

“Home is not a safe place”

Guest: Irene Maun

Location: Des Moines & Dubuque, IA

Interviewer: Brian Campbell

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Brian Campbell (narration): I'm Brian Campbell and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. This is the final episode in our second season, stories of immigration in the Heartland. Today, we hear from Irene Maun, who's originally from the Marshall Islands, an archipelago of coral atolls in the central Pacific midway between Australia and Hawaii. This place is a lush, green tropical paradise, and as you'll hear, it is also one of the most polluted and environmentally vulnerable places on earth.

Irene Maun: I'm glad I'm from Marshall Islands, but I would say it's not a safe place; we are very, very sick people. I remember my mom passed away from cancer, and also my grandmother. She always said we're not going to survive from this cancer, from the nuclear testing.

The old generation, when they started the testing, kids were playing in the falls with powders. They thought it snowed, so they played around it. They were playing, like splashing. The way we play in the snow, they just played around with that.

Yeah, and my mom was there, but my grandmother said to not go outside. So they were staying inside, but other kids, they were playing, thinking, “Oh, we have flour from heaven!” We today say snow, but they've never seen snow before. It's not even cold. But we describe it as snow because it was white as snow. All the fallout, from the nuclear test. So they were playing, throwing it at each other. And all of a sudden, not within 24 hours, their hair, their skin was torn off, and their hair was falling off. Their fingers and toes were falling off too. It was the scariest moment, and that's when they began to get sick.

BC (narration): After WWII, the United States claimed control of the Marshall Islands as a military outpost and testing ground, and between 1946 and 1958 detonated 67 nuclear bombs there, vaporizing whole islands and contaminating the people, the soil, and the surrounding sea with radioactive coral dust raining down from the skies. Today, this low-lying nation is ground zero for the impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels and stronger storms threaten to overwhelm the islands that remain inhabited and threaten to release the nuclear waste still stored in the islands.

Now, more than a third of the Marshallese people live in the United States, including Irene. She is part of a growing community in Dubuque, Iowa, where she leads the Pacific Islander Health Project at the non-profit Crescent Community Health Center. Irene provides translation services and supports Marshallese who need help navigating medical appointments and social service resources. Everyday, she sees patients suffering the long term impacts of US colonialism and militarism in her home country, dealing with chronic illnesses like diabetes and cancer. These are legacies not only of nuclear pollution but also the post-WWII changes in island diets. In the wake of war and weapons testing, US troops and corporations flooded the islands with

processed foods, the most popular and iconic being SPAM, the canned meat produced by Minnesota-based Hormel Foods. Many of the Marshallese patients Irene now supports work in a Hormel meat-packing plant in Dubuque. These workers, with existing medical conditions and crowded living arrangements, were especially vulnerable when the coronavirus swept through packing plants in the Midwest this past year. And that made Irene and her family vulnerable too.

But as you'll hear, these Midwest Pacific Islanders have been remarkably resilient, creating networks of support in the U.S. to survive the pandemic. And they are nurturing a new generation of Marshallese who are writing a new story, through poetry and song, confronting the trauma and injustice that has made home an unsafe place.

BC: Take us back then, how did it become that way? What do people need to understand about the history of the place that makes it unsafe?

IM: It started in 1954 when our government, the US government, started nuclear tests on the islands. I really hated when they talk about the island, but I would say not the islands are contaminated, but the people are. It's getting worse. It's getting worse because we are the highest percent of cancer and diabetes. Our seniors, when I was growing up, they never experience any kinds of disease or chronic cancer. Today, young generations, like teenagers, are passing away from cancer. Today, there's no adult living with us, only when they reach the age of 50, they die from cancer. I just came back from Hawaii, and I was so sorry about one of my sisters-in-law. She passed. She's only 52 years old. From cancer. The other one, she's only 34 years old. She passed away from the cancer too. It's so sad. Pregnant women deliver their baby, their baby is not surviving because they live so differently. No nose, or their eyes are not open. They're just born, and that's it. Not going to survive. Within a minute or – they just deliver a baby that already died in their womb. A lot of pregnant women.

