

Dream catchers: How these mentored kids have fared

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In 2003, a charity set out to change the lives of dozens of disadvantaged schoolchildren, with the goal of solving inter-generational poverty. Donna Chisholm finds out how the programme's graduates are faring in their mid-20s.

Ask Tevita Fualalo what he's up to these days, and he jams his black cap down over his eyes, hunches his shoulders and talks about the labouring job he has in South

Auckland. He's a road worker in Flat Bush, he says. "Right now, I'm just going from day to day."

Only when pushed will he tell you he's just graduated from Auckland University with a double-major Bachelor of Arts degree in history and philosophy. "I liked history as a kid and saw a booklet about Indian philosophy when I was enrolling, so I thought I'd give it a go. A double major sounded fun. It's not as hard as it sounds."

He doesn't know what he'll try next, only that it won't be unskilled work. "I want to keep studying, but I don't want to rush – the degree took me five years." He's interested in journalism, or perhaps law. "The hard thing is everything interests me. Some days, I want to do one thing, a couple of days later, something else."

Fualalo is a seriously smart young man. But if his high school had had its way, he wouldn't have gone anywhere near university. In Year 10, he was called into the principal's office with nine others and encouraged to do an "alternative education pathway" focusing on sports. The group had one thing in common – they were all Pasifika boys.

The only reason Fualalo has a degree today is because he had some firepower in his corner: the I Have a Dream charitable trust, a group set up to change the life and career trajectories of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The trust gives each student a mentor through school, extra tuition and career guidance. "Tevita had academic talent to burn," says the trust's New Zealand founder and chairman, philanthropist Scott Gilmour, a former tech entrepreneur. "His attendance was great, his grades were great. His attitude wasn't that great. But for various reasons, they were profiling him out of the school, out of an academic track."

At the "Dreamers" after-school programme in Mt Roskill, Fualalo talked to project co-ordinator Ant "Coach" Backhouse and asked him, "Coach, why was I in that group?" Backhouse and Fualalo's mentor, Ant Howard, argued his case and Fualalo stayed at school. He finished his Year 13 studies with NCEA Level 2 – he missed Level 3 by one credit – and headed to

university, his life course irrevocably altered. “They changed my life for the better – my family’s too.”

Fualalo is one of 53 Mt Roskill students who started as Year 4 pupils in 2003 in the inaugural Dreamers programme, which supported them throughout their schooling. Of those, 37 completed Year 11 and 32 completed Year 13. Fifteen moved away or “disengaged” along the way. Fualalo still lives with his parents in the same house they were in when he went to high school, but it’s the only thing about his life that’s stayed the same. Gilmour is unconcerned Fualalo isn’t sure where his studies will lead, saying he’s still very young: one of his own sons was 33 before he landed on his career choice.



For 13 years, the I Have a Dream programme was limited to that inaugural Mt Roskill group from Wesley Primary but in 2016, it launched in four schools in the decile one suburbs of Tikipunga and Ōtāngarei in Whangārei. It’s a more ambitious programme, with 400 children already enrolled and the aim of mentoring up to 1500 over the next 15 years. It serves an

ethnically different group: about 85% of the Roskill group were Pasifika children and most of the others were refugees. Only two were Māori. In Whangārei, up to 95% of the children identify as Māori.

In September, a *New Zealand Herald* investigation highlighted the low rates of entry to so-called “elite” university courses – law, medicine and engineering – of students from low-decile schools. It found just 1% taking those courses come from the most deprived homes, and only 17% of low-decile students attend university at all, compared to 50% from high-decile schools.

After leaving high school, 80% of the Dreamer students entered tertiary studies or training, compared with just 30% of a comparison group. Only 11% of the Dreamers failed to gain NCEA Level 2 (23% of the comparison group failed). One of them was a boy who’s been “in and out of jail”, where Gilmour has visited him. “If he comes out and wants to go to uni, we’ll support him. Once a Dreamer, always a Dreamer.

“He’s a smart, talented kid; he’s just using his talents in the wrong direction. He almost didn’t stand a show. His older brothers had been in a lot of trouble and in gangs; when he turned up in Year 9, the teachers, his dean and classmates looked at him and said, ‘You’re going to be trouble.’ Well, guess what? Kids live up to expectations, or down to them. You tell a 13-year-old Tongan boy ‘You’re going to be trouble,’ he’ll think, ‘Too right I’m going to be trouble.’”

