

VAVA'U PEARL ASSOCIATION

SUCCESS STORY #1



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Vava'u Pearl Association

As a single mother of five children, life was hard and I knew I had to find something real quick to help me take care of my children. Both my parents were deceased and so life was a continuous struggle. The daily mind wrestling on what to feed my kids every day, how to pay for their needs and where to get the money was mentally exhausting. Some days, I thought of just giving up but I couldn't. I had to keep going, keep thinking, keep trying at whatever I could get my hands on to support us.

My big break came when I attended a training hosted by Tonga Skills in February 2019 on jewelry making here in Vava'u. The training lasted for 2 weeks and I learned a lot about making jewelry out of shells, particularly mabe pearls. I started thinking of jewelry making as a possible livelihood for me. During the training, I overheard some talk on how one can become a pearl farmer. The very next week, I came to the Ministry of Fisheries to seek for help on processing my application to be a licensed pearl farmer. While I waited for my license, I was washing dishes at a cafe just to get some money.

One day, as I came to advertise our coffee from the cafe to a cruise ship at the wharf, I met an Australian volunteer who told me she could get work for me at the Vava'u Pearl Center. It was unexpected but I was sure that this must be the Lord's doing and that he has heard my prayers. I interviewed for the job and started working in July 2019 as a supervisor. I soon became a member of the Pearl Association and then later on became their marketing and communications officer.

By December 2019, I received the best news. They sent me to Australia to represent Pacific women in the pearl sector and to share my story of how I came to be a pearl farmer. It was a life-changing event for me. For the first time in a long time, I felt valued and successful. I became a model to all women in the Pacific to empower and encourage them to look into pearl farming. I took with me some of our products from the association, sold them in Australia and returned with a lot of money. The association was very happy, especially the mothers whom just like me, were only looking to make a living.

As a woman pearl farmer, there are challenges. Because I was single, there were talks that I was interested because there were a lot of men at the industry. At times, these brought me down but I also knew, these stories weren't true. I kept going because this is what put food on my table.

The best part of joining the Pearl Association is already having a market for my products. I don't have to look around. When the border is open and tourists visit Vava'u, there's always sales every day at the pearl center. Every

month, there is a cruise ship with lots of tourists which only boosts up our sales. We also started exporting last year to Hawaii. We have exported 2 times from last year to this year and we made big money. It helped me so much as a mum. I was able to buy a stove, a refrigerator and even a lawn mower. The standard of living for my family has improved immensely.

Not only does pearl farming help me financially, but mentally as well. It has given me peace, lessened my stress, helped me become more independent and given me incentive to what is most important in my life; my children. I'm grateful I discovered the pearl industry at a young age. I'm still 39 years old and single, but I'm making it. The way I see it now, who needs a man when you already got some pearls to take care of you?