

Canoe

Part one of a three-part series
by GIFF JOHNSON

It's hard to think about outrigger canoes in the Marshall Islands without Dennis Alessio's name popping into mind. For nearly 20 years, Alessio has been at the heart of a revival of interest in canoe building, sailing and navigation.

Alessio left the Marshall Islands last week but his legacy in canoe building continues to reverberate through the Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) program, now ably run by Alson Kelen.

You might call his move to the Big Island of Hawaii the end of an era, but thankfully not the end of a program.

As so many things in life are, Alessio's arrival here was quite by accident, despite his interest in Pacific canoes.

A skilled wooden boat builder, he was occupied in the late 1980s with teaching the art of boat building to students in the state of Washington when he was asked to bring a team of carpenters and supervise all the woodworking on the Tole Mour tall ship that was being built in Seattle by the MariMed Foundation for health service in the Marshall Islands. Tole Mour was modeled on the three-masted tall ships that once plied the Pacific carrying trade goods between Asia and the Americas.

As he and the team got going on installing the decks and all the cabinetry on the 156-foot vessel, Alessio began researching the Marshall Islands and Pacific canoes. "I didn't see much information about canoes generally, and none about how to build them," he said. His interest in canoes dated back a few years earlier to when he was in Fiji and involved in an international boat building training program. "I was in Fiji and I wanted to start a business of building Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) designed canoes for local fishing," Alessio said. "But I had no money."

His work on Tole Mour segued into becoming a crew member. "The US Coast Guard required us to sail the vessel with only six crew to show that Tole Mour was seaworthy," Alessio told the Journal.

"It was quite a deal — six of us running up to the top of the masts to open the sails — but we were so intimate with the ship (from building it), it worked well." The Coast Guard declared it seaworthy and a few months later, in late 1988, the vessel was sailed from the US to Majuro.

"When we delivered the ship to Majuro, I didn't see any canoes in the lagoon," Alessio said. Later on, he saw one. "The one I saw was over by MJCC, owned by an older guy who used to go out fishing in it."



Dennis Alessio

New course for Dennis

Dennis Alessio came out to Marshall Islands aboard MariMed Foundation's tall ship Tole Mour in 1988. Twenty years on, he's packed his bags, heading for new challenges.

Although Alessio in his modest way would downplay the contributions he made to the revival of outrigger canoe culture in the Marshall Islands, he has had as much — or more — to do with it than any other individual.

But beyond the huge role in canoe work in the RMI, Alessio has had a big behind-the-scenes impact on the development of the non-government organization sector.

His work promoting NGOs included founding Waan Aelon in Majel (WAM) program, helping establish the Marshall Islands Council of NGOs four years ago, and elevating the profile of the NGO Council and other affiliated NGOs in the international donor community.

He left Majuro last week for a new home on the Big Island of Hawaii.

While on Majuro, he bumped into Gerry Knight, who was running Alele Museum at the time. Knight tried to sign up Alessio to work on an outrigger canoe documentation project that he was developing. But Alessio had other fish in the frying pan after delivering Tole Mour. Though he was interested in Knight's offer, he had already committed to a job in the Netherlands to finish a similar tall ship.

The following year, Alessio returned to the Marshalls to work with Alele Museum, which was sending a Jaluit outrigger to the Field Museum to become part of a permanent exhibit on the Pacific islands at the famed Chicago museum.

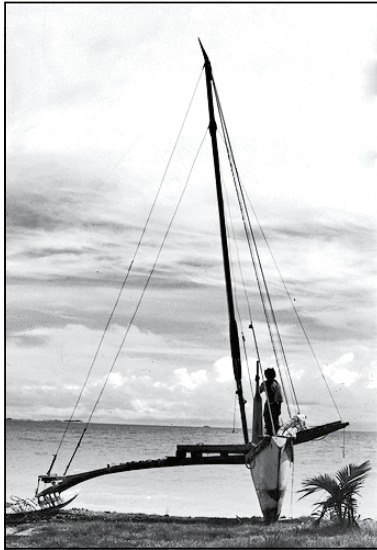
"Gennade Leon from Jaluit donated a canoe of his for the Field Museum," Alessio

reincarnation

Vessels of Ujelang and Wotho



A former American Peace Corps volunteer who worked on Ujelang in the mid-1970s snapped these fine photos of outrigger canoes. Above, Ujelang islanders sail out on a fishing trip; right, a canoe on Wotho Atoll; and below, on Ujelang, Luta planes a wood plank that he used to repair the canoe in the background. By the 1980s, fewer and fewer canoes were being built and sailed both on the remote outer islands, and especially in Majuro. Photos by David Anderson.



