

# Beyond the Blueprint: A Journey Home to the Islands

By K-Andrea Evarose Suda Limol

Greetings! My name is K-Andrea Evarose Suda Limol, but you can call me by my nickname, “K.” More than a decade ago, I participated in a summer cultural exchange program as a high school student, all thanks to the Association for Micronesian Development (AMD). A lot has changed since then and I would like to take this moment to share my story with you.

In the village of Sapuk, in the state of Chuuk – one of the four states of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) – I grew up surrounded by ocean, community, and a quiet understanding that where you come from matters. Sapuk is my home. It is where I learned that responsibility is shared, that land is sacred, and that education is both a privilege and a duty.

It was there that I attended and graduated from Xavier High School, a school rooted in discipline, service, and reflection. I was fortunate to visit Japan for a summer and learn about the people, the land, and the culture. I did not know it then, but it would be the first of many trips to one of my favorite places in the world to visit.

When I graduated from Xavier, I carried more than a diploma; I carried expectations – from my family, from my community, and from myself – that whatever I pursued would one day benefit the islands that shaped me. At 18, I believed I knew exactly how I would do that: I would become an engineer and I would build something that would last. I did not yet know that the “building” I would eventually do would look very different from what I imagined.

## Redrawing the Plans

I began my journey determined to study civil engineering. Infrastructure felt urgent and practical for island communities – roads, bridges, seawalls, water systems. I wanted to design solutions that could withstand storms and time.

Over time, my focus shifted to environmental engineering. I became increasingly aware that for small island communities, environmental protection is inseparable from development. Rising seas, limited landfill space, fragile ecosystems – these were not distant global issues. They were realities back home in Chuuk and across Micronesia.

Yet the deeper I studied, the more I realized environmental challenges were not only technical. They were shaped by policy, regulation, and governance. Laws determined what could be built. Agencies determined what standards were enforced.

So I changed direction again.

I switched to political science with the intention of pursuing environmental law. If engineering built systems, law governed them. I wanted to understand how decisions were made and how power influenced environmental outcomes.

Political science gave me a new lens. I learned to analyze institutions, governance structures, and public policy. I began to see that protecting the environment requires more than technical knowledge; it requires systems that function with accountability and foresight.

Still, life had another unexpected turn waiting.

# A Time of Crisis

When the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the world, I was fresh out of college. I found myself stepping into journalism, despite having no formal academic training in the field.

It was not a carefully mapped-out decision. It was an opportunity born out of urgency. Communities needed accurate information. Policies were shifting rapidly. Public health guidance evolved daily.

As a young journalist, I learn in real time – how to interview responsibly, verify facts, and communicate clearly under pressure. Words carried weight. A poorly framed sentence could mislead; a careful one could inform and steady a community, especially amid a global crisis.

Although I had not studied journalism formally, my political science background helped me understand policy decisions, and my early interest in environmental systems made me attentive to infrastructure and public health vulnerabilities.

Without realizing it, I was gathering tools I would later use in another field entirely.

# Changing Tides

As the world began to heal from the global pandemic, I found myself as an environmental journalism fellow through an international program based in Japan. During that fellowship, I encountered something that would quietly but decisively redirect my life: solid waste management.

In Japan, waste was not treated casually; it was sorted meticulously, managed systemically, and supported by both strong policy and community participation. Waste management was recognized as essential infrastructure.

For the first time, I saw waste not as an afterthought but as a complex system involving engineering, governance, public behavior, and environmental science.

And I thought about Sapuk.

About Chuuk.

About island communities where land is limited and every environmental decision has lasting consequences.

Waste is not just a sanitation issue in island environments; it is a survival issue.

Something aligned.

All my earlier interests – engineering, policy, environmental protection, communication – converged in this one field.

# Returning With Purpose

After that fellowship, this time, I was no longer searching for my purpose; I found it. I pursued a master's degree in environmental sciences, concentrating in natural resources. I networked with local solid waste management stakeholders to jumpstart my career in the industry.

Graduate study deepened my understanding of ecosystems, sustainability systems, regulatory frameworks, and waste infrastructure planning. What once felt like detours now felt interconnected. My early fascination with engineering made system analysis intuitive. Political science helped me understand environmental governance. Journalism strengthened my communication skills. Nothing had been wasted – not even the changes in direction.

# Serving Island Communities

Today, I work as a Solid Waste Technical Analyst for the government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

In island environments, land is finite and ecosystems are fragile. A poorly managed waste system can affect groundwater, reefs, tourism, and public health. Every decision must consider long-term sustainability.

My work involves technical analysis, regulatory compliance, and system planning. It may not resemble the engineering career I once imagined, but in many ways, it fulfills the same purpose.

I am still building – not bridges of concrete, but systems of accountability and environmental protection.

## The Thread That Never Changed

From civil engineering to environmental engineering.

From political science to journalism.

From an environmental journalism fellowship in Japan to graduate school.

From graduate school to solid waste management.

The path was not straight. It rarely made sense in the moment. But the purpose was constant: to serve island communities.

Not every journey follows a clear blueprint. Sometimes, the long way around leads you exactly where you are meant to be – carrying new knowledge home.

Looking back, I see that every twist, every detour, and every unexpected opportunity was preparing me for this moment – working to protect the islands that first shaped me. My journey has taught me that purpose is not always linear and success is not defined by a single title or degree. What matters most is using your skills, curiosity, and resilience to make a meaningful difference.

I hope that by sharing my story, other young Micronesians and other Pacific Islanders will feel encouraged to explore widely, to follow their interests boldly, and to trust that no matter how winding the path, it can lead back to home – ready to contribute, protect, and build a stronger future for our communities.