

Melisa Laelan is a native Marshall Islander, born and raised in the Marshall Islands. At age 16, she graduated top of her high school in the islands. A year later she enlisted in the United States Armed Forces. While in the Army, she was offered the opportunity to serve as a logistic specialist within various units throughout the United States and abroad including Asia and Europe. It was then that she acquainted with people from different cultures and became more appreciative of the diversity she experience. After ten years in the service, she moved to Arkansas to attend University of Arkansas in 2004 where she is now a senior, part-time status, studying International relations. Because of her prior service with the Armed Forces, she was able to attain her citizenship and in 2011, she became a U.S. citizen. She now holds a dual citizenship.

In 2011, along with other Marshallese leaders, Laelan founded Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM) and in the year 2015, ACOM received its non-profit status, making it the first organization founded and directed by native Marshall Islanders. As the executive director of ACOM, she has become a resource contact in both Marshallese and non-Marshallese communities. As the Marshallese community continues to grow in Arkansas, she is frequently visited by many.

In February 2013, Ms. Laelan received her certification and became the first certified court interpreter in the nations. Her work as an interpreter provided her a higher visibility in various Arkansas communities. Her service as an interpreter is currently at a high demand. In fact, she travels to serve other courts outside of Arkansas on a continual basis.

Shortly after her receiving her certification, in March 2013, she was appointed by former Governor Mike Beebe to serve as a Commissioner on Arkansas Minority Health Commission board. The appointment makes her the first Commissioner from the Marshallese community to serve on any state commission. Commissioner Laelan has a passion to advocate for the Marshallese communities. Commissioner Laelan spends her time with the agency raising awareness of the challenges the Marshallese communities face as non-immigrants living in the United States. She continues to build bridges with legislators through her work as a commissioner. Commissioner Laelan has a passion to advocate for the Marshallese communities.

Northwest Arkansas Business Journal honored Commission Laelan in 2014. She received honors as one of 40 under 40 influential leaders. She is proud to be the first Marshall Islander to be recognized as 40/40 honoree due to her leadership roles in the community. She hopes that there will be more Marshall Islanders to be recognized for their involvement in the community in the future.

Laelan is a single parent and she enjoys her spare time with her 10-year-old son Zion and her cat pet Bryan. She is very proud to have her son going to Lee Elementary school in Springdale. She appreciates the education Lee Elementary has given her son. She is very thankful to hold leadership roles in Arkansas and more appreciative of her involvement in North

West Arkansas communities as she continues to be hopeful of what the future brings to the Marshallese communities.