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Margaret Miles

Margaret first took an interest in local body politics after having been involved in her local residents' association in Paremoremo. She stood for election on a ticket with Ann Hartley, who was running for mayor of North Shore City. Margaret won a seat on the newly established Glenfield Community Board in 1989. *So that was probably my first involvement in the whole community development thing.*

Margaret was not from the North Shore originally; she was born and educated along with her elder brother in Hawera, Taranaki. When she was 17, in the 1970s, Margaret went to Dunedin to train as a physiotherapist. Originally Margaret thought that she wanted to be a nurse, perhaps a Karitane nurse, and work with babies, but thinking it might not be challenging enough for her, she chose physiotherapy instead.

While at physiotherapy school, Margaret started dating Wayne Miles, a friend of her brothers. They were married in 1972 just before Wayne graduated from medical school. Both were facing post-training placements in different parts of the country, and being married ensured that they would not be separated. They first went to Christchurch for one year. Margaret worked at Christchurch Hospital and Princess Margaret Hospital. Both she and Wayne finished their training in Christchurch and then moved to Palmerston North. After two years, the couple were

faced with another relocation but this time they had a choice: Christchurch or Auckland. They decided on the latter as Wayne had never been to Auckland.

It was 1974, and by this time their first child was eight months old. After six months living in Auckland, they bought a house in Northcote on the North Shore for approximately \$20,000. Margaret remembers Northcote at that time. *We lived in College Road just along from the shops, and with our first son it used to be my daily walk to the shops. There was a Farmers and a Levenes; they've long gone. There was a post office, banks, shoe shops, dress shops, men's and women's, there was virtually everything. There was a big huge hardware store, too. It was a very, very different Northcote. Very different from today.*

Margaret was soon expecting her second son. Being new to the area, and craving some social interaction, she made connections in Northcote through Plunket. There were coffee mornings



Student days in Dunedin

and speakers' events. Margaret made lifelong friends. In 1979, Margaret was pregnant again, with a daughter this time. Margaret and her friends discovered the Birkdale Community House and enrolled in a leadership course for women. It was confidence boosting. Margaret decided that she could take on anything, and soon after that joined the Plunket mother's committee and became the chair. It was Margaret's first chair position.

The women's movement and feminism was in full swing during those years. In later years, Margaret has often been asked if she became involved in local body politics to represent the women's perspective. She considers there to be no difference between male and female community board members or councillors, and that she has always been there to represent everyone.

By the 1980s the family moved to Paremoremo, where Margaret and Wayne still live. She worked as a physiotherapist at Northbridge Retirement Village in Akoranga Drive from 1983 to 1997. The children went off to Rosmini and Carmel colleges, and later all went on to higher academic and vocational achievements in law, neurophysiology and psychology, respectively. Margaret



Graduation as a physiotherapist 1972

joined the local residents association in 1985 and has served on the association for 30 years; she only just stepped down in 2015.

With her daughter, Melinda, Margaret took up a lifelong interest in breeding miniature horses on their five-acre property. Many medals and show ribbons adorn the family home. Being a townie, Margaret initially had no experience of horse breeding when she and her daughter started; nevertheless, they just leapt in and learnt what they needed to know. *You learn really fast when you are doing it*; this seems to have been Margaret's approach to life. Margaret now has 38 small horses at her stud. She definitely regards herself as a country person now. *Over the years I've learnt how to hand-shear sheep, drench sheep, do their feet, and then of course moving on to miniature horses.*

After 18 months on the Glenfield Community Board, she became chair. Margaret remembers one of the first community development projects in 1989 was assessing the feasibility for a proposed Glenfield community centre. It was at this time that Ann Hartley's council introduced contracts for community groups working in community development. *I was totally supportive*



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of Ann's philosophy, which was always grass-roots, community knows best what they need, instead of council staff sitting in an office telling them what they need.

