



Lorraine Owens

Striving for social justice has always been a focus in Lorraine's community work. She has been an advocate for the rights of women and children for over 40 years, and has *loved every minute of it*. Influenced by the Christian teachings of love thy neighbour, feminism, and social work, Lorraine has left a strong legacy on the North Shore. She has also provided leadership and mentoring for the many women she has walked alongside.

Lorraine's recognition of the value of community service began from a young age, as a girl attending Bible class in Dunedin. The ideal of service to others, and her natural leadership ability developed further during her time as a young volunteer with Volunteers Service Abroad (VSA) in Vanuatu. Her vision for social justice and advocacy work for women and children came from her own sense of self-empowerment as a young woman, and her own ability to take on leadership roles in the community.

Her personal attributes matured during her working life; firstly, when she worked for the Presbyterian and Methodist church, and later, when she volunteered her time to establish, or contribute, to the work of essential support services for women and children on the North Shore. These range from a retreat home for women to working with De Paul House, and the North Shore Women's Centre. With hindsight, however, Lorraine feels unhappy in stating that, *unfortunately, a lot of issues haven't changed for women, particularly around violence, poverty, and abuse*.

Lorraine's early involvement in the Church and the Girls' Brigade moulded, from a young age, her values in life. *I doubt I would have followed the paths that I took if it hadn't been for them. That was our fun, going to Bible class, dances, going out to coffee, and of course church*. Lorraine has never questioned the fact that she has been an independent woman for as long as she can remember; it's normal, and not anything to be questioned about, just as it should be. *I basically did my own thing, and I don't remember men telling me I couldn't do it. I think I was very fortunate to have that time, to be expected to lead, and to be able to lead*.

Church was a big part of her life, and she attended St James Presbyterian Church in South Dunedin. She thinks she might have been more interested in the social aspect of Bible class, rather than the actual Bible study, but her first involvement in community activities began when she was a member. The group would visit older people in their homes, distribute goods, and help



Lorraine in her high-school years

with the gardening. She was also a member of the Dunedin Ladies' Brass Band, playing a soprano cornet, *which was a lot of fun.*

Lorraine was born in Dunedin, the eldest of three children, and spent her early years there until moving to Auckland aged 20. She has lived in Auckland ever since. Her parents separated when Lorraine was very young. *It would have been terribly hard for my mother to have kept us; there weren't [welfare] benefits or anything in those days.* Her mother worked when the children were older, and Lorraine recalls having to put the vegetables on to cook when she came home from school, because her mother was still at work. She did not mind. *It sort of created in me a real sense of being independent and being able to manage on my own,* says Lorraine.



Coordinator of the North Shore Women's Centre, early 2000

At high school, Lorraine studied commercial subjects in preparation for working in clerical or administrative work. *I would have preferred to have done more academic subjects, but you had to be practical and I certainly didn't want to do sewing. I hated sewing! So I did commercial, and they were wonderful courses when I think of it now, absolutely superb.* It was easy to find work and Lorraine left school just before she turned 16.

Her first full-time job was as a dentist's nurse at 16, then she went to work as a legal secretary in a law firm in Dunedin. Lorraine's move to Auckland came about because of her involvement with Girls' Brigade. After six weeks' preparation in Auckland, she went to the New Hebrides, now Vanuatu, as a volunteer. There she trained young women for leadership. She found her time in Vanuatu very

empowering as she worked to encourage young women to *stand on their own two feet, be independent, run their own groups, do their own kind of things*. She also enjoyed the experience of meeting the local people, although she felt that it was a very *male-oriented society*.

Lorraine turned 21 the week she returned from Vanuatu. She spent her birthday at home in Dunedin but felt unsettled after her time away. This led her to return to Auckland to work with young women from Vanuatu. Lorraine went on a YWCA leadership course with them. It was at this time when she met her husband to be. They married in 1968, and then settled in Campbells Bay before moving to Mairangi Bay. *I just loved it over here [on the Shore], and fortunately my husband did, too.*

Lorraine worshipped at the Mairangi Bay Presbyterian Church, and was a member of a committee that appointed a new minister who would also work as a counsellor for the community. *There was a little cottage next door to the church and it was called 'The Cottage Counselling Centre'. I was quite passionate that the church had to be part of the community, and that's what was achieved.*

She was also the youth leader at her church. *We had a fabulous youth group, it was quite different. Instead of meeting every Sunday night in the church buildings, we would meet in parishioners' homes and they would tell us about their lives, so older people and younger people in the parish were involved.* By age 27, she was ordained as an elder of the church. During this period in her life, she also worked part-time for three years with the National Council of Churches, starting in 1980. She was a secretary for the Very Reverend Dr Alan Brash, who was deputy secretary of the World Council of Churches at the time. *The experience really emphasised my involvement with social justice. It was during the 1981 Springbok tour protests and we would have people coming in beaten up.*

Lorraine's next job was for the Methodist City Mission in 1983, again doing secretarial work, but her contact with the Mission's social workers working with foster families meant that she *got*

to know what foster care was all about. During her time with the Mission, she helped set up a retreat house for women and their children in Sunnynook on the North Shore. *We wanted to work with women, so a friend and I decided that we would look at starting up a retreat house for women, where they could come and have time out from whatever was affecting them.* A house was purchased in Sunnynook and the two women raised extra funds to run it. Lorraine lived on site, as she had separated from her husband by then. Children, who were generally in foster care just up the road, did not stay at the house, but were able to visit their mothers there. *We got women that had breakdowns, women whose marriages had broken up, all kinds of different issues, and gave them time out and encouraged them to go to counselling, or whatever they needed to do, to get their lives on a more positive basis.*

