

MERE TUIASOSOPO BETHAM
EDUCATOR



Born on April 3, 1932, to High Talking Chief Mariota T. Tuiasosopo and his devoted wife Venise Pulefaasisina, both of American Samoa, Mere had an interesting childhood and unique early educational experience growing up under the United States Naval Administration of the American Samoa Islands. She started her formal education in her village religious minister's parish, where the children at ages 2 and 3 were taught the Samoan alphabet, reading and writing. Her public school education began for her at an illegal age in the first grade, according to the laws in those days, and she recalls with amusing detail how her teachers would hurriedly slip her into the tapioca field next to the school to hide until the school inspectors from the central office were gone.

When Mere completed her elementary education, a very selective public high school -the only high school on the islands then -came into being and she enrolled there to continue her education. (There are now five public high schools with compulsory universal education from ages 6 through 18.) There were only 16 in her class; being a small class in size and the first to graduate, the students were expected to set good examples of high academic proficiency and be models of good behavior and conduct for other students to emulate.

Mere's class was like a family, each one looking after the other's interests, protective of each other. This feeling of togetherness (like a family) continued when Mere and a number of her fellow graduates left to attend colleges in the mainland United States. They started a round-robin letter to stay in touch with each other.

They left to study in the States with a mission well implanted in them by the leading chiefs of American Samoa, including her father: Upon completion of their college studies they must return home to serve their people. Mere feels now that it was highly presumptuous of their chiefs to expect that of them since the Samoa government did not give them any financial support for their college education. The propoganda of "service to our people," however, was so well rehearsed during their island schooling that for Mere, at least, it was the only reason, she believed without a doubt, that she was being sent so far away from home to a land foreign to her to get a college education.

After a year at Pomona College in California she transferred to Geneva College in Pennsylvania where she finished her college studies in January, 1954, and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in economics with a minor in secondary education. She was certified in Pennsylvania where she did her practice teaching and was the first woman from Samoa to receive stateside teaching credentials. She never went home during her 3-1/2 years of college training and by the end of her studies she was completely acculturated into eastern American mores and so-called characteristic fashion.

The readjustment to Samoa was traumatic, Mere confessed; but under the competent guidance of her courageous and devoted parents, her father in particular who in his wisdom had his daughter's educational development charted far in advance, she "weathered the storms" and rose to prominence in her career as an island educator, becoming a highly regarded and respected leader in Samoa. In 1955, she married James Manuel Betham, who is now manager of an oil company operating in American Samoa; they have six children ranging in age from 14 to 29 years.

Mere Tuiasosopo Betham is well known and admired in American Samoa and other islands of the Pacific Region for her integrity and leadership ability. Although active in other affairs of government and political development in her territory, she is best known as a leader in the field of education. She ably held the post of Director of Education for the Government of American Samoa for over a decade. Her accomplishments during the more than 30 years of her career as an island educator are far too many to enumerate. But perhaps the two that have been most influential and far-reaching are:

- (1) Local Capacity Building -- the staff development efforts with which Mere's name has become synonymous; and
- (2) Bilingual/Bicultural Education -- the conceptualization, development and materialization of the bilingual/bicultural educational system of American Samoa, an innovative approach to reconciliation of the fervent desire of Samoans to maintain their identity as a cultural entity while at the same time they educate their people to meet the demands of the Western world, characterized by enormous changes and the rapid rate with which these changes are occurring in the islands.

A vital step towards the full realization of her goals for education in her territory has been the necessity to upgrade the total teaching force (close to 90% Samoan), the major part of which was qualified only to the ninth grade until the late 1960s. Her emphasis on Local Capacity Building grew out of this need, and this focus has guided her efforts to be more responsive to the needs of her territory as she sees them. "Our people are our greatest and only valuable natural resource, and it is imperative that we invest heavily in their development (at all levels),

for by so doing we invest in our country's future stability, growth, health and security," she said in her Professional Day remarks to the teachers and school administrators of American Samoa.

Mere Betham expanded the old concept of in-service teacher training through summer institutes only and aggressively sought assistance from the Governor's Office, the local legislature and from Washington, D.C., to bring college degree programs for teachers and school administrators to American Samoa.

