



# Whānau up front

Concluding our series, REBECCA MACFIE is in South Auckland, where a community-led approach is bridging the gaps between struggling families and fragmented bureaucracy. • photograph by ADRIAN MALLOCH



Building a stronger community: He Whānau Whānui o Papakura members Crystal Morgan, Colleen Koni and Rawinia Wade.

**T**he car park at Papakura Marae on Hunua Rd is busy. A queue of vehicles is snaking through, their occupants stopping to load food parcels into boots, before quietly pulling out into the traffic. A young man with an iPad is helping to co-ordinate the effort. I tell him I'm here for a meeting, but I'm a little early. "Have a seat in the wharekai," he says. "Grab yourself some lunch."

Mine is a white face among mostly brown, but no one looks at me with suspicion or asks for proof that I have legitimate business here. No one directs me to tap my details into a touchscreen. It's just haere mai, be comfortable, have a hot meal.

This is tikanga. The arms of the marae are as open to me, a Pākehā stranger from Christchurch, as they are to the thousands of local whānau who come for emergency kai, healthcare, housing support, budgeting or any of the 52 services that are provided here.

With its large wharekai, tukutuku-lined wharenuī and immaculate garden, Papakura Marae is an oasis of welcome and acceptance amid streets of struggle.

There are areas of significant wealth around Papakura, but the University of Otago's deprivation index colours huge swathes of the South Auckland suburb red, signalling a community that's among the poorest 20% of New Zealanders.

It's also a young population – nearly a quarter are under 15, compared with fewer than 19% for the country as a whole; 9.1% are infants under four, compared with 5.9% nationally.

The usual markers of hardship are evident around the town centre – abundant \$2 outlets and discount stores; shop verandas stained with mould and grime that could be easily tidied by diligent landlords. There are also obvious signs of community spirit: vegetable gardens inviting passers-by to "take some, leave some"; vibrant street art.

In the statistical area known as Papakura Kelvin, near the marae, 1000 children live in grinding poverty and 18.6% of households are in crowded accommodation, according to analysis by researcher Sandy Callister submitted to the Productivity Commission's Fair Chance for All inquiry.

In the 17 months to May this year, the marae's food bank distributed more than 11,000 parcels. Every Thursday night, there's a free community dinner in the wharekai. It all lightens the load on whānau dealing with empty cupboards, insecure housing, isolation and poor health.

Papakura Marae was built after years

of fundraising by people like Charlie and Noeline Kake, who left impoverished tribal homes in the post-war decades to work in the city. Their son, Tony Kake, was part of that effort, and for the past 13 years has been the marae's pragmatic and visionary chief executive.

Kake and his team have built a reputation for innovation, driven by a determination to help whānau thrive and anchored in the tikanga Māori values of manaakitanga, whanaungatanga and rangatiratanga. The marae partners with local businesses on job opportunities, with philanthropists and with central and local government. Oranga Tamariki, Kāinga Ora and Work and Income have staff on site.

"Whānau feel a lot more relaxed [here]," he says. "I expect our staff to build relationships of trust and understanding. We can

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## **“We can break through a whole lot of stuff that government departments can’t.”**

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break through a whole lot of stuff that government departments can't ... There might be 101 things going on in [whānau] lives, but [we] start to break it down, build that relationship."

### **UNTAPPED POTENTIAL**

I've come to hear about one particular innovation, from three local women who are at the heart of it. Rawinia Wade, Colleen Koni and Crystal Morgan are all mothers, and Wade is a grandmother. They didn't know each other a few years ago, but now they are tight friends and call each other "sister-girl". All three have lately completed studies in bicultural social services at tertiary level.

Wade – a feisty, slightly built wāhine who stands under 1.5m tall – had thoughts of becoming a navy medic when she was young, but instead had the family she also wanted. Now, she's tossing up between a career in social work or midwifery.

Koni has been pouring energy into rebuilding the Kelvin Road School Netball Club. She shyly accepted an invitation to coach one of the club's two teams; now she's treasurer, there are six teams, and last season her under-11s won their grade in the Counties Manukau competition.

Morgan longed to connect with her Ngāti Kahungunu whakapapa. She made the link

through an aunt, and now is a trustee of a Māori land trust in Hawke's Bay and part of a drive to build papakāinga on ancestral whenua.

