Return to Paradise?
What it really takes to live Samoa's way

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Return to Paradise? What it really takes to live Samoa's way

Visitor numbers to Samoa have never been higher, and among them are Kiwi Samoans drawn by culture, family, and curiosity about their ancestral home. But as Karima Fai'ai finds, rediscovering paradise often comes with unexpected lessons.

The fans stop. A heavy stillness settles over the classroom as rain drums against the tin roof. Afternoon light fades to grey. Jantina Perese-Kuil pauses mid-sentence. The power is out again. Around her, students fan themselves with exercise books. The air is thick and slow.

Without the hum of the fans, every sound sharpens: the scrape of chairs, the rustle of paper, the steady tap of rain. A wind pushes through the louvres. The dim light shifts across the room.

In Auckland, the lights never went out mid-lesson.

For Jantina, the blackout is more than an interruption. It is the pause between two worlds, the ordered rhythm she left behind, and the unpredictable one she is learning to live by.

She teaches at Vaiala Beach, a private school in Samoa's capital, Apia. Her students switch between English and Samoan without pause, and she listens, catching the meanings before the words. Ten months on, she has adjusted to life there, the homesickness of those first months now fading into memory.

The idea for this story came from curiosity. Social-media posts about moving or returning to Samoa made me wonder what drove people to take that step, since most leave New Zealand in search of better opportunities, not to take things back to basics.

In Samoa, the word *returnee* is often the name given to *deportees* - an unofficial label to soften the stigma. In this story however, *returnee* simply refers to those who moved back by choice.

That choice is becoming more common as statistics suggest that more Kiwis are moving to Samoa. Since 2013, travel has climbed steadily, reaching a record 251,000 arrivals in 2024. Most came from New Zealand and hundreds have stayed for good.

Jantina is one of them, part of a quiet return movement shaped by family, faith, and the pull of home, even when the lights go out.

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The Move Back

When Niuafolau Helen Uiese moved from Wellington to Samoa in 2003, it was to care for her grandparents. “I had the privilege of spending time with them before they passed,” she says.

Daily life was nothing like what she had known in New Zealand. Spaces and belongings were shared, and people moved easily in and out of one another’s routines. “There wasn’t really a sense of these are my things and those are yours,” she says.

Adjustment meant slowing down. “Sometimes there was no electricity. You’d get a bucket from the neighbour’s house to shower. That's life. You just go with the flow,” she says.

Finding steady work was another test. “I was actually earning maybe five tala an hour,” she says. That’s roughly three New Zealand dollars.

“This is coming from New Zealand with a degree. I was going, ‘Why?’ I was doing casual work because I just couldn’t find a job. I got jobs from people I knew, from friends. That’s how things work there,” she says.

Wages in Samoa are among the lowest in the Pacific. Formal-sector workers earn around 30,000 tala a year (about 17,000 NZD), while household spending averages more than 60,000 tala leaving many families to bridge the gap with loans and money from relatives overseas.

These realities surfaced in my 4-week survey of more than a hundred Samoans living in New Zealand. Many acknowledged the financial challenges of living in Samoa but would return for a slower pace of life.

Others spoke of wanting to reconnect with the Samoa language and culture, or to use what they had learned overseas to give back.

But for some, the way of life has become too hard to live by.

For 25-year-old Seneturi Fonofaavae, the journey went the other way. He was born and raised in Samoa, and moved to New Zealand earlier this year through the quota scheme. “My mum was the only one working for years, taking [out] loan after loan just to keep us going,” he says.

He became a secondary school teacher after graduating from the National University of Samoa, hoping life would improve, but even with a job, his family continued to borrow so they could put food on the table.

That situation fuelled his desire to look abroad. “I see the hardships in my household - mentally, financially, physically,” he says. “I slowly found more reasons to come to New Zealand.”

Jantina Perese-Kuil finds herself standing somewhere between their two worlds. Living with family in a comfortable home in Apia made the transition easier. “I’m very privileged,” she says. “We have Wi-Fi, air-con, and a really nice place to live.”

“When I first got here, I was constantly comparing everything to New Zealand. I had to stop doing that because it just took away from the experience.”

