
REVIEW

Giff Johnson. *Don't Ever Whisper: Darlene Keju, Pacific Health Pioneer, Champion for Nuclear Survivors*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013. Pp. 444. ISBN-10 1489509062. US\$14.00 paper.

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Don't Ever Whisper is a personally touching and politically powerful biography of the late Darlene Keju, who was a preeminent nuclear activist, advocate for social justice, and organizer of local health care programs in the Marshall Islands. Her husband, Giff Johnson, is the author of the book. The reader never loses sight of his admiration for the woman he loved and his pride for the work she accomplished. He includes copious quotes by those who knew Darlene as well as entries from Darlene's diaries, all of which add interesting perspectives and dimensions to the text.

The book follows a chronological path. The first half covers Darlene's early life, her education, and her nuclear activism. The second half turns to her contributions to health care. Throughout the text, engaging details enliven the many events that influenced her life and labor. Examples include growing up on her mother's homeland of Wotje Atoll, moving to Ebeye as a child, the unnecessary death of her older sister, leaving the Marshall Islands to study in Hawai'i, her return to the Marshall Islands to conduct research on the legacies of the nuclear testing, and experiencing health care on remote outer islands that had no power and where a ship arrived only every few months.

Darlene's life was intimately intertwined with nuclear testing in the Pacific. After World War II, the United States took possession of the Marshall Islands from the Japanese and then used the islands to test various nuclear

weapons from 1946 to 1958. During this period, the United States exploded the equivalent of one Hiroshima-sized bomb every day (63). Born in the Marshall Islands in 1951, Darlene grew up during this era. Shortly before her third birthday, the United States tested Bravo, its first and largest hydrogen bomb, exposing Darlene and others to Bravo's radioactivity. Because of the veil of secrecy surrounding the US involvement in the Marshall Islands, it was not until Darlene was twenty-seven years old and a student at the University of Hawai'i that she began to learn about the nuclear history of her homeland. It was at a campus talk by Giff Johnson that she first heard the details. She approached Giff after his talk—itself a brave act for a young Marshallese woman—in order to learn more. She was upset that an American knew more about her islands' history than she did and, at that moment, decided to conduct her own research. This meeting between Darlene and Giff was the beginning of their eighteen-year relationship, including fourteen years of marriage.

The next summer, in 1979, she flew home to interview older Marshallese about their experiences during the testing. She traveled to the northernmost islands (areas the US government claimed had been unaffected by the testing) and interviewed both men and women about their health conditions, thus making her the first Marshall Islander to record the statements of the nuclear test survivors. She listened to women's stories about miscarriages, stillbirths, and giving birth to babies that looked like jellyfish or clumps of grapes, all things that the US government had covered up. Their heartrending stories inspired her to make a personal commitment to help the victims of the testing.

A turning point in Darlene's life occurred in 1983 when she was invited to be one of four speakers as part of a "Pacific Plenary" at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver, Canada. With purpose and passion ("don't ever whisper" was her motto), she captivated the audience with her words. She told them that radioactive fallout from the nuclear testing on her islands was more widespread than admitted by the US government and was responsible for serious but unrecognized health problems. Her poignant twenty-minute speech lifted the veil of silence, which had shrouded the consequences of the nuclear testing program. With tumors growing in her body, she told the audience, "Remember, we are the victims of the nuclear age; don't you become a victim."

Soon thereafter, Darlene turned her attention to public health. She was accepted into the one-year Pacific Islands Program at the University of Hawai'i's School of Public Health, where she was the only Marshall Islander in the program. As part of her graduate work during the 1980s, she proposed a pilot epidemiology study of certain atolls in the Marshall Islands, only to

discover that many roadblocks were placed in her path because of her activism. For example, the scholarship board refused to fund her. Being brave and outspoken, she demonstrated her power of persistence and risk taking by going directly to the minister of education. She told him bluntly, “I’m not begging you to help me. . . . But I want to hear it directly from you that the scholarship board is not going to support a Marshallese who is studying to get a master’s degree in public health” (114). Eventually, they gave her some money although not as much as she needed. On graduation, Darlene became the first Marshallese woman with an advanced degree in public health to work for the Marshallese government.

She created innovative health programs and delivered reproductive health services to underserved populations and to the youth of the Marshall Islands. She also planned formal training for youth peer educators. What previously had been known as the Jodrikdrik (Youth) Drama Team was renamed Youth to Youth in Health (YTYIH). Starting with a group of only fifteen teenagers, she established YTYIH as a branch of the Ministry of Health’s Family Planning Office. As YTYIH grew in size, she transformed it from a branch of the government into a nonprofit agency.

Darlene understood that building a cultural foundation was key for the group’s success. She taught the youth to use culturally appropriate forms to deliver health information. They combined humor, oratory, and cultural talent (song, music, skits, singing, dancing, and food) to educate the villagers about such things as contraception and family planning. For example, they performed entertaining skits about unwanted pregnancy, where more and more “babies” (in the form of a bundled-up shirt) arrived for a family. The activities were fun for the youth, but, equally as important, the activities also incorporated a high degree of discipline and adherence to rules of behavior. Darlene laid down several rules of which the most important was to not make fun of youth who were learning to speak in front of others. Marshallese culture values personalities that are reserved rather than outspoken, and Darlene wanted the youth to speak up and be heard. While modeling the behavior they were teaching, the youth also gained pride in being Marshallese. Recognizing the power that Marshallese had in their own hands, she empowered them to face their challenges, take control of their communities, and solve their own problems—and never to whisper.

With the youth’s interest always in mind, Darlene planned events that allowed them to broaden their horizons. For example, she took the drama team to Hawai‘i, where they had to perform in front of others—in English—providing another occasion for them to gain self-assurance and pride. While they were in Hawai‘i, she arranged for them to attend theatrical productions, meet with the drama education director of the Honolulu Theater for Youth,

tour colleges, visit hospitals and church groups, and do radio interviews. As time went on, YTYIH grew in scope and included the Outer Islands Income Generating Project, youth leadership, health assistant training, women's business workshops, school and community outreach health programs, clinic services, and sports activities.

Sadly, as Darlene's work broadened and intensified, her health deteriorated. In 1991, she learned that her cancer had spread to her spine and pelvic area. Yet she continued with her work. Darlene died in 1996 soon after her forty-fifth birthday. The YTYIH program that Darlene headed for twelve years still flourishes today, now in its twenty-seventh year of operation.

Don't Ever Whisper is an eloquent, momentous, and highly accessible book from which readers can learn much about the Marshall Islands as well as about the inspirational woman whom Johnson, on the last page, compares to Nelson Mandela because of her courage to change the world.