

# Ivoni Nash

## Tonga



**Ivoni:** My name is Ivoni Nash. I am running a nonprofit organization here in Utah. It's the National Tongan American Society, where we help all the Pacific Islanders who come to the United States and do not have a permit to stay over here. I help show them the way to apply to get the paper, get the permanent resident, and become American citizens.

**Interviewer:** What's your country of origin? And what does it mean to you?

**Ivoni:** I'm from Tonga. Tonga is my country that I love. And United States is the second one. [Tonga] means a lot to me because that's where I was born, and our culture helps me and our people together.

**Interviewer:** I noticed when you came in, that you have these necklaces and earrings and your dress, can you tell us about them?

**Ivoni:** This is the traditional everyday wear for a woman. In terms of wear for every day, you don't just run around wearing long pants and stuff like that. No, a Tongan woman is supposed to wear their sleeve up to [their elbows], and their dress all the way down to the ankle. And this [refenecing clothing around her waist] is what they call a *kiekie*, and you put this around your waist. It shows of respect. The respect is when you leave your house, or your family, or your country, you carry them all in a waist. So that is why you put this on your waist. In here is love, respect, and memories. You put your family, your country around your waist and you carry it around with you all the time, so you won't do anything bad, you'll just remember that you carry all of this as a reminder. In the Tongan islands, we wear different types of waistwear. There is a different one you wear to the funeral, there's a different one you were to get married with, there's a different one you wear to the church, there's a different one that you wear in a happy time, and the one I'm wearing is the everyday wear. The Tongan women, they just make them. And it's original, it's made from the back of a tree.

**Interviewer:** Did you make that one?

**Ivoni:** No, I did not make this one. Someone gifted it to me.

**Interviewer:** Why did they give it to you?

**Ivoni:** They know that all the Tongan women like to have them and mine is old, so they gave me one because they know that I get involved in things like this. When I go to represent our island or our Kingdom I have to wear it to identify who I am and where I am from.

**Interviewer:** What was immigrating to the U.S. like? What were your thoughts when you came to the U.S.?

**Ivoni:** When I came to the U.S., it's a shock. Because I just came straight from Tonga to Salt Lake City, Utah. The dressing is different, the climate is different, the people is different, the food is different. And especially when I don't see a lot of people like me, I was lonely- Scary. But I like to go to new places and learn. It was quite interesting.

**Interviewer:** Did you come alone or with your family?

**Ivoni:** I came on my own. I came to go to school. I came on a student visa to go to school and it ran out.

**Interviewer:** How old were you when you came here?

**Ivoni:** I was 19. I had just graduated from high school. And I got a scholarship to come and go to the LDS Business College, which was old and is no longer here. I went straight from the island to go to school and stay in a dorm. It was really nice because where I stayed in the dorm there were students from all over the world. There were especially lots of students from South America and other places. And I like it because I see them and we connected.

**Interviewer:** What things do you miss the most about your country?

**Ivoni:** What I miss the most is the laid back. It's not that busy. Walking everywhere. The food- it's organic, you plant your own food, and you raise your own chickens and you go to the house and get your food from there. And family. Family, in the Kingdom of Tonga, means everybody in the village. And that's what I miss the most. Because you know everybody in the village and you have safeness. They're all one big, huge family. That's what I miss the most- knowing your neighbors, knowing them and they know you. And here, you don't even know your neighbor. Over in Tonga, you just walk into the neighbor's house.

**Interviewer:** When did you feel the most lonely?

**Ivoni:** I come from a place where you don't feel lonely. Coming over here, when there is a big gathering and no one speaks my language I feel lonely. And when I go to the store and I don't see someone my color I feel lonely. Those are the only times I feel lonely- when I don't see anybody like me. It doesn't matter whether it's Polynesians or people from other parts of the world. As long as I see a place where there's all different kinds of people it makes me happy. When I don't see my people I feel this weird feeling of loneliness. It's weird to feel lonely in a place full of people. I come from a very religious family. And on Sunday, they go to church. And I came here and go to church that was the first time I noticed that I was so lonely. I go to church and I don't know anybody and I don't sit by my family but I see families sitting together and I remember my family. The service was not in my language and I tried to understand it, I tried to learn to understand. I avoid going because I miss my family when I go there I see the family sitting together.

**Interviewer:** So you said you came here to get an education. What was your experience in the school you went to?

**Ivoni:** It was very, very different from the education in Tonga. I just graduated from high school and come over here to go into business in the LDS Business College. That was when the computer was new and I wanted to become a computer programmer. But, I couldn't make it- it was a different language and different program. And I changed. But that's why I came here- to go

to school, but the school is too different. You have to really study a new language and try to keep up with what's going on at school.

**Interviewer:** How did you improve your language?

**Ivoni:** I had to improve my language because back home we study English but not very well. I improved my language here because talking with friends, meeting with other people that don't speak my language, that's how I improved my language. And take some English classes at the community college and talk to my roommates. They were from Pakistan, they were from South America. And we all struggled to understand each other. So we all go to school and learn to speak the English language.