The three wāhine are part of an initiative called He Whānau Whānui o Papakura, which started four years ago as a partnership between the marae and the Southern Initiative (TSI), an Auckland Council group set up to unlock the social and economic potential of South Auckland. The impetus grew from the Early Years Challenge, TSI research that combined scientific evidence of the harms caused by deprivation to children in their first 1000 days with data and interviews with South Auckland whānau. The latter revealed the mountain of poverty-related stresses facing many households, almost a fifth of which have children under three.

A key theme from the research was the massive untapped potential and aspiration of parents, and the opportunity – if the right environment is created – for them to "co-design" alternatives to the traditional systems of social support to improve wellbeing.

The South Auckland Social Wellbeing Board (made up of representatives from 13 government agencies), which was working separately with the marae on innovations to improve social services, later became a key partner in He Whānau Whānui.

The initiative is both deeply radical and highly nuanced. Radical because Papakura locals like Wade, Koni and Morgan are not just props to be wheeled in for "consultation" sessions with government departments who've come up with a new scheme to fix the poor people. They are there as experts in their own community and in the realities of raising families under the crushing stress of poverty. Nuanced because this isn't about yet another patch on an unequal society: they are there to help rethink how our system of social support can better do its job of assisting families in need, rather than – as is too often the case – holding them down under the boot of judgment and sanctions.

### **SENSE OF PURPOSE**

All three women are razor-smart and are flourishing, largely because of the friendship and sense of purpose they have found in He Whānau Whānui. But they also know the toxic stress of trauma, racism and poverty.

Wade and her family experienced homelessness after their landlord wanted his house back, and ended up living for nine months with a cousin. Only when they were





**Papakura Marae CEO Tony Kake: building relationships of trust and understanding with those in need.**

a day away from having no roof over their heads (the cousin was moving to Australia) were they offered the Kāinga Ora house that remains the family's home seven years later.

Oranga Tamariki threatened to uplift Wade's then-eight-year-old daughter after a nurse noticed a graze on the child's cheek and reported it. If the nurse had asked, rather than rushed to judgment, she would have learnt it was a fabric burn from the trampoline, incurred when the kids were fooling and shoving each other around. Wade's response to the ordeal was to lose trust in every government agency.

She has also known terrible grief. In the midst of a Covid lockdown, she lost a son to stillbirth, four days before the due date. And she's a fierce advocate for members of her family with health and developmental needs: one child has a kidney disorder, another has autism, another attention deficit disorder, and her husband is currently too unwell to work. Wade herself has diabetes.

Koni was working split shifts at a bar in Drury, finishing as late as 3am. "I wasn't seeing my kids off to school, wasn't able to get up to provide what mothers are supposed to provide ... getting their breakfast, their shoes. I was drained, fully drained."

Despite the crazy hours, she wasn't making enough after rent and petrol to put food on the table. She quit when she decided the children were suffering too much, but then was denied a jobseeker benefit for six weeks because she had voluntarily left her job. The humiliation was such that she'll now do anything – put in 12-hour stints in the onion fields in Bombay or borrow from family in Australia – rather than go to Work and Income for help.

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Morgan grew up with a violent father and she and her siblings and mother suffered abuse. A couple of months after the birth of her first child, she was back at work as a caterer, putting in massive hours. "I just felt like a robot ... It was work and drinking, work and drinking. I had postnatal depression without knowing it. I started not to feel.

Someone could tell me their sad story and I would feel nothing."

When she was pregnant with her second child, her nephew phoned and asked if he could come to live with her and her partner. In her robotic state, she told him they would talk about it later; he died by suicide a month after. It was only when she was pregnant with her now one-year-old twins that she got treatment for depression.

**SILOS AND WASTE**

The three women responded to the multiple stresses in their lives by isolating themselves and keeping their trauma private. But their involvement in He Whānau Whānui has brought healing, camaraderie, confidence and aspiration.

It's not just about rebuilding the lives of individuals. The goal is to build a stronger community, where whānau have the relationships and mental "bandwidth" to help each other, and where central and local government provide the right kind of support to those who need it.

"That's what pulled me in," says Koni. "To better myself, to better my family and to better the whole community."

The backdrop to that ambition is filled with official reports and inquiries detailing

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the multiple ways poverty has become entrenched in New Zealand, and how our complex and overlapping systems of social support are part of the problem.