However, the centre only lasted for about 15 months before funding dried up. Despite this short period in operation, Lorraine feels that it was a great success as they had referrals from all over Auckland. Lorraine then bought her own house in Murrays Bay. At this time Lorraine also trained to become a volunteer Lifeline telephone counsellor, work she did for seven years. Lifeline is an anonymous telephone counselling service offering support for the emotional and mental well-being of members of the community. *I think the more involvement I had with people, the more I thought I might as well use what I am learning. Lifeline gave you training and I became a group leader, and also a trainer in Lifeline. You never knew what kind of calls you were going to have. It could be anything from an addiction, like gambling or alcohol, to a mental health patient who rang regularly because they needed someone to talk to, or someone who was going to commit suicide.*

She then moved jobs to Presbyterian Support Services' human development team, which provided training for counsellors. When the team was disbanded, some of the team and Lorraine started the Human Development and Training Institute in Remuera. This was in the late 1980s. The Institute provided personal development

programmes and training for counsellors working in pastoral care. *The churches were really developing a lot of these human support services to offer support in the community. The church was pretty liberal at that stage.*

After helping to set up the Institute, Lorraine went to work at the Leslie Centre in 1991, which was a family therapy centre, in a front-desk role. The Presbyterian-run Leslie Centre was established in Meadowbank in 1911 thanks to a substantial bequest from Auckland baker James Leslie. The Centre moved to Greenlane in 1990, where it focused on family counselling and working with children who had behavioural issues, or had suffered sexual abuse. In 2002, it moved to Mount Roskill, where it specialised in early intervention with at-risk families. Since 2006, it has been known as Family Works.

With encouragement from one of the psychologists at the Leslie Centre, Lorraine then applied for the position as manager at Homebuilders in Grey Lynn in 1994, a home and community-based family support service. She worked there for three years. *I was a coordinator of the programme, and we worked with a lot of families in their home. There were connections with what we now know as Child, Youth and Family (CYFS), as we met with them every few months and they would send families to us.*

Lorraine supervised a team of social workers from different Pasifika groups and also had clients herself. She explains that their work began at a very basic level: *You can't work with what is going on until you have got a roof over their heads and food on their table.* Dame Georgina Kirby was chair of the board, which was very supportive. *I could turn to them at any time or talk to them about what was going on.*

After three years with Homebuilders, Lorraine felt the need for a new direction. In 1995, she was appointed as coordinator of

the North Shore Women's Centre. It had been set up in Glenfield in 1987 as a women's health cooperative. Her job was to run the centre and do the fundraising, but all decisions were made cooperatively. Lorraine says she had to learn to be patient with the decision-making processes. She was involved in networking with other groups, and organising workshops and courses. She recalls that the centre was doing quite a bit of work with women who had eating disorders at the time and arranged a course, 'Beyond Bulimia' run by Caz Palmer. The effort eventually floundered through lack of funding.

After three years she reduced her hours and began to work voluntarily on the Care and Protection panel of CYPFS for several years. The panel was made up of members from the community.

Social workers presented cases, and those on the panel *gave them assistance to work out ways they might handle a family. It was a community involvement.*

It was during this period that

Lorraine became involved with North Shore Community and Social Services (NSCSS), after having attended meetings for many years. She was, she says, *shoulder tapped* to become a member of the NSCSS advisory board by Catherine McClintock. She warmly recalls the dinners organised by NSCSS to acknowledge the work of volunteers in the community, and the community awards organised by Catherine. Another part of her role was to attend meetings of North Shore City Council to ensure that NSCSS, and other community groups, continued to receive funding. In her six years as chair, she attended national meetings of the umbrella group, The National Council of Social Services, with Catherine in Wellington. *I learnt a lot through Catherine—all the courses she ran, workshops, and all those good things.*

Lorraine was appointed chair of NSCSS, a role she held for six years from 1998 to 2004. In the 2014 history produced for its 40th

For me, social justice will always be at the forefront; and I think that's probably why I started doing it all.

AGM, Lorraine commented that *'the leadership has made it a force to be reckoned with in both local and national politics. During my time as chair, I was very aware of the immense benefits community groups and organisations provided to the North Shore community and the many volunteers who served on them. I was humbled by the passion and commitment shown by all our members to the well-being and development of the North Shore community. Long may it continue!'*¹

She worked as a youth social worker for CYPFS, and then went on to manage the Pathways to Arts and Creative Employment (PACE) programme at Devonport's Depot Arts Space in 2004. *It was working with people of all different ages who found themselves in situations of unemployment.* She was a member of the interim board for the Depot Arts Space while it reorganised its board structure, but did not choose to stay on the board. She has also worked organising programmes and volunteers at De Paul House in Northcote Point; the house provides emergency housing and family support. She has, theoretically, now retired from that position.

About eight years ago, the North Shore Women's Centre asked her to come back and do some community resource work, and also be on the board of trustees. *I thought, I'm not ready to retire.* One of her initiatives was creating a group for older women called 'Age with Flair', a conversation group where women can share together, and tell their stories. They have guest speakers from time to time on different issues, such as depression and money management.

Lorraine describes her involvement with the North Shore Women's Centre as being her greatest passion. *The women I work with are fabulous women. It's a great place to be, even with all the issues that we deal with. For me, social justice will always be at the forefront; and I think that's probably why I started doing it all.*

¹ North Shore Council of Community and Social Services Inc. *The History 1974-2014* (page 37), Auckland North Community and Development, 2014

