

Strong Paddles, Strong Testimonies in French Polynesia

By Mindy Anne Leavitt
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In the middle of the Pacific Ocean lie 118 islands created from underground volcanoes or coral atolls. Filled with palm trees, black pearls, and Tiaré flowers, these islands are home to about 275,000 Tahitians (as inhabitants of French Polynesia are commonly called).

Gerry Huuti, a 29-year-old convert, is one of those people. He relishes the national sport, *va'a*, or outrigger canoeing, which has been an important part of his life since age 16. Five years after he began racing, he met Laydreane—a champion paddler and a member of the Church. Thanks to her example, Gerry was baptized and served a mission in New Caledonia while Laydreane served in Tahiti. They married six weeks after Gerry returned home.

Now, several years and one son later, Gerry still participates in *va'a* tournaments—but he supports his family by creating paddles for *va'a* outriggers. “My business is right next to my house,” he explains. “I go out

and look for wood to cut up and glue together to create paddles.” It sounds simple, but each of these beautiful wooden paddles takes five full days to make. And with about 20,000 paddlers on the Huutis’ island of Tahiti, paddles are always in demand.

Though Gerry and Laydreane are both busy with Church callings, they still make time to go to the temple. “Because of our temple attendance, we have a better relationship,” says Gerry. “We are also blessed on the work side of things. Selling paddles by yourself might work well enough, but if you do it with the Lord, it’s better.” That divine aid is vital to the Huutis. Gerry and his wife also have a strong testimony of tithing. “We never worry that Heavenly Father is going to bless us,” Gerry says. “If you pay your tithing, you’ll end up with more than what you have.”

For the Huutis, *va'a* is more than just a sport. The principles of dedication and commitment necessary to be good paddlers have helped both Gerry and Laydreane be more

One young couple in French Polynesia finds that the gospel and their favorite sport have several things in common.

dedicated to the gospel. “In *va'a*, the physical counts for a lot,” Gerry says, “but it’s not the most important thing. What’s more important is the mental—being determined to finish your race. When you have to paddle for four-and-a-half hours, your body can tell you that you can’t make it, but your mind tells you that you can. In the gospel, determination is very important. Sometimes you get discouraged, but faith can help you succeed by following God’s plan for your life. We can always learn something from *va'a* that applies to the gospel.” ■

MORE ABOUT GERRY

What's your favorite traditional Tahitian dish?

Kaku. It's made from crushing breadfruit into dough and eating it with coconut milk and *poisson cru* (raw fish that is a Tahitian specialty).

What do you do for fun?

Our family likes to go to the ocean, gather leaves, and play together.

What is a cultural practice unique to French Polynesia?

Tahitian dancing is part of the Polynesian culture. The annual Heiva dance festival has been going on since 1881.

THE CHURCH IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

22,659 Latter-day Saints

8 stakes

83 wards and branches

16 family history centers

1 mission

1 temple (Papeete)

BY THE NUMBERS

100 million U.S. dollars' worth of black pearls exported annually

French Polynesia covers 1,930,500 square miles (3,106,839 km²) of ocean, but only 1,544 square miles (2,485 km²) of land

79° F/26° C is the average temperature; water temperature averages 80° F/27° C

13 letters in the Tahitian alphabet

FACTS ABOUT TAHITI

Capital: Papeete, on the island of Tahiti
Languages: French, Tahitian

