation and the work that Fremy did for the university during weekends and holiday breaks. After finishing his degree, Fremy spent a year teaching and five years working with local NGO Live and Learn, before joining the TVET program in 2009. In 2012, he was awarded an Australian Government scholarship to complete his Masters at the University of Newcastle, and upon his return to Vanuatu, he successfully applied for the position of TVET Program Deputy Team Leader, working closely with Anna Gibert as her successor.

Emerging tourism industry and new opportunities

It has been a long and eventful day and before nightfall, we make it to the place where I will be spending the night, Big Nambas bungalow.

Perched atop a big boulder rock, standing right on the seashore, a bamboo bridge unites the rock to the mainland. The quaint bamboo bungalow is quite impressive. Inside, big glass doors open onto a veranda, from where you can see fish swimming in the rock pools below. Ahead, the ocean fills the view towards the horizon. Naiwen, the owner, comes to meet us bringing juice and lovely grapefruit and vegetable patties.

It was through the courses offered by the TVET centre that this bubbly, welcoming lady decided to start her accommodation business. Back in 2009, she attended the first of many tourism courses and coaching sessions delivered through the TVET centre. With her newfound skills and confidence, she started her own accommoda-

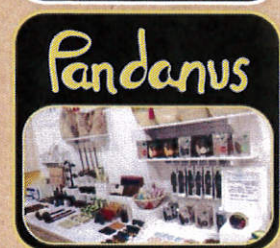
Below: Fremy and his family in Lekhan, the village where Fremy grew up, in Big Nambas territory, north west of Malekula. Photo by Patricia Gil



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tion business, back in her village, in Big Nambas territory.

Part of the TVET program's innovative approach is the follow up that it offers. After coordinating demand-driven training modules, the TVET centre organises further coaching and further training modules to progressively up-skill the participants. Industry experts keep in touch and visit participants on-site to offer further coaching and advice.

Pascal Gavotto, owner of Fatumaru Lodge in Port Vila, is one of these coaches whose passion and commitment to helping the local tourism industry in the outer islands has made a great difference to many. "When we realised that we wanted to build a bungalow, we asked the TVET centre for help and advice on location and design. Pascal and Fremy came and walked with us, all along the coast, looking at all suitable sites. When Pascal came to the big rock, he said to us 'Here, you must build here'," explains Naiwen. "At first we were a little unsure, it is hard work to build on a rock, but we trusted Pascal's advice and so we did." Indeed, Naiwen and her family now have a unique product on their hands, a bungalow like no other, in a very special location. Naiwen was excited to attend her next TVET course, starting the next day at the centre, this time in book-keeping. "Oh yes, I go to all the TVET courses", she said smiling. "I never miss one!"

Working together for the betterment of all

The next day, we left the wilderness of north Malekula behind for Norsup, where I saw for myself the participants who were attending a TVET centre training. Most of the owners and managers of the local bungalows, restaurants and tours were there. Tam Tam bungalow, Asunda from Lakatoro Palm Lodge, Man Bush Trek, Nanwud Bungalows on Uriv Island and many others.

A strong woman with an open and contagious laugh, Lene Banga, owner of Nanwud Bungalow, has also attended all the courses that the TVET for Tourism program has offered since 2009. "The training courses have been great and have taught me a lot" she tells me. "The Malampa Call Centre has doubled my

bookings". Before the Malampa Call Centre, Lene's visitors knew of her only through the Lonely Planet guide.

The Malampa Call Centre was created in partnership between the Department of Tourism, the TVET program and NZAID to facilitate the marketing and bookings of local activities and accommodation across all the islands in the Malampa province. With no internet and very little technology, tourism business in Malampa province used to be greatly hindered by their lack of contact with the rest of the world. The Call Centre has opened a virtual door out into the world for tourism in the outer islands and is a good example of how the TVET program creates a network between different organisations, departments and education providers. It has also provided professional development training and coaching to the tourism officers in charge of the call centre while the call centre requests training from the TVET centre to meet the demand for skills from emerging businesses. The Department of Tourism, with whom the Malampa Call Centre shares office and resources, is in charge of making sure that new products, from tours to accommodation, meet the DoT standards, requesting training and coaching through the TVET centre in any areas in need of improvement.

TVET centre skills training is not only focused on tourism however and its support to agriculture and other primary industries is just as important. In Malekula, the TVET centre has facilitated accredited trainings in rural fishing, forestry, poultry and many more. The cocoa industry, the second biggest industry in Malekula after copra, has seen an increase in both quality and quantity, after training undertaken through the TVET centre, with many small farmers benefiting from an increase in income. The Cocoa Growers Association is now able to export directly to Singapore, bypassing Santo's middleman, and has built new offices and storage and holding facilities to cater for the increase in production and quality of its cocoa.

Yet another example of what working together can achieve is the new Handicraft Centre in Lakatoro. The centre is the brainchild of three women, Naomi

Malau, Gloria Jeremiah and Mothy Viranmal, part of the Malekula and the Malampa Provincial Council of Women. In 2012 they decided to apply for funding to create a Handicraft Centre in town where rural women could sell their handicrafts. With funding from the Australian Government, they secured the help of a volunteer, Molly, and the materials to build an undercover market.

Through the TVET centre, they requested training on handicraft quality production for the local mamas. The land was donated by the province and the building itself was built through the practical component of one of the TVET Centre's building training modules. Since opening in April 2013, the new Handicraft Centre has generated over 400,000vt of income for the local mamas.

The TVET program is currently focusing on gender equality and achieving higher numbers of female participants. "Our focus right now is to get more women involved and participating in the different trainings and modules offered," explains Robert Kalowie, the TVET program's gender equality specialist and one of the people who will be overseeing the implementation of the TVET Centres' Gender Equality Strategy in partnership with the Department of Women's Affairs.

Fremy, at 33 and at the helm of this vast program since January 2014 has, no doubt, a lot of work ahead of him. I ask if he ever knew that this is where he would end up when he first set out for university in PNG. "I always knew that I wanted to work with people and in education. So yes, in a way, it is not a surprise." Now in charge of the program which makes vocational education available to thousands of rural people, Fremy is far from alone in his quest. A team of great people, too many to mention, all wholly committed to and passionate about making education available to all, makes TVET the successful program it is. Like his village coming together to build a classroom for the children, the TVET program team, passionate about education and skills, is working together to build many classrooms, and ultimately, the future of a nation.