"To get around this "problem" in dealing with Alessio, an American, Leon did an island-style adoption of Alessio. "He called me 'neju' (my son) because he needed to do this to pass the information on to me."

said. "The Field Museum provided money to buy him an outboard motorboat, but Gennade didn't want one. He wanted an outrigger built with a plywood hull." Outriggers were virtually always built from breadfruit logs, so Leon's idea was a big departure from tradition, but one that would prove far more sustainable in the future, when breadfruit logs became more scarce.

Alessio and Leon worked on a canoe

they've been building boats. Konou Smith, a high school student at the time, was involved in the building project, Alessio recalls.

"I did the hull and Gennade built the other parts," Alessio said.

This was not as simple as it sounds. A very few people in the country are considered master builders and traditional navigators. Historically, this knowledge was not widely shared, but only passed along to carefully selected sons or close relatives who proved worthy of carrying on the skills to the next generation.

To get around this "problem" in dealing with Alessio, an American, Leon did an island-style adoption of Alessio. "He called me 'neju' (my son) because he needed to do this to pass the information on to me," he

said. At the time, Leon was somewhat of an anomaly, since very few canoes were being built in the late 1980s and the keepers of the knowledge were generally not sharing the information with the next generation — a reflection of how modernization and urbanization were shaping island attitudes. "All the information was in people's heads, but it was not being passed along."

Among the things Alessio learned from Leon is that there are five main canoe designs in the Marshall Islands, with three styles.

Alessio wrapped up the work with Leon by producing a report with detailed diagrams to help future canoe builders. But why stop at one canoe? The idea was hatched to continue the documentation program for the other designs.

Alfred Capelle, the curator of the museum, was very supportive of the idea, and introduced Alessio to Chief Secretary Oscar deBrum, who was equally enthusiastic, telling Alessio, "canoes are in the heart of all Marshallese." These discussions sparked encouragement from President Amata Kabua, Senator Tony deBrum, local businessman Dennis Momotaro and others, Alessio recalled.

But there wasn't any money for the work, and it was a shoestring existence for Alessio for a while. He lived for a bit at the MariMed office in Uliga, and then was given a small office at Alele. "I kept a mat there and often slept on the floor next to my desk," Alessio recalled with a laugh.

The Jaluit canoe sent to the Field Museum had been done under a project known as Waan Aelon Kein (canoes of these islands), and the documentation project kept the name.

Alessio soon headed for Likiep to work on a canoe with local master builders.

"When I first arrived at Likiep, there was one canoe being used on Jebel or Melan" (small islands in Likiep's lagoon), he said. "Other canoes were laying unused on the beach, old and rotting."

Alessio proposed a canoe race with prizes to get people excited about canoes, and enlisted support from Carmen Bigler, the Internal Affairs secretary.

"We got 13 canoes fixed for the race all the while we were working on building a new 18-foot canoe from a breadfruit log," he said, adding that each step was documented with photos and videotape.

"We involved Likiep students in the building project," he said. "It was fantastic, living outer islands life."

Race day brought out virtually every person on Likiep, and infused the community with excitement for canoes.

The race and student participation at Likiep convinced Alessio that this was a great formula for future canoe work in the RMI.

Next week: Canoe building involving Namdrik, Ailuk, Enewetak and Ujae master builders, the 1992 Pacific Festival of Arts, and the birth of Waan Aelon in Majel.

Dennis' decades of canoe discovery

Second in a three-part series by GIFF JOHNSON

Having documented the construction of Jaluit and Likiep-style canoes, wooden boat builder Dennis Alessio was ready for his next assignment at Namdrik Atoll.

Although the outrigger building documentation projects got everyone jazzed up while the work was going on, this didn't always translate into funding for the next project. Funding constraints would frequently slow the Waan Aelon Kein (WAK) canoe documentation project, but rarely diminished Alessio's enthusiasm for the work.

The Alele was able to raise only a small amount of funding so the project at Namdrik focused on building just a six-foot canoe, using a small grant from the Australian government. This one mainly focused on Marshallese techniques for lashings used to build canoes.