BC (narration): These health problems stem from ongoing exposure to radiation, but also the radical changes in how people eat.

IM: We used to have our healthy diet, but after the nuclear bomb, they started to import all the sugary stuff. Bread, canned meat, which they really don't know that canned meat contains a lot of sodium. They thought it's healthy, so that's our main dish.

I love Spam. That was my favorite canned meat.

BC: How do you prepare it usually? Straight from the can?

IM: I just open it up. I love it when it's fried with grease. We didn't even know it was too much greasy. Today when I learn it, I just open it up and put it on a pan, no grease. There's a lot of grease in that. Wow. We've been treating like – I don't know. It's so complicated to explain it. Now we're not doing the same thing. We learned from a long time ago, our generation. We try to feed our children healthy food here in the United States, but I don't know about the Marshall Island. The main dish is rice and chicken. Lucky - you eat chicken. You get the frozen chicken. We do not eat chicken every week or every day because it's so expensive. We bring lots of the

times, 5 or 10 people, can fit with a can of tuna or Spam or corned beef hash. Those canned meats, only one can can feed 10 people because everything back home is expensive and we don't want to go eat the fish because we're afraid. You never know which fish is contaminated.

BC: What kind of diet do you remember for yourself as a child growing up?

IM: Fish. We raised our own pigs; pigs and chickens. And then after that, we do also have fruits that you've never seen - breadfruit, something like banana. They grow their own. They were happy having those foods. Taro, yam, but no rice. They also contain starch food, but they think it's a lot better because it's their own. There's no chemical added or anything. That's our main diet, healthy food that we call it. They said before the nuclear testing, everything they were growing was very healthy. They could tell. Today, our coconut milk is, like there's coconut in a tree, but there's nothing in it. It's all dry. We know that it's from the nuclear tests. It's not like before. Everything gets changed after the nuclear tests.

BC: Yeah, so tell me what was it that brought you to the United States?

IM: Oh, that's my favorite part. I got married. I'm a mother of four. I have two sons and two daughters, and seven grandkids. Seven grandkids going on eight. They're expecting another grandbaby in May. When I first got here, I, myself, and my husband – he was a very sick man. It's common, diabetes on the island. He never paid attention to go get health checked or something. He was getting worse, like very sick. The last thing I remember, we had to go to the emergency because he was very, very sick. Because of the diabetes noncompliance with the medication or not seeing a doctor. We had to go to the emergency, and then we found out that he was a very sick man. The kidney failure also. They checked his eyes. It also affects his vision because of not treating with any medication. It started to leak. Today he's not very well. It's not going to go back to normal like it was before because it's already damaged from the diabetes.

Our government – when you're sick, they send you to specialities like either you go to Phillipine, or you go to Hawaii. And they recommend him to go to Phillipine, but you're going to have to pay your own ticket. I said, "Why he have to pay his own ticket?" And they said diabetes is not on our list. It's not an emergency. Well what is an emergency for you guys? And they said dialysis. You wait until the person is needing dialysis that you send them away? But no preventative – how do you say it? Preventative?

BC: Yeah.

IM: Yeah. They say cancer and dialysis the most. I was like, "Okay." I don't have that much. I don't have any money. How can I pay for a ticket? So, I was like, that's unfair. I don't want to go starve or anything. I'm not going to Phillipine. I cannot afford a ticket.

So, a month later, or two months later, we decided to go to mainland United States instead of going to Phillipine. I work hard. I came up with the fare for a ticket so I can buy a ticket to go to Hawaii. That's the first thing I decide to do. So we did. I made it. Left my kids home without any trust. But I have no chance. I have to go with my husband. There's an auntie - my aunt - I asked

her to come and take care of them. My aunt is not working. She has no income. But one thing I remember I told her: God will protect whatever we need. I trust him. I trust him with our ticket, so He provided. I also trust with taking care of my kids. They were very young when I left them.

