

ARKANSAS ATOLL – EPISODE 3

Sam Whitesell (00:00)

This episode was produced in the summer of 2020. Since then, statistics may have changed.

Benetick Maddison (00:10):

The first Marshallese to come here to Arkansas is John Moody. He came here. He first came to Oklahoma for college and then heard about the jobs here, especially in the poultry industry, and decided to move here to Northwest Arkansas. And from there he told his relatives, and relatives told their friends, and you know, two, three decades later, we're now, they say, around 20,000 Marshallese here in Arkansas.

[Theme music begins]

Whitesell (00:55):

That's the voice of Benetick Maddison, who provided a brief history in the U.S.-Marshallese relationship in the last episode. In this episode, we'll dive deeper into that relationship and the status of the Marshall Islanders in Arkansas. My name is Sam Whitesell, and this is Arkansas Atoll.

Maddison: (01:27):

Leading up to 1979, the Marshall Islands wanted to become a sovereign independent nation. So in 1979, they became a sovereign nation. They created their own constitution, but the U.S. didn't recognize that sovereignty until they signed the first Compact of Free Association that allows Marshallese to come here to the U.S. to work, to study, to be with family, and for health purposes.

Whitesell (02:00):

To further explain the unique conditions of the Compact of Free Association, we will now go to Dr. Sheldon Riklon. Dr. Sheldon Riklon is one of two Marshallese physicians in the U.S. and is a family practitioner at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences or UAMS.

Dr. Sheldon Riklon (02:17):

Because we're from the Marshall Islands, you know, we have an agreement with the U.S. it's called the Compact of Free Association. And you know, for

the Marshallese, you know, this went into effect back in 1986. And that basically, you know, exchange for the U.S.'s oversight of the area and the Marshall Islands and Micronesia actually, and their strategic denial of military rights so that basically no other superpower can go to the Marshall Islands without the U.S.'s okay. In exchange, we got this compact where it makes us freely—can move back and forth. We can travel between the Marshalls and the U.S. without the need for visa. We can apply for work here without need for any, you know, certification, work certificate. You know, we don't need to have a green card. We can travel with a Marshallese passport and come here and work and go to school and be employed.

Whitesell (03:14):

Among these Compact of Free Association citizens is 31-year-old Christopher Balos. Now a resident of Springdale, Chris left the Marshall Islands at the age of two to receive medical care in Hawaii.

Chris Balos (03:26):

I was really young. I really didn't—really don't have much like memory as to the initial migration. Like the first thing I remember was like waking up in a hospital bed, you know? So the story goes like we—I was unable to walk by the time I was two, and I had a younger brother that was already walking before me. So my family brought me out to Honolulu, Hawaii, where I was admitted to Shriners Hospital. So I was—so yeah, my first memory was waking up in a hospital bed. And I had these little—these metal bars across my head and stuff. So they call it a halo. I guess it was to like help, you know, hold my spine in place and stuff, so, or my body. So but yeah, that was kind of like my first memory. And the other's when I first moved out there, it was me and my mom, you know. And two of my other siblings, they were back home. But yeah, I was—we were in Hawaii for a few years. And then when I was able to walk and go to school, we kind of made that big leap to come here to the mainland. So we've lived in Hawaii and Washington and then move out to California where, you know, I spent most of my adolescent years. You know, graduated high school, did some college out there, worked a little. Then when I was 21, I moved out here to Northwest Arkansas. Myself, I didn't understand why, you know, we were making that big jump coming out from the islands all the way to, you know, like Northwest Arkansas and stuff, so.

Whitesell (05:25):

Immigration brings many challenges. During Chris's adolescence in California, the lack of a support system was difficult for Chris's mother.

Balos (05:33):

A lot of these families that don't have to go through a lot of stuff my mom had to go through. I was introduced to the big population of our people over here, and having that familiar support system that was intact back home. They can have it over here as well. As soon as they get here, they could stay with families and friend for a few months or something and then get their self on their feet. But like, you know, our route, you know, we really—we had similar stories, but most of the time, you know, it was always my mom doing it for herself and stuff.

Whitesell (06:12):

Chris now works for the Arkansas Support Network and as the climate ambassador for the Marshallese Educational Initiative in Springdale,

Balos (06:20):

But after living here almost 10 years now, I think, you know, I've come to understand that, you know, it's a good enough pace for a lot of my people that are, you know, first generation to the state. So it's not as, you know, fast-pitch like California and Hawaii and all that stuff, so.

Whitesell (06:40):

Here's Benetick again.

Maddison (06:43):

There are Marshallese in every 50 States actually, but many of them come here to Arkansas because of the cost of living here. It's a lot better than other places in the country. Now we not only have Marshallese coming in from the islands, but we also have those moving in from places like California or Hawaii, places where the cost of living is too high.

Whitesell (07:13):

Growing up Marshallese in the United States has given Chris perspective on what home means.

