

ARKANSAS ATOLL – EPISODE 2

[Theme music begins]

Benetick Maddison (00:05):

In 1946, the Navy pulled into the harbor, the lagoon, in Bikini.

Newscaster (00:16):

Enewetak and Bikini, sparkling necklaces of coral reef studded with tiny islands in the mid-Pacific Ocean, are remembered largely because of bombs; fifty nuclear tests in 12 years.

Maddison (00:34):

You know, what happened in the Marshall Islands is part of American history.

Octavia Rolle (00:42):

Hi, my name is Octavia Rolle. Welcome to Arkansas Atoll. In this episode, you're going to learn about a tragedy from the voice of a member of the Marshallese community. My team and I had the opportunity to sit down with Benetick Maddison before the COVID-19 outbreak began. Benetick is the project specialist for youth, climate and nuclear issues at the Marshallese Educational Initiative in Springdale, Arkansas, Benetick offered to share what he knows about the nuclear testing done on the Marshall Islands. Now, he's sharing it with all of you.

Maddison (01:18):

So I guess, to give a brief history lesson about the nuclear testing, prior to the nuclear testing program, the Marshall Islands were under Japanese control. Then after the United States pushed out the Japanese, that's when the U.S. decided that they were going to use the Marshall Islands for nuclear testing program. It's basically a strategic area for the U.S., and I think that's why so many people around the world didn't know about the nuclear testing program was because it was a strategic area. And so they kept everybody away and made sure nobody knew about what they were doing in the Pacific, especially the Marshall Islands.

Rolle (02:12):

The United States made the Marshall Islands a strategic area in order to keep the nuclear testing under wraps. This only makes me wonder what could have possibly been going on.

Maddison (02:24):

They basically used it for 12 years to test 67 nuclear weapons.

Rolle (02:32):

Wow, that's crazy.

Maddison (02:35):

Yeah. When they have the weapons, but you have the stick, what do you do? You know, we didn't have an organized government back then. And so the Marshall Island wasn't a sovereign nation at that point. It was a more of like a regional type of government in the region called Micronesia. And so we were basically forced to sacrifice our health and our islands for the good of mankind, basically. The most powerful hydrogen weapon tested by the United States was Castle Bravo on March 1st of 1954. After they detonated the weapon, there were fallouts from Castle Bravo that actually landed in a nearby island where there was a population living there, and they thought it was snow, but it was actually from the evaporation of two or three islands that were picked up into the air and scattered all throughout, you know, wherever that—wherever the fallout went. And it caused a lot of health problems, but also women were giving birth to jellyfish babies. And so, deformed human beings, to the point where, you know, babies were born without bones. Some of them didn't even last weeks or months. Prior to, you know, the nuclear testing program, people lived up to their nineties, their hundreds, but now we have people dying at my age, people dying in their thirties, forties.

Rolle (04:59):

So Castle Bravo was a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb equivalent to a thousand Hiroshimas. Bombs the size of Castle Bravo with so much fallout must've created an enormous amount of contaminated waste.

Maddison (05:12):

After they tested, you know, the last weapon in the Marshall, they sent these 4,000 U.S. servicemen to Enewetak to clean up the nuclear waste. But basically what they did was they dug up a hole and then moved the nuclear waste into it and then covered it with an 18-inch concrete.

Rolle (05:43):

What Benetick is describing is a giant concrete dome, nearly 400 feet in diameter, that contains a bunch of nuclear waste. Surrounded by the pristine, blue-green waters of the Pacific, viewed from above the Runit dome is a circular scar on the atoll resembling a science fiction landscape. It was built as a temporary container for the waste and is referred to as the tomb or coffin.

Maddison (06:10):

And so it has already cracked, and it's—we're talking like, you know, many, many years ago, 'cause you know, even our grandparents, you know, they complained about, "Oh, there's cracks." And to this day it's been leaking, and it's leaking, you know, nuclear contaminants into the environment. And there's also the fear that, you know, if some big hurricane comes by the island, it can actually crack open that structure and release all of that nuclear waste. How do we find a con—a solution to

this dome? And I've spoken to a scientist, and he said, "You know, the best solution right now is to just put more cement in to make sure that it doesn't release more, you know, of that nuclear into the environment." But in terms of like, how do we basically get rid of all of that? I really don't know the solution to that. Yeah. It's a very complicated issue. It didn't really hit me till like towards high school. And that's when I began, you know, learning more about climate change. Back then it was global warming, but I think towards the end of my high school year, we began using the term climate change more often. But I began to do more research into, you know, the nuclear legacy. And I think it was a moment of awakening, of decolonizing my mind about the impact of, I guess, colonialism in the Marshall Islands.

Rolle (08:28):

Benetick helped my team and me understand a little bit of the history of the nuclear testing on the Marshall Islands. He also works on a daily basis to educate both the Marshallese and non-Marshallese communities of Northwest Arkansas.

Maddison (08:42):

So I'm currently the project specialist for youth climate and nuclear issues here at the Marshallese Educational Initiative, mainly to reach out to the youth population in regarding to opportunities. And then with climate and nuclear issues, to do outreach, educating the community about the impact of the nuclear legacy, as well as the impact of climate change in the Marshall Islands. And the purpose of it was to educate the non-Marshallese about the Marshallese community and our issues. I think the first step is to educate. You know, what happened in the Marshall Islands is part of American history. And it's really frustrating and sad that, you know, when I open a history book or when my fellow Marshallese open history books, the only image of a bomb we see is the one in Hiroshima or Nagasaki. But it's like, where's the other 67 nuclear weapons that were tested? And so climate change and the nuclear legacy needs to be part of the national curriculum here in the U.S.

Rolle (10:12):

The nuclear legacy continues to affect the Marshallese community and is the reason why a large population of Marshall Islanders have immigrated to America.

[Theme music begins]

In the next episode of Arkansas Atoll, we hear how some of these nuclear refugees came to Northwest Arkansas, and we learn about the complicated status of the Compact of Free Association.

Shane White (10:36)

Arkansas Atoll is a production of the Arkansas Story Vault project at The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas. Shane White, Neba Evans, Obed Lamy,

Octavia Rolle, and Sam Whitesell are the student producers for this podcast series. Sarah K. Moore and Colleen Thurston are the staff and faculty advisors to the project, with the guidance of Dr. William Schwab. Funding for this Arkansas Story Vault project was provided by a generous donation from the Walton Family Foundation. Our sincerest gratitude is extended to the Marshallese community of Northwest Arkansas for sharing their stories with us. For ways to support them during the COVID-19 crisis, visit impactnwa.org. That's impactnwa.org. The theme song used for this podcast series, and so that I don't butcher the correct pronunciation, in Mr. Tibon's own words is titled:

Jorelik Tibon (11:38):

Jiduul im Kaddol

Shane White:

We'd like to extend our many thanks to Mr Jorelik Tibon and producer Scott Stege for their musical contribution.

[Theme song continues] (15:47)

Arkansas Story Vault <https://wordpressua/storyvault>
© The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History
<https://pryorcenter.uark.edu>