



ARIETA ENESI MULITAUAOPELE  
CHAMPION OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
NURSING SERVICES

"I always wanted to take care of people," says Mrs. Arieta Enesi Mulitauaopele, considered the champion of public health nursing services in American Samoa. The fifth in a family of eight and the youngest of five girls, Arieta was born on February 21, 1923, to Reverend and Mrs. Niko Enesi of the village of Utulei, American Samoa. At a very early age, she knew exactly what she wanted to be: a nurse. Her father was the first faife'au (pastor) in Utulei, and he and his bright and energetic young wife, Seine, set out to raise a family that the village eventually came to respect as models of intellectual and moral integrity.

Arieta's strict upbringing quickly taught her to address all issues honestly and with a forthrightness that would serve her well when, years later, she began the training that would in time make her Samoa's leading advocate, planner, and teacher of public health care programs and methods.

With the encouragement of her family, she began nurses' training at the American Samoa Hospital in 1939 upon completion of her public school education at Poyer Junior High. The training was a lot more demanding than she had anticipated. "It was rigorous and exacting," she now says. But she worked hard, and in 4 years she was a graduate nurse. She was made Nurse Supervisor of the hospital's maternity ward. She was also singled out by the Head of Nursing Services, Ms. Betty Bailey, to be sent off to the United States for training to become a full-fledged Registered Nurse.

However, that plan had to be delayed. A handsome young suitor -- the son of one of Samoa's traditional families and already holder of the family's ranking High Talking Chief title -- had fallen in love with the beautiful and gifted young nurse and had asked her parents, in proper Samoan fashion, for her hand. Unprompted, Arieta consented to her parents' wish to honor the young chief's intentions. In her words, "I had to put my desire for further training on hold and had to adjust to a new life as the chosen wife of an important chief." The High Talking Chief also happened to be the Chief of Police for the American Samoa Government. In December of 1945, in an elaborate wedding celebration, Arieta was married to High Talking Chief Tamotu Mulitauaopele.

Arieta continued her work at the American Samoa Hospital. Still, she was gripped by the nagging yearning to broaden her education and experience as a nurse. So, in 1946, she left for Honolulu to do just that. Her husband remained behind to attend to his traditional family and village responsibilities as a chief.

For the next 2 years, Arieta worked and trained, first at Queen's Hospital in Honolulu and then at Kapiolani Maternity Hospital, where she was subsequently awarded Hawaii's Certificate for General Nursing. In 1948, she returned to Samoa, at the urging of Samoa's Head of Nursing Services, to become a teacher of the young women entering the nursing profession.

At this time, too, her husband embarked on a political career as a senator in the Legislature of American Samoa (the Fono). Elected by his County Council of Chiefs, he has now held that post for 38 years and is respected as a senator of senior ranking.

Meanwhile, Arieta began her own climb to prominence. Her ability to communicate in both Samoan and English added immensely to her early success as an instructor. Her students idolized her and looked up to her as a model for their own growth and development in their profession. Arieta also worked closely with the Head of Nursing Services to improve the nurses' general image. She was able, for instance, to show how a practical, single-purpose uniform could create a change in morale and, as a consequence, bring about improvement in efficiency and, importantly, a heightening of public notice. For the first time, shoes became a part of the new nurse's uniform!

With her impressive drive, Arieta rekindled interest in the nursing profession among the young women of Samoa. Her enthusiasm and dedication were infectious. And for a long time after Arieta began teaching, nursing was clearly the favored profession of most of the young women of Samoa. "It is humanly impossible to feel fulfilled unless you make a commitment to something larger than yourself," she said, as she continued to minister to the sick, to train new nurses, to raise a family, and to attend to her duties as the wife of a chief.

As she assumed greater and more demanding responsibilities, she also moved up the ladder of her profession. In 1950, she was supervisor for all nurses, and in 1952 she became Assistant Chief Nurse in the Nursing Services Unit of the American Samoa Hospital.

