



Carol Ryan

Carol comes from a large family where music and song, and political debate around the dinner table were an important part of her childhood. Those debates were the beginning of her questioning society, the Church, power and paternalism, and led to her desire to be involved in community development.

Growing up in a large family was her first taste of living in community. Carol was born in 1953, the second youngest in a family of eleven children. She was raised in Oamaru. Her father was very interested in politics, and Carol remembers vigorous discussions around the kitchen table about people's rights, equality and equity, as well as the activities of the Church and the Government. Her father was a good debater, and had been offered a safe Parliamentary seat by the Labour Party, but turned down the opportunity because of his family responsibilities. Carol feels that her parents were very influential in instilling what she came to think of as social responsibility. She was very close to her mother, and remembers her as an *amazing woman*. The Catholic Church was also very influential in Carol's early life. *The things I loved about the Catholic Church were the rituals, and I loved singing, but I couldn't quite get my head around some*

of the set practice, and why girls couldn't join the boys and be altar boys and girls.

After she left school Carol worked for the Post Office Savings Bank. When her parents left Oamaru for Auckland in the early 1970s, Carol decided that she would also move north. She took six months' leave from the post office, and became a ballroom dance teacher for a short while in Auckland, *even though when I applied I only knew basic dance steps*. She then began work in the old

central post office at the bottom of Queen Street; today this is the site of the Britomart train station.

Her colleagues at the post office were all women and, to

begin with, she thought that they were unfriendly; that was until one of them said that they were a bit daunted by her because she knew all the systems and they did not. This was a result of having taken on more responsibility when working for the post office in a

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Ryan family photo, 1955. Carol sitting on stool in the front.

small town. Relations thawed, and she made friends who took her to a party where she had her first cross-cultural encounter. *What was really interesting is in the South Island there had been no Māori in the township I grew up in, so I hadn't really met Māori until I came to Auckland. I went to this party and I was sitting there, shy as anything, and these young Māori men said, 'Come and join us,' and they got the guitars out and started playing. I had an absolute blast and really enjoyed myself.*

Carol had started to question her religion whilst still at school. When she was 18 she taught a Christian doctrine class for young people, *but I was questioning it at the same time and I stopped teaching because I had started in my own mind going... 'These answers aren't enough for me.'* It was after she came to live in Auckland in her early twenties that she started thinking about roles and people's lives, and what was important. *Auckland was right for me to start thinking that through.*

In the mid-1970s, Carol went to Australia on the first leg of her overseas experience. In Melbourne, she met her future husband, and the couple both travelled overland to Europe, where they married, before returning to live in Panmure, Auckland. It was being a married woman that first stirred Carol's feminism. She applied for a department store card in 1980 and was asked who was working in the family. Her husband was in paid work, but she recalls *I used to wear a badge that said 'Every mother is a working mother.'* The company insisted that the card had to have her husband's initial and name on it, even though Carol did not use his name. She was shocked, and sought her sister's advice. She suggested Carol get in touch with the Human Rights Commission. The Commission explained that the company was within its rights to refuse to use her name on the card, but the store had agreed that they would do so for Carol. *I was the first woman in New Zealand to get one!*

After her children started school, Carol studied Human Resources at Manukau Technical Institute (MIT), as she was keen to get back into the paid workforce. She also became involved in the nuclear-free movement in the 1980s, hosting meetings at home, delivering leaflets, as well as working in the Auckland Peace Office. She recalls organising, and being part of, the 30,000-strong march up Auckland's Queen Street to mark International Women's Day of Action for Nuclear Disarmament in 1983. It was a time of personal growth for her; when she started to think about peaceful processes, using consensus for making decisions, and feminism.