Her pay is much lower than in Auckland, but she has come to see value in other things. “You don’t move to Samoa for the pay,” she says. “Life is simpler here. I’ve had to learn to appreciate that.”

Helen calls it humility. Seneturi calls it survival. Jantina calls it perspective. Their stories reveal that migration is more than changing address. It's a balance between comfort and challenge, and the hope that life in Samoa can offer meaning without losing stability.

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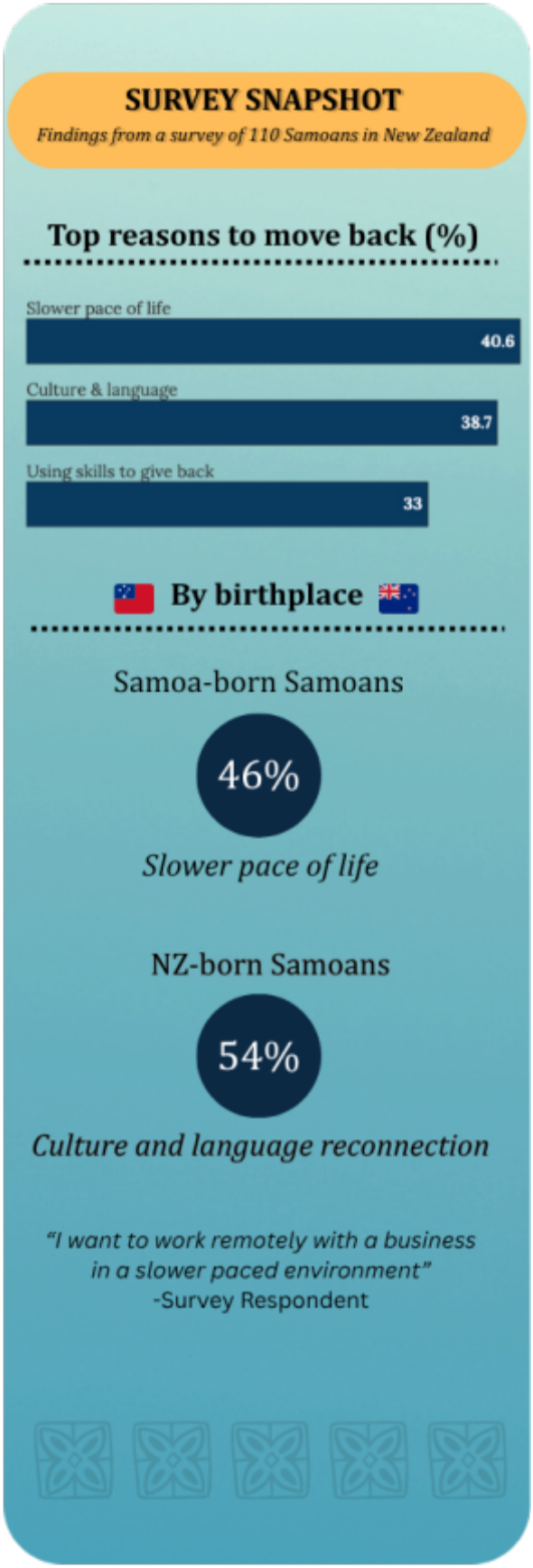
What It Takes to Stay

Both Helen and Seneturi were navigating more than comfort. There was the strain of everyday systems: money, bills, and the slower pace of life. These remind us that home can be as demanding as it is familiar.

For decades, Sociology Emeritus Professor, Cluny Macpherson, has studied the circular movement of Samoans overseas and their ancestral home.

To him, the biggest difference between those who survive the transition and those who don’t often comes down to one thing: expectation.

"I know of people whose parents, over many years, encourage them to think of Samoa as the ‘beautiful homeland,’" he says.



“When they went to Samoa to actually live, it was a different reality. They were no longer guests of an aunty or a guest of an uncle. They were expected to do quite different things from what they did on holiday."

Macpherson says those expectations have shifted over time. Social media has made returnees more informed, but what looks familiar from afar can still feel foreign up close.