While the project struggled for funding, canoe building in the RMI generally was on the decline in the face of an onslaught of bumbums and outboard motorboats that were much in demand, not only in Majuro and Ebeye but also on many outer islands.

While on Namdrik building the small canoe, Alessio and local fishermen organized a fishing tournament for canoes. "We had lots of prizes (for the winners)." Alessio



'The Marshalls canoe was so fast, the crew had to stop and wait for other canoes to catch up on the overnight voyage to Rarotonga.'

on the floor," he said. A "loft" is a wooden boat builder's visual design that shows three views of the vessel — from the top looking down, from the side and up from the bottom — and serves as a blueprint for building the boat.

"In the United States, I trained 'professionals' in lofting," Alessio said.

"My students were MBAs and college graduates and it took them weeks to see (and understand) the three dimensions of the boat on a two dimensional surface," Alessio said

he was amazed at the response from the canoe builders on Namdrik to his preparing the loft. "They were telling me how to do it," he said. "They'd never done a loft before, but they knew how to build canoes. It was in their brains. It was totally visual, so when I put the view from bow to stern, they designed it and explained how they wanted it built."

From the experience at Namdrik, Alessio earned that the way Marshallese set up for building an outrigger canoe mirrors the way

traditional wooden boats are built.

Next stop for Alessio was Ailuk, where he worked with master builder Killon Takia to document two canoe styles, working on existing outriggers.

After the Ailuk work, the US-funded Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provided money to bring Jaluit master builder Gennade Leon's 30-year-old canoe to Majuro, where it was rebuilt as both a training opportunity for several Ailuk builders and a documentation project.

By late 1991, excitement was building for the Festival of Pacific Arts, which was being organized in the Cook Islands with canoes as the centerpiece. The RMI's organizing committee wanted to build a canoe. "I put word out about building a voyaging canoe," Alessio said. This was a big jump for the Waan Aelon Kein program, since its biggest canoe had been less than 25 feet, and a voyaging canoe would nearly double that length.

"Enewetak Senator Ismael John came in and told me 'we can do it,'" Alessio recalls. But initially, some organizing committee members objected, saying an Enewetak canoe wasn't a Marshallese design.

A few days later, Alessio found the solution to this knotty problem. "I borrowed a table sized outrigger model and took it to show to the committee," Alessio said. "It (the model) had been at the United Nations on display when the Marshall Islands be-



Next week: Making the jump from documentation to training young Marshallese men and women to build and sail canoes.

came a UN member (earlier that year)."

The committee members really liked the design of this canoe, and voted to have the voyaging canoe built based on the model. Alessio then explained that the model was of an Enewetak canoe.

And so a big crew of Enewetak islanders, led by master builders Lombwe Mark and Hertel John descended on Majuro to build the first voyaging canoe built in the Marshall

Islands in 50 or more years. "The Enewetak crew was a joy (to work with)," Alessio said. They built the nearly 50-foot canoe in an old Trust Territory era quonset hut that was in the area now occupied by Cost Price.

Lots of local residents stopped by to watch the canoe building. "They'd say, 'it'll never sail. It's going to sink.'"

But not only did it sail, it caused a sensation in the Cook Islands. It joined with the

for the canoes to navigate to open ocean. The Enewetak sailors hoisted the sail and organized the rigging as the canoe slowly moved toward the pass.

"Then they pulled the sail in tight, maneuvered to catch the wind and shot out the channel," Alessio said. "It was a precision move and the crowd went wild screaming and shouting as the canoe went sailing out."

The Marshalls canoe was so fast, the crew had to stop and wait for other canoes to catch up on the overnight voyage to Rarotonga. Finally, the crew got tired of waiting, and zoomed along.

But as dawn broke, they hit a patch of heavy weather, with big waves and suddenly the mast snapped in two. It sounds almost too simple, but the crew simply fixed it and sailed on, still arriving at Rarotonga before the other Polynesian canoes.

In Rarotonga the Marshalls canoe — which later would go on display at the New Zealand Maritime Museum after the Festival of Arts — continued to stand out for its speed and design, as well as its single hull construction.

Back home in Majuro, there was a new development that would shape the canoe program in the years ahead. Now well known as the canoe program manager, then Alson Kelen was a new hire, a "rookie" too new to qualify for participation in the Cook Islands Festival.



