

# The New Kids On The Block: A 'Hidden Minority'

The Micronesian diaspora has spread out across the country, but many Americans still don't realize who their new neighbors are.

OCTOBER 28, 2015 • BY CHAD BLAIR

SCROLL TO READ

*This church service in Springdale, Arkansas, is popular with the many Marshallese who have settled there. Photo by Mark Edward Harris*



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E iken Elam Saimon burst into the First Congressional Church service carrying three guns.

His first shot went into the ceiling. If he didn't already have the attention of the 50 or so Micronesian immigrants gathered inside the Neosho, Missouri, church for a Sunday afternoon service, that did it.

A recent arrival from the tiny atoll of Pingelap, part of the state of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia, the 52-year-old gunman was angry because members of his own community had berated him at a barbecue a few days earlier for not bringing food.

"That made me really mad," Saimon said in a written statement, according to news reports at the time. "I went home and thought about how they were all talking bad about me and how much I helped all of them when they first came to the U.S. I knew they would all be at church on Sunday afternoon."

## An Angry Man

Saimon had also become a suspect in the sexual assault of a 14-year-old girl, a relative, although it's unclear if members of the congregation knew that when he waged his one-man war on his own community inside the church.

Still, Saimon allowed children and members of his own family to leave the red-brick building.

The first to die was Kernal Rehobson, the 43-year-old pastor and one of the leaders

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of the Pingelapese community. He'd come to Neosho to work as a warehouseman in a big box store, but later started his own place, a store catering to Micronesians. He was known to help anyone who needed it.



Pastors Tom Thorne, left, and Jim Handy at the First Congressional Church in Neosho, Missouri. Handy was wounded by the gunman who killed three others.

Rehobson was shot as he tried to calm the angry gunman.

Saimon turned his gun on two associate pastors, their bodies slumping to the floor near the pulpit. Many people managed to escape, but five others were wounded before Saimon finally gave himself up to police.

Now, eight years later, a bullet hole still marks a wall in the church. A permanent memorial for the three slain men stands next to the church on the corner of North Wood and East McCord streets.

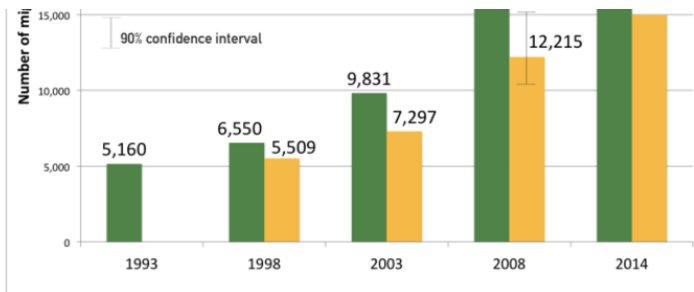
When news of the violence broke, it was reported that the gunman and his victims were Mexicans. Some neighbors claimed to have heard Spanish being spoken during the Sunday service, and most residents in the small town of Neosho (population, 12,200) had never heard of Pingelap — never mind that hundreds of Pingelapese had been living in the area for 20 years.

In fact, prior to the shooting, which made national headlines, the only time most Americans might have heard about Pingelap was if they'd read neurologist Oliver Sacks's 1997 book, "[The Island of the Colorblind](#)," in which he explores the genetic quirk that has caused some Pingelapese to have total color-blindness.

### Estimated Compact Migrant Population in Guam and Hawaii 1993-2014







Source: U.S. Government Accountability Office, *State of Hawaii, Guam*. [Click to enlarge](#).

Sacks described an idyllic and technicolor setting in the Pacific Ocean, which couldn't be more different from the long, flat prairies mixed with hill country in southwest Missouri.

Micronesians like the Pingelapese aren't attracted to Missouri for the scenery, however. They come for the work in poultry plants and big box stores.

At the time of the shooting, there were about 200 Micronesians living in Neosho, more than the black and Latino populations in town. One official says the figure today is closer to 500.

But up until the 2007 shooting, Neosho residents didn't even realize who their new neighbors were.

"I would say that up until that time, they were kind of a hidden minority," Tom Thorne, First Congressional's semi-retired pastor, said of the Pingelapese community.

An Associated Press report at the time of the shooting noted that Micronesian homes in Neosho were identifiable only by the "piles of shoes left outside according to island custom."

Mayor Richard Davidson says that most of the town had no idea there were so many Micronesians in their midst, let alone worshipping at a church just a few blocks from the town center.