BC (narration): Irene flew with her husband Jenta to Hawaii. Once he had started treatments, she continued on to a church conference in California, where she hoped to connect with someone to help them to move permanently to the mainland US, Jenta's best hope for affordable ongoing healthcare.

IM: There was a sister of his. She came to my hotel, and she said, "Irene, I heard about Jenta." And I said, "My husband." And I said, "Yeah. We're looking for a place that we can be established." She was like, "Okay, where is he at now?" And I said, "In Hawaii." And she said, "You're coming with me." I said, "I've been praying for this. Thank you." And I said, "We'll be taken care of?" And she said, "Yeah. I will take you to Iowa." So, I ended up in Iowa. [Laughs.] Miracle, huh?

So, my husband later that week, I told him he better come because I went to California for a meeting, a church conference, so he came. You come because we're going with your sister. She'll take us to Oklahoma, and then we'll go to Iowa. So he did. He came to California, and we drove all the way to Oklahoma. It took us forever.

When we got out from the car, my legs were swollen so bad. I ate too many canned meats. It contains a lot of sodium in my health, my body. They were like surprised. My shoes did not fit. It took us like two nights and we were driving all the way from California. It was not fun. Of course, we stopped at the gas station and we slept a little bit, like a nap. And then refuel and go.

BC: You just stopped to buy more canned meats along the way.

IM: Yeah. We ate canned meat all the way.

BC: You had this journey. First, these flights. You came to this church conference, and then you drove. It must have been the longest drive you ever imagined.

IM: It was. I was so tired. Never sit for that long time because our island is so small. You walk every day. You don't have to go with a car or anything. You walk every day. It would not take you forever to walk.

BC: And you came to Oklahoma where there were many people from the islands.

IM: I waited. We had to wait there so my sister-in-law and the family could drive us here to Iowa. Because we have a niece. He was here before. He was a bastard also. They said Iowa is the best place to go. Iowa is the best.

music

So we left our children. Two years later I got a job. I had to earn money so I could save money for their tickets. One came in first. My older son, so he could come and attend school. My two daughters were younger than my oldest son. They came within two years later. I had to go get a job so I can have them here.

BC: What was that like being so far from your young children?

IM: I cried. It's hard. It's not easy. I cried every night. Every night. That's the worst time ever of my life. When it's come to bed... you never know. If you leave your children behind, you don't know what they're eating. Are they starving or are they healthy? I couldn't sleep. And I work hard. Because coming here to Iowa, we're talking about for a round trip ticket, \$2000. I had to pay them for \$1000 each ticket for her and my two daughters so they can come in. I spent almost \$3000 for the round trip ticket.

BC: What kind of work were you able to find for someone who is –

IM: I went to find a job. The first job I apply was Mount Carmel. It's a nun place for all the sisters. I heard they hire non-CNA or not-certified nurse, so I went to start there. I filled out my application myself, and it was so hard. I couldn't fill it out. I don't know what they're asking. It's a language barrier. I don't think my application I made pleased the hiring people because it was off. I don't know what they're asking, but I just write whatever I can, because of the language barrier.

BC: Did you speak some English already?

IM: I speak some English. Little, not some.

BC: Just a little.

IM: When I was in school, I didn't always concentrate. I wasn't thinking of my future.

So, I got this job. Anyway. It took me forever. I applied and they were ignoring my application. They don't like – “Oh, she's not a high school graduate. Why would we need her?” They'd been ignoring my application for six, almost seven months. But you know what I did? I kept calling and bothering. I called and I called because my mind is now set on my kids. Who's going to be – my husband is a very sick man. I understand English a little bit, but him? No. He's one of the kids that never go to school ever. Never. So that's the problem. Our age, we never think of our education or our future.

BC: So you were very motivated to work and learn English and have opportunities so you could bring your own children here to be with you.

IM: Yeah. My husband was not getting healthier. He was declining every day. His heart is broken that he left our children.

BC (narration): Irene and Jenta would not have made it without support from Crescent Community Health Center, where they got help with all sorts of basic needs and got the support for Irene to finally get a job.