“[The experience] depends very much on how people engage with Samoa when they go back,

“If you go to a village in the back of Savai’i, your experiences are going to be very different than if you go and live [in Apia] and work in the public service,

“I think the experiences of highly educated people and entrepreneurs will be very different to people who retire in Samoa or people who go back because they’re sick of New Zealand,” he says.

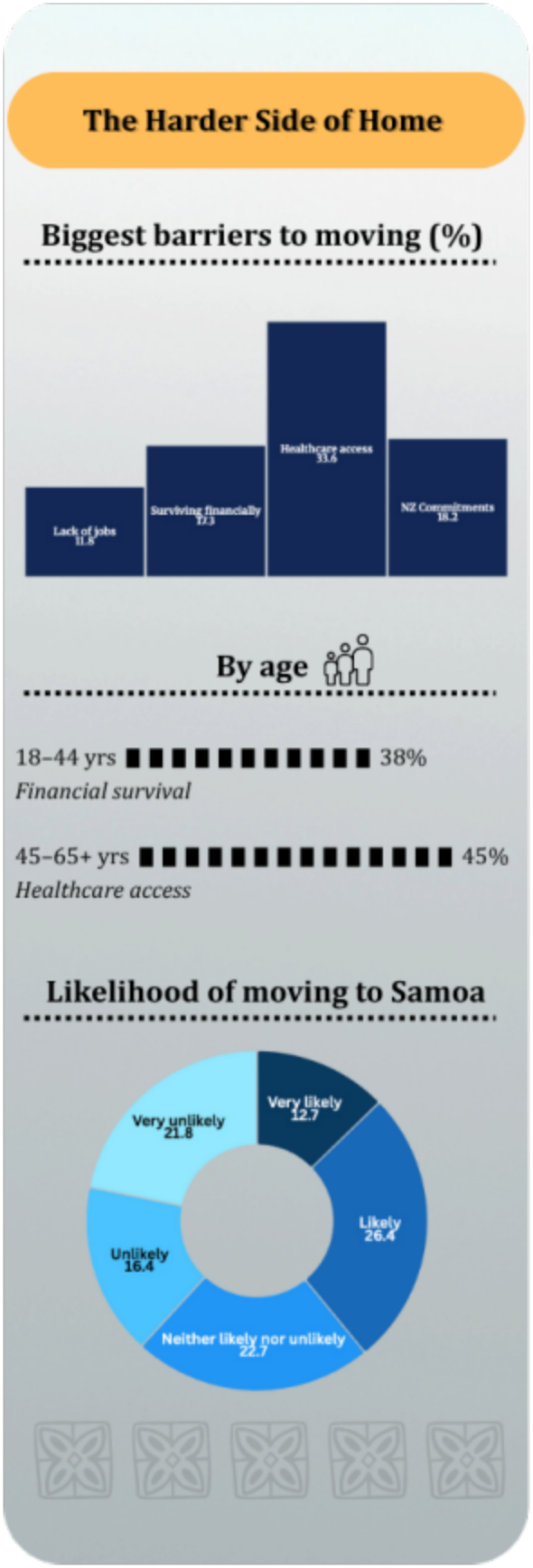
That engagement isn’t only cultural. Power cuts, slow bureaucracy, and the cost of imported goods test even the most determined returnees.

But according to Leiataualesa Renate Rivers, a senior journalist for the Pacific Media Network and formerly the editor of the Samoa Observer, the challenges go beyond infrastructure.

“It's a lot of beach, beer, and barbecue, you know, the whole Instagram reel,” she says.

“It's lovely for us to think that Samoa's like that, but they're not seeing the meth addiction. The child vendors who sleep on the roads in town all night. The hidden prostitution. The domestic violence."

Social and economic pressures are also reflected in the survey. Two-thirds named financial pressure, lack of job opportunities, and healthcare access as their biggest barriers to staying long-term.



Rivers says health, in particular, is a system that is stretched thin.

“[There are] not enough doctors and nurses. They’re extremely overworked. The facilities are run down - the maintenance has been terrible and there are lots of leadership issues at the higher level as well. Every now and then, you’ll hear a story of someone having a great experience, but the majority are not good.”