Nearly 45% of the Dreamers achieved Level 3 NCEA – four times the comparison cohort – and by early 2016, 32% were on track to earn a bachelor’s degree, nearly four times the number in the control group. Gilmour estimates that over a 40-year working life, the Dreamers could earn \$20 million in extra income and pay an extra \$10m in taxes than their less well-educated peers.

He believes the programme has the power to halt intergenerational poverty. “For these kids, we have done that. We have stopped the cycle in most of those families forever, because

they're earning more, they've had high levels of education and they have different expectations of what is possible."

But it will take a vastly bigger effort to drive systemic change. "All the politicians came through – [former prime ministers] John Key, Bill English and [Auckland mayor] Phil Goff – patted us on the back, and said, 'Well done, boys, carry on.' But we've had minimal engagement from the ministries of social development or education. How do I take this from 50 kids to the 500,000 kids in New Zealand who need it? If every decile one, two or three primary school had this running, within a generation or two we could largely eradicate poverty in this country – that's the power of education."



Gilmour says he hasn't been able to connect with enough of the first group recently to confirm how many completed degrees. But on a Friday night in Auckland in spring, *North & South* was invited to meet half a dozen of the Dreamers at a Korean restaurant, and there, they told us

their stories. They're nearly 25 years old now and, for some, tonight is the first time they've seen each other since they left school.

Raela Varu arrives before the others. It's her first night out on her own after the birth of son Werner four months ago, and her first Uber ride. She's come from Mt Roskill, where she lives with her sister because her partner spends much of his time working overseas. Varu's dream was to be a PE teacher, but she dropped out of Otago Polytech after one year of a two-year course. It was her first time away from home, and she was homesick.

Since then, she's worked in Australia with her uncle who's in furniture removals, and as a waitress and bartender at a five-star resort in the Cook Islands, her homeland. She loves being a mum but says the Dreamers have awakened her to the importance of tertiary qualifications and she plans to return to study next year, when Werner's a bit older, to take a course in hospitality – something she "definitely wouldn't" have done without the programme.



Diana Tuisalega breezes into the restaurant next, and hugs Varu. Now an art teacher at Rangitoto College on the North Shore, Tuisalega is in high spirits, and passionate about her job. "I'm loving it," she says. "I've almost finished my first year and it's SO exciting!" She's paying forward what she's learned. "When I started [the programme], I felt I had a purpose, that I could make it."

She was just 12 when her mother, a great supporter of the Dreamers concept, died. "She knew this was a good programme and that I should try to get through school, do my best and get where I want to be." But she then moved to Orewa with her father, and her two years as a Dreamer ended. "He said I didn't need that help. It was sad to leave knowing there were all these opportunities."

The ambitions the programme seeded in her remained, however, and she graduated with a degree in visual arts from the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), before qualifying to teach. "I get to explore kids' talent, to see them grow, develop their skills and have fun in art. Some of them are really insecure about their talents, so it's awesome to see what they can do when they get the support."

Robel Hailu and Amelia Unufe come next. Hailu, an electrical engineer, slips in unobtrusively. Statuesque fashion designer Unufe, a gold crown in her front tooth gleaming beneath her cloud of platinum blonde curls, dispenses enthusiastic waves and hugs.

Ethiopian Hailu came here as a refugee with his mother, with whom he still lives in Mt Roskill. "She stays with me until she leaves this earth, even after I have kids and family." He left school with Level 3 NCEA, endorsing with merit, and graduated this year with an honours degree in electrical engineering from AUT; he now works at infrastructure design and build company Downer Group.

"I Have a Dream gave me a platform that allowed me to do anything I wanted. That kept me in my room studying, and stopped me doing a lot of bad stuff."

Hailu initially wanted to be an artist, but after reading about energy systems at intermediate school, "it hooked me". He's still in touch with his mentor, philanthropist Ant Ford, whom he calls the dad he never had.



Unufe found a second influential mentor during her university study: fashion designer Kiri Nathan, for whom she interned while completing her bachelor's degree at AUT in art and design, majoring in fashion. Unufe launched her own label, Unufe Design, in 2016, but also works on contract for Nathan, who's now on the I Have a Dream board.

