



Mike Cohen

It was a debate over the need for a skateboard park that got Mike Cohen interested in local body politics on the North Shore. He saw it as *'pure chance'* that he even considered standing for the Devonport Community Board, but 19 years on, Mike couldn't envisage doing anything else. He loves working with community at the local government level but has never thought of it as work because it's *'far too enjoyable, while making a difference'*. While it was a chance opportunity that got Mike involved in local body politics, it was an earlier experience of life on a kibbutz that really shaped his thinking about what makes a healthy, sustainable community.

After 16 years in Israel, in 1996 Mike returned to New Zealand with his family to settle permanently on the North Shore. The experience came as a complete culture shock, with Mike describing the society he found as the *'ME society'*. The economic 'reforms' of the 1980s and '90s had resulted in a more self-serving and less community-oriented society with changes in social policies and the mass privatisation of social services.

It had changed a lot from when I grew up in the 1950s and '60s. Back then we had a largely egalitarian society. People didn't swap houses every five seconds so you had neighbourhoods where everyone knew which child belonged to which family, and you knew their parents. It made it a much friendlier and caring place to be living. When I came back to New Zealand I looked around and realised that our communities were shrivelling up, they were dying. We had dormitory suburbs. We had people who were more concerned about 'ME'. The 'ME society'—where as long as I'm okay, to hell with everybody else.

Mike and his family moved to Bayswater to be relatively close to parents, and so that their two daughters could continue to go to co-educational schools. *By chance Mum was talking to a city councillor who suggested that perhaps I should stand for the Community Board. I thought, Community board? Coming from a chartered accountant background, my first reaction was, What do we need another level of local government for? It's a complete waste of money!* But a few days later he went along out of curiosity to a Devonport Community Board meeting where a group of teenage boys were advocating their case for a skateboard park, and a group of retired people had a petition against it. Mike was impressed by the Board's process of deliberation and the negotiation that took place to enable a community idea to gain traction.

It was quite cute really, like in a classroom. They all put up their hands. The boys identified that they didn't want to be away from people, out of sight. They wanted safety by proximity. Also they said, 'Hey, we're pretty cool at this and why shouldn't we show off how

good we are, too?’ The dynamics of the meeting brought the two groups together. I went home from that meeting and thought, This is actually fantastic! Because here are two groups that if nothing was done, they would just take pot-shots at each other through the Devonport Flagstaff [newspaper] and eventually a young skateboarder would probably get injured or worse.

Mike recognised, that the Community Board’s hearing process had brought the community together to find a practical and creative solution to the issue, one where everyone could be comfortable with the outcome. Now he could see the justification for having another level of local government. This meeting provided the impetus that eventually led to the development of the Ngataringa Reserve skateboard bowl. The Community Board and Council staff worked with the young skateboarders on the design of the bowl. The Devonport Rotary Club raised \$30,000 towards it and North Shore City Council contributed \$250,000.

Standing for election was a challenge, as Mike knew few people in the area, let alone two people who were permitted to nominate him. So, he came up with a plan: he stood outside the Devonport New World supermarket at different times, day after day. His strategy was twofold: firstly, this was a perfect way to get to hear about the issues and concerns of the community, and secondly, people would get to know him and what he valued. This has continued to be a reliable strategy for Mike ever since.

It’s only when you start talking to people, or more importantly listening to people, that you actually find out what the local issues and opportunities are. My wife never sends me to the supermarket for ten minutes because she knows that I’m going to away for an hour or so. But that’s the beauty of local democracy: that people know who you are and you should always be available. The worst possible thing

is for governance and decision-makers to work in a vacuum, that no one will come up to you and say what they think, that people have predetermined that they have no ability to make a difference.

Mike says that today he needs to understand how communities operate in the 21st century. He recognises that local communities have changed and become more transient. They have become more dormitory-style suburbs where people work outside their communities and come home only to sleep. More and more he sees that people don’t necessarily work and play where they actually live, so their connection to their local community is different. Mike believes that, by and large, people tend to prefer a ‘*bottom-up involvement*’ where they are more likely to relate to their neighbours and their neighbourhood, to local cultural and sport organisations

and schools in their community, rather than to the city as a whole. The challenge for local boards now is how are they going to connect with people who only work in the community, alongside those who live there. Local people still want to be engaged and participate and to feel that their voice can make a difference.

People have got to feel that they can influence what is actually happening in their communities. Participation is critical. If any form of local government acts as an obstacle for that, then all we get is apathy and non-participation. People need to feel empowered to front up and say what they feel about an issue, otherwise how does a good community idea get traction? You have to be heard to have influence. It then takes a wise person to actually listen.

