



The place must never look like an office. It must be welcoming, because I don't know who is going to walk in the door each day.

Jill Nerheny

Jill has always been a colourful character. If people don't know her personally, they have recognised her by her big hair, her bright green car, her pink track suits, the pink sofa in the office and all the big toys, feather boas and mannequins that adorn the office in Glenfield where the Kaipatiki Facilities Trust is based.

From the early 1990s Jill has been the community coordinator for Birkenhead, Northcote, Birkdale, and Beach Haven communities. Since the amalgamation of the local authorities, Jill has played a management role for the Trust that works in partnership with the Kaipatiki Local Board.

But Jill also recognises that while she has gained many supporters, perhaps she has also burnt some bridges along the way. She takes the view though that anything broken can always be fixed. *I'm on a mission and I can't really be bothered with crap. Don't lie to me. I know the truth.*

Building a strong reputation, the community have given her a lot of support to create long-lasting projects. When talking to her about what makes an impact in community, Jill explains that it comes down to just being there, walking alongside people where they are at, walking the talk and being approachable. She says that

there are the quiet approaches to community development, that is, working quietly and slowly with families, and the bigger more visible approaches, such as organising events, building skate parks, and tackling graffiti removal while allowing young people to place murals on local walls.

Together, Jill and her Trust have steadily built a strong working relationship with the Kaipatiki Local Board. The Trust is well supported by the Board, but other financial support is achieved through contestable funding for project work. Today the Trust is included in the Board's annual budget which is a huge and well-deserved achievement.

But it has not always been easy, and Jill may not have entered into community development work if not for an accident she had whilst working as a volunteer family liaison worker for the New Zealand Army. Jill says she still doesn't know why, all those years

I'm on a mission and I can't really be bothered with crap.



Jill at Papakura Military Camp

ago, she joined the Army at the age of 19. From the start, she didn't conform. Or, to look at it the other way around, the Army didn't accept her big personality. A punk before the punk era was official, Jill added a bit of pizzazz to her uniform and green beret by having a bright pink spiky hairdo and pink shoe laces. She spent more time confined to barracks for unruly behaviour than falling into line. *I have no idea why I made that stupid decision; we're still trying to figure that out. I didn't go down well in the establishment. I didn't realise at that time what the Army really was.* It could be said that Jill hasn't conformed since.

Jill met Bill at the Papakura military camp, and they were married in Hamilton, her home town. They then spent time in Whangarei, south Auckland and Singapore, before returning



Jill in army uniform, aged 19 yrs

to New Zealand. As a mother of three, Jill became aware that Army families needed support, in particular the youth, who led a transient life determined by the military commitments of their parents, and often lived abroad. In Singapore, Jill and a team of volunteers ran events such as discos and water-skiing, and holiday programmes in the military compounds, as well as providing support for families.

It was back in New Zealand at Burnham military camp, when she organised a parachuting event for young people, that Jill had a life-changing experience. Her parachute did not open properly; she suffered a stroke in mid-air and fell to the ground, fracturing some of her vertebrae. *It was the end of my life as I knew it.* She was fortunate not to have suffered permanent spinal cord damage and

paralysis, and her recovery was very slow. Bill left the Army after 25 years' service and they bought their first house in Birkdale, where Jill still lives today. Jill only knew one person when they arrived, and it was the company and support of neighbours in those early days that really made a difference to her life. *I met the most amazing people in those first three months I was recovering.*

Jill followed a strict regime of physiotherapy, neurological testing, acupuncture, and post-stroke therapy for a number of years. She had difficulty with mobility, memory and speech. *I used to be embarrassed about it in the early days but I got over that. I drove out the depression. I thought, You're not going to get a hold of me, you little shite! I'm that type of person.*

During this period she met someone who became a significant contact: Ann Hartley. Ann introduced her to many new people through different community group meetings, and then suggested that Jill get involved with the newly formed Birkdale College Community Pool Trust Board. Jill joined in 1985, and took on the school swimming pool as a project. The pool became a focus for the whole community as the facility was a partnership between the local authority, the college, and its wider community because the community were able to use the pool outside school hours. Lots of local people worked as pool staff, including Michelle Whiu, who continues to work alongside Jill. Today, Michelle is the events and programmes co-ordinator for the Kaipatiki Facilities Trust, after its amalgamation with the Glenfield Community Facilities Trust in 2009.