Official figures show Samoa has about one doctor for every two thousand people, roughly three times less than the global average.

Most are based in Apia, while rural hospitals often operate with just a handful of nurses, leaving much of the country with limited care.

For Macpherson, it’s not just the systems but the pace of life that divides returnees.

“People who get used to working in high-powered environments expect that if you tell somebody to be there on Thursday at two o’clock, they’re going to be there on Thursday at two o’clock,” he says.

“They don’t figure that there are a whole lot of other, more important things than talking to them, and they get frustrated.”

Those who were either involved in the Samoan community in New Zealand, or were fluent in the language and culture before the move, tended to settle a lot more easily.

“[They] have a clear idea of what’s expected of them and are generally happier because they’re better able to understand what’s happening around them, to know what’s expected of them, and to meet those expectations,” he says.

“Others who lack the language often fear that people are talking or laughing about them. Their lack of confidence stems from a lack of cultural competence, and that means they have a very different experience.”

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Working the Samoan Way

Joe Lam was born in Samoa and moved to New Zealand as a teenager in 1984. For years, he ran the Scalini's Italian restaurant in Auckland before taking his business to Samoa in 2009.

He quickly saw how closely business and culture intertwined.

Often, one of his staff members asks for an advance. Sometimes it is twenty dollars for a bus fare. Other times it is a few hundred for a church fundraiser, a wedding, or a funeral.

In Samoa, these events are called *fa'alavelave* which refers to giving time or money to family or village when called on.

"I will only give what I can. I am not bending over and forking out $5000 when they ask for it," he says.

"I feel sorry for [my staff]. It's not them that want the money. It's their parents or their church, and they actually ask their kids to come and ask [me] for more money."

Saying no can strain a relationship, but saying yes too often can empty the till. Joe has learned to live with that tension, but the question lingers: how long can generosity and business survive side by side?

Across workplaces, status carries weight. In Samoa's public service, a *matai* name or a chiefly title often speaks louder than job credentials, connecting a person to their family and village. Most villages are led by *matai* who make decisions collectively, and that same respect carries into the workplace.

Niuafolau Helen Uiese knew that, but it was not until she worked in the public service that she saw how much it shaped professional respect.

She recalls one meeting where she was sent in place of her CEO. At the time she was untitled and "the woman on the other side just stood up and said, 'Where's your CEO?'" Helen says. "We told her she wasn't available, but she refused to deal with us and walked out."

Her family later encouraged her to take the matai title, Niuafolau, to make her work easier. "Because you had to be a matai to get the same respect that you deserve," she says. She eventually accepted, "and it wasn't until that, that you kind of see the changes."

Authority can depend as much on who you are as what you know. The Public Service aims for merit and efficiency, but custom still runs beside it.

For Jantina Perese-Kuil, teaching in Samoa came with a softer landing. Her school is one of the few in Samoa that combines the New Zealand and local curricula which has allowed her to build on familiar methods while slowly adapting to local practices.

She admits that if she had gone straight into a government school, the shift would have been far harder, with language barriers and limited resources making it a much bigger culture shock.

In New Zealand, she often found herself doing far more than teaching. “I felt like I was a social worker, a therapist - to some kids I was like their mum,” she says. “I had five high-needs kids, and I loved having them, but it was hard because you want to give your all.”

In Samoa, she has found space to breathe. “Here, I can just teach and enjoy it,” she says.

Working alongside local teachers has also shaped her adjustment. “Our perspectives are quite different, especially in terms of education and delivery,” she says.

“It’s nice though. They support us with the local curriculum and cultural aspects, and we share what we’ve learned from professional development back in New Zealand. We go hand in hand.”

From Joe’s kitchen to Helen’s ministry to Jantina’s classroom, their stories point to the same truth: success in Samoa is not only about finding work, but also about learning how work itself lives within culture.

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The Cost of Comfort

When Fitiao Susan Faoagali moved from Christchurch to Samoa in 1995, it was a move she had long considered - a chance to be closer to family and reconnect with the country her father had migrated from.

