



# Kuini Karanui

Through her own experience of being a ward of the state, Kuini knew the value of providing a safe, nurturing home, full of love, care, and understanding for young people whose lives were in turmoil. Her desire to improve the lives of young people led to formal recognition and remuneration from the government, and support from her local community.

For the first nine years of her childhood, home life was secure, schooling was an adventure, and where she lived was paradise. Kuini (Queenie) is the sixth child in a family of ten. Her father, Tamati Thomas, was a gum digger, served in the First World War in the Māori Battalion, and returned home to Ahipara in the far north to marry, settle down, and raise a family. Both her parents were from Te Rarawa iwi and Kuini's grandparents were kaumātua in the community. Her grandfather presided at religious services; because of his knowledge, and practice of Māori spiritual traditions, in healing or placing a mākutu (spell or incantation), he was also considered a tohunga (expert or leader). As an adult, she recalls having her own spiritual experiences, and then thinking to herself—*Oh, this is what they were talking about.*

As a young girl, Kuini was traversing two cultures, two worlds. That of Māori customs and traditions; speaking only te reo Māori

at home, and observing the spiritual ways of her grandparents. At the same time, she was also being immersed in Christianity, a Pākehā education system, taught in English.

Religious practice wasn't unfamiliar to Kuini. In the evenings at home, she and her siblings would wait to hear their father knock on the wall between the lounge and their bedroom, and they knew it was time for evening prayer. In the morning he would knock again, and that was for the morning prayer. For Kuini,

God's love and nurture was like having a kete for life, something to carry with her wherever she went, a basket full of knowledge, stories and skills to sustain

her on her journey. In her own words of wisdom, Kuini has told many young people: *If you put bad things in there it will contaminate it. So, don't put bad fruit in with good fruit—it goes off!*

The community she grew up in was a mix of Dalmatian (from the former Yugoslavia) and English settlers, and Māori.

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God expects us to help.



*Kuini with Linda Blincko, at Government House, circa 1980s*

*Everybody got to know everybody in the community.* Money was not a great necessity as the family was highly self-sufficient. *We never knew anything else,* says Kuini. At home her family had vegetable gardens, an orchard, hens, pigs, a milking cow, and a goat. The family were always willing to share what they had with those in the community, or with strangers who passed through. Kuini remembers her mother saying *'If someone is thirsty, give them some water; if someone is hungry, feed them. Introduce yourself. They might appreciate that.'*

Horses were a means of transport, and at weekends the family would go by horse, or walk, to the next village to stay with her grandparents, then go to church the next day. Or, sometimes they would ride out to the beach, all piled up on the sledge towed by the family horse, go fishing, make a shelter in the flax bushes, and stay

the night. She has fond memories of doing that and loved looking up at the stars. *It was really awesome to get out there to those places. This was the life we knew.*

All the children had to work the land with their father, milk the cow, feed animals, harvest produce, and do chores around the house. Kuini remembers, *As you grew up you knew exactly the jobs you had to do, to help out.* Each day the children walked a mile or so to school, making sure they had clean nails, and a hanky in their pocket; this sometimes meant ripping a piece of material and folding it in their pocket as a handkerchief. *We'd be walking along biting our fingernails to make sure they were clean.* Kuini can remember sometimes getting the strap at school.

When a new child came to school they used to get picked on, but in the end everyone wanted them to be their special friend. *They used to call us niggers and so forth, and we'd say you're a maggot, you're a white maggot. But we then got to know each other, and we'd become like family.* Kuini enjoyed school, although learning to spell and read did not come easily. Maths, however, was the subject in which she excelled.

In 1944, when Kuini was nine, her world was turned upside down when her mother died of tuberculosis (TB). She remembers helping to nurse her mother at home. There was no cure for TB in those days. After her mother died, as she was the eldest child left at home, Kuini had to help her father raise the other four children, look after the household, work on the land, and care for her grandmother who was living with the family. She managed to do this for three years, until one day she remembers her father sitting the children down and saying that they were not coping, and that they needed to be at school, and so they were now going to be cared for by other families. *I could never blame my father for what was out of his control; he never gave up on us.*

The children were separated and left Ahipara, in 1947. Kuini was 12. For the next four years, Kuini lived with four foster families, but only one gave her the love and support she was craving.



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but my faith has kept me going.

They considered her their third daughter. The father set up a bank account for Kuini, she received pocket money, learnt to drive, and above all, was able to share her feelings and thoughts as a young woman with her two young foster sisters and foster mother. As an adult, Kuini would visit this family if she was passing through Whangarei. She remembers the father calling out, *'Mum, put some breakfast on; Kuini's here.'*

When she was 15, Kuini decided to leave school. Her foster family at the time helped her find her first job, working on a farm in Moerewa, where she boarded with a family, who had ten children all under the age of ten. Kuini worked there for a year and then found work at the Moerewa Dairy factory, as a clerical worker, which she loved because she was in accounts and able to use her skill in arithmetic.

