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Linda Blincko

Linda has developed a critical appreciation of the synergy between the arts, the work of the creative sector and that of community development. *Implicit in the arts is a way of seeing the world, of seeing social change.*

Linda grew up on the North Shore of Auckland and attended Westlake Girls High School. Achieving well academically, she was streamed into languages and sciences and her art studies were put aside. She discovered contemporary city galleries, such as Barry Lett and New Vision, which kept her interest alive and, at the same time, began to be aware of national and international politics and the social upheavals and inequities of the time, such as the Vietnam War, the rise of feminism, and protest by Māori against racial inequality. In the 19a70s there was more visible radical activism and it was perhaps clearer to see how change was possible and able to be effected in society. For Linda, one such way was through the inspirational work of New Zealand artists.

The artists she first appreciated were Colin McCahon, Greer Twiss, Molly McAllister, and Nigel Brown; some of whom were involved in Artists Against Apartheid and Visual Artists Against Nuclear Armament, where they were able to make valuable social commentary and express deeply held political and social views.

This was a time when artists were questioning New Zealand society and how we were portraying ourselves. It was a time when there was an intersection of the arts with social and political issues. Art was about getting to the nub of the matter. We were holding onto our integrity, seeking to represent ourselves, articulating our identity in different forms. Art was a conduit for this, says Linda.

Linda began her own journey, one that she feels enabled the arts and community development to become effective partners in raising social consciousness and liberating people from the structured paradigms that precluded independent thought.

Linda left school after the Sixth Form (Year 12) and went to Auckland University, but dropped out after her first year and travelled for a while. She returned to university in the early 1980s and studied Criminology and Sociology, gaining a master's degree in Sociology. During this period she took on a holiday job with CORSO (Church Organisations for Relief Services Overseas) where she was charged with putting together a catalogue of

ALL THINGS TO ALL NATURE

Nyle Major



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alternative, avant-garde, activist cinema. Once again, it was a time when Linda felt her social and political awareness grow, as she learnt about the radical left and what people were doing worldwide to address social and structural inequality, peace and injustice, racism and prejudice.

Then in 1983 Linda moved to Devonport. She recalls that it was on the cusp of the early gentrification, when the peninsula was still a backwater suburb of the North Shore. After graduating from university, she took a role as coordinator of the Devonport Community House. The first venue was at the former Devonport Borough works depot, then moving to the side of Mount Victoria in 1995. Linda worked there with two community workers: Clare Dargaville and Jill Lythberg.

In this job Linda recognised an urgent need for services to cater for youth in the area. Young people were experiencing homelessness in Devonport at the time and, as a consequence, not pursuing higher education or securing employment. She met fellow Devonport resident Kuini Karanui, who was providing informal foster care and accommodation for youth in her own home. Together they were able to raise support across the North Shore community, the Devonport Borough and government departments to fund a range of youth programmes in Devonport.

Devonport was one of a number of boroughs on the North Shore. The mayor at that time, Jim Titchener, negotiated with the Navy so that young people could use the recreational facilities at the Devonport naval base. Every Sunday afternoon at 4 o'clock, young people were able to use the gym, swimming pool, and the sports and recreation grounds. *These youngsters really grounded me.* Linda recalls that the older teenagers mentored and supported the younger children. *It was never about winning—it was always about giving everyone a go.*

Becoming more involved in community development work, Linda began to feel a little isolated from others doing similar work. She had no contact with anyone outside Devonport who was working in community development, and needed to find a support network. In 1985 she was invited by Peggy Ashton, a Quaker social activist and community worker, to attend a meeting hosted by North Shore Community and Social Services (NSCSS). Others such as Betty Cuthbert, Elsie Tillet, and newly-appointed Birkenhead Council Community advisor, Ewen Derrick, all became influential role models for Linda and *pillars of support* for her work in the community.

Linda says that she found NSCSS to be an organisation that was able to galvanise the community. She recalls that it was a time when government departments were not as bureaucratised as they are today. Linda attended many network meetings in Takapuna

hosted by NSCSS with community people and staff from the Departments of Social Welfare, Corrections, and Housing, as well as borough councillors.