She was very involved in her local community in Panmure, as treasurer for her children's kindergarten, and then chair of the Tamaki Primary School board. She remembers the hardship and poverty in Glen Innes, *but I understood it and felt that for those who have more to give, it's only fair that we share.*

In 1988 Carol, her husband and children moved to Birkenhead on the North Shore. Then, in 1989, Carol and her husband separated. A friend suggested going to Raeburn House in Milford



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and seeing if they were holding any groups for recently separated women—they weren't. However, a week later she was rung as four more women had expressed interest in such a group. Close friendships were made among the women in the group. Carol realised that her training had been very useful. *It didn't reduce the pain of my marriage break up, but it gave me skills to move through it in a very healthy way, and that was brilliant. So I realised I actually had quite a bit to offer.* She was then asked to run the group, but felt that her pain was still too raw to do that initially. A year later, however, she started facilitating groups; in 1993, she applied for a job as a group coordinator and was appointed.

She recalls that she wanted the role, but initially her confidence was low, as she felt that she might have been out of the paid workforce for too long. I was thinking, *'Can I do the job? This is scary and they sound like strong women in there.'* Fortunately, her friend Linda Marsh was working at Raeburn House and encouraged her to apply. *I was keen to work for the community. I had looked at power, the use of power and hierarchy, and I recognised that I didn't really like hierarchies. Often you would have two opinions that are opposed, but actually that is representing diversity, not that one is wrong. So the culture that I'm focused on is that it doesn't matter if you're right or wrong, or if someone else sees it that way, because it is about being diverse and having different views. I'm far more philosophical than I have ever been.*

When Carol started at Raeburn House, she worked with, among many others, Moira Green, Barbara Stanley, Marin Adams, Linda Marsh and Sue Moore, along with Cheryl Hamilton who was the chairperson at that time. *They were all quite strong women in their own right. I went in and found that everything was done by consensus and that there was a management committee.* John Raeburn often popped into the house and was interested in its progression.

To begin with, Carol ran the group for women who were recently separated from their partners, as well as other courses for women, and a mixed parenting group. *The groups grew, they tripled. I loved facilitating the groups; it was humbling to hear the women's wisdom, courage and willingness to learn and move forward; the groups were very effective. They would ask me, 'So for you, what happened there? How did you handle it?' And I'd shared with them the learnings.*

There were a number of other community projects on the go; among them Parent Port, which had its roots in a project that offered short-term help for families with preschool children who were under stress or in crisis. Carol led significant change in her role as the board chairperson of Action for Mental Health Society (AMHS), an organisation now called Connect, Supporting Recovery, which works with people living with mental health issues. There was also

a group which facilitated contact visits for children with whānau, called Care for Kids.

In 2008, Carol became the manager at Raeburn House. It was not a huge change for her as she was already a core member of the Raeburn House management team, except in the area of financial management. It soon became apparent to her, however, that there were tensions between community organisations who were all chasing the same inadequate funding for their work. Carol feels that Raeburn House has had its strongest working relationships with mental health providers, non-government organisations (NGOs), Foundation North (formerly known as the ASB Community Trust), and local and central government, as it maintains its original focus on supporting the mental well-being of people from a community development perspective.

In 2015, Raeburn House shifted its main office from Milford (which now hosts all their mental well-being/wellness courses), into new premises in Pearn Crescent, Northcote. The building

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is named after Norman King, the former Minister of Social Development in the Labour Government of 1972 to '75. Based on the identified need by local communities for a 'community and migrant, refugee multi-agency hub', Raeburn House has led this development, taking the dream and making it a reality for community, providing space for many agencies, be it office space, hot desks, or meeting rooms, but also as a place for *the wider community to feel it's theirs. Having a bigger space has enabled the team to think bigger and broader in terms of our strategic vision. The team will tell you that they have had more ideas flying, and more expansive thinking happening in themselves and their learnings by being here.*

Carol has worked hard to ensure that Raeburn House is a family-friendly working environment, and also that each member of the team feels that they can have input into discussions about programmes and priorities, and so have ownership of the outcomes of decisions. Carol believes in fostering leadership and that each team member can be and (are) leaders in their own roles, be it from information and referral navigation to programme delivery to projects. This fosters a spirit of collaboration and kinship, which is the best way of ensuring that all involved actively practise the ethos and values the organisation was based on, and are committed to making a real difference within the organisation and, most importantly, to people and communities.

We are holding onto the original dream, and working out the evolving steps towards it.