Another year later, when she was 17, Kuini decided to visit her sister living in Auckland over the Christmas holidays. During her stay, however, she had an accident while riding a bike. She broke her pelvis and many bones in her body, and was in hospital for three months. She had to give up her job in Moerewa, and on leaving hospital went to live with her sister.

After she had recovered, Kuini did get another job, this time in the public service, in clerical and accounts. But life with an older sister, and the wrong crowd, took its toll on her working life and she lost her job. At the same time her father came to live with her and her sister in Ponsonby. He died in 1954 of cancer. In 2015 for the ANZAC centenary, Kuini wrote a dedication for her father: *He was my hero and my mentor.*

She worked in a number of different factory jobs for the next few years before meeting her husband-to-be, Alfred. Alfred's grandparents had property in Rutland Road in Devonport, which they gifted to the newly married couple. There Kuini and Alfred raised their eight children, and also cared for Kuini's sister, who has an intellectual disability.

In the late 1960s, her children started to bring home young people from school who were not happy at home, or who were wagging school. Kuini would feed them, and listen to their stories, but always said she didn't want their parents worrying about where they were and sent them home. Gradually, more and more young people started turning up at her doorstep asking for a bed, food and support, and Kuini took them in. Neighbours began to wonder what was going on, as a new garage was built with kids sleeping in there, and in the garden shed. At one point the family were offered some paint, and the kids painted the house a rusty orange; now the house stood out, and was referred to as *that orange house where all the kids go to stay*. By the mid-1970s, Kuini was supporting young people from across Auckland who had heard about her hospitality. At the busiest time, she had 27 young people living in her home, as well as her own eight children. She was paying for everything out of her own pocket. Alfred was the only one bringing in an income at the time; he worked at the Devonport Naval Base as an engineer, until his death in a car accident in 1974. He was 34.

Life was hectic, chaotic, and money was tight. Then in the late 1970s the Department of Social Welfare approached Kuini, and asked her if she would be a foster carer, employed by the Department. She agreed, and at last received some income and allowances to support the costs of raising many young people.

Food was purchased in bulk, and clothes came from op-shops. It's hard to imagine how Kuini did this all by herself. As word spread around the local community, the reaction was either *What the heck! or You've got to respect this lady!*

It wasn't until 1981 when Kuini met Linda Blincko, who was the new Devonport Community House coordinator, that she found a real ally. Linda immediately recognised the good work Kuini was doing, and offered practical help. Linda's partner became a mentor for the young men. They took the young people on trips to Motutapu, Waiheke and Rangitoto islands, and camping trips to Goat Island. Weekly picnics, and hangi were held at Stanley Bay. Linda liaised with the Department of Social Welfare to ensure that

Kuini received all the allowances she was entitled to for the young people in her care. Linda also arranged for access to the Navy's recreational facilities at weekends, namely, the swimming pool, sports field, and gym. Through this partnership the Rangimarie Trust was formed in order to formalise the work with young people. Rangimarie translates as peace.

In the late 1980s it was decided that the young people needed a space for themselves, so the search began. In 1990 Linda found a new community space at the Clay Store on Lake Road. This was as a cooperative venture between Council and community, with the aim of providing a space where people could learn new skills in various trades or in the arts.

The Clay Store, also known as the Shed, was home to several artists. Everyone pitched in and turned part of the Clay Store into a cool space for the youth, where they could go to play music, games, do creative projects, or just hang out. Kuini remembers that for the opening night she made Māori bread, *the guys put down a hangi, and there was heaps of food!*

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By 1994 Kuini was tired and realised she needed a change of pace. The following year she sold her Rutland Road house, bought a campervan, and spent the next five years travelling around New Zealand, before returning to live in Belmont. Reflecting back on her life, Kuini can see that caring for people has always been important. *It all began with looking after my mum, then my grandmother, and then helping my dad, and looking after my sisters. It's in my nature.*

In 2014, the team at the Depot Arts Space in Devonport, produced a book entitled *Tūrangawaewae: Sense of Place*. They wanted to celebrate the contributions of residents of Devonport and their legacies. Kuini is recognised in Linda Blincko's introduction: 'There wasn't a soul who met Queenie who did not love or respect her and the heart she had for people.' She has played an integral role in shaping the particular character of the Devonport community.

Kuini has certainly contributed to the well-being of this community and the many young people who have passed through. They have benefited from her love and generosity, her companionship, and that of her whānau and the extended whānau of the Rangimarie Trust. *It's been part of my life, to care for people.* Now in her eighties, Kuini continues to open her home to family and friends in need.

*I think all the things I've been through have helped me out in life. There have been some pretty hard times, but my faith has kept me going. It's been awesome because I've seen the fruits of things happening that are good and I say to the kids, 'Don't talk to someone like that. That person will soon heal. We are all people, never mind what culture we come from. If someone needs help, God expects us to help. You might not see that right now, because you are kids, but one day you will and then you'll understand.'*