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Alele idea

Highlights of two decades of activity

1989: Alele Museum collaborates with Field Museum in Chicago to provide traditional sailing canoe for permanent display on the Pacific. Museum provides funding to build replacement outrigger from plywood.

"Waan Aelon Kein" (Canoes of These Islands) project officially established by Alele as a result of Field Museum project.

Alele director Gerry Knight enlists wooden boat building specialist Dennis Alessio to work with Gennade Leon of Jaluit to build 18-foot canoe in Majuro — the first outrigger canoe construction to be documented under Alele project.

1990: Plan to document all five outrigger canoe designs developed by Alessio with support by Alele Museum officials. Alele curator Alfred Capelle gets support from President Amata Kabua, Chief Secretary Oscar deBrum and other leaders for plan.

Alele's Waan Aelon Kein (WAK) manager Alessio goes to Likiep to document building of 18-foot canoe from a breadfruit log in second phase of WAK project. At the time, only one canoe is in use on the atoll. Likiep elementary students get involved in the canoe building work.

WAK, in collaboration with Internal Affairs, sponsors outrigger canoe race at Likiep, sparking Likiep residents to repair 13 canoes for the competition.

Alessio goes to Namdrik to work with local builders on small canoe; lack of budget prevents building bigger canoe. Focus of project is on lashing techniques for the hull and outrigger.

Namdrik Senator Andrew Hisaiah provides funding for Alessio to return to Namdrik to build demonstration outrigger from plywood. 18-foot canoe built.

Fishing survey conducted on Namdrik comparing catches and costs of fishermen using outrigger canoes and outboard motorboats. Survey demonstrated viability of canoes for fishing, and at virtually no cost compared to more costly engine boats.

1991: Alessio goes to Ailuk to work with master builder Killon Takia, who shows construction techniques of two styles of outriggers for WAK to document. Alessio and Takia work from existing canoes to document designs.

US-funded program Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provides money to bring in Ailuk canoe built by master builder Killon Takia and a 30-year old canoe from Ailuk to Majuro to rebuild. Boat builders from Ailuk work on canoe project.

Late in the year, planning begins for Festival of Pacific Arts to be held in the Cook Islands in 1992 with a focus on outrigger canoes. To accomplish documentation and Festival goals, plan is set to build a large voyaging ("walap") canoe. Enewetak Atoll builders chosen

grows into key program

to do project.

Approximately 50-foot voyaging canoe built in Uliga, Majuro by Enewetak crew under direction of Lombwe Mark and Hertel John.

1992: Voyaging canoe transported from Marshall Islands to Cook Islands from many other islands. On 140-mile sail from Aitutaki Atoll to Rarotonga, Marshall Islands canoe causes sensation for its speed and different style from traditional Polynesia double-hull canoes.

Alson Kelen hired as assistant manager/translator for WAK.

1993: Alson and Dennis write about the Enewetak canoe construction.

1994: WAK staff members Alessio and Kelen work with Iroij Mike Kabua who helps them go to Ujae Atoll to document building of voyaging canoe (walap) by masterbuilders Thomas and Atbi Bokin.

This will be the last canoe documented under the WAK project. After canoe is finished, this walap, named "Laninmentol," is used in Majuro and elsewhere as a training canoe.

1996: As the program switches from a documentation to a youth training program, it becomes an independent non-governmental organization using the name Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands or WAM).

1997: WAM begins collaboration with Youth to Youth in Health in its canoe

sailing and maintenance program.

Outrigger Marshall Islands Resorts is the major sponsor for the first National Cup canoe sailing race organized by WAM in Majuro Atoll.

Outrigger general manager Laverne Salvador supports WAM with an office in the hotel.

1998: WAM builds thatched roof canoe house next to Marshall Islands Resort.

1999: Waan Aelon in Majel (WAM) officially incorporates as a chartered, non-governmental organization.

Polynesia Voyaging Society from Hawaii builds Makali'i voyaging canoe as a gift to recognize Satawal navigator Mau Pailiug for reviving the art of canoe building and traditional navigation among Hawaiians. Mau navigates Makali'i to Majuro. WAM's Kelen travels with Makali'i from Hawaii to Majuro.

Kelen becomes program manager of WAM; Alessio becomes director of the program.

2000: WAM masterbuilders and trainees build a 23-foot midsize sailing canoe ("tipno").

WAM staff members build program office next to canoe house.