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In these early days these people came to listen and to learn—it was amazing! I don't know if that would happen today.

In 1997 Linda was elected chair of NSCSS. *NSCSS kept alive, in a gentrifying environment, the whole issue of inequality and the issues of need... exposing truth, the truth of a community—the truth of a life.*

The introduction of the Employment Contracts Act 1991 and the establishment of the Royal Commission on Social Policy in 1996 signified to Linda that the community needed to adapt to a changing political environment. More and more, community organisations had to respond to a competitive contracting environment. Community advocates and community workers had to stop and reflect on the way they worked, and begin to articulate the concept of community development more formally.



Linda (centre front) and colleagues outside the Depot Art Space, 1996

We had to now provide an analysis of the process and of the outcomes achieved in community development. Basically the question of the day was, What is community development and how do you do it? But when you do stuff and it's just natural, you just do it, and you don't think about it being actually a social construct. We then had to start analysing the theory and practice and making sense of it in order to maintain what we've always done.

NSCSS made an impact at the time by becoming a unifying voice for the North Shore community sector. NSCSS had to have a voice for the community; it had to put a conceptual, political, sociology stake in the ground. We were all faced with institutionalisation, [and] political conservatism and we had to develop new strategies and a common language that people could now use. I think NSCSS actually gave people a vantage point. You could take people to a place like

standing on a hill and looking down over something and you could make sense of what you were seeing. I think NSCSS really helped that. One of my big concerns about community development at the time was that it was going to become another career choice. It became a profession. And I've never seen community development in that light. Because to me it's like something you live by. Council-led community development is an oxymoron to me.

In 1996 the Depot Art Space was established. The premises in Clarence Street, Devonport had been a Council works depot for many years and then a warehouse for organic produce, and it required a lot of work to make it a viable arts space. Volunteers, PEP workers and others doing community service undertook the task of clearing out the building, getting rid of the rats, dealing with the flooding and renovating the space. The first installation at the Depot was the sound studio. Again Linda responded to an identified need in the community for a recording space and a place for young musicians to practise.

Linda and local artist Robyn Gibson also created an art gallery and studio space for local artists. But there was still a need for other facilities for youth in the area, especially for social events and as a place *just to hang out and play loud music*. At the time, house parties and large gatherings of youth at beaches was a problem for the community and police alike.

In October 1997 Linda wrote in a letter to the editor of the local Devonport newspaper, the *Flagstaff*: *Venue for young people needed—Can't we acknowledge youth culture as a legitimate and integral part of New Zealand society. It's also a fact that despite our moral opprobrium at its widespread occurrence, that under 20 year olds drink alcohol. It seems a major mission to reconcile the opposing perceptions of this situation. Unless there is a will to find solutions young people will continue to feel marginalised in their own communities.* A submission from 30 young people and their families was put forward at a public hearing for North Shore City Council's Annual Plan which included a call for a youth advocate.

In 2001 the Depot became a provider under the Pathways to Art and Cultural Employment (PACE) mentoring programme, an initiative which the government was funding nationwide. Today the Depot is one of a few informal PACE providers still operating, and it has the largest mentoring programme for aspiring artists in the country. It supports up to 150 artists a year and achieves a 60 per cent success rate in supporting emerging artists into employment.

The Depot has always had a vision of being a community development-based arts organisation. It engages with the local community and strives to reflect local issues. Its exhibitions over the years and its publication, *LOUD* magazine, contribute to both a history of local community development and of the arts.

The arts cannot but be community development. You cannot institutionalise the creative. The creative articulates a way of seeing the world. For me art is the last bastion of freedom. Art validates the point that nobody needs to see things in the same way; art is subversive in this way because it raises the question: If we all see things so differently, then why are we still reproducing the same society, decade after decade, century after century, where inequality dominates, where wealth and power are controlled by a few to their own benefit?

