

Like-minded peers embrace education and leadership

by Joel Tony and Steven Puri

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Steven Puri (left) and Joel Tony (right)
Photo Credit: *Supplied, Flickr/Alexandre Perrachon*

It was 2019 when the two of us crossed paths through education. We never knew our comradeship would be an extraordinary one, changing the course of our lives.

Although we came from two different provinces, we had few differences in terms of family background and culture, so soon after meeting we decided to support each other on our journey.

I am Joel Tony, currently aged 24, from Mount Kuta and the Kopi tribe of Hagen Central District, Western Highlands Province. I come from a polygamous family with one father, three mothers (one biological mother and two others) and ten siblings. Fighting between my tribe and the neighbouring tribe affected my schooling so I was really fortunate to move in with my relatives to continue my schooling. I often had to walk seven kilometres to my new school when I was unable to catch a minibus.

I am Steven Puri, aged 22, from the village of Telta and the Minti tribe of Jimi in Jiwaka province. Jiwaka comes from Jimi, Waghi and Kambia which refers to the Waghi Valley and the mountain ranges at the north (Jimi) and south (Kambia).

I am also from a polygamous family with one father, three mothers and seven siblings. I am from one of the remotest and most isolated parts of the province. Public services hardly reached Telta as rugged mountains and fast-flowing bridgeless rivers are a major constraint. Therefore, my parents had to migrate to Mount Hagen City in search of better education for my siblings and myself.

They made a good choice to move out of their hometown but my parents were still subsistence farmers. We attended school without footwear. I sometimes had to go to school without breakfast and at other times without lunch too.

We crossed paths in Grade 11 at Mount Hagen Secondary School (MHSS).

We bonded during the class discussions, when we realized that our minds speak the same language. We started working together on complex problems in certain subjects, like maths. What made our friendship unique, compared to others, was the

quality of the bond we shared and our shared study habits, goals, and leadership aspirations. Importantly, we also had the shared understanding of our Christian values.

We faced challenges when our families could not afford the boarding fees. As day students, we needed to provide stationery supplies and food while bunking in with students who had secured a bed in a dormitory. Some days we survived by eating biscuits for breakfast and lunch, and sometimes dinner too.

We were there for each other to keep our studies on track. For example, in Grade 11, Joel was diagnosed with tuberculosis, malaria and pneumonia so he had to leave school for one month. We were able to share lecture notes and study materials during this period to keep Joel from falling behind. (Unfortunately, the diseases recurred at the start of 2023. Joel needed to miss university for a whole month to recover.)

Simultaneously, our Christian life was embraced at all times. Negative peer influence could not disturb our focus. We did not go clubbing or drink alcohol.

Over time, our bond was even clearer when we started to engage in leadership roles. Steven was vice-president of MHSS and Joel was class captain from Grades 9-12.

At the end of Grade 12, Steven received the dux award and Joel received the second-place dux award plus the citizenship award in recognition of his leadership role. We even placed in the top five in the Grade 12 examination across the country in Business and Accounting. We felt this was an extraordinary achievement. Our hard work had paid off and it was a reward for our family, clan and tribe that embraced education as our future.

We saw entering the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) as our goal for tertiary education. Economics was not just a random choice to us. We chose economics because we saw it affecting our daily lives, for example, the theory of opportunity cost and resource utilisation, and many more concepts. The main motivation for us was our understanding that the heart of a nation relies on its economic performance. Our upbringing in remote provinces showed us that economic opportunities are not equal across the country.

In moving to UPNG in Port Moresby, we felt apprehensive after hearing rumours about the increased pressures of university study and the possibility of losing the unique connection we had between us. With this in mind, we took the initiative to seek to create an association for former students from our previous school, MHSS. This initiative did not eventuate as the group was considered by the UPNG Student

Services Department as a regional and social group which would not affect study habits. However, we continue to support MHSS students in any way we can despite not being funded by the Department.

Our focus on study during the first year of university led to us both being accepted into the economics stream of the Bachelor of Business and Management degree. The following year we earned the important 50% fee subsidy offered under PNG's Higher Education Contribution Assistance Scheme (HECAS).

To cap off our academic achievements, we were selected to attend the ANU-UPNG Summer School program in Canberra in January 2024. Seeing both of our names on the selection list, we experienced a day of joy and excitement like none before. This achievement was not only a testimony to ourselves but to our parents and families. In the history of our immediate families, no one has had the privilege to travel overseas through education.

Alongside our studies we continue to pursue leadership roles. At the UPNG Economic Students Society, Joel has taken on the role of President and Steven the role of Assistant Fundraising Coordinator. Steven is pursuing an additional role on the Student Representative Council. We continue to pursue the twin aims of education and leadership because we aspire to belong to a generation of strong intellectual leaders who will become the next leaders of our country.

*This blog was written as part of the annual Summer School funded by **the ANU-UPNG Partnership**. The Summer School allows the top ten students from the University of Papua New Guinea in the Economics and Public Policy Management streams to undertake a month-long program at ANU to further their academic and analytical skills.*

*Read **the series of blogs** written by ANU-UPNG summer scholars.*

Author/s:

Joel Tony

Joel Tony is completing his fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Economics at the University of Papua New Guinea.

Steven Puri

Steven Puri is completing his fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Economics at the University of Papua New Guinea.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/like-minded-peers-embrace-education-and-leadership-20240508/>