Unufe began sewing her creations in the bedroom of the family home, then moved to the garage when the business grew. She's now looking for a bigger space, and to hire machinists to help her make her signature ball gowns – dresses with a "Polynesian twist" that sell for \$400-\$800 apiece.

Unufe grew up speaking Tongan, so struggled to read and write in English when she started school. As with Fualalo, only Backhouse's intervention enabled her to take the subjects that qualified her to study fashion design at AUT. "Ant told her she'd better do physics in Year 12 but she didn't get accepted. We had to appeal to the dean and the principal and really fight to get her in," says Gilmour. The challenges didn't end there. "She walks into the first day of class and the teacher looks up and says, 'Oh hello, dear, have you got the right class?' She was the only Pasifika kid in the room."

Unufe was the first in her family to earn a degree, but one younger sister is studying psychology and another is trying to be a chef. She's hired one of her two older brothers as a photographer and his photos feature on Unufe Design's Instagram account, which she's captioned "Just your average island girl living her dreams."



Nurse Janita Siva has helped to organise tonight's dinner via Facebook, even though she will start her shift at Auckland Hospital in just a few hours, at 10.45pm. She chose a career in health after seeing her mother go through two open-heart surgeries. "I saw a lot of doctors and nurses and wanted to be like them when I grew up, but I don't really want to be a doctor any more because they don't have much freedom – they're at work constantly."

Her parents weren't educated and although they thought her studies were important, she had no help apart from the Dreamers' after-school homework classes twice a week, where volunteer tutors answered her questions about maths and science. Siva trained at Unitec in West Auckland, but says it took her five months to find a nursing job. She still lives with her parents in Avondale and wants to qualify as a nurse specialist, so she can work more autonomously and prescribe for patients.

A number of Dreamers have left Auckland, including Salote Makasini, who's just graduated with a degree in neuroscience from Otago University. She plans to study medicine in the hope of qualifying as a brain surgeon and take her skills back to Tonga, her parents' homeland.

Makasini's older sister had earned a BA from Auckland University without the help of the Dreamers, but Makasini says her parents embraced the opportunities the programme provided. Her original plan was to become a paediatrician but she became interested in brain science after two of her grandparents had strokes during her studies.

Anna Moala spoke to *North & South* from her home in Colorado, where she's working towards a social-work degree at Colorado State University. Backhouse arranged an internship for her after she dropped out of teacher training in favour of social work because "teachers don't get to have the kind of relationship that I wanted to have with students".

In her last school year, Moala moved in with her mentor on the North Shore after problems at home – including the fact she often missed school because she was the go-to babysitter for a new baby in the family – threatened to derail her studies. When she left teacher's college after a semester and a half, she was "desperate to leave the country. I just felt stuck, like I wasn't going anywhere. I felt I was going to go into the cycle of being a Polynesian girl getting pregnant at a young age and getting married or being a single mum. I really didn't want that. I felt I was being pulled down and thought I would have no life, that I would just be at home with my parents."

In Colorado, she's working part-time at a public library, and helping children in a local I Have a Dream programme. Eventually, she sees herself back in New Zealand, doing what Backhouse does now. "In all honesty, I think if I didn't have the Dreamers, I'd be working in a factory job. I wouldn't have even thought of going to university. It wouldn't have been in my mindset, to know there's a world outside New Zealand that has more opportunities that can provide for you and your future."



When I Have a Dream moved to Whangārei, Gilmour and Backhouse knew establishing a strong relationship – whānaungatanga – with the community would be crucial for its success. “We were very cautious of coming to the north, that it wasn’t ‘white men telling them what to do’,” says Backhouse.

The pair recruited Joby Hopa as community engagement manager, and a group of Māori navigators – paid staff who will guide the children from primary school to the age of 20. “Joby will tell you the success of this programme is due to the fact we didn’t just parachute into a community and say, ‘We’re here to fix your problems,’” says Backhouse. “We spent two years coming up here, meeting all the stakeholders in the community, from the marae to the schools, businesses, the mayor and the council and saying, ‘Do you feel there is a need for something like this in your community?’ We tell them I Have a Dream is not the silver bullet, we are not the waka in this journey, we are the ama; the support or the outrigger to stabilise your journey through the rough seas.”