The Pingelapese community gradually slipped back into the background once Saimon, who pleaded guilty to the shootings and the rape, was sentenced to three life terms without possibility of parole.

Today, there is little interaction between the Pingelapese and the rest of the town.





*Emeral Nena from Kosrae, is a student at Park University in Parkville, Missouri, near Kansas City. Education is a primary reason Micronesians flock to the U.S.*

## Setting Goals

Wherever Micronesians go in the U.S., they bring their faith with them. Churches are at the center of their cultural preservation and perpetuation; they are meeting places to worship but also to comfort and help one another as they try to assimilate into local cultures.



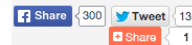
*A mother and child at a Chuukese church service in Dededo, Guam.*

Religious figures like Kernal Rehobson often take leadership roles in advocating for the new immigrants.

“Anyone from the islands who needs help of any sort — a social security number, a

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Anyone from the islands who needs help getting a social security number, a driver's license, a job — always comes to Kernel (Rehobson) first," the Jesuit priest and author Francis X. Hezel wrote in a study on Micronesian migration a year before the shooting.

Other religious leaders run continuing education opportunities.

In Washington and Oregon, for instance, pastors like Mitham Clement often offer assistance to help explain American culture and expectations — things like eschewing "island time" for more punctual interpretations of the clock.

Washington and Oregon have sizable and growing populations of Micronesians — as many as 10,000 in Oregon alone, by recent estimates. While islanders have immigrated to the southern U.S. and the Midwest in large part for economic opportunity and to live with people from their own islands, Micronesians in the Pacific Northwest are more diverse, including immigrants from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, from Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae and Yap in the Federated States and from the Republic of Palau — all allowed under the Compact of Free Association to live and work in the U.S. without the need for a visa.

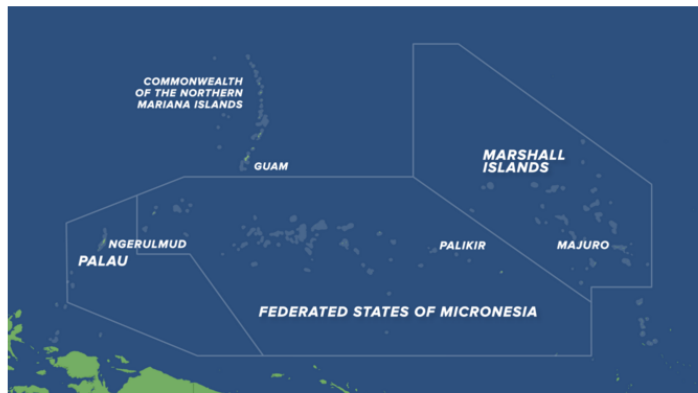
Their presence has spawned the [COFA Alliance National Network](#) (CANN), an Oregon-based nonprofit, that works to help Micronesians assimilate, including political advocacy and continued education opportunities.

In addition to straightforward lessons in time management, Clement, CANN's vice chairman, says he also encourages more fundamental shifts in new migrants' ambitions.

"I remember when I was in the Marshalls growing up, even in high school, I really didn't have any goals," Clement said. "No one taught me how to do that. But coming here and seeing my two daughters and my son who spent some time with us in Hawaii, they were setting goals in elementary school, they had mentors. People basically bring them along and help them start thinking about their future. That's really important, to try to help them understand where they are going."



*A Chuukese family at their church in Vancouver, Washington.*



[VIEW LARGER MAP](#)

Three Micronesian nations make up the Compact of Free Association.

The education process, however, is a two-way street.

While it is typical, and understandable, for islanders to spend time with their own people — Marshallese with Marshallese, Chuukese with Chuukese — and their shared cultures and languages, it often means Micronesians don't have much interaction with the local population, even as they are increasingly becoming part of it.

Many, in cities like Portland, blend in with diverse populations while others, like the Pingelapese in Missouri, are assumed to be from Latin America.

According to David Anitok, a fellow CANN member and a Marshallese who was born in Minnesota, "Lots of folks ask, 'Where exactly is the Marshall Islands?' It always takes me by surprise. You think they should know given the common history of the nuclear testing and the unique relationship."



*Most Americans have no idea where Micronesia is, something that immigrants as well as federal officials are trying to change.*

This stumbling block, according to Anitok, is one of the reasons getting help for COFA migrants is so difficult.