IM: We started to come to Crescent. There was a lady working. She was a care manager here before. She was the one – she kind of feels sorry for us. I didn't tell her anything, but she could tell that we're in need – we need everything. We need clothing. We need access to foods, a pantry or something. She really knows what we're going to need. So, she's the one who helped me out with the application. She wrote a recommendation note. She said, "She's a hard worker. She will take care of your sisters. She did the same thing to her husband. She's a good mom" So with that letter, I got the job! They said, "Irene, are you ready for an interview?" I said, "Yes, I am! I've been dying to get a job." They said, "Well, come today at this time." I was excited.

People said their very exciting time is their marriage. When they're getting married. To me, it was not. To get a job in the United States was the happiest moment, especially when I'm in a bad situation and very need it. I was so excited that I cried. I know if I got this interview – I got that faith in my heart. Interview, then I will get a job. I did. When I first started a job, I thought it was the happiest moment in my life, but I cried. It turned the other way. I cried. I couldn't communicate with the sisters, and they'd get mad. They get old, and they yell at you. "We don't need this lady!" They tried to communicate, but they didn't understand. They will kick you out from there. It was so hard. It was not easy. I stood up and I said, "I feel like I'm left out." So I asked them if they can teach me English. So they did. It was like I was going to school every day.

BC: With the sisters?

IM: With the sisters.

BC: They would sometimes be angry with you, and instead you turned it and asked them to help?

IM: I asked them to help. My time will be like, free. I don't care. I just need help. So they agree with me. There were two of them. One English writing and the other one was reading mostly. A year later, they were all wanting me to be their aid. To take care of them. They were excited that they have me because I was – my schedule was flexible. I'm right there. I started with not full time, but part time. I can work first shift, second shift, third shift. I don't care. Once they need help, I'll be there. I'm all over.

BC: A hard worker. And you wanted to learn.

IM: I wanted to learn. I'm still learning. From experience from my job.

BC: You're still working in healthcare, but not at Mount Carmel anymore.

IM: I lost my job. I lost my job because only one car cannot take us all to work and school. So many tardies, that they let me go. I worked there for six years. I called, I have no car, and I have to call neighbors, our families, and they pick us up. But you know how it works because under a roof there's like ten people and only one car. That's another barrier.

BC: Language, transportation.

IM: Like challenging. It's also exciting, but a lot of challenges. It was not easy.

BC: Before when you were telling me about Iowa, you said you were so excited and Iowa is the best. Did you know anything about Iowa before you arrived?

IM: No. They told me that they will help us. Crescent was the first place we came to. No copays, they said they help you. No insurance, they will find sources for you.

BC: So this was the first place that you came when you arrived as a somewhat new to the United States. You found some help there. And now you helped to create this Pacific Islander program at Crescent.

IM: Yeah. I did it for the first time. The first thing I did was volunteer. Then two years later, I was hired in 2017. That's when I started to get a salary. Now I'm working full time. I used to be alone with a nurse and a social worker. Now that our social worker is no longer working, they hired another social worker and another health worker. I asked them if they can hire another health worker so they can help because I'm here and there. I cannot do it alone. I'm very busy. I go out there with the facilities and then outside the Crescent. I can be interpreting on the phone, too. It's a lot better to our culture if you always depending on someone that knows the resource and everything. If you don't know what you're doing, our community is not built like that. They need someone to go with them. Once they got it, get into it, you can leave them. But for the first thing, it's none. If you're trying to send them over with, "Okay, go do this because you blah blah blah," they cannot without their interpreter. They really need help. Once they get it, they can go by themselves.

BC: How has the Marshallese community changed in Dubuque since you've arrived?

IM: Big difference is when we got this project. I'm here and there. I'm all over trying to get them resources and trying to help them out. We have a worker. They're now working at the school. I have my daughter working with them. She's volunteering for interpreting and also helping families navigate. We also have a lady working through our project. They call us and we look for another lady that she's now working with the resource of navigating family. Those kinds of kids that are kind of slow. My other daughter she's working with Monsoon. Have you heard about the Monsoon?

