

Calm, Cool & a Pioneer of His Time

People | Trailblazers



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When the topic of insurance in Papua New Guinea comes up, one name always surfaces: Henry Kila.

For many of us who came of age in the late '80s and early '90s, he wasn't just a businessman - he was a presence. A leader. A household name. His image and influence were everywhere during the 1991 South Pacific Games. I was a volunteer at the time, and even then, you knew this was someone who mattered.

But I didn't meet him in person until years later.

I had just come home from Waitaki Boys' High School in Oamaru, New Zealand, for the holidays. My father took me to the Royal Papua Yacht Club, where he introduced me to a man who said little, but carried an air of quiet strength. He didn't need to speak much. His presence did all the talking.

"This guy is cool," I thought.

Reconnecting – When Our Paths Crossed Again

Years later, while working at Blake Dawson Waldron, I discovered Henry's office, South Pacific Insurance Advisors, was just a floor below ours in the Mogoru Moto Building.

We'd run into each other often in the lift, in the car park, around the building. I reintroduced myself. He didn't remember me, not exactly.

But I remembered him.

And more vividly, I remembered his truck, a towering 4WD with tyres so big they looked like they belonged on a mine site. Just like the man himself, the truck didn't make noise, but it made an impression.

You'd see him in the papers often, not just for his professional achievements, but also as a business leader and sports administrator. He wore many hats. And wore them well.

The Achievements – Breaking New Ground

Henry hailed from Delena village on Yule Island, a proud son of the Central Province. But his influence reached far beyond his roots.

He was the first Papua New Guinean to earn international qualifications in insurance, according to the Journal of the Australian & New Zealand Institute of Insurance & Finance - a major milestone for the time.

But he didn't stop there.

Henry co-founded Kila Bowring Insurance Pty Ltd, PNG's first nationally owned insurance broking firm, a joint venture with Baillieu Bowring. The firm, aside from one technical director, was staffed entirely by Papua New Guineans. He served as Managing Director, working alongside trailblazers like Pelik Sapul and Masket Iangalio.

He wasn't just succeeding, he was setting the stage for local ownership in an industry once dominated by foreign firms.

The Character – Sharp, Humble, and Hilarious

Henry Kila was known for his strategic mind and composed manner. But he also had a razor-sharp wit that would catch you off guard.

Anthropologist Nancy Sullivan once told a story that captured his humour perfectly. They were seated at the back of a business forum at Divine Word University. A speaker from the Education Department walked onstage - afro in full bloom.

Nancy turned to Henry and asked, "Where's he from?"

Without missing a beat, Henry replied: "1972."

That was Henry, sharp as a pin, quietly hilarious, and always watching.

The Quiet Trailblazer

Henry didn't need a microphone to make an impact. His calm confidence, pioneering achievements, and understated brilliance did the work for him.

He showed us what was possible, not just for himself, but for every Papua New Guinean dreaming of stepping into an industry, a boardroom, or a space they'd never seen someone like them in before.

He reminded us that trailblazers aren't always loud, sometimes, they lead with humility and open doors for others.

A Role Model for Our Time

We often associate success with noise: charisma, speeches, the spotlight. But Henry Kila was proof that real impact can be made in silence, in consistency, in grace.

He was a role model in the truest sense. Not just because of what he did, but because of how he did it — with vision, character, and humility.

His good family friend, Arua Toua's son Fred, now in the insurance industry himself, put it best:

“He created the pathway when there really wasn't one. That's the impact he made on the industry, and it's why we now have locally owned brokers and underwriters.”

Fred added a personal memory too:

“HK was a close friend of my father. He'd often swing by our place for a few cold stubbies. Sometimes, we'd spend school holidays at Arure Beach on Yule Island with Uncle HK, Uncle Jack, and all the families.”

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