She was a teacher by trade and soon taught in schools, lectured at the National University of Samoa, and eventually worked in the public service. After nearly three decades on the island, she is back in Christchurch for family reasons but hopes to return to Samoa for retirement.

When she left earlier this year, power cuts had begun again. “They hadn’t kept up with the maintenance, and the demand is too much,” she says. “The whole infrastructure has been run down because it costs to keep maintenance up.”

She remembers when diesel engines powered the grid and blackouts were routine. It is a reminder that keeping the lights on in Samoa is never guaranteed.

Most of the country's electricity still comes from diesel generators that run on imported fuel, with only about a third now produced from hydro or solar power.

When fuel prices climb or rainfall runs short, the system strains. In 2023 the country's power provider, the Electric Power Corporation, ended the year more than fifty million tala in debt despite government assistance to keep prices down.

Electricity is not the only costly utility. The same pressures extend to how people connect and communicate.

Technology has changed daily life, but costs remain steep. "Back in the day, there was no internet," Susan says.

"Now there is, but it's more expensive. There's no unlimited Wi-Fi. You pay for every megabyte. You turn it off, then you use it, then you turn it off again."

Internet access has improved through mobile data, but broadband is still a luxury. The average connection costs almost three times as much as in New Zealand and delivers speeds nearly nine times slower.

The struggle to stay connected is yet another cost families shoulder as they try to stay afloat.

"People just get loans to live every week. Even if they work for the government, they still get loans," she says.

"Every payday, there's no money because it's all paying off the loan they got last week."

Nearly half of all bank lending in Samoa goes to households. It is a smaller share than in New Zealand, but the nature of the debt is very different.

In Samoa, fewer than one percent of people have a mortgage, and most borrowing goes toward living costs, from building loans to short-term borrowing for school fees or fa'alavelave, debt is sustained by the same family networks that support Samoa's social and economic life.

Susan decided long ago she would not live that way. "I always put my foot down. I refuse to get a loan. I live on what I've got, and if I haven't got it, then I don't have it. We just eat noodles or something."

The strain on Samoa's health system isn't just a statistic; Joe Lam has seen it firsthand.

“Don’t get sick,” he says.

“We do have the doctors. We do have the knowledge. It’s just that we don’t have enough.”

He also recalls his father’s stroke. “They just come in and they say ‘here are your tablets’ or ‘this is your injection,’” he says.

“So for somebody like me or my wife, we’re like, ‘hang on, what’s the injection, and what’s it for?’”

Joe says he was often left unsure about what was happening or why, not because of poor care but because communication wasn’t always a priority when the staff were busy.

For Jantina Perese-Kuil, the weekly shop became an exercise in patience. “Sometimes you can’t really plan what you want for dinner,” she says.

“You might have to go to three, four, five different shops just to find that one thing.”

Food prices are almost eight percent higher than a year ago, driven by staples like taro, fish and tomatoes, leaving families to stretch what little they have.

For many, small loans and remittances fill the gap between paydays, while imported treats have become luxuries.

“In New Zealand, you go and get a chocolate block but here it can be anywhere between 20 and 30 tala,” Jantina says.

To make ends meet, she turned her hobbies into small sources of income. “I used to bake cakes to sell,” she says. “It was good. I enjoyed it.” Additionally, she does after-school mentoring with two students every week and the extra money helped pay for her first trip back to New Zealand.

Living in Samoa has taught her to live within her means and find small ways to supplement her income. “There are things that I’ve just given up and I’m okay with that,” she says.

Across their stories, the details differ, but the pattern is the same. In Samoa, systems hold together through patience as much as policy. For returnees like Susan, Joe, and Jantina, living in Samoa means learning to live within its limits and finding dignity in making do.

I tried to get some official response to these issues. I tried to get an interview with Samoa’s Minister of Immigration, who is also the Prime Minister. His office told me he was unavailable for comment.

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Finding Home

By night, the restaurant settles into its quiet rhythm. The fridges hum, the counters gleam, and Joe Lam does his final walk-through before locking up. Over the years, he has learned to go with the flow.

“I had to change my attitude, the way I do things, to be able to make a change,” he says.