BC: Monsoon especially supports women from immigrant communities, migrant communities who are dealing with domestic violence.

IM: Domestic, yeah. You know it. Yeah, she's working with them. We're getting people resources.

BC: Yeah. So, it sounds like you've been able to expand all these different services to all different ways of supporting people. I'm curious – people from the Federated States, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, they're not exactly immigrants, right? Not refugees, not asylum seekers. How do you describe that? I imagine there's some confusion when people are looking for work, looking for medical care. Are they undocumented? How do you describe your community?

IM: Well, it's very – there's a lot. The Marshallese are not considered immigrants or refugees. Nor are they considered US citizens along with the people from the Federated States of

Micronesia and Palau. Known as the Free Associate Nation. They pay taxes. They serve in the US Armed Forces and enjoy freedom of movement through the 50 states. They are also denied US resources, like Medicaid.

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BC: The Marshall Islands gained formal independence from the United States in 1986 through an agreement known as the Compact of Free Association. The deal insured the US could continue operating military bases in the islands but also committed the US government to certain responsibilities. One is paying compensation for the environmental and economic impact of nuclear testing, payments that are still not fulfilled. The agreement gave Marshallese citizens the opportunity to live and work in the US, with the promise of health coverage and social programs for those who migrate here. This provision was eliminated in 1996 by welfare reforms, and ever since, Marshallese leaders have pushed to restore Medicaid coverage. They were finally successful, getting language added to the December 2020 COVID relief bill. Irene was one of those leaders lobbying congress to provide Medicaid to the Marshallese.

IM: I was. I was. Most of the time we drive down to Des Moines just to meet the government people. I have supporters. We have supporters from the organization that they support us. That's the main thing I did. We did a lot of presenting so that I can bring awareness to our culture and so people learn a lot about us. They said they never learn about such things as that.

BC: You were lobbying the Congress to make this change. Then it just passed in December. You were saying you hoped you could have a big celebration.

IM: Yeah! Hope so. During the meeting, due to COVID we were on Zoom. The last Zoom I was with the government was last month just before they approved the Medicaid. I was like, "We need to get back. Get that Medicaid back. All the benefit." Because it's all that matters to us. Nothing else. We were prepared before the COVID hit us. We were prepared. These people would be the easiest people to get the coronavirus and spread it out. Because we are a very sick people. We have lots of chronic. That's why the big concern was prepare for the community because they are a very sick people. They are not in full health.

Like myself. I was the first one to have corona and announce it. I got it. I went home. My two sons got it. They run the test. They sent me over to quarantine for 14 days. It affected my husband and two sons. Luckily, my other son and my other daughter, they have their own house. We all isolated in a safe place with corona. But my husband was admitted for almost two, three weeks because he had a heart problem. I'm looking back. Before the project was started, and I'm looking back, now the people are knowing to go to doctors. They're used to it now. They're like calling me, "Hey, my appointment is today!" They know. And they do care. Before it was so hard that they'd throw their medication away. They never had compliance with their medication. Today they're on it. We prepare for them, for the community because we're six years now, our project. Just imagine with me. Look back and if we would not establish this project, what would have happened to the community? I'm looking at those people who have heart problems. Chronic disease. They were covered. But those that never come to the clinic and come establish? They're the ones who have no chance. I've looked at that, and wow. I'm so

grateful that we could help before the corona hit. We were preparing for everyone. That was my big picture here. Look back and say wow.

BC: Even though it's been so devastating with COVID, it sounds like it's such a high percentage of people infected and died, you can imagine it could have been much, much worse without a program like this to help people understand the importance of medical care and feel comfortable and trust and have people like you to help them understand how to get the help they need.

IM: Even when I was sick and isolated at home, people called me. I was very sick, but I realized that they really need help. I couldn't hang up from them. My husband was like, "Are you crazy?"

BC: So you're translating and helping them on the phone.

IM: Yeah, I'm translating.

BC: While you're in quarantine yourself.

