

*Story developed for Communications for Change (cChange)

FOR 36 long years, Petero Vatu gave the best of his life to the city of Suva as a worker for the Suva City Council.

So when he decided to heed the call of the vanua, it was for the future of his people.

At 66 years of age and as chief of Nacavaga Village in the Bua province, he recalls with fondness the places his travels took him to, the choices he made and that final decision to return home.

“I was born in Nasavu where my mum is from. I also attended primary school there until my family moved to Nacavaga. I grew up during the colonial era and a time when there were no secondary schools so we only went as far as Class 8 then,” he said.

The young Mr Vatu returned home to his parents after completing primary education until he got the opportunity to visit an aunt in Suva.

“I only went for a visit and ended up living in Suva for three years. I worked with my uncle at Standard Concrete and later returned to the village to visit my parents. When I returned to Suva again, I found work at K P Maharaj Buses until I got an interview with the SCC.”

Following the interview, Vatu scored a job with the council. He went on to marry and had four children.

“I was still working with the council when my wife fell ill with cancer. As her condition grew worse, the council allowed me to take 6 months leave so I could travel with my wife to India for treatment.”

Instead, Vatu asked a niece to travel with his wife to India and he stayed back to work.

“Sadly, just two months after her stay in India, my wife passed away. Her body was flown back to Fiji, we buried her and I continued to work and look after our children. At the age of 55 years when I was supposed to retire, the council extended my contract by five years,” he said.

During his period of employment with SCC, Vatu remembers his dad visited him on several occasions asking him to return to the village to take up his role as chief.

“I was still working at the SCC when my dad passed away. It was a while after his death that I realised I needed to go back to the village and serve the people. My aunts traditionally installed me as chief and it has been seven years now,” he said.

Vatu remembers clearly the day that changed his life and perception about the environment.

“About five years ago, I attended a workshop which educated community leaders about the environment. When the facilitators of the workshop began to talk about marine resources and how they were becoming depleted very quickly in many parts of Fiji, I identified very quickly with what they shared because there were signs of the same thing happening in the village.

“That workshop enlightened me in so many ways. I couldn’t wait to return and share what I had learnt with the others in the village. I consulted the villagers and we established a committee that was tasked with protecting our marine resources.”

Marine protected areas were established. Vatu went further and restricted a family fishing site from being fished.

“That workshop changed my life. It helped me redirect my priorities and today, I’ve made it my goal to change the mindset of my people and instil in them a better appreciation for our surroundings.”

As the sun set on another day at Nacavaga, the humble chief rested content with his decision to return to his coast and help save the future.