2001: WAM training program builds an 18-foot racing canoe and a 14-foot padding canoe.

2002: WAM training program builds a 30-foot sailing canoe (tipno) and two eight-foot fiberglass dingies.

2003: WAM training program builds a

24-foot fiberglass catamaran for Ailuk Atoll Local Government.

WAM training program builds four fiberglass canoes.

Traditional leaders from Raik Chain sponsor Jebro's Race at Ailinglaplap, bringing canoe competitors from around the Marshall Islands to compete for large cash prizes. WAM helps coordinate race.

WAM and CMI staff members develop boat building and fiberglass technology curriculum.

2004: Eleven trainees graduate from a two-year WAM canoe building training program.

WAM staff members complete curriculum for cabinet and furniture making training programs, as well as integrated carpentry and woodworking.

WAM represented at Japan Tourism Trade program.

WAM masterbuilders and trainees represent RMI at the International Festival of Canoes in Maui, building an 18-foot sailing canoe in three weeks.

WAM masterbuilders and staff members represent RMI canoe culture at the Festival of Pacific Arts in Palau.

2005: WAM masterbuilders and trainees again represent the RMI at the International Festival of Canoes in Maui, building a 20-foot canoe in three weeks. WAM, in its second year, is the only group from the Micronesian area represented at the festival.

WAM completes English and Marshal-

lese language versions of a Trainer's Guide and Trainee Workbooks for a six-month canoe-based skills and life-skills training program.

WAM works with traditional navigators and students from the University of Hawaii to document the traditional knowledge of navigation and weather in the Marshall Islands.

WAM partners with the College of the Marshall Islands Upward Bound summer program to offer two five-week elective courses for the high school students.

WAM staff members complete first strategic plan to guide the work of the program.

2006: WAM staff members complete an English and Marshallese language workbook for a Canoe/Canoe Model Building Training Program.

WAM continues work with University of Hawaii to document traditional knowledge of navigation and weather in the Marshall Islands.

2007: RMI marks 10th anniversary of National Cup outrigger canoe race in Majuro.

WAM represents RMI in the International Festival of Canoes in Maui, this time building a 20-foot canoe in only two weeks.

WAM begins full time training with 11 young men and three young women in a six-month canoe and woodworking training program partially funded by the National Training Council.

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The Marshall Islands' canoe program comes of age

Third in a three-part series
by GIFF JOHNSON

The building of a 40-foot voyaging canoe at Ujae Atoll was both the last and most difficult project undertaken by Waan Aelon Kein (Canoes of these islands) in its approximately 10 years of operation.

It followed completion of a nearly 50-foot canoe by Enewetak builders in Majuro that represented the RMI at the 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts in the Cook Islands. The Enewetak project involved for the first time new hire Alson Kelen, who translated the canoe building documentation manual into Marshallese.

Waan Aelon Kein program manager Dennis Alessio and assistant Kelen during the 1994-1995 period spent many months on Ujae documenting another large walap. That vessel — named "Lanimentol" — was produced under the guidance of Ujae master builders Thomas and Atbi Bokin. Although it took much longer than planned to complete this large vessel, complete it they did. And in the late 1990s, it was sailed to Majuro, where it was the focus of canoe training programs.

With Lanimentol built, Alessio and Kelen were keen to move the project from documenting canoes to training young people to build and sail canoes.

Having the program under the Alele Museum while it was in the documentation phase made sense. The Alele "was the perfect place for Waan Aelon Kein," Alessio said. "But when the project changed, it was right for it to move out and establish its own personality."

In 1996, Alessio took the unusual action of "firing myself." Kelen took over, while Alessio focused on developing his tropical hardwood home building business.

Waan Aelon Kein became Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) and went into a partnership with Youth to Youth in Health as the canoe building training moved into its first phase.

Kelen asked Alessio to continue working with the program to develop the training curriculum, and their partnership continued.

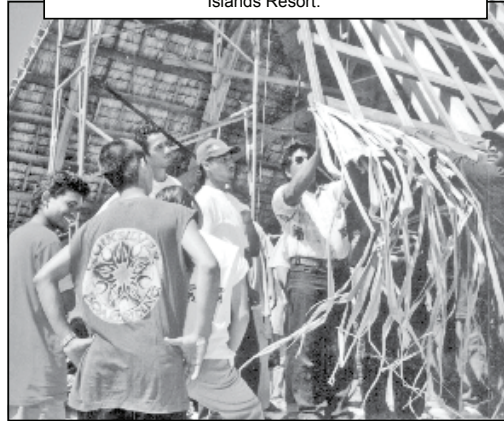
Meanwhile, the government's new hotel was going up in Delap to host the South Pacific Forum meeting at the end of 1996. President Amata Kabua identified the piece of property that's at the western end of the hotel property for the WAM canoe house and office to be built.

