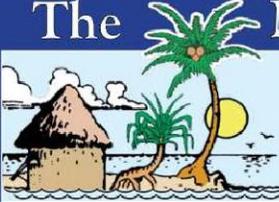


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# Flood of sorrow after Kalena loses her life



By Giff Johnson  
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The outpouring of sorrow, love and recognition for Kalena Tonie Kattil-deBrum in the wake of her sudden and untimely death last weekend in the US demonstrates the unique person she was and what she meant to so many.

Kalena was described as "brilliant, funny, sweet, cool, and formidable" by one friend. In her work toward her PhD, Kalena, who was a fisheries expert, was engaged in groundbreaking research looking at radioactive contamination of fish before, during and after the nuclear testing of the 1950s.

Kalena, 31, was the daughter of Dolores deBrum-Kattil and Paul Kattil of Majuro. She was well advanced toward achieving her PhD in Fisheries Science at the University of Washington.

She was reportedly found dead in her room by a friend this past weekend.

No further details were known about it.

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"Oh, bright star, we drank from your glow," said Dr. Holly Barker, one of Kalena's PhD advisors. "You held your own in every space you entered, and all things felt possible. You had so much more light inside of you. Your impact can NEVER be extinguished you live on in all of us, especially the next leaders you inspired.""

"Her unexpected and untimely passing not only deeply affects her family and friends but resonates across her homeland," wrote Lami Maddison in a social media post that accompanied a GoFundMe solicitation to support Kalena's funeral expenses. "Kalena was a dedicated advocate for sustainable living and environmental conservation, earning recognition from esteemed organizations for her passion and commitment to protecting the environment. Her unique personality and compassionate nature inspired her to work throughout the outer island communities of the Marshall Islands to develop conservation plans and help the communities understand their marine environment."

Kalena had worked for eight years in MIMRA's Coastal Division. She was active in numerous underwater surveys on atolls and islands throughout the RMI, and was also engaged in MIMRA'S trip to uninhabited Bikar and Bokak atolls in 2019 for the first detailed baseline studies of those pristine marine environments.

Kalena was in her second year as a PhD student. She was conducting a study around a 70-year-old collection of fish from the Marshall Islands at the University of Washington. "I am using these specimens to study historical trophic shifts and food web changes using stable isotope analysis," Kalena wrote recently of her PhD research. "Because these fish are from before, during, and after the nuclear testing period in the Marshall Islands, I will also be looking at the way radiation accumulates in fish tissue and across trophic levels. This multidisciplinary research confronts environmental, social, and nuclear justice issues and I am happy to be leading it with the support of my team here at UW and back home in the Marshall Islands."

"Not surprisingly," said Holly, "she was rocking it! She was thriving. She was inspiring., she was leading. She was changing us where we need it most. She had an amazing collective of brilliant Pacific Islander graduate students and undergrads who hung on her every move. She had a huge community beyond Pacific Islanders, too, as she merged worlds. I would love for people in the RMI to know she was happy, and deeply, deeply loved."

Holly, who is one of the commissioners on the Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission, said that things were in motion for Kalena "to lead the independent scientific work with the National Nuclear Commission." The GoFundMe page is seeking donations up to \$25,000 to support bringing Kalena back to Majuro for burial. "It is our hope to bring her home to the place she loved to be laid to rest," said Lami.

## COMPACT UPDATE

Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine is lobbying members of the US Senate to adopt the Compacts of Free Association with the RMI, FSM and Palau.

All three are currently in legislative limbo in the Congress despite having gained approval from the House Natural Resources Committee, the committee in the House with primary jurisdiction over the Compacts.

In a letter sent to a US Senator last week that was posted on X by Compact commentator Cleo Pascal, Heine requested that the senator “do all possible to have the Senate pass the amendment to the supplemental appropriations bill...to enable the defense relationship between our nations, and the similar US associations with Micronesia and Palau, endure for at least 20 more years.”

In the copy of the letter reproduced on X (formerly Twitter), the name was blacked out.

The agreements with the three North Pacific nations “give the US strategic control of an expanse of the sea and air larger than the 48 contiguous states — including shipping lanes the PRC (People’s Republic of China) covets,” she said. This “effectively extends the US border for military purposes from Hawaii to Asia,” she added.

She said the PRC has been active in “carrot and stick” efforts to get these US-affiliated nations “to shift our alliances, including discontinuing support of Taiwan.”

This included an effort to develop one atoll that she opposed during her first administration that “generated an effort to topple my government in our parliament. Later, people from the PRC were convicted by a US court of bribing proposal support-

# President lobbies US Senate on Compacts



**President Hilda Heine. Photo: Chewy Lin.**

ers in our parliament who voted against me,” she said. While Marshallese have grown up with the United States over decades, identifying with and admiring American values, “further delay (in passage of the Compacts) threatens to undermine confidence in the US and to encourage some to agree to PRC enticements,” she said.

Heine’s February 13 letter followed a letter the previous week signed by her and FSM President Wesley Simina and Palau President Surangel Whipps, Jr. calling on the Senate to take action.