The most demanding of her assignments -- and, according to her, the most challenging and the most rewarding -- began when she became the Chief Public Health Nurse in the Public Health Division of the American Samoa Health and Medical Department. She was the first Samoan to hold such a post. She began immediately to devise an ambitious plan. In those days, public health services were not available to the outer villages because of a shortage of public health personnel and the lack of transportation to the more remote villages. Arieta planned to change all that. She even included in her plans the Manu'a Islands, 65 miles of ocean away, and Swains Island, 240 miles away. She established in each village,

large and small, a Women's "Tumama" (Health) Organization, which she and her small cadre of trained public health nurses used as a center of contact for the immediate community. This effort was helped greatly by the fact that she was the wife of a high chief of Samoa, a status that immediately and automatically drew respect and attention from the Samoan community at large. Also contributing enormously to the success of the plan was Arieta's astonishing talent for recognizing and recruiting reliable and talented village women, whom she trained. And so, with a total of 960 women in the Tumama, an impressive public health program was launched. She personally visited each village initially and conducted intensive training of the Tumama women in giving immunization shots, keeping basic health records, and observing good habits of personal health and village cleanliness. Follow-up training was provided by the public health nurses she had trained. Still, she maintained a rigorous schedule of village visits for herself. For 15 years, she was the dominant figure in promoting preventive health practices and general home and community cleanliness and nutrition. She was instrumental in developing programs aimed at the problems of filariasis, scabies, malnutrition, and other communicable diseases. These early efforts eventually became standard, territory-wide programs. The entire Samoan community finally and for the first time became totally immunized against these diseases.

"The most important thing about my work," she said, "is that it will reach everybody and touch every child and adult who needs care." To achieve this goal, she had to endure great hardship, even great physical danger. She often spent nights on the road, leaving the care of her children and family to loyal and trusted family members. Once she was stuck on Swains Island for a month for want of transportation. And in her many visits to the villages of Manu'a Islands, she risked her life many times when her boat would capsize in the rough and unpredictable surf of those islands. But she never waived in her commitment to her avowed goal.

As if this were not all-consuming enough, Arieta took advantage of every opportunity to broaden her knowledge of good health practice. She participated in training sessions sponsored by the South Pacific Commission, as well as in other short-term training opportunities variously sponsored. Her knowledge of current public health practices was further enriched by her close friendship and professional working relationship with a Medical Department Director whom she continues to hold in high regard. This was Dr. John Kennedy, who was contracted by the American Samoa Government as Health and Medical Director in the mid-sixties and who, totally committed to serving the people of Samoa, would often accompany Arieta on her visits to the Tumama villages. "He was, in a sense, a medical missionary," Arieta remembers. "I learned a lot from this dedicated man. He was always teaching us, the Samoan nurses and medical practitioners, the latest and most practical methods and thinking in health and medical practices. He was a caring and very personable man who had an air of -- well, not just authority, but of something like omniscience."

Somehow, without fail, Arieta has also found time to devote to her church and to be actively involved in the activities of non-profit organizations, some of which she helped to establish and served as president at one time or another. A great believer that women can provide many more different kinds of community service than they do now, she herself has been president of the Nurses' Alumni Association, the Pan Pacific Southeast Women's Association, the American Samoa Cancer Society, the Women's Health Organization, and the Church Women's Fellowship Council; she has been the chairperson for the Elder Deacon's Council of Women and a member of several other women's organizations, such as the Intercultural Women's Association and the Women's Hospital Auxiliary. She has been vice president and secretary of the local YWCA.

Add to all of these her duties as the wife of a ranking chief in her village and district, her duties as the mother of four boys and three girls, and one can see how, for Arieta, there were never enough hours in a day. But as if that were not enough to fill her days, she took a brief but satisfying fling in politics in the late fifties when she served in the local House of Representatives, taking leave from her public health post to represent her county. Very rarely in Samoa has a woman been so politically involved. Twenty-odd years later, however, in 1979, she decided to try politics again. She resigned after 30 years' service in the Health Department and ran as a candidate for lieutenant governor in American Samoa's first gubernatorial election. In spite of her unsuccessful bid, she will be remembered in Samoan history as the first Samoan woman to run for such high public office.

Following the disappointment of defeat, she became the pulenu'u (village mayor) in her home village of Iauli'i and was given a chief's title of moderate rank, Talking Chief Falelauli'i. Because of a progressively deteriorating eye condition, she retired from public office in 1981 and has since devoted all her time to her family, her church, and her community. She is currently the eastern district's president-at-large for the National Women's Council, and she continues to lead the Church Women's Fellowship Council of the American Samoa Christian Congregational Church.

As elder deacons in the church, she and her prestigious husband are both actively involved in church affairs, especially activities in support of church youth organizations. They are both also actively interested in the proper upkeep and maintenance of their church parishes throughout American Samoa.

"Mrs. Arieta Enesi Mulitauaopele," says one of her long-time associates, "has a maternal instinct for what is right, which not only makes her co-workers feel important and proud to be her associates but also makes her children and her family look up to her and think her achievements great and wonderful. She deserves it, for she is just that: great and wonderful!"