IM: Yeah. I also called 911 to get them from their home. I called the shelter so they could be isolated themselves too. I was like, is that real me that I'm doing this? And I realized my heart is poured out for them. I do care about them. And I'm so glad I've got this job. I don't know. If someone else – it's going to be limited. But myself, it's not limited. I have a home cell phone that they know. When they ever need a phone, they say please don't take the phone home. Otherwise you're gonna call everybody.

BC: You'll be working day and night.

IM: I don't care about the time. As long as I'm there, I'm satisfied with it. They don't know that I have my home personal phone. My husband is looking at me and is like, "Is that my phone or your phone?" "Well, it's your phone, but it's very important." He doesn't have any numbers on it, like his friends, only a few. But I have hundreds of tons of numbers there of the community. I save their numbers. They don't allow me to take the work phone home. They know I will call every night and day. Doesn't matter.

BC: You're obviously such an important leader in that community, and I saw a little while back you had a sculpture in Dubuque with your name. Tell me about that.

IM: Yes. Lots of people here don't know anything about us. They started to do the sculpture. And inside that sculpture, it's supposed to have headphones. It's gonna be my story in it. I would say, like a story and you just go in. The back of the head was going to be a door. There's a door back of my head and you just go in and listen to my story.

BC (narration): In the end, the sculpture was on display only temporarily, and they never incorporated the audio portion with Irene's story, but the Dubuque community has done lots of other creative projects to share Marshallese stories including hers... at public events, in print, and online. The hope is this storytelling and cultural sharing can build understanding and create a sense of welcome for new immigrant communities. Like many cities in the Midwest, Dubuque is hoping this represents a new chapter in a complicated history of hostility to African-Americans and immigrants of color. In the 1980s and 90s, Dubuque had a series of cross burnings clearly

meant to drive away black and brown people. The city was sometimes called “the Selma of the North” and racial tensions have flared up in years since.

Irene says she hasn’t experienced explicit racial hate and violence, but she’s been actively working to promote understanding. She communicates regularly with the large employers that hire most newcomers from the Marshall Islands, talking through language and cultural barriers.

Lots of Marshallese migrants work at Dubuque’s Hormel meat packing plant, with others in nursing and long term care facilities, housekeeping, and retail.

IM: Now that we’re connecting with all the employees, because they have lots of questions. Why are they getting late? They’re very good workers. I’m connecting with them too, other employees. I bring awareness that under a roof there’s only one car. Like I said. Now that they know, they’re now hiring more and more Marshallese and Micronesians. Before there was more racism. We know. Now that they’re aware, they’re very happy with them. Once their group of Marshallese at Hormel are working, they think – The last report I get is all the Micronesian people are running the place. They’re nonstop. Walmart is packed with Marshallese. Other places. Before it was hard. Now that they know and learn about and are aware of, everywhere you go there’s a Marshallese there. Before it was so hard. Now that it’s open, the job is open for all the Marshallese, people keep coming here. Once you know that you have your relatives here in Iowa, you can come and stay and live with them. When you get a job, you can be on your own. They’re looking at coming to Iowa. We have people moving here every month. Just to get health and a job.

They’re all over. Kids graduating from college and working in a hospital. They’ve got good jobs.

BC: I was going to ask, it sounds like there are more and more young people. You said the schools in Dubuque now have a family navigator to help. How do you think that younger generation is maintaining connection to the islands and Marshallese culture? What is that like?

IM: It’s also a challenge because most of our generation are afraid we might lose our culture, especially our language. Our young kids’ generation don’t speak Marshallese much. Especially those that are young ages. They don’t speak it at all. That’s what we’re trying to encourage all the parents. Please do not lose our language. Speak Marshallese so when we have more helpers, they can help, because I’m also teaching all the children at the church, so I don’t speak English. They call me *Bubu*. *Bubu* means grandma. They go, “Oh, *Bubu!*” Even though I am not their *Bubu*. I’m okay with it. It’s pretty normal. I speak Marshallese. I read Marshallese. They say, “Please don’t speak Marshallese.” I said, “No, it’s very important,” I always tell them. “In the future, you’re going to be like an interpreter. And you’re going to help a lot of adult people in my generation.” We cannot lose our culture, so I teach them our culture also. Because within maybe a few decades from now, we’re not going to speak that language anymore.