As well as managing the pool, Jill and Michelle got involved in the Community Regional Top Team challenges, where people across the community joined teams and competed in obstacle course challenges. Jill's team was different. It was made up of young people she had engaged with who had been involved in

petty crime, or who were currently doing community service. Today Jill is still proud of what they all achieved together. When she sees those people in the community, now as parents, she is so pleased to see how far they have come.

In 1986, during the time Ann Hartley was mayor of Birkenhead City Council, the community coordinators became paid roles. Jill was appointed 'acting' community coordinator in 1989, after the first two men who held the role left. Jill did not have universal support for her appointment. *This was my first time seeing the politics of it all.* However, she was appointed and her first task was to clean up Birkdale and Beach Haven. I thought, *Right, you're on! And it was just an amazing journey of lots of people coming together to help me. Everyone played an important support role.*

Without the ongoing support of her family, especially Bill, she knows that, she could have never have completed these tasks with the community. The past and present board of trustees have been supportive of all proposals and action plans. Jill wishes she had kept a journal of the early days as she was overwhelmed by the support from local residents, many of whom have since passed on. *We did some crazy fricken stuff but they all allowed me that freedom, to do what I wanted. They would be there to make it happen.*

One of the long-term projects was graffiti removal. Right from the start, Jill thought very carefully about who she would approach and who she would work with on such publicly visible community projects. A community paint day with a van and trailer, and volunteers, were the first tools of action for the job, and then the Trust engaged community service workers. However, she soon realised that she got the job done more quickly, and made more of an impact in the community, by having a permanent staff member working with young people who took immense pride in the murals.

And it was just an amazing
journey of lots of people
coming together to help me.



Through the murals project, Jill and her team were able to reach other young people in the community.

Early in her time as community coordinator, Jill learnt that the role meant working seven days a week. She felt that she could not just sit in an office and request things to happen, but had to be seen by the people and seen to be involved, doing the work with the community. She was also given the advice that the public didn't know all the good work she was doing quietly with families in need, and the slow and ongoing support she was giving behind the scenes. In the public's eye, what was memorable and had impact were the events, and being visible in the community. This is when Jill started driving brightly coloured cars, and wearing her pink tracksuit 'uniform'. Her office changed then too, with big cushions, soft toys, many decorations and lots of food for those who came in. *The place must never look like an office. It must be welcoming, because I don't know who is going to walk in the door each day. I don't know whether they just want to say thanks, need help or are in trouble.* Jill has worked hard to build trust and earn respect from everyone she engages with in her role.

In the 1990s Jill began working with Peter Wolf of the Kaipatiki Youth Development Trust, who was running youth programmes in Beach Haven. They had a common goal: engaging and encouraging young people to do well and to understand that learning is for life. This partnership was the start of planning more strategically and getting the community to understand the importance of working collaboratively. Peter and Jill still work together in the youth sector, and Peter shares office space with the Trust.

Today Jill is proud to know that in Birkenhead, Northcote and Glenfield (now Kaipatiki) all the collaborative work that has been done with young people and with the wider community has achieved a reduction in youth-related crime, and that graffiti, too,

is much reduced. Jill recalls that when she first arrived, people asked her why she wanted to take all this on. She felt that having lived and played in South Auckland, in comparison, this would be peanuts!

Jill approaches all that she does with great enthusiasm, an abundance of generosity, a commitment to see things through from beginning to completion, and with an inclusiveness of all people that is supported by her hospitality. She acknowledges that not everything could have been achieved if it wasn't for the amazing volunteers who were the force behind the action plans.

Other programmes over the years have included: Families in Parks, summer programmes, community resources, working with solo mothers, ACCESS employment programmes for youth, youth forums, resident place-making projects, community pride projects, and many network meetings.

I'm the Network Queen, as everyone knows. But I did that because I thought, What's the use of me holding onto all that valuable info? What was I going to do with it? No! It had to be shared. From the network meetings came the establishment of MAST, a Multi Agency Strategic Team, in 2000. A key aim of MAST was to bring community agencies together with the Police to continue to look at issues of safety and crime in the community.

Today, Kaipatiki is still Jill's home, and the community she values so much. Her work has been a journey of reciprocity. She has gained much love and respect from the community and the community has received the same from her. *I often wonder what else I would have done if I hadn't had my accident?*

I'm the Network Queen,
as everyone knows.