



Aidan Bennett

Aidan's parents instilled a strong sense of community and leadership in himself and his brother when they were children. This has manifested itself in his thriving advertising and graphics production business—Benefitz—and in his involvement with community organisations. Today, Benefitz supports local schools and sporting organisations and sponsors a range of community groups.

Aidan, his wife, Michelle, and their family first lived in Herne Bay, until around six years ago when the couple moved to Takapuna. He identifies strongly with the area. *What we find over here is, it's much more of a community. Here we get to know the neighbours and people say hello. We have a couple of street parties here each year. The Shore is very community orientated. The couple's two daughters, Courtney (26), works in PR and marketing and Ashleigh (23), is a lawyer, also live on the Shore.*

Born in Whakatane, Aidan has one older brother, Dallas. The family moved quite frequently when he was young because of his father's work with the Bank of New Zealand, but when his father left the bank and went to work for AMP, the Bennetts put down roots in Waiuku. Aidan attended Sandspit Road School and Waiuku College before securing a job as an advertising cadet with the *New Zealand Herald* in 1979.

He enjoyed his time at the *Herald*. *It was an interesting place because newspapers in those days were thriving.* His cadetship

meant that he worked in different areas of the *Herald's* advertising business, and the company also paid for him to attend a four-year advertising course at Auckland Technical Institute. Eventually he sold advertising for the *Herald* and stayed with the business for five years. *I learnt a lot.* Aidan then travelled overseas for six months before returning to a job in sports publishing with a company called Rugby Press, which published *Rugby News*. *I used to play rugby to a reasonable level and I was always keen on sport so I applied for this job.*

It was again in advertising but because it was a small company, Aidan was involved in a range of different publications. As well as *Rugby News*, the company published cricket and bowls magazines and books, mainly sporting autobiographies. It was during his time at Rugby Press that Aidan got an understanding of *the whole process of publishing, both magazines and books.*

He worked there for two years in the mid-1980s before working in an advertising agency for another two years. *I decided I wanted*



Speaker at North Harbour Club, 2006 – 2007, with club founder Ross Finlayson

to start my own business, which is how we started Benefitz in 1988. He says Benefitz was initially like a small advertising agency and the company shared office space and resources with Rugby Press in Parnell. One of the most important things when you're selling something from an advertising perspective is having a benefit. Why is somebody going to buy your product, or your service, instead of something else? You've really got to have a benefit and it came from there. It was a play on my name as well. That's how the company got its name Benefitz.

When Rugby Press shifted premises to View Road in Glenfield on the North Shore, Aidan and Benefitz moved, too. The area has changed immensely since that time in the late 1980s when the northern motorway ended at Sunset Road.

Benefitz worked closely with Rugby Press in terms of design and layout. *One of the contracts we had was for the magazines and books that were being published. That became a third of our business. This contract was a good base for Benefitz, which was also able*

to do other advertising and design work. Computers and digital printing techniques have transformed the advertising and printing business during the time Aidan has been involved. Initially most of our customers didn't have computers, didn't have graphic design packages. As time went by, our customers started to be able to do basic desktop publishing and design themselves, which meant our business needed to evolve to do other things. We got into print manufacturing. We bought printing machines essentially.

His brother, Dallas, a professional sailor and sailmaker by trade, joined Benefitz in 1990. *He's more technical than I am. He started experimenting with Mac computers, which at that time were starting to evolve to be really good design*

tools. In that period, through the early '90s, we developed the ability to do lots of computer design ourselves. For a short time, the company was involved in book publishing, which is a pretty tough business, but they did reasonably well. Then we decided really just to specialise in print production. They did design work and printing, sometimes buying the printing. Initially we got into digital printing, then into large format digital printing and then into offset printing, then into grand format printing, to the point now where we've probably got the most extensive range of printing capability and signage of anybody in the country.

The company began small—initially just Aidan and then his sister-in-law part-time. Then slowly the staff numbers increased until nowadays they employ around 75 people in the Constellation Drive-based business.