Balos (07:18):

So you know, you have home, and then I feel like it's like a sanctuary, you know. You know, we can't really say we're at home, but you know, at least we know that we'll be safe at, you know, at this place. You know, if you go down to Springdale, you can see the culture there. So you can't really say, oh, these are, you know, immigrants who are assimilating to American culture. So they're not technically American. We're still Marshallese. You know, we always say, Springdale is the next island. You know, so us coming from a navigator's, you know, mindset, you know, is we're planting our seed

and then kind of grow from there. And but I believe as soon as we lose the culture, then that's—I believe that's when we really left the islands.

Whitesell (08:14):

The Marshall Islanders have been experiencing effects of colonization since missionaries first visited their islands.

Balos (08:21):

Truly, in our hearts, we never really want to leave. You know? We just kind of got forced to, and then the fact that, like, we could still see that piece of history, like in everyday situations. They were put in a position where a lot of us weren't, had a lot of decision on, you know. You know, just like a lot of indigenous community or minority community. Like, you know, we, I feel like, you know, we were, you know, taken advantage of, and put in a situation where we weren't accustomed to, or never really supported to really adapt to. So I think, the faces are pretty important because, you know, it's like a, you know, a basic human right. You know, to just kinda help teach a person how to crawl and teach them how to walk. So I feel like we know from our historical background, I think we've, you know, they just, you know, threw us in the water, kinda learn how to swim like that, but at the same time with a whole bunch of sharks in the water. So yeah, I think it's really important for a person to kind of like take one step at a time when they're able to. So I think Northwest Arkansas can give us that.

Whitesell (09:59):

Here's Benetick again.

Maddison (10:01):

I mean, I would say that we've lost so much of our culture starting from the 1850s, but right now we're trying to revive it by teaching people about the culture. And in a couple of months, you know, that there's going to be a program, you know, to teach young Marshallese their language, their culture, how to build these canoes, and you know, teach our young ones how to make these handicrafts. 'Cause those are skills and talents that so many people of my generation don't know.

Whitesell (10:40):

The program is called Manit Camp, and it's been postponed due to the pandemic. The Marshallese make up approximately 2% of the population of Northwest Arkansas, but they represent 19% of the area's COVID-19 cases. Marshallese community members are often reluctant to seek healthcare from non-Marshallese providers.

Riklon (10:59):

Most of them are very hesitant to seek healthcare in places where they don't know the people there.

Whitesell (11:04):

Dr. Riklon, who spoke earlier, came to the U.S. to attend the University of Hawaii, where he eventually received his medical training before returning to the Marshall Islands to practice medicine. After eight years of practicing medicine in the Marshall Islands, he returned to Hawaii before moving to Springdale, where he now works as a family physician and leader within the Marshallese community.

Riklon (11:24):

We heard about what the UAMS was trying to, you know, accomplish in terms of their, some of their projects with the community. Most of the people that we spoke with, you know, there—you could see their struggle. You could see that they need some help. You know, through the course of my interactions with many of the people I came across, you know, I came to realize that that was my calling, that I need to come here to at least try to do what I've been trying to do in Hawaii and hopefully reach the community here. So my whole purpose of moving to Arkansas was to work with the community.

Whitesell (12:00):

The issues surrounding healthcare in the Marshallese community have become even more complicated due to the spread of coronavirus, but their access to healthcare is also restricted by U.S. legislation that has been introduced after the Compact of Free Association.

Riklon (12:14):

So all was well until they have this act that came about, and it was called the Personal Workers Opportunities Reconciliation Act back in 1996, that went into effect that the language in that bill or that act basically made us ineligible to access any kind of federal Medicaid programs, which means we couldn't apply for federal Medicaid programs, which we cannot have insurance through the federal government. It was part of the healthcare reform that was happening back in 1996. That's the same time that, you know, President Clinton was the president. So it was part of that healthcare reform. But for whatever reason we're told that there was a mistake by a staffer that the language of the act, when they wrote it, basically made all of us Compact of Free Association migrants or citizens become ineligible for federal Medicaid. It's hard for us to trust a lot of things that, you know, come from the U.S. given our history with them. You know, so we hear

different things. You know, most say, yes, it was a mistake. And for us, you know, it doesn't really matter to us whether it was intentional or not. What we basically need to do is to reverse that. And you know, since 1996 till today, it's still active, and we've been doing our best to get to Congress, get to the right people so they can—all they have to do is change the language and reverse that act so we become eligible for something that we're contributing into. But since 1996 to today, 2020, we're still paying into the tax system, yet our people cannot access federal Medicare and mostly—most other state Medicaid programs,

Whitesell (14:09):

The Compact of Free Association expires in the year 2023, which could have enormous consequences for the Marshallese if it's not renewed by the U.S. government.

[Theme song begins] (14:20)

Stay tuned for the next episode of Arkansas Atoll, which dives deeper into the healthcare disparities within the Marshallese community.

Shane White (14:34):

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. Tobin's own words is titled:

Jorelik Tobin: (15:36)

Jiduul im Kaddol

Shane White: (15:40)

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

[Theme song continues] [00:16:11]

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