

My education journey from Jiwaka to UPNG

by Robert Mek

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The Mek family in Jiwaka Province, Papua New Guinea

Photo Credit: Robert Mek

I was born in Gulka (Kimil), one of the remotest villages in Jiwaka Province. Gulka is situated between Jiwaka and Western Highlands Province, so as I grew up I learned the cultures and lifestyles of both provinces. I was the third-born child of Simon and Polti Mek and I have three younger siblings. My dad and mum are subsistence farmers. They sell ripe bananas, greens, peanuts, red pandanus and pigs to raise money. Dad dropped out of school in grade four. Mum has never been to school.

We have no access to proper roads and electricity. The rugged terrain, jungle, valleys and big rivers in the Highlands region make access to basic services a difficult task. Illiteracy and birth rates are very high, and some mothers die trying to give birth. We often have shortages in drugs and medical facilities in our community health centre. Growing up in such an unfavourable environment made it extremely hard to access education. Despite that, I made up my mind to go to school.

In 2007, I was enrolled to do kindergarten (prep) at Gulka Elementary School. I used to wake up at around 4am to prepare for school. My mum would cook four sweet potatoes: one for breakfast, one for lunch and two for afternoon dinner. The distance from home to school is about five kilometres. Because of the distance and frequent bad weather, no one else was interested in going to school. I used to walk back and forth by myself. I was often late for class. I sometimes missed classes due to heavy rain, floods and landslides.

For grade three, I went to Kimil Primary School, a Catholic mission school. When I first went there, I could not cope with its tough rules and regulations. I had no friends to share all my problems with. I did not understand anything I learnt in class. When a teacher asked me a question, everyone laughed because my answers were always wrong.

At the end of the term, my report card ranked last. My parents could not read the comment on the report, they thought everything went well. I literally lost tears but I

did not give up easily. Apart from helping my mum in the farm garden, I committed all my remaining time to studies. I read a lot of textbooks. I consulted my teachers for help after hours.

My marks and academic performance slowly improved. I completed grade eight in 2015 with good grades on my certificate. Many people did not believe my academic performance for I was a village kid. They thought I would not get a secondary school offer. But never at any point in time did my parents let me down. They had greater hope for me. They continued to motivate me when I lacked motivation, and pushed me forward when I fell back.

Waghi Valley Secondary School was far away from my village. I walked to catch the bus and the trip took around three hours. When I had no bus fare, I took the shortest route through the bush. The bush track was not in good condition. It took me around six hours to reach school when I travelled by foot. During the highest rainfall around June, July and August, I had the most difficulties going to school. But I still managed to overcome them. I successfully completed grade nine.

I thought I would do the same in the next academic year. Unfortunately, an election-related fight broke out. Some of our classrooms were burnt down. In fear, the teachers left school. I was unable to go to school because the school was on my enemy's land. The fight continued for two months, until the police came to solve it. Classes recommenced, but we had lost so much of our precious time to prepare for exams.

Our teachers squeezed up everything. They gave us piles of handouts, old exam papers and reference books. When I went home, I had no time for my friends and family. I sat in my room and studied. I had no proper light at night and used the old torch that my grandmother gave me.

In January 2018, the selection lists for grade eleven in various secondary schools in Jiwaka were posted at our district office. I checked for my name, but I couldn't find it. My parents shared my pain. A few days later, however, I received a phone call from my uncle in Port Moresby who told me I had been selected to do grade eleven at Sogeri National High School. It was one of the most exciting moments in my life. Everyone in my clan and tribe was so proud of me.

At Sogeri National High School I met new friends from across the nation. Some people were dark in colour (especially from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville), some were brown, others were white. Their cultures and lifestyles were so different and unique. I faced many challenges academically and socially. Studying in a very demanding and competitive institution was the greatest

challenge. Many students came from international and private schools with better grades. I was the smallest fish in a big ocean full of whales.

As the time went by, I started to make friends with everyone. I found that people were so kind, loving and caring. We built an unbreakable bond. As a result, my mind settled. I fully focused on school. Suddenly my marks improved. I scored very high grades which boosted me to study extra hard. Unexpectedly, I secured the top placing across all subjects. At the end of the year, I topped the school. I was awarded the dux of humanities and social sciences. It was something beyond my expectation.

I was accepted to study business management and accounting at the University of Papua New Guinea – it is what my parents dreamed of and wanted for me. I'm now grateful to be a final year economics student here at the university.

If it was not for the commitment, sacrifices, courage and priceless advice of my beloved parents, I would not have come this far. I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to my parents. If I'm lucky enough to become successful with riches one day, I will establish a school back in my remote village to make sure my younger siblings and those generations that will come may not face the problems I once faced.

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Author/s:

Robert Mek

Robert Mek is a final year economics undergraduate at the University of Papua New Guinea.

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