He laughs at those early days. “I used to yell at staff, and they’d just go into their shells,” he says. “So I thought, okay, I need to change.”

He began finding gentler ways to guide his team with colour-coded cutting boards, clearer routines, and a slower pace. “Figure out how you can do things that’s not quite direct. There’s a roundabout way of doing things here.”

That same patience shaped how he now handles *fa‘alavelave*. Instead of pushing back, he helps his staff plan for it by teaching them about financial literacy. “Half these kids didn’t know about interest, so we started talking about it,” he says.

“I told them, ‘bro just put five dollars away a week,’ and the more they put away, the more they don’t look at it.” Since then, some of his staff have managed to buy cars and save for their families.

“Samoa has been here for years, and it's always been the same. Things do change, but in Samoan time, you know, Samoan marches at its own pace,” he says.

“We have this thing called the Samoan shuffle. It’s two steps forward, one step back, and fifteen sideways.” Over the years, he has learned to move with it and to find peace in its rhythm.

Fitiao Susan Faoagali found peace in making Samoa her steady home. She lived there for nearly 30 years and she talks about the country with the calm assurance of someone who knows how it works.

“I can understand Samoan, but I will not speak it in front of everyone,” she says. “I tried to learn, but I haven’t got the hearing. When I do speak, people laugh at it, so I stopped.”

For her, language was never the measure of belonging. “It’s not only just the language,” she says. “It’s understanding the way of life. By living there, people show you respect for being there.”

Susan has seen how some overseas Samoans returned with big ideas and little patience, expecting to run things their way. “When you fly in and fly out and think you’re all that, that doesn’t hold much weight really,” she says.

The best way to settle in, she believes, is to meet the culture on its own terms.

These days, Jantina Perese-Kuil moves through Apia with quiet ease. When she first arrived, even small errands made her nervous. “When I went to the shop for the first time, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, am I going to be okay?’”

That small moment captured the deeper reason she had returned, to move beyond the *“plastic Samoan”* she had felt like in New Zealand and find a place where she could belong.

Growing up in Auckland, her lifestyle had been “very European,” and she admits she often felt disconnected. “I've always kind of struggled with my cultural identity. It was like this little piece that was missing.”

When she arrived in Samoa, she worried about getting words wrong, but that fear didn’t last. “It was just my mindset - changing that - that it was ok. Better to try than to hide away from it.”

She lets her understanding grow in small, everyday exchanges such as a shopkeeper’s greeting or a student’s joke.

The slower rhythm suits her. “I’m a lot happier here,” she says. “Not saying I wasn’t happy in New Zealand, but I feel happier, healthier, mentally happier here.”

For now, she’s content to keep building her sense of home one small step at a time. “I could see myself living here, settling down, starting a family,” she says. “The only thing stopping me is that my partner is back in New Zealand.”

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Taken together, these experiences raise a final question: what makes a good returnee? Degrees, savings, and work experience matter, but they are rarely enough on their own.

What the returnees and observers alike emphasized was attitude. Those who came back expecting Samoa to operate like New Zealand often struggled. Those who arrived ready to adapt, to be patient, to learn, even to start at the bottom, found more space to belong.

For Joe Lam, the philosophy was summed up in the “Samoan shuffle.” Change in Samoa comes at its own pace - go with the flow, take setbacks in stride, and don’t force things to move faster than they are meant to.

After weeks of interviews and survey responses, I kept thinking about what “home” really asks of us. Every story, from Helen’s to Joe’s, came back to humility and learning to move with the shuffle instead of against it.

Success depends less on what you bring from overseas and more on what you are willing to leave behind, whether that is ego, entitlement, or unrealistic expectations.

The ones who thrive are those who find contentment in slower rhythms, embrace obligations as part of life, and recognize that living in Samoa is not about control but about connection.

Like Jantina in her darkened classroom, those who stay learn to pause, breathe, and keep going when the lights go out.

In the end, the returnees who flourish are not the ones who try to bend Samoa to their will, but the ones who return willing to bend themselves - patient and open to Samoa’s roundabout ways of getting things done.