

Alex Riccio, '08

Nacomoto, Fiji

A very good friend of my family, Kerry, married a Fijian man, Solo. Solo holds a high position in the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Fijian Government. I called Kerry and Solo and asked them if there were any places in Fiji where I could offer any type of assistance for my summer of service. It turned out that the village where Solo's family is from is very primitive, poverty stricken and had many needs to be met.

The main island of Fiji, Viti Levu, is characterized by very poor living conditions, except for the few vacation destinations, which are isolated from the everyday life of the people. There are several other islands that surround the main island, where life is even more primitive. This is where we went. The name of the island was Kadavu. We took a ten hour over night ferry ride from the main island to Kadavu. Once we were in Kadavu, we took a one hour long motor boat ride to the hidden village of Nacomoto to stay with Solo's relatives.

The ancient culture and customs are still very much intact and practiced daily by the members of Solo's tribe. We presented a whale's tooth to the chief of the village, which is considered one of the greatest honors in the Fijian culture. Oil and rice were among the other gifts that we brought to the village as a token for their hospitality, letting us stay with them for several weeks. We were able to take part in many tribal ceremonies, including a funeral and a wedding. Also, as honored guests we visited sacred places in the village that outsiders had never been allowed to go to before. Also, I was especially excited because I knew that the Fijians loved to play rugby and snorkel. Our meals, which were prepared by the women of the village, mainly consisted of freshly caught boiled fish, taro leaves, eggplant, and rice. All of the food was either straight from the sea or the farms of the villagers.

There were two problems in the village that we could offer assistance to correct, educating the young children and building a sea wall to prevent erosion. For the most part, no one in the village spoke English. If people could speak English, they did not in everyday life. As a result, the children were behind when it came time for school. This is a problem because in order to advance academically and leave Kadavu for later schooling on Viti Levu, you need to be able to speak English. We were able to receive donations from a local Girl Scout Troop in order to get supplies to properly teach a kindergarten level class. With the help of markers, crayons, scissors, bubbles, paper, and stickers to name a few, a kindergarten was erected for the young children to learn English. We needed to learn Fijian words in order to communicate the lessons to the young kids, needless to say this was a challenge, but fun.

The Fijian people hold their land closer to their heart than any other physical entity. Erosion from the river that cuts through the village had been slowly eating away their land, from which they were able to see major future problems. We bought and brought supplies to make a sea wall of approximately fifty yards as a test to see how it would work. For a few weeks the villagers and I collected large amounts of rocks to fill PVC cages to line the eroding river bank. The PVC cages made me feel more at ease because the children would not cut themselves on any rust if they were to play on them. We measured how much more needed to be done to sufficiently

protect the whole village and gave the numbers to Solo. Solo is now going to finance the continuation of the project through government aid, as a result of our success this past summer.

This was a great experience with genuinely nice people in a remote, beautiful, and innocent setting.