The University of Hawaii and Brigham Young University (Hawaii and Provo campuses) responded with enthusiasm to Mere Betham's energetic scheme to certify her schools' professional personnel to the highest standards possible. They set up undergraduate level and graduate degree programs, a combination of on- and off-island training during the year and in the summer. At the same time the Teacher Corps was institutionalized for the first time in American Samoa.

A host of other mainland and Hawaii colleges offered opportunities for some of Mere's teachers to earn degrees in content areas. Special education degree programs for her teachers in that field were also instituted through the Oregon College of Education and the University of Hawaii. A Master's program for counselors was begun with the University of Hawaii. Also, an intern doctoral program with Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, provided middle management professionals with high level skills in education administration.

The extent to which Local Capacity Building efforts have developed in American Samoa in the years that Mere Betham has provided stewardship in education in the territory is phenomenal. Quantitatively, success in this effort is seen in the growth of teachers' baccalaureate qualification, which from 1980 to 1983 was 70%; those qualified at the Master's degree level increased from 40 in 1980 to 92 in 1983, an increase of more than 100%. At the Ph.D. level, there was an increase from 3 for the period up to 1980 to 12 in 1984. This impressive growth in teacher corps qualification level is even more astounding given that the first high school graduation in American Samoa was in 1950; Mere Betham was the only girl and the youngest member of that class.

Inherent in Mere's insistence on Local Capacity Building is her conviction that it is the only way citizens in a developing country like Samoa can ensure to a large measure their survival amidst the influxes of the Western world, remain the masters of their land and development, and continue to reaffirm confidence in their ability to determine their own destiny. It is also the means, she believes, by which the Samoan culture and democracy will blend for Samoans to continue to live in peace and harmony.

Under Mere Betham's guidance and support, Dr. Betty Kendall Johnston and her assistant Mrs. Iutita Savali developed and installed the American Samoa Early Childhood Education program, which has enjoyed a nationwide reputation as a highly innovative and exciting program designed to

introduce preschool age children to formal education. The program uses parents, selected for basic training, to teach the children, utilizing local materials in the local setting to transfer ideas and concepts.

Through Mere Betham's dynamic leadership a milestone in Pacific education occurred in 1982 in Apia, Western Samoa: an international professional 3-day workshop for almost 1,000 educators from top-level supervisors and curriculum specialists to classroom teachers. Top political and religious leaders of both American Samoa and Western Samoa were also involved. Dr. Herman Goldberg of the United States Department of Education represented the United States and relayed to the gathering a message of greetings from President Ronald Reagan.

In the wider community of American educators, Mere T. Betham is well known for her activities in professional associations and for her published work on American Samoa. She is co-author of the book Bold Experiment - The Story of Educational Television in American Samoa, published in 1981 by Stanford University Press, which has received extensive reviews by education critics around the world.

What has been accomplished for education in American Samoa could not have been realized without years of dedication to learning and the ability to identify and guide human resources both in the profession and from the community as well. Mere Betham is the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her work in education in the Pacific. Among them is the Samoa Educator of the Year Award, of which she is the first recipient. In commending her for such an honor, the then United States Secretary of Education, Dr. Terrell H. Bell, referred with admiration to the many efforts she has made to improve educational opportunities in the Pacific Basin. "Progress in education (reform)," he added, "depends most of all on the activities of leaders in each of our states and territories, and your example to the people of American Samoa has been bright"

Dr. Del Wasden, chairman of the Department of Educational Administration at Brigham Young University, Provo, came to American Samoa especially to present to Mere Betham the Distinguished Service to Education Award by Brigham Young University. He said that his university (BYU) had planned for some time to give such an award to Mere Betham in recognition of "her unselfish struggle to provide the finest in education for American Samoa, and for the finest qualities of stewardship she exemplified" and also because of her national and international reputation as being "a committed, hard-working, unselfish and giving person."

Amidst the demands and unceasing excitement of her "service to her people" commitment, Mere Tuiasosopo Betham managed to raise a family of six handsome, well-disciplined children, and she demonstrated once and for all that it is indeed possible, even in the islands, for a woman to meet the demands of challenging work and family life successfully. She did not wait to change with the times, she made times change with her.