Benefitz now also does website development and employs programmers and designers for that side of the business. *Evolution of products is essential. Our challenge is to find out what the new norm*

is and make sure we are setting ourselves up to be able to do that. Aidan feels that change in the printing and design business has been so transformative that it is impossible to specialise in one or the other. The key of what we do is diversifying and offering a range of products and services for our customers.

Aidan says that one of the reasons Benefitz has been so successful is because they have always tried to be part of the local community. They have developed a good business, which employs a lot of people, most of whom live on the Shore. Aidan prides himself on being a good employer and so the relationship with the community is symbiotic. *Because we give to the community, we do get a lot back in terms of the community supporting us as well. Our strategy has been to get really involved. We've put our roots down on the Shore.* Benefitz supports local schools and sporting organisations, and sponsors a range of groups.

Aidan's membership of the North Harbour Club, a group of community leaders who got together for networking and leadership opportunities, has been an important part of his life, the AIMES Awards, in particular. The awards are for young people who show promise and excellence in one of six categories: the categories include the arts, IT, innovation and science, music, education, sport and service to the community; the North Harbour Club has granted around \$1.7 million in these awards since 1995. Aidan became a trustee of the club in 2005, then vice president, and was elected president in 2015.

He is also a trustee of Harbour Access Trust, which was set up to open commuter wharves for ferries at Takapuna and Browns Bay. When the idea of establishing the National Ocean Water Sports Centre on Takapuna Beach was first mooted in 2010, the Trust was approached to promote the idea. After the site of the

Takapuna Beach Holiday Park was chosen as the location for the Centre, community opposition strengthened. *It's become a little bit controversial. To the point now where I think the campground is clearly going to stay now. I believe the sailing centre won't be in Takapuna, it will be somewhere else.*

Aidan is very proud of being the publisher of *Channel Magazine*, which he began with the support of Peter White from the Takapuna Beach Business Association in 2010. The pair wanted to produce something that was positive about the North Shore and had a community and business focus. It is a combination of advertorial with non-commercial copy and is free. It has doubled in size to 140 pages from the 60 pages it had when first published and is produced monthly, eleven issues a year. *Channel Magazine*

has the support of local business associations as well as what Aidan calls *infrastructure-type* organisations, such as shopping centres and business associations.

Since beginning the magazine, Aidan has been determined that every aspect of the community is reflected in its pages. While the

business community is a focus, the magazine also has news from local schools, the arts community and profiles of local people. *Our ethos for the magazine is we don't like taking photos of buildings. If we're talking about an organisation or a community, whatever it is, we want photos of people and the building, rather than just the building. I think that's what's made the magazine popular, because people see their photos in there and see people in there.*

Over twenty-four thousand copies are printed every month, and they are very popular. An example of its community focus was a multi-page feature on the Yes Disability Centre in 2013. *We produced extra copies so they could use it as a promotional thing as well. It was a win-win.*

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Another of his community initiatives has been getting a playground built on Gould Reserve near Takapuna Beach. There had been some community opposition to the idea over the years, but Aidan has worked with a local couple, Chris and Jackie Reeve, who have generously underwritten the costs of building the playground. *I didn't know either of them. I just approached them when I heard of their plans and said Channel and Benefitz will get behind this. We want this for Takapuna. I've got to know them pretty well now and I'm a proud trustee of the thing. It's going to be a lovely playground that really suits the environment.*

As with his business, Aidan believes that the community must keep evolving, but not lose its links with the past—although he does acknowledge that not everyone in Takapuna is as keen as he is for change.

I understand why some people are a little bit scared of development but the reality is that this place is going to get more inhabited with people so we need to make sure that we are preparing for that. You can't put your head in the sand and say it's not going to happen. The playground is a classic example. There's a group that feel we don't need a playground in Takapuna and yet we do. We need those sort of things to ensure we are catering for future generations. Something we haven't traditionally been that good at.