**Interviewer:** What are your hopes for your community?

**Ivoni:** I want them to know all the resources that are available to them. That's why I started and am the founder of the National American Tongan Society. Because I came here as a student, and my visa ran out, and they were going to deport me to go back to Tonga. My visa was okay, but I didn't go to school because I ran out of money so I was working and that's illegal. The immigration officer called me up and told me that they will deport me to Tonga. They asked me what I was doing, and I said, 'I am working' and he said, 'I should be only going to school.' I said, 'I don't have any money left to go to school.' But he said that they will deport me. So they processed the paper and everything. But I did meet someone, we fell in love, and we got married. He's an American citizen, so I could stay. But my hope for my community over here is for them to know all the resources that are available to them. I want the people like me that came on a student visa to be able to complete their school. I don't want what happened to me to happen to them, because it was scary. You're in a foreign country and it's really scary because I was a young and a woman. That's what made me want to start this nonprofit organization. It started by getting the Pacific Islanders or the Tongan people to become American citizens. I helped them file their papers, walked them through the process, and translated for them. And now they're really happy that we put that program together. And we met with Joseph [the New American & Refugee Liaison of the Salt Lake County Mayor's Office for New Americans] and we thought 'What a blessing' you know they will welcome the new people that come to America. This is our home now. Make it friendly, make everything available to them not to go through it like I did when I first came.

**Interviewer:** What do you think it means to be 'welcomed'?

**Ivoni:** This is a greatest event that I've been a part of, this *Faces of Salt Lake County*, and the welcoming of new people over here. 'Welcome' is when people say 'Hello' to you no matter who you are. You just walk on the street. It's a habit for me, I say 'Hello,' If they don't say 'Hello,' it's okay. I acknowledge them if someone by me. That's what welcome is to me- is to just acknowledge the person by you on the street, not just the person you know. Just say 'Hello.' People you know, people you don't know, little kids, you just need to acknowledge them when you see them. It makes you feel good. I think that's what welcome is, it starts small like that.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about your religious or spiritual beliefs?

**Ivoni:** I was born and raised in the LDS church, but I'm not active in the LDS church. It means I'm not against the belief, I just want to visit all the Tongan churches, and I belong to all of them, whether they are Methodists, whether they are Seventh Day Adventists, and there is a Church of Tonga. And I visit them on Sundays, and I learned a lot from all of them. I'm not just holding onto one and saying that 'I'm LDS'. No, I belong to all of them. I'm Christian, I think that's what I say. But, I like to visit all the churches and work with the women in their community, encourage them to participate in whatever that is available, and teach them to speak English and to teach them to become American citizen.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any children?

**Ivoni:** I have one son and four grandchildren. My oldest one is 18 and he just graduated from Kerns High School last year. The four of my grandkids are homeschooled. But they take the classes they like from Kerns High School. And my little granddaughter shes in the Water Polo team and she is a swimmer, and she takes English classes in other classes from Kearns High School, but she is homeschooled, all four of them. And I like it. I love it. They're so smart, I think because they are homeschooled- it's all one-on-one. They're really, really smart.

**Interviewer:** What are you thankful for about America?

**Ivoni:** I'm grateful for America, for this country. I'm grateful for United States, their freedom. I'm grateful that I'm here, and grow up in a big, beautiful country that have lots of blessings, lots of resources for my family to participate in. I'm grateful for the freedom. I'm grateful for the freedom of speech. I'm grateful for just being an American and do what I want to do. And there's no one that tells me, 'No the government said that's wrong.' The freedom I have over here.

**Interviewer:** Do you have a favorite holiday food you like?

**Ivoni:** Yes. My favorite holiday is Thanksgiving. It was the first time for me to eat turkey and stuffing and stuff like that. And I love it. And we practice it in our home. But my favorite food is pumpkin pie. I adore it. But the one from home, I like a piece of raw fish mixed with coconut milk and onion and all those stuff.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about that thing you brought with you, is that a fan?

**Ivoni:** Oh, that's my fan. They make it from a tree. And because we are from the islands lots of the electricity is only for the rich people- For the foreign people that come over and try to run our island. But this [referring to her fan] we call the 'Tongan air conditioning.' This is just when it's hot back in Tonga, this is how we get cool- you fan yourself. This you can take anywhere. When you dress up to go to church or go to weddings, it's not complete until you carry one of your fans. Just to fan yourself.

**Interviewer:** What is the difference in culture between your country and the United States?

**Ivoni:** A lot. The culture is not even close. In our culture, we respect the older people, the senior citizen, we respect women, we respect men. It's the respect that we have in our countries. I don't think there is any other place in the world in that respect like what we do in Tongan. We teach our children to respect people older than them. And if you are a senior citizen back home, you are the number one person in the community- we respect them. Like if we have a get-together, we will all stand up and make sure they get the good seat, and we feed them first. And we have people that wait for them. And when they talk to us, we respect it, and we take it to our heart. And that's how our culture goes from one generation to another- Is us communicating and respecting each other. And here in the United States, it's sad how people over here they don't respect their older generation. To me when I go to the grocery store, I see that happen. You know, it's really, really sad when you see that. You don't see that in your culture.