



This house has
got a magic sign
down the gate
that says,
'If you need help
just knock on
this door!'

Diane Vivian

Diane has been bringing up her own family and along with her much adored husband, Erin Vivian, has been gathering new foster sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, most of her adult life. *Blood doesn't necessarily make family; love in the heart does.*

In the 1960s, Diane's teenage years were influenced by beatniks, mods and rockers and, of course, there were the Beatles. Diane was right into it all, and loved the fashion of the day, wearing her mini-skirts and white boots. The local hangouts were the milk bars and coffee clubs where the youth drank milkshakes and coffee, and smoked cigarettes. Alcohol was largely out of reach for young people in those days. There was also the Shera-Lee night club in Auckland. Diane remembers, as a rare treat, her parents taking her and her siblings to Queen Street to shop and to see their first movie, *South Pacific*, dressed in their Sunday best with white socks and gloves; as was usual in those days. Before she was married, Diane worked at Boots Chemist in Queen Street. To look presentable each day, she and her sister used to wear cloth napkins over their heads on the daily commute from Stillwater with their father, along the windy, dusty, unsealed East Coast Bays Road.

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and commitment.

Diane had met Erin Vivian when she was 14 years old in Tairua, where the family ran a takeaway bar over the summer holidays; Erin was helping to bale hay at a nearby farm. A friendship and romance developed, and three years later they were married. In 2016, Diane and Erin celebrated their 49th wedding anniversary. Their marriage was the beginning of an ordinary family life of that time, which unknowingly would become an extraordinary family life in later times. *We've got stick-ability and commitment;* qualities that have not only well served their own relationship and family, but also the numerous people they came to care for and support in future years.

When they were first married, the couple lived in Stillwater, in a cheap rented property without hot water, and with a coal range to cook on. *We had to run some tubing from the Zip heater and fill up the bath inch by inch with warm water to have a bath. But we loved*



Diane on her wedding day, 1967



Launch of the GRG NZ book. Ann Hartley, Diane Vivian, Jill Worrall and Jill Nerheny

it! They had a pet sheep called Bunty and a veggie garden, which they continued to have in every place they have lived.

Then, when they were both in their thirties, they unexpectedly expanded their parental responsibilities when they took in their first foster child, a 14-year-old from a Child, Youth and Family home. Their middle son had, at that time, befriended the young girl at school and brought her terrible home situation to the attention of his parents. It was agreed by all parties involved to bring her into the family. Two years later a second foster child, also 14 years old, joined the family. That was the beginning of hosting many more children in need, and caring for other's raised as their own kin in difficult circumstances. *This house has got a magic sign down the gate that says, 'If you need help just knock on this door!' I've got to learn to switch that sign off!*

After the first two foster children had left home, Diane and Erin thought they were now child-free. They purchased a Saab convertible, and had plans to tour the country. Their freedom lasted for just six months. *God had other plans for us.* The children

of their first foster child, now their adopted grandchildren, four and six years old, arrived on their doorstep in 1997 to stay for a weekend. When Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) could not find a place for them on the Monday, the girls were 'off loaded' and *thrilled to be back at the house*; the door could not be shut on them... *and so a different journey began.* But it wasn't easy... *the parents don't thank you for taking these children on, they blame you. They think you have stolen their children.*

In the early days, it was incredibly stressful to access the financial and emotional support from elsewhere that the couple now needed to raise young children. Then, in 1999, Diane decided to place an advertisement in the *North Shore Times Advertiser* seeking to make contact with other people bringing up their grandchildren, inviting them to meet. It opened a Pandora's box. The phone rang all day and late into the night. A meeting was held at Highbury Community House. Diane, Erin and their eldest daughter hosted a number of MPs, lawyers and Jill Nerheny, their local community coordinator. About 30 people attended

the meeting, each *'busting to tell their stories'* of bringing up their children's children. *It was harrowing*, recalls Diane.

At first sceptical, but then convinced of the great social need, Jill Nerheny approached Diane and suggested that they establish a charitable trust to support grandparents raising their own grandchildren. Together they wrote the mission and vision statements for the trust deed, and fundraised for a computer, and from there the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust New Zealand (GRG NZ) began. The service had humble beginnings, first at Diane's kitchen table. The phone was always ringing at all hours of the day and night, seven days a week. Diane learnt of the hardship facing many grandparents, and the difficulties they often had in getting the welfare support they were entitled to.

The trust has now grown into a nation-wide service, with support groups in communities from Kaitaia to Invercargill. There are now over 6500 people on the organisation's database. The Trust has its own office, an office manager, operations manager, business and fundraising manager, three national field officers, and a beneficiary's advocate. Diane remains very active in the organisation.

Facets of the service delivery today include education and training, crisis support, legal services, respite services, support groups, advice and advocacy, and resource publications. Well-earned recognition of the organisation and its service came in 2013. Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust New Zealand was nominated for, and won, the Mitre 10 Community of the Year award, in the New Zealander of the Year awards. GRG NZ was the first community service ever to receive this award.

In 2016 GRG NZ conducted a significant survey focused on the social and economic issues impacting on the thousands of full-time grandparent and whānau caregivers raising some of our most vulnerable children in New Zealand today.



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