

## **FEATURE STORY RELEASE**



### **FROM MILITARY TO SUGAR: Leone lives his best life**

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Leone Mocelekaleka was probably always going to be a soldier, drilled with uncompromising discipline throughout his childhood in Seaqaqa, Vanua Levu.

And he did become a career army officer.

Leone remained a member of the Territorial Forces after putting his older children through school on a modest army salary. He kept abreast of peacekeeping tours to the Middle East that he could join, going on to serve at Golan Heights for two years and then Syria.

“I was planning my retirement the whole time,” he said, reminiscing his peacekeeping days. “I was planning on coming back home to farm and I knew that I would need farming equipment.”

So while the returning peacekeepers bought clothes, homeware, jewelry - the usual spoils from the Middle East - Leone packed farming tools and sprinklers, much to the amusement of his fellow soldiers.

“I had two years with the military at Golan Heights and I had to make the most of the opportunity to buy my farming implements for my retirement.”

Leone did not waste an time in making his retirement plan a reality. He said that the financial environment was a lot more encouraging for sugarcane farming so he took his entire family back to Seaqaqa with some nephews and sons-in-law in tow.

“I always wanted to return to the sugarcane farm where I was raised,” Leone said.

Now three years into retirement, the father of six believes he is living his best life.

Leone has three children in white collar jobs, one almost done with university and two others at school. The 57 year old Nasuva, Cuquma native has big dreams of the retirement life ahead of him.

Early to bed and early to rise, Leone is a salt of the earth type of personality and for him, everything in life is connected to the land. He asserts that there is great potential to earn from the land and stresses the importance of maintaining a disciplined lifestyle to extract the best from the land.

“This old man, at around five in the morning he is already up and if you’re still sleeping, you better be aware he will throw things inside the house to wake you up,” Leone jokes.

“In farming you really need to be disciplined. My old man taught me all the skills about farming which I have today. He was a farmer all his life and I learned from watching him.”

Leone remarks that it’s not in the nature of Fijian people to have long term vision.

“We don’t plan things ahead, but we must,” he said.

Leone networked with others in the Seaqqa community eager to learn from his Indo-Fijian neighbours those traits and habits he didn’t think came naturally to an i-Taukei farmer.

“As time went on, we looked at what my father was doing and I also looked at my Indo-Fijian friends who live nearby to pick out their good farming habits.”

“My kids and my nephew help me and sometimes I need to hire labourers,” Leone explained. “When you live on a farm, there is always something to do, whether it is spraying, ploughing, weeding or whatever. The main thing is to understand there is always something to be done on a farm.”

When he first returned to the farm, he produced only 100 tonnes of sugarcane and this motivated him to draw up a plan to achieve higher tonnage.

In his plan Leone would plant more, mechanise his operations and join the local cooperative so he could access mechanical harvesters to increase his output.

Within a year, he reached his target of 600 tonnes of sugarcane at the end of the 2019 harvesting season.

“My target is to reach 1000 which I’m looking to accomplish in the next two years,” Leone said.

Leone said hunger for success drove him and he wants to make sure his children inherit the same drive.

“I taught them to always be hungry to achieve their targets and remain humble,” Leone said. “Get on with the job first, celebrate your successes and importantly, continue to be hungry to achieve your next lot of goals.”

(Ends)

Captions:

1. Leone Mocelekaleka on his farm in Seaqqa, Macuata. Picture: JOSEFA KOTOBALAVU
2. Leone has all the mechanical implements required of a commercial sugar cane farmer. Picture: JOSEFA KOTOBALAVU
3. While other soldiers were returning with gifts, Leona bought himself farming tools from the middle east. Picture: JOSEFA KOTOBALAVU

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