

The Republic of the Marshall Islands and the United States of America



PROGRESS **THROUGH PARTNERSHIP**

— Marshall Islands and the U.S.A. —

Building Canoes, Self-Esteem, and Relationships

A love of canoes, culture, and kids inspired Alson Kelen for decades. He now runs Canoes of the Marshall Islands in Majuro, a campaign to help at-risk young people. The program educates them scholastically, plus provides life skills and vocational skills—such as canoe building, sailing, and navigation—so they can be self-supporting.

The idea began about 25 years ago when Alson was helping document traditional boat building. Some kids at construction sites were dropouts—as young as 14 years old.

“I knew then we needed to help them,” he said, “but I wasn’t sure where to start. I almost gave up because I had a family to support.”

Alson finally landed a few grants totaling \$20,000. Early on, he simply taught trainees how to use tools. Over time, it grew into an organization with classrooms, a curriculum of basic education, and a program that tracks students’ progress after they leave.

“We want them to become taxpayers rather than burdens to the system,” he said. “We cannot control where they go, but we can improve their chance of success. The hard part is only taking 25 at a time due to funding and space.”

The six-month course for those 16–24 years old relies on grants from the National Training Counsel, which receives funding primarily from the U.S.A. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Health, funds certified counselors.

“I’m also proud of the grant we had to revive our traditional navigation skills,” Alson added. “When people learn about their environment and culture, it makes them feel part of something. Plus, we race canoes, which builds self-esteem and family relationships.”

The organization hosts open houses to show what trainees have learned—from carving a fish to building a canoe model. Future possibilities include jewelry making and building wind or solar powered catamarans for fishing and cost-effective transportation between islands. Encouragement and success stories keep Alson and the team going.

“One evening, I was out walking,” he recalled. “A woman came to me in tears, telling me her son is doing great—that he has a good job, an apartment, and a TV. What we do is working today, and everyone involved plans to keep it rolling.”

To read more, go to: Canoes of the Marshall Islands at www.canoemarshallislands.com

National Training Council at www.ntcinfo.org

To learn more about the relationship between RMI and the U.S.A. visit <https://mh.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/progress-through-partnership/>.