Then, in 1992, under Paul Titchener's mayoralty, there was a change of boundary for Paremoremo and Albany Ward was established. Margaret was soon campaigning for a seat on the Council, a process she describes as *horrible!* She was unsuccessful in 1992 but stood for one of two seats in 1995, under the mayoralty of George Gair. There was only one seat in 1992 but, due to population growth, a second seat was established for the 1995 election. Margaret won one of the seats. *I have loved being on Council. I loved the work, but I hated the elections. I find it really difficult to go up to people and say, 'You should vote for me because I'm so good.'*

In her first term on North Shore City Council, Margaret learned about upgrading basic public facilities like sewage plants, roads and the city's basic infrastructure. The Bruce Mason Centre, North Shore Events Centre developments, and the completion of the purchase of Takapuna beach front properties all occurred in this period. These developments had already begun in the previous term of Council, but there was still a lot of public criticism about the investment and so they were still on the Council agenda at this time. Margaret, however, believes that the future-focused thinking of Council has benefited the city's residents. *They are amazing facilities and look how many thousands have gone through them.*

Margaret was on North Shore City Council for five terms. While on Council, Margaret served on a number of grant distribution committees including Creative Communities and the Community Organisations Grants Scheme. Margaret was appointed as the Council representative to the newly established Massey University E-Centre board, an innovative business incubator. She found this role particularly stimulating and served on the board for five years. *It was an amazing thing to be involved*

with. The people were so enthusiastic and I used to come away from the meetings thinking, 'Oh my, gosh! That was so amazing there.' Their enthusiasm, their innovative ideas, and ways of looking at things. She has also given her time to other community services alongside her Council commitments, serving on the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board and becoming a justice of the peace.

She has seen huge population and physical growth on the North Shore, particularly the Albany Ward, as well as many shifts in the political boundaries. Albany was paddocks when she first moved to the area and Bush Road was still metal. The area now has a very strong migrant population and, according to the latest

Community knows
best what they need.

census, Upper Harbour is now the most diverse and fastest growing area of the city. *So from a whole community development perspective, it's been a real challenge over the years. It's quite a big spread-out geographic area. We've got rural where we are, then there is intensive housing, there's standard housing. But I think because of the spread, Albany, as it is today, I always feel, still hasn't actually developed itself a heart. Other areas have developed their niche in their communities but we are still going through that. There is still a real mixture of older families, who were the farming families in the area, with a lot of the new ones. So it's quite a diasporic community in a lot of ways.*

Margaret is part of a motivating force that is slowly developing the heart of Albany with the establishment of Albany Community House, Hooton Park playground, and a skating facility; all as a means to draw residents into community activities and services. The area is shifting slowly from being a dormitory-style suburb—where people leave every day to go to work and only sleep there at night, nothing more—to a place where the residents of Albany can live and work, shop and relax. The completion of a new swimming pool complex will add a huge social value to the area, as has the earlier purchase of the 100-acre property for Sanders Reserve in Paremoremo.

Since 2010, Margaret has served the new Auckland Council as a member of the Upper Harbour Local Board, of which she was chair for 18 months. She has mixed views on the realities of the super city. *I think while there are some pluses with the super city, in terms of maybe infrastructure stuff, like the roads, it's my personal view that there's a disconnect now between Council and communities, and that no matter how hard the local boards try, it's a challenge to get that connection. I think a lot of the funding tends to go to the bigger projects, so the local funding isn't quite there to the same extent. There have been cutbacks on the likes of park maintenance and things like that. There's not the money there like it used to be. So I think for communities, bigger is not always better, and I think the other criticism that I do make frequently is that the desire of the super city to have the same policies for everywhere, doesn't work.*

She has also been serving as chair on the Northern Community Response Forum, for the past six years. The Forum arose out of a 2010 initiative by MP Paula Bennett, who was at that time minister of Social Welfare, to form 14 forums across New Zealand. The aim of the forums was to seek community feedback on what is working in terms of funding services to families and children, whether there are gaps, and to enable closer communication around individual community needs.

As for her future in political representation and community building, *I don't want to just necessarily give up and sit at home and do nothing. I'm the sort of person that likes to be motivated and like to do things. I guess through my former professional job as a physiotherapist I do like helping people, and I do feel that so long as I'm able to think I'm making a difference to somebody's life, then it's worthwhile continuing.*