Those rough seas include poverty, drugs – particularly P – and suicides. Backhouse says the ethnic differences in the Roskill and Whangārei communities do not translate to differences in need. “A lot of Pasifika families migrated here for a better life; for work, better pay and opportunities for their children. They get here and realise it’s bloody hard work. They end up living in a state house and just surviving every day, but they still want their kids to fulfil that dream. That kind of fire is a little more alight after only one or two generations, compared to up north, where you have to go a few more generations back. Māori were still navigators when they came – entrepreneurial people who had a lot of get up and go. Many in the north now don’t connect with their own history. But I sit down with the parents when they enrol their five-year-old in primary school. Some of them are trapped in drugs, or symptoms of poverty, but 99% want the best for their kid. They love their children.”



Individual and corporate sponsors pay \$1000 a year to support a Dreamer. Gilmour says he gets “pushback” sometimes when he promotes the trust at fundraising events. “Some of them say not everyone needs to go to university; we still need people to dig ditches. Yeah, but why should brown kids be the only ditch diggers? Why can’t they go to university?”

For Backhouse, that pushback epitomises the biggest enemy of student success: lack of expectations. “What are the eyes we see people with? Sometimes we say the fault is with Māori or Pasifika, because as a lot of white people, we are sitting on a couch watching these news stories every night and we’re getting that rubbed in our faces. That’s the lens we take on, and some teachers have never taken the time to sit down with these kids to understand their story.”

He acknowledges that for many children up north, university will not be the prime focus. “The reality is there aren’t a lot of universities in Northland, so studies have got to be vocational. Kids still need training on the job, or a tertiary qualification, but a degree from Auckland or Canterbury or Otago or Wellington is not the big carrot. I’ve learned not to place too much value on only that, because if kids don’t make it they can feel like a failure.”

He says I Have a Dream doesn’t come into a community with “a deficit story” by saying “we are here to fix your problem or you’ve been referred to us because you’ve done this, that or the next thing. We’re coming in and saying, ‘What are your dreams?’ We instil a message of hope.”

As the first group of Dreamers reach adulthood, that hope has, in many cases, become reality. Ask Tevita Fualalo what he would have done without I Have a Dream, and he scratches his beard, smiles and has no answer.

“It’s like asking how you would have been without your parents.”



Worlds apart

Students on the I Have a Dream mentoring programme often have to walk between different worlds: the worlds of the Dreamers, their home, their school and their friends.

In a 2014 study, Kerry Mitchell from The Education Group, a team of education researchers and consultants, found the mentoring philosophy was about service to others and setting aspirational goals, while at school the Dreamers were expected to conform; at home, they were

often living in overcrowded conditions and their friends outside the project wanted them to do drugs and skip school. "It is a gifted teenager that can walk those worlds and stay centred."

Mitchell, who prepared case studies on eight Mt Roskill Dreamers, says teacher attitudes contributed to attendance problems at high school. "Some teachers didn't respond well to them, and would typically escalate conflict situations." One student recalled "many times when my dean just screamed at me". Another spoke of teachers and other students making them feel "dumb and useless... not only being judged about the way I work but also the colour of my skin. It was hard enough not having support from home but then having all the stress from school as well." Mitchell says many felt out of place in academic subjects, not because they were out of their depth, but because they were often the only brown face in the class.

Another consultant Jan Hill, who evaluated the Mt Roskill group's outcomes in a 2012 report, says the most important factors in the Dreamers' success was the structured programme that kept students focused, and the involvement of significant and caring adults who supported them "whenever they needed it".

"Ant [Backhouse] went beyond a normal job, and many of the mentors did as well. Where the relationship between the mentor and student was really powerful... it was invaluable."

Auckland University education and social-work research fellow Mohamed Alansari has been evaluating and advising the Whangārei programme since early 2017, collecting achievement data in reading and maths, and assessing students' attitude, aspirations and motivation. He recorded moderate gains in reading and in maths for all Dreamers, irrespective of their school. The gains haven't yet been compared to control groups, but reading progress, in particular, was greater than for students at schools with similar characteristics, including decile level.

Dreamers' participation in after-school homework programmes was almost 90% by year's end. "Parents are signing the kids up to join the activities," says Alansari. "The programme is really aspirational in a good way. Parents are invested in it, school leadership teams are invested in it,

external funders are invested in it, and they all contribute. That's likely to make a difference in outcomes."

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