In 2013, CANN helped pass a bill in Oregon to change the valid driver's license period for COFA citizens from just one year to eight years. The one-year restriction made it difficult for COFA citizens to hold down jobs, secure housing and use banking services in Oregon.

Anitok was surprised that even Oregon legislators were in the

dark about COFA citizens and their special status in America.

"They'd say, 'Oh, what is COFA?' We had to educate 30 people in the Senate and 60 in the House," he said.

But CANN has also been educating the entire state of Oregon, helping to secure a number of political wins on behalf of COFA citizens in the process.

COFA citizens are ineligible for Medicaid, for example, yet many are poor and in dire need of medical care for conditions like diabetes and cancer.

In June, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown signed into law [legislation that instructs](#) the Oregon Health Authority to study the idea of a basic health program for individuals who earn 138 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Advocates of the legislation say a basic health program could cover as many as 87,000 employed Oregonians, provide better care at lower costs and create an affordable option for residents from the COFA nations.

Oregonians are starting to pay attention to their newest residents' contributions, too.

In May, the Legislative Assembly unanimously passed a [House concurrent resolution](#) expressing support for and gratitude to COFA citizens residing in United States. The resolution cites the U.S. nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, notes that





Eastern Oregon University in La Grande has had a program

for students from the Federated States since 1977, and recognizes that COFA islanders volunteer to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces "at a higher per capita rate" than U.S. citizens.

"We express our deepest appreciation for their extraordinary commitment to the service and defense of our nation," the resolution states.

### The Ultimate Sacrifice

"I joined the military because I am very adventurous," Melisa Laelan, a Marshallese woman says.

Laelan is from Laura on the island of Majuro, a flat, often narrow strip of land stretching 35 miles from Laura on one end and Rita on the other. The names come from American servicemen, who dubbed them after the actresses Lauren Bacall and Rita Hayworth.

*A Pingelapese near Portland, Oregon. The Pacific Northwest is home to thousands of Micronesians.*



"Our status is unique. Our stay here is unique."

— Melisa Laelan

#### Looking for the American Dream

Melisa Laelan, a Marshallese, is commissioner of Arkansas Minority Health Commission and a certified Marshallese court interpreter in Springfield, Arkansas.

 [Listen to Audio](#)

She was valedictorian in high school and, right after graduating in 1995, enlisted in the U.S. Army. Her uncle is a tribal king in Majuro, making Laelan a princess, but she saw more opportunity for herself in the Army and in America.

She's not alone.

A [2011 study](#) by the nonprofit Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice reported that citizens from the Federated States of Micronesia "serve at approximately double the per capita rate of American citizens."

The country has also seen more casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan per capita than any U.S. state. Indeed, it is one of the untold stories of Micronesian immigration that many islanders have made the ultimate sacrifice for the U.S.

Time magazine reported in 2009 that, "For FSM youths, military service means money, adventure and opportunity, a way off tiny islands with few jobs."

With starting salaries in the military more than double most jobs in Micronesia, the decision is an obvious one for many — especially in a region that is no stranger to war and America's place in them

war and America's place in them.

From historic ruins of Japanese bunkers and rusting cannons wreathed in vines, to the history of Laura, Majuro's namesake, there is a solid line linking militarism and American patriotism to some of the most remote areas in the world.



Portraits of fallen Micronesians hang at the airport on Pohnpei.

For Laelan, joining the Army was an opportunity to satisfy her adventurous nature. "It was something different from what I was used to," she said.

Her service career took her to Army bases in towns like Fort Sheridan, Ill., and helped her develop leadership and logistical skills. She also deployed to Iraq for a short stint in 2003, in the early part of the American invasion.

"It was very scary," she remembers. "But I did not go through a lot of traumatic events like most of my friends."



**WATCH VIDEO** Many Micronesians serve in the military and some, like this soldier from Palau, make the ultimate sacrifice. Video by Nathan Fitch. Read about his related film, [Island Soldier](#).

## The Tipping Point

Laelan now lives in Springdale, Arkansas, earning a living as a court translator. She is a single mother, but still makes time to work as one of the directors of the [Arkansas Coalition of the Marshallese](#), which formed last year to increase the quality of life for Micronesians through better access to health care, legal services and the community.

Springdale is as close to a model as there is for Micronesians integration and assimilation.

Eligibility Status of Compact Migrants for Selected Federal Benefit Programs	
Marina Riker/Civil Beat	
<b>Eligible</b>	<b>Generally Ineligible</b>
Social Security Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance	Social Security Supplemental Income (SSI)
Emergency Medicaid	Medicaid
Medicare	Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
School Lunch Programs	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
Section 8 Housing Federal Rent Subsidies	



*Click to enlarge.*

Outside of Hawaii and Guam, no other location in the United States has as many Micronesians living in one place. Of the more than 70,000 people in Springdale, which is home to Tyson Foods headquarters, at least 10 percent — about 7,000, and likely many more — are from Micronesia, primarily the Marshall Islands.

Another 2,000 live in the area and in nearby towns. Neosho, Missouri, for instance, is only an hour and a half drive.

There are at least 30 Micronesian places of worship in the Springdale area, as well as a Marshall Islands consulate general — evidence of how significant the city is to the Marshallese government.

Laelan notes that Marshallese could make a better effort to integrate, saying they tend to stick with their own.

"It is an enclaved formation of this culture here," she says, noting that language barriers continue to be a problem for many adult Micronesians. "We are in our own little world."

Language is not a problem for the younger generations, Laelan says, and the Springdale public school system can largely be thanked for that.

In the 1980s, the student population of the Springdale school system, the second-largest in Arkansas, was 97 percent white. Today, 10 percent are Marshallese while about 34 percent are Latino. More than 60 percent of the students in the Springdale school system are in English as a Second Language programs.

"Today we are obviously at the tipping point where the minority is a majority number in our school district," says Jim Rollins, the school superintendent. "It's been an enormous transition process and there are challenges every day. But we are in the people business, the education business, the learning business."



*A Marshallese church service in Springdale, Arkansas.*



*Superintendent Jim Rollins and language coordinator Mary Bridgforth, Springdale, Arkansas.*

Rollins, a big man with a lot of Southern charm, has been in charge of the schools since 1982.

"These are beautiful, lovely people, and there is a cultural pathway to their hearts," he says, noting that one of the ways administrators reach out to parents of Micronesian students is by offering food and entertainment along with their parent-teacher conferences.

"You have to understand those cultural differences," he says. "The language issue is significant, but from my perspective it's almost secondary."

Mary Bridgforth, the director of English as a Second Language for Springdale Public Schools, also stresses that personal relations are crucial. The school district now

has four Marshallese liaisons that help reach out to the community.

"I first had Marshallese students years ago, and I fell in love," Bridgforth says. "They made me little placemats that said 'yokwe' (Marshallese for hello), and I said, 'Who are these kids? I love them.'"

Still, working with Marshallese students has required extra effort. Bridgforth says she and other teachers offer their students basic necessities like food, backpacks, coats and shoes, as well as rides home.

"We take care of them like they are our own children," she says.



*Latinos and Micronesians make up a large percentage of Springdale's public school system.*

Rollins echoes the sentiment, especially when it comes to financial decisions. So far, he says, the large influx of Marshallese has not hampered the school system's finances.

Rollins says there has been discussion about applying for the Compact Impact Aid that Hawaii and Guam receive to offset expenses of the COFA population, but it has not been a major concern.

"It doesn't really matter whether a child comes from across the street or across the ocean," he says. "Once they get to our door, they are our children. By the year 2030, more than half of school-age children in the U.S. will be non-white, so that paints a picture of a rapidly growing immigration picture across the country."

## Culture Clash

Despite the good jobs and school system, more than three-fourths of the Marshallese in northwest Arkansas are considered low-income earners. Over half live in poverty (compared with the regional average of 15 percent) with about the same number having graduated from high school.

Communities like Springdale also are not free of tensions between the new immigrants and the established population. Cultural differences can cause problems whether the newcomers are from Majuro or Mexico, though the majority of clashes are the result of misunderstandings over laws and zoning codes, communication challenges, difficulties in obtaining driver's licenses and barriers in accessing quality health care.

Mearlod Rakin, pastor of the Celebration Marshallese Assembly of God, is from Alinglaplap in the Marshall Islands, and he has lived in Springdale since 1996. He

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says he noticed immigration pick up in 1999 when more people back home heard about the educational and employment opportunities in Arkansas.

Rakin says the Marshallese have a responsibility to learn the rules of living in America and to fit into the community. He's concerned, however, that they may lose their culture, something he worries about for his own children, who were born in Enid, Oklahoma, and Springdale.



*Dancers from Pacific Voices ready to perform during a Celebrate Micronesia exhibit at the Honolulu Museum of Art School.*

For many, the church is essential to maintaining their culture; services in Springdale are very much like the ones back home, with music, dancing and singing along with the sermons.

But the services, held in rented buildings that are temporarily converted into religious facilities, have drawn complaints for being loud or for having too many vehicles crowd the streets. The fact that Marshallese families are large has also run afoul of building and zoning codes.



*Parishioners at Mwalok Church, United Church of Christ, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia.*

Rakin says the city has shut down some churches after receiving complaints.

"There is not enough information," he says. "They say the building is not zoned right, but we need to understand more. We sometimes ask, 'Why us? Are we targeted? Why Marshallese? Why our church? We have been there for seven years and now they are shutting down because a lady from the city mentioned all the Marshallese cars in the parking lot?'"

Rakin says his church is working to build its own place of worship on land it has purchased.

But Springdale Mayor Doug Sprouse says Rakin mischaracterizes enforcement of the code.



Springdale Mayor Doug Sprouse is mindful of the differences between cultures in his city.

"We enforce the same for everyone, and I think it's more a lack of understanding of the reasoning behind the codes: health, safety, quality of life. We've got buildings for Micronesians and Hispanics that have been abandoned metal shops that were never built for assembly. So you have certain fire codes and others that we can't bend on. The same goes for parking requirements for a building, or else parking in streets and yards."

Sprouse says one church was used for cooking and selling food, something not allowed under Department of Health regulations. He says that noise regulations have to be followed, too.

"Some of these buildings were not built to keep that much noise in, and some of them may be next to neighborhoods," he says. "The Marshallese churches in particular don't keep the same hours as other churches. They can go late, and we have had complaints after midnight. ... It's a matter of being able to sleep at night."

## A 'Shared Nuclear Legacy'

While nearly all economic immigrants start out segregated from the people around them, the Micronesians seem to have had a harder time assimilating and getting people to understand their unique history.

When the [Marshallese Educational Initiative](#), for instance, hosted a 60th anniversary for "Nuclear Remembrance Day" at the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock in 2014, only about 250 people showed up.

Nuclear Remembrance Day is marked every March 1 in the Republic of the Marshall Islands to recognize the day in 1954 that the Castle Bravo test by the United States was conducted on Bikini Atoll. The test detonated a hydrogen bomb that was 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, Japan.



**WATCH VIDEO** Marshallese church services, like this one in Springdale, often feature joyous performances with music and dance. Video by Mark Edward Harris

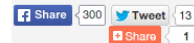
April Brown, MEI's executive director, said the anniversary event was meant to raise awareness about the nuclear testing, not blame anyone.

"We call it a 'shared nuclear legacy' to reflect, honor and educate people," she says.

Brown says most Americans simply don't understand the status of COFA immigrants nor do they know about the nuclear testing.

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She recounts a story about visiting community and business leaders to tell them about MEI.

"A very prominent businessman said, 'Well, why don't they pay taxes?' We were just kind of stunned by that," she said. "They generally think COFA migrants are abusing the system and not pulling their weight. They don't understand that we have a military base on Kwajalein and that we nuked their islands. I think if they did really understand that, hopefully they would be more sympathetic."



Mark Edward Harris/Civil Beat

**LISTEN** Albious Latior, with April Brown of the Micronesian Educational Initiative in Springdale, Arkansas, wants Americans to better understand Micronesians.

What would help persuade Americans of the need — the obligation, some say — to help Micronesians is to learn that they are making contributions to America, whether it is serving in American uniforms in the Middle East, working in poultry factories in Springdale, Arkansas, educating fellow Micronesians in Portland, Oregon, operating their own convenience store in Honolulu or serving as community liaisons in the Ocean View area on the Big Island.

Many Micronesians are working or taking care of kids or in school, says Asterio Takesy, the Federated States ambassador to the U.S.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

"We are pulling our weight, and I am seeing an upward mobility."

— Asterio Takesy

#### Success Stories

Asterio Takesy is the ambassador to the U.S. from the Federated States of Micronesia.

**Listen to Audio**

"That's a very powerful message: that we are trying our best, and that most of these jobs are entry-level, meaning these are the jobs that many (Americans) do not take," he says. "We are taking care of senior citizens, guarding houses and

business, working as chambermaids and in fast food, working graveyard hours. We are contributing to the local economy. We are pulling our own weight, and I am seeing upward mobility.”

## Working Class

Takesy points to [a 2012 study](#) by Francis X. Hezel and Michael J. Levin that surveyed Federated States immigrants living in the U.S. and its territories.

“Everyone who was not in school or taking care of the children seemed to be working,” the authors concluded. “The number of earners was high relative to the number in the household.”

For an example, look no further than Kevin Rehobson, Kernal’s son. After his father died in the Neosho shooting, Kevin took over the family business and moved it to Springdale where there was a bigger market.

Now Asian Island Food Market is the largest Micronesia specialty store in the area and Kevin and his wife, Brittney, a Neosho native, sell island favorites like Calrose rice, shipped-in fish, coconut oil soap and powdered sakau, a mildly narcotic beverage made from the root of the pepper plant. The various flags of Micronesia decorate the store’s interior.



*Kevin, Brittney, Brin and Oshen Rehobson at their Micronesia store in Springdale, Arkansas.*

The Rehobsons’ two kids, Brin and Oshen, attend John Tyson Elementary, just down the street from Tyson’s headquarters.

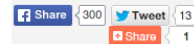
“My daughter is student class president, fifth grade, and my son is the fourth grade class president,” Kevin says. “They are Americans.”

Kevin and his family members in Missouri and Arkansas still send money back home to Pohnpei, but he hasn’t been back since he was a boy. He says that, someday, he would like to take what he has learned back to Micronesia, “to help them prosper.”

“It’s very important to me, our culture,” he explains. “We’re very family oriented, and we work hard. I think a couple more generations and our quality of life will get

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better.”

The theme of family and the importance of taking care of the extended family is a common one among Micronesians.

It’s why, according to Carmen Chong-Gum, the Marshall Islands’ consul general in Springdale, it’s so confusing to COFA citizens that the U.S. doesn’t always treat the COFA nations as family members.

“We are extended family,” Chong-Gum says of the special relationship between Micronesia and the United States. “Look at the history, our history, we have not been anything else but friends of the U.S.”

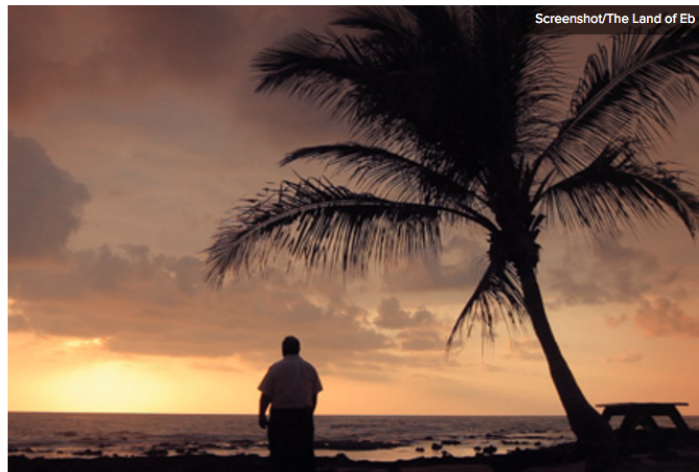


**LISTEN** Carmen Chong-Gum, the Marshallese consul general in Springdale, says Micronesians are family oriented.

Given the — at times — fraught history, it is surprising that more Micronesians aren’t bitter or outraged over their current predicaments.

Micronesian immigration has taken many paths, but the majority of COFA citizens are slow to anger, longing for a return to their homeland above all else.

Isao Eknian, for instance, is a native of Rongelap, where nuclear fallout from the Bikini tests fell like snow on residents. To this day, no one inhabits Rongelap, and Eknian now lives on Majuro, working out of the Rongelap town hall there as the executive council member.



*Some Micronesians still long to return to their home islands some day.*

While one of his daughters lives in Majuro and a son lives on Kwajalein Atoll, about an hour’s flight away, his other daughter followed a familiar immigration story. “First she went to Honolulu and spent two years there,” Eknian said, “and all of a sudden I heard Oklahoma first and then Arkansas, and now Arizona.”

She has been in the U.S. for 20 years now, he says, finally settling in Tucson with her family. Eknian says he doesn’t get to see them often, but he has nothing against Americans for what they did to his homeland.

“I’m not really mad at them,” he says plainly. “I really want to go back.”





**WATCH SLIDESHOW** *A Marshallese child attends a church service in Springdale, Arkansas, with her family.*



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