In 1975, Mike and his wife, Julie set off on their OE. They were fortunate that their parents were based in different parts of the world, in Europe and in Singapore, which meant that they could stop over, rest up, eat well and set off again on their backpacker experience. Moving between one set of parents in Rome and the

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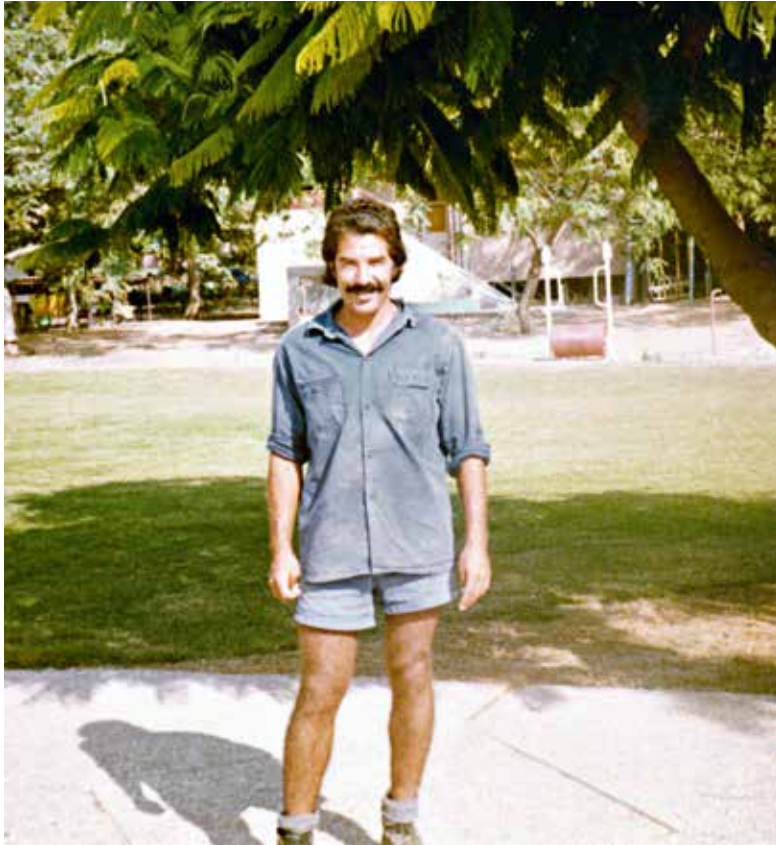


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other in Singapore, they had the choice of travelling via either Greece or Israel. Israel provided more convenient travel opportunities and so that was where they went.

Mike had been keen to be a farmer since he was a child but had never been able to afford a farm in New Zealand. In 1979 he and Julie returned to Israel and joined a kibbutz, abutting the Gaza border, where he could be a farmer. They immersed themselves in the work and life of the kibbutz, which was made up of mostly young people and couples with young families. When inflation hit 500 per cent per annum in Israel, the kibbutz utilised Mike's accounting and financial expertise to help it weather the difficult times. He was appointed a director and involved in enabling the first kibbutz company in Israel to be floated on the stock exchange.

The community's philosophy was to be an egalitarian society with equality of opportunity, where no one person owned property, where the kibbutz itself and its assets and income were shared communally. Surplus money was invested in the daily operations of the kibbutz and everyone benefited according to need. The well-being of children was a big focus and children were cared for by everyone who lived there. *One of the benefits of real community is that it tends to double the joy and halve the sorrow. We're all there for each other. We celebrate our joys together and support one another through the hard times. There were huge advantages to our life on the kibbutz; we were living in true community.*



Mike at a kibbutz near the Gaza border, Israel, circa 1979

Mike and Julie thrived on the kibbutz for 16 years. During that time they came back to New Zealand in 1988 for two years so that their children could get to know their grandparents, and then returned again to Israel. However, by the 1990s they both felt it was the right time to leave the kibbutz. They could see that the communal model of community was shifting to a more user-pays economic model. Mike predicted that within ten years the new model that was evolving would undermine any community benefits the kibbutz provided. In fact, it reached that position within five years.

Amongst many things Mike learnt from life at the kibbutz was that communities needed economic strength to thrive and

to achieve social goals. Key services such as health and education had to be highly resourced, and people needed to have a sense of shared ownership of their public spaces and local community assets. *It's all about how we make our neighbourhoods, our streets and our communities all better places; friendly, vibrant, caring, and safe. Better places to be living, working and playing in. That's something really worth going for. There's nothing like it!*

Mike admits that his agenda as a local body politician has been to see people get involved in community building. From his kibbutz experience he knows that by putting in the work you will reap rewards; that community doesn't grow automatically. Mike has always said that people need to get stuck in and not take it for granted that their community will take care of itself, or that their community will take care of them without their giving anything in return. *If we're going to create real community, we actually have to all do something. It's not something that is going to happen automatically. We obviously need to put a lot more energy into getting people together to create community today than was necessary, say 50 years ago.*

From working with communities on the North Shore, Mike has learnt that local events can often act as a catalyst for community development. He has observed first hand that the dynamics of communities change and that networks are strengthened when people come together for a common reason or a shared experience. However, he also argues strongly that community groups and social services are the *'delivery arm of community development'*. Community organisations do three things very well at the coal face: they can identify the needs of their community, they respond quickly, and they can work in new and innovative ways to bring about social change and strengthen communities from the grassroots.

Council may follow some guru of the time, saying that this is the way do to it, whereas community finds likely partners, the local community coordinators, community groups, arts practitioners, community leaders, etc., and just gets on with it. It's a very collaborative

approach to community development. We can then leverage off each other to get the best possible outcomes, given the fact that we all know we will never have enough money to do it all. It's really important to have a good working relationship with the community sector so that it becomes a win-win situation.

In his role as chair of the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board, Mike initiated 'community briefings'. In this way he expanded the opportunities for people in the community to speak directly to the whole Board, to share their thoughts, their great ideas and concerns about any local issues. At formal Board meetings, Mike allowed the public an opportunity to speak to