

Through the lens of a seasonal worker

by Kalomel Sepa

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Credit: Kalomel Sepa

My name is Kalomel Sepa and I am 30 years old. I come from Marou village on the island of Emau, northeast of Efate in Vanuatu. Before I was born, my biological father left my mother, so my mother had to live with my great grandmother to afford shelter and food to survive. My mother with all she had tried her very best to feed and clothe me. She looked after my great grandmother and me very well. After I turned one, my great grandmother died. Following that, my mother left me with her sister and went Port Vila to look for work. Her sister and her husband looked after me as if I was one of their children, even though they already had five children.

My adopted family managed to put me into kindergarten to start my education. I continued to primary school, and my adopted parents tried their very best to pay the school fees for four of us boys. I always compared myself to other kids – what they have and what I didn't – but I never gave up and didn't take my education for granted either. I failed my exams most of the time, but one teacher always reminded me to be strong and that I can do better next time.

In 2003, I passed the Year 6 examinations. I was selected to Onesua Presbyterian Collage to continue my education in 2004, but after I completed my first year of high school I had to leave because we could not afford the school fees. I went to Vila North School for another year but the same thing happened. I returned to Onesua High School for a third year but the lack of money for school fees meant I could not go any further. I had plans and dreams to get an education but it never worked out. I was in high school for three years but could not complete high school because with three of us children in high school the fees were too high.

I tried to find a job in town but no one would accept a person like me. I worked hard doing laundry for some of my family members to keep myself occupied. I could not apply for a job as I had not completed my secondary education.

In May 2008, my adopted brother asked if I wanted to go to New Zealand for the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme. Once I agreed, he told me to look for a job, get some cash and do the paperwork (RSE application, birth certificate,

passport and visa). I was given a job in a bakery shop for two weeks to earn the money for my documents. After all documents were submitted, I was told to attend a briefing in September 2008 and I received a date and time to travel.

I have been coming to New Zealand every year since 2008, and in my 11 seasons I have experienced many new things. I trained myself to be a real man and accept any job given by my supervisor. I learn from my mistakes and accept corrections from others. In the first season we worked with apples, apricots, cherries, nectarines, pears, and other summer fruits.

In my second season, I worked for another company, moving from orchards to vineyards and always learning something different at work and by socialising with new people from Vanuatu and from other countries. In 2010-2011, four of us were selected to work for Chard Farm. I learned and improved as I kept returning every year. Some of my workmates never returned, some disrespected the rules, but I do not. I am still here, I work hard, and I help families and my community. I help my biological father and mother with what they ask for, and pay for my younger brother's school fees; it is like playing a father's role. Even though we are not from the same dad, I choose to pay his fees because he is my sibling.

The RSE scheme has helped me learn new skills and provided income to purchase camera equipment for my business. I love capturing moments – that is what motivates me to improve my photography skills. When people told me they enjoyed my pictures, I was happy and created a [Facebook page](#) for my photos; now the NZ company I work for use my photos for advertisements on their website and I have been hired as a photographer in Vanuatu also.

I started working for the RSE at the age of 20. It is more than a job – it is a lifestyle, it is my career. It is my passion and pride; as long as I am wanted back I will keep coming. The RSE scheme is something I can rely on, while at the same time attempting to secure my photography business in Vanuatu for when I finish working for the RSE.

I am still single, but I help finance family commitments, paying for school fees, contributing to a family transportation business and other needs in Port Vila and Emau. I recently built a house in Emau. Building a house was part of my dream, not just for me but to help my parents.

When I return from New Zealand, I visit my families and friends, spend time gardening, cleaning, cooking, and baking – especially using the recipes I had learnt through the RSE scheme's [Vakameasina](#) course. Visiting families and friends is part of our culture and is especially valuable after being away for seven months. I also

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continue with my photography business. I have been booked for weddings, birthdays, *kastom* ceremonies, labour mobility meetings, and other celebrations – even a ministerial visit from the New Zealand delegation to Vanuatu. Currently, photography is a hobby that is generating a new source of income, and by teaching myself I am developing new skills and opportunities. The plan is to keep doing what I do best and, in the future, create a viable and successful business back home. For me, the RSE scheme is about new opportunities, using new skills to create new dreams.

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Kalomel Sepa is an RSE worker from Vanuatu.

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