Once the hotel was opened, under Outrigger management, first general manager Laverne Salvador provided a room for WAM to use for an office. Outrigger's support for canoes went far beyond providing an office to include

The birth of Waan Aelon in Majel



Pictured in the late 1990s, WAM trainees work on lashing intricate parts of a canoe together. Below, trainees are taught how to create a thatched roof on the new Waan Aelon in Majel building next to the Marshall Islands Resort.



'The reason it will continue is because everyone owns it. It's not owned by Alessio. I was blessed to be part of the process.' — Dennis Alessio

major sponsorship, in 1997, of the first Outrigger Marshall Islands National Cup. That race sparked canoe racing competition that had not existed in Majuro for several generations, and continues to this day.

By 1999, WAM formally incorporated as a chartered, non-government organization.

But in the early 2000s, despite significant youth training successes, funding was pulled by a major local funding partner, forcing the program to stop the larger youth trainings it had been doing

and concentrate on more focused "train the trainers" type work.

Alessio described this as one of the challenges of running a successful program in the Marshall Islands, but added: "Either you take it as the end or you take it as an opportunity. That's why the program is successful. We take whatever comes and develop opportunities."

Major international donors, such as the Asian Development Bank, recognized the fine work of the program, and this led to funding for facilities expansion, giving

Alson: We need government support of NGOs

Seeing a former youth gang member change to become a productive, contributing member of the community is like a huge "vitamin" for Alson Kelen.

"I love what I'm doing and I love to see the results (from working in a non-government organization)," Kelen told the Journal about his work at the Canoes of the Marshall Islands program.

"It's a great feeling to see a life change in the youth involved in the program."

Kelen said some of the kids who come into the program have been in and out of jail — looked on as "bad people" by others in the community — but get active in building and sailing canoes and become role models for other youth. And sometimes it is the parents who are most impressed with the changes they see in their children.

"The changes took hard work and commitment," Kelen said. "That's why I love doing it."

For Kelen, who also doubles as the President of the Marshall Islands Council of NGOs, NGOs are the wave of the future for this country.

"NGOs are for the betterment of the country," he said. "They are what will change the Marshall Islands."

Working at the grassroots level the "challenges are hard but at the end you see a lot of smiling faces," he said. "You see the change and the results."

Through NGOs, people's voices are heard and results are noticed, he said.

A challenge for the government and NGOs is to get top-level people in government to recognize the importance of NGOs. "The government needs to realize that a lot of what it does could be done by NGOs," Kelen said. Among the obvious areas for NGO expansion are programs for youth and women, he said.

He'd like to see government agencies see the value of partnerships with NGOs, and inject funding to expand NGO activities. By providing funding to NGOs, the government "gets the credit and more results," he said.

WAM additional shop space for its boat building work.

The key element in the program, however, was not money. "The most important ingredient is youth," Alessio said. Looking back at various RMI national meetings such as the National Economic and Social Summits (NESS), Alessio said: "We developed a program to meet the needs of youth at risk so they are a viable part of the future."

With Alessio's recent departure, some people in town speculated that the program might stop. But a visit to WAM last Friday found a beehive of activity: Outside, master builder Tiem Clement, Andy Caleb and James Jelai were starting on a 14-foot outrigger canoe that will be displayed in the new RMI government convention

center; on the water, recently arrived Dartmouth teachers were being taken out for sails on canoes by WAM trainees; inside the canoe house, young women and men were working on fiberglassing the hull of a new 24-foot outrigger canoe (tipnol) under the skilled guidance of John Kawakami; and in the office, program manager Kelen and program administrator Rachel Miller were working on grant and funding reports.

"It's taken on a life of its own," Alessio said shortly before he left Majuro for his new home on the Big Island of Hawaii. "I see the strength of Alson and others in the program. They're buying in. The reason it will continue is because everyone owns it. It's not owned by Alessio. I was blessed to be part of the process."