BC: The church must be such an important place for that cultural sharing to happen.

IM: Yeah. Because that’s where everybody goes to. They come to church every Sunday. That’s where you’re getting lots of people, because they come.

BC: In addition to regular Sunday gatherings, the biggest cultural celebration at a Marshallese church is the kemem, a celebration of a child's first birthday. In a context where miscarriage and infant mortality are so high, making it to this milestone is a relief to the whole community and an

And the new generation of Marshallese are doing more than just surviving. Irene says her grandkids are learning way more than she did about the islands' complicated colonial history, the impacts of US nuclear testing, and the impacts of climate change. And young people are finding their voice and claiming their power. More than victims of transgenerational violence, they have a wealth of passion and creativity to shape the uncertain future of islanders all over the world.

When Irene shares with community groups about the Marshallese, she often includes the poetry of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, a young writer, performer, and educator who also serves as Climate Envoy for the Marshall Islands, representing the country at global climate negotiations. Jetñil-Kijiner's storytelling and poetry have been a powerful voice on the world stage calling for ambitious climate action to protect the planet's most vulnerable people and places. She leads a group of youth environmental activists on the islands, and Irene shares that Marshallese teenagers in Dubuque have also created a Pacific Islander group at their school to deepen their connection with their homeland and to wrestle with the complicated issues of the past, present, and future.

Even the youngest are finding ways to claim their voice and claim their power.

IM: Our young kids, there is a song that they – it's a rhyme, something like that – it's meant like this: The American, they're greedy, they treat us like those people from Israel. We were treated like the people from Israel. They go to Egypt, and they were treated like a slave. All the kids, they play with it. They create it. It's not even a five minute song. It's something they would say everyday. Because they want to do something. They're powerful, but they want to do something, because they're learning more about it, today they're learning more about it, so they can create something they would describe from what they think of the Western people.

BC: So like being enslaved in your own land? Being enslaved in the islands, but by this nuclear testing. By the United States government.

IM: Now all kids are learning how they did the nuclear tests, and they're even scared. They're like how could they do such a thing like this? We're human beings. It's a big world. Why couldn't they just drop it somewhere in their own place? But why did they bring it over and test on our islands. They think it's unfair.

BC: What do you tell kids when they ask a question like that?

IM: My grandkids, they ask me, "Grandma, we heard a lot about the testing." They're the ones who ask why. Why did they have to bring it all the way to Marshall Island? Why did they choose Marshall Island? It's a continent. We're living on a continent. Why they didn't do it somewhere else? Why did they bring it all the way to Marshall Island? I told them that I don't have any clue. We just grew up with it. It's in our heart. It's like they buried something terrible in our heart. I,

myself, I couldn't get it away from my heart. In school today, they're learning a lot about that. It's scary. It affects all the generations, and it's not going to go away. It's going to continue.

BC (narration): It was moving to hear Irene talk about these conversations with her grandkids asking why, trying to make sense of the stories they hear about their homeland, the beautiful and terrible memories buried in the hearts of generations of Marshallese as they've migrated far from the islands. I couldn't help but thinking of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poem, "Anointed," which Irene had shared with me. It speaks powerfully to the experience of Marshallese so vulnerable to the toxic legacy of colonialism and nuclear war, and now the devastating threat of climate change. But it's frighteningly universal as well. We're all vulnerable, and there are no easy answers to the future generations asking why.

Here's a clip of Jetñil-Kijiner's video performance, from the beginning and end of the poem.

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, "Anointed"

I'm coming to meet you
I'm coming to see you

What stories will I find?
Will I find an island
or a tomb?

To get to this tomb take a canoe. Take a canoe through miles of scattered sun. Swallow endless swirling sea. Gulp down radioactive lagoon. Do not bring flowers, or speeches. There will be no white stones to scatter around this grave. There will be no songs to sing.

How shall we remember you? ...

Here is a story of a people on fire – we pretend it is not burning all of us.
Here is a story of the ways we've been tricked, of the lies we've been told:
It's not radioactive anymore
Your illnesses are normal
You're fine.
You're fine.

My belly is a crater empty of stories and answers only questions, hard as concrete.
Who gave them this power?
Who anointed them with the power to burn?

IM: I cried when I first saw that poem. I cried. It's true.

BC: Me too. The video is so powerful of her standing on top of the concrete. Can you describe what that is?

IM: That's their nuclear waste. That's the nuclear waste. They bury it. Today, that small island is no longer a dry island. It's covered with water. It's leaking.

BC: You said that island is now underwater.

IM: Climate change. Now the islands are covered with water. When it's high tide, it's covered. Low tide, you can still see the concrete.

BC: How has that changed on all the different islands? Are there king tides and the sea is coming more and more and impacting life in Marshall Islands?

IM: They're very scared. They're always looking to our government, asking where can we go? What can we do? Because the islands are sinking. It's not just because of the tidal wave coming in. You can see the water rise up, and it's very scary. It happened two years ago. They have video of it, and it happened in Bikini islands, Kili island. They were saying that they were very scared because the water would just rise up. There's no wave on the ocean side or lagoon side, but the water would just rise up. Salty water. And it was up to four feet high. The scariest thing is the plants. All the coconut, the breadfruit, bananas, everything died because of the salt water. I heard more. It's not just Kili Island. A year later, they were talking about Namorik. When you're talking about Namorik, it's an outer island from Majuro. The same thing that happened to Kili is happening to them too. The smallest islands, they're all gone because of the rise and climate change.

BC: You're saying the people are asking the government where can we go and what can we do?

IM: When are you going to move all the people? Evacuate them. Are we going to move from the islands, or are we going to die here?

Our government is dying to do something for the people, but they can't be alone. Like they said, "Oh, you can come to the United States. You can work here." That's all we know from what we learned when we were young. The US Government promised that they were going to take care of us.

BC (narration): I asked Irene more about the impacts of climate change, not just in the Marshall Islands, but also in her new home here in the Midwest. What's is it like to be displaced by extreme weather and sea level rise, only to resettle in Iowa and live with the threat of rising waters here too? In the past several years, Dubuque has dealt with increasingly large rainstorms and increasingly regular flooding. The city has been a model for resilience, responding to climate risks by investing in massive projects to manage stormwater and keep the Mississippi River at bay, but storms continue to grow in size and frequency here and across the Midwest. I was curious, was all this alarming to Irene, facing such risks yet again? Or did her experience in the islands give her a different perspective on vulnerability and what it means to be at home in a place.

IM: Here in Dubuque, it's just the water runs down and you're not going to flow away from. It's not as scary as our island. Our islands, if a tidal wave is on it, once it comes, just one tidal wave is going to wipe out everyone. It's already happened to our island. And I've seen it. Here in Dubuque, we feel safe. It's dangerous too, but we're also safe because we're around a lot of resources and we have a lot of help. We know we can be dependable on someone else, the government. We know that we're going to be safe. It's not as scary as at home. Home is more scary.

BC: That must be hard to feel that way about home. Home is usually a place people think of as safe and comfortable. But, yeah. That must be hard...

IM: Yeah

BC: Thanks to Irene Maun for sharing her story. And thank you for listening to Mid-Americana. If you like the show, we hope you'll subscribe, share it with friends, and leave us a review wherever you listen to podcasts. Visit our website, midamericana.com, to find original illustrations for each episode by artist Mathew Kelly, plus transcripts and show notes. This is the final episode of our second season, featuring stories of immigration, so visit the website to listen to more and to sign up for updates on our plans for potential future seasons. We want to give a special thanks to everyone who supported this season's work, including Dave Barasoain for his help with production; students Emma Chervek, Elizabeth Sheldon, and Allison Stuenkel who transcribed the interviews; the team at NowNow for managing the website, to Adam Bruce for writing and producing our theme music, and especially to Brad Linder for all his help with editing and engineering the audio.

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