In 2019, the Welfare Expert Advisory Group described a system that “diminishes trust, causes anger and resentment, and contributes to toxic levels of stress”; one that is bureaucratic, inconsistent and driven by performance measures that “focus on efficiency and reducing liability rather than what is best for the individual or family”.

Last month, the Productivity Commission’s Fair Chance for All report flayed the public sector for siloed and wasteful practices such as “delivery of unsuitable standardised services to people experiencing persistent disadvantage”, and a lack of accountability on ministers and agencies to move the dial on poverty. It urged a shift to locally led and whānau-centred approaches, supported by central government.

## POWER FLIP

Those involved with He Whānau Whānui are experimenting with how that shift could happen – how to develop local solutions and build community strengths, rather than constantly reacting after the event to family crises, hunger, crime and the multiple other harms of poverty.

The wharehui at Papakura Marae is the tikanga Māori setting in which the three women and about 20 other locals come together with the bosses of government agencies to prototype new ways of doing things. The usual power relationship of supplicant and benefactor is left at the door. No one wears a badge declaring their status: the Papakura manager of Work and Income is no more important here than the mother who needed a food grant last week.

Angie Tangaere, who has worked closely with whānau since the initiative started in 2019, says it’s about “collapsing the distance” between those who have decision-making power and those at the receiving end. Tangaere, who is attached to TSI as kaitohu (co-director) tangata whenua of the Auckland Co-Design Lab, a Manukau-based agency, says they are trying to “shift the equilibrium”.

And so, whānau don’t just participate in hui, they take the lead. “For lots of whānau, this is the first positively reinforcing experience they have had as an adult,” says Tangaere. “Whānau can bring their kids along – you can have a deputy commissioner of justice holding someone’s baby ... It’s non-hierarchical. It’s about creating the conditions where whānau feel safe and welcome and feel they have power in this space.”

“Whānau have told us that people want to help themselves. They are not out there living in poverty and sitting around going, ‘Well, what is someone going to give me?’ They don’t want to live like that. They want us to help them help themselves.”

Another insight has been a desire to build what Tangaere calls “social capital”. “[They say] ‘I need to know new people who can help me with my aspirations.’ One wāhine said, ‘Before I came here, all my mates were crackheads. I didn’t know anyone who’s not on meth.’

“New pro-social connections become incredibly powerful if you otherwise have only the same relationships, and therefore the same opportunities, around you.”

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Among the prototypes that emerged was Te Arataki. The title translates as “the guide”, and, Tangaere says, it was an experiment in building supportive relationships between senior government agency staff and whānau members. “It wasn’t to be about what the agency does for that person, or an assessment of need – it had to be about [whānau] aspiration.”

Wade was matched with a senior administrator from Oranga Tamariki – the very agency that had threatened to take her child a few years earlier. Koni paired up with a leader from Work and Income. Tangaere herself worked with Morgan.

Each pair communicated regularly, and over a period of six weeks (during a lockdown), brighter futures emerged. Koni, Wade, Morgan and others enrolled in study that matched their goals rather than the dead-end warehouse and hospo courses that Work and Income tried to make them do; some started fitness regimes, completed CVs, connected with extended whānau to heal past hurt, or began learning te reo.

“Whānau usually get asked, ‘What’s wrong with you?’” says Tangaere. “They’re not normally asked, ‘What do you think can work, and what’s working for you now?’ That’s what a lot of our work is premised on – figuring out what is already working and building on that infrastructure, starting with the strengths and values that enable connections and wellbeing.”

## KEYS IN THE BASKET

Another prototype was rolled out after the first Covid lockdown in 2020. For many well-off families, that had been a time of quiet relaxation, reading and games. But, “when you’re living in the ‘hood, for some people, things like cards and board games are a luxury”, says Koni.

Wade recalls the group meeting on Zoom and discussing “how the families with nothing were coping, the ones in emergency housing with five kids, the ones who were isolating”. They came up with the idea of He Kete Aroha (a basket of love). The local Oranga Tamariki office backed it, and they bought educational toys, resources and games, packaged them into colourful backpacks, and distributed them to whānau in the area who they knew needed support. Not only did the kete bring enrichment for kids and relief for parents, but also the exercise built connections between He Whānau Whānui organisers and families they were helping.

A bag of goodies might sound like a small thing – the kind of neighbourly support that’s easy to deliver in well-to-do suburbs – but it’s far more challenging in a stressed, low-income community with unstable housing (one in four South Auckland kids moves address between nine months and two years of age, according to the TSI’s Early Years Challenge report).

“The roll-on effect of a whānau-led initiative like He Kete Aroha in terms of building relationships and manaakitanga in a community is huge,” says Jaymee Wells, Oranga Tamariki’s Papakura site manager. “[You might] have just moved to the area or there’s a crisis in your whānau, and someone rocks up to your door and says, ‘Hey, we’re here to support you – here’s some stuff for your kids, here’s where you can go for a doctor, here’s this cool netball group or mamas’ group.’ That’s community supporting community.”

It’s not just a nice-to-have: the research on early child development shows that strong neighbourhoods and local networks are “protective factors” that help reduce the harmful impact of toxic stress on young children’s cognitive, health and behavioural development.

Wells has been involved in the marae-based hui for the past three years. “It’s been inspirational to have whānau take the lead and we [government agencies] are there saying, ‘Hey, we’re here to support.’ I come from a social-work background in a government organisation where we are very focused on a referral or a support service. This has made me realise that relationships



Angie Tangaere of Auckland Co-Design Lab: Asking whānau what works for them.

are the key thing. Sometimes, whānau don't need referral to a service or a counsellor, they need relationships that are built in the community where people care about one another."

## BUILDING TRUST

This could, and should, happen everywhere, says Wells. But you can't take what's happening at Papakura Marae and plonk it down in other towns and expect it to work. Conditions of trust, openness, respect and reciprocity have to be created for the expertise and ideas of struggling whānau to come through.

It's taken time for those conditions to be created, including years of relationship-building between the marae, highly skilled workers like Tangaere, and the South Auckland Social Wellbeing Board. The board was set up in 2016 as a "place-based initiative" under the social investment policy of the then-National government. Central and local government agencies are at the table, and director Ann Wilkie says the insights from He Whānau Whānui have been "key to understanding whānau-led innovation, and the impact that the system can have on whānau."

Wilkie and her small team are based in

Manukau, where they share space with a multidisciplinary family violence team. "This is about system change, with a focus on nought to five-year-olds and their whānau," she says of the board's remit. "This is about trying to understand where and why the system doesn't allow whānau to thrive. It's about how the system tells people what they can have, as opposed to what they need."

Wilkie has plenty of real-life stories of the ways in which that "system" can be oppressive, ineffective and, for some, disastrous.

"We had a young man who ended up in Pāremoremo prison. His [risk of offending] was identified when he was five," says Wilkie, a sworn police officer since the 1980s. "For six months, he was back in school, had a great relationship with a mentor, everything went well, he didn't reoffend. But that [mentoring] contract finished after six months, he spiralled completely out of control, and his journey has probably cost in excess of \$1 million, whereas, for the meagre cost of continuing that contract for a few years, you would probably have had a completely different outcome."

She doesn't mince words in describing the duplication, waste and failure to build trust with families needing support. "A particular whānau had six NGOs all paid to knock

on their door ... The way that funding was being utilised to cold call somebody who just doesn't want to be found was never going to be successful. But if they had all got together and had a meaningful discussion about who might have a trusting relationship with that family, it would have looked completely different ...

"If you collaborate, if you work together with iwi and whānau, and listen to what whānau say they would like, you will get far better outcomes than if you work individually and in siloed ways with funding that dictates what we are allowed to do and not do."

In a society beset by lagging educational achievement, homelessness, family violence and fomented fears about youth crime, no

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one is denying that this is complicated. But the proof is out there that a whānau-centred, trust-based approach works. Half of the young South Auckland offenders in a programme that aims to stop the descent into a life of crime are back at school, says Wilkie. "That's the stuff that makes you want to come to work each day."

And Wade, Koni and Morgan have found healing and friendship, are building their community, caring for families and planning careers.

At the end of my afternoon with the three women, I bump into a couple of marae helpers who are setting up the wharekai for the weekly community dinner, which will be shared on this rainy June night by 200 locals. We chat briefly, and they welcome me to stay.

Yes, it is complicated. But behind the inequality, suffering and polarisation that afflicts Aotearoa in 2023, their warmth reminds me that we have the foundations upon which we can choose to build a country that puts whānau at the centre, and where all can thrive: generosity, care and respect. Manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, rangatiratanga. ■

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