

## **Representing Pacific Islanders in FAPAC**

A Conversation with the American Samoa Chapter President Theodora Meredith

Theodora Meredith, a native Samoan, feels intense pride in her Pacific Islander identity and reflects that in her work as a meteorologist and in FAPAC. Her identity and ability to work are intertwined: “As a forecaster, you have to share the weather to the public, to the community. When the community sees a familiar face, they trust you and they trust the information that you shared.”

Meredith is the President and founder of the American Samoa chapter of FAPAC and currently works as a meteorologist in the Pago Pago office as part of the National Weather Service: the only National Weather Service office in the southern hemisphere and the only weather office in American Samoa.

She began her career as a meteorologist when she interned at the weather station while at the American Samoa Community College: the only college in American Samoa. Then, she received an undergraduate degree in atmospheric science at the University of Hawaii, and returned home.

Despite leaving home for her education, Meredith had no doubt she would return back to American Samoa: “My goal was always to come back home. What better way to help your people succeed than to actually be there. I'm very grateful because I'm here, and I get to do the training off island through the National Weather Service, so that really helps me expand as a forecaster while at the same time I'm here and I get to be with our people.”

After returning, Meredith worked with Homeland Security and then was a technician at the weather office, where she worked to collect data for forecasting. Working in Homeland Security allowed her to make connections within the federal government and being a technician allowed her to experience a variety of essential jobs at the weather station.

Forecasting is an essential and rewarding job, especially in American Samoa: “I feel like a superhero when I forecast incoming weather. It's an important job especially since hurricanes and tsunamis are a big threat for the islands. We had a tsunami in 2009 that took the lives of about 30 people, which doesn't sound like much, but because we are a small island that was a very sad and devastating day. That event was one of the reasons why I wanted to work for the weather office, because it was this office that gave the tsunami warning for people to be evacuated.”

As her office is majority Samoan, Meredith states that she doesn't experience racism in the workplace. However, her experience is different in the mainland: “If I go to trainings off island, the room is full of mostly men, and I'm the only brown girl. They all come towards me because I'm exotic to them. I'm actually the star over there because these people have never seen a Samoan.”

Her office in Pago Pago is also majority female; therefore, Meredith has not personally experienced sexism in the workplace. That is also a result of American Samoa's traditional culture which is different from mainland America, but that may be changing: "In my culture, the women can have chiefly titles. Women have a voice in the community, but I think nowadays, it has changed. My boss is a woman, and she has a hard time with the leadership here because I think the mentality has changed over the years. Our culture evolved."

Unlike many Asian Americans living in the US where they are the minority, she has never struggled with her identity as a Pacific Islander: "I don't think I've ever had issues with my identity because I live on the island, and I grew up here where my parents are both Samoan. Pacific Islanders are very proud people and our culture is strong. We are deeply rooted in our family, church and in our language."

In addition to her pride in her Samoan identity, she's proud to be an American. After being surrounded by independent countries, she's grateful for the privileges she has. She said: "When I see so many people hating the US, I'm like, 'Do you know all these countries that died to be a part of the US?' People need to get out of the US to see that we are actually very advanced. Everyone wants our data and our information."

The resource difference is even more obvious within the Samoan islands themselves. Half of the Samoan islands are a part of the United States, while the other half is an independent country. "We are the same people with the same culture, but half of the islands are under the US and the other half is on their own. They have their own government; they run it the way they want. Those people try to come over to our islands because all the money is here. The support that we get from the US makes me proud to be part of the US."

The resources FAPAC provides are what first interested her in the organization. However, when she went to her first FAPAC conference in 2019, she was surprised to see no other Pacific Islanders there. This inspired her to join and eventually found her own chapter: "What made me interested in joining FAPAC was seeing all this opportunity out there and bringing that down to the Pacific Island level. We talked about [the lack of Pacific Islanders], and I was very vocal but thought, 'I cannot be complaining and not doing anything about it. I have to do something about it.'"

For Pacific Islanders especially, Meredith emphasizes that representation is essential: "[Pacific Islanders] see someone who's not from here, like seeing [an] Asian person, a white person, and think, 'Oh my gosh. They're so smart. Like what do we have to offer?'" It's important to be going out there and showing the upcoming generation that someone like you can do it. Someone like you can learn just as much as anyone in this world."

Meredith believes grouping together Asians and Pacific Islanders does not represent the diversity of the different communities. "I don't think all of us should be put in a box like for the Asian Pacific Islander month. I was like, 'Why a month? We deserve a whole year!'" Meredith said. The term AAPI represents approximately 50 unique ethnic groups, speaking over 100

different languages, showing the immense diversity here.

However, she appreciates the support from the Asian community. “The Asian community was so nice to me, and they were so helpful in helping us set up a chapter here; they're very inclusive with [Pacific Islanders]. They try to include us and everything, which we are truly grateful for. I think it's good that we are together, especially since we are new at this, but I think Asians should stand on their own and Pacific Islanders should as well because we're not the same people,” Meredith said.

FAPAC has been essential in helping Meredith and other Samoans network and connect with the rest of America: “FAPAC is an open door, an opportunity for us to get to America, to get to the federal government. You have a network; you meet high people over there and I think, ‘We need a piece of that pie.’ FAPAC has given us the opportunity to connect to the other federal government opportunities that are there in the US. Because we're so far south of you guys, we don't see much that's happening off island so FAPAC is like, ‘Hey, look, there's this training.’ Or ‘Hey, look, there's this job opportunity. Look, there's this internship opportunity.’”

The American Samoa FAPAC chapter is currently planning a career fair and organizing scholarships to send Samoan students to FAPAC conferences. They also have a mentorship program that partners students with different local federal agencies. Meredith clarified their focus and said, “The students here are our priority for the local chapters because they are the future.”

To Pacific Islander youth wanting to follow down a similar career path, Meredith said, “You can do it. If I can do it, you can. There are no limitations for [Pacific Islanders], especially in the federal government. Reach for the stars. Don't let people who think they're better than you get to you because at the end of the day, it's your life, it's your journey and only you can accomplish the goals that you have set for yourself.”

However, Meredith reminds Pacific Islanders youth that for their community, it goes beyond their own personal goals: “There are people who are relying on you to take our community to the next level. You don't only represent yourself, you represent your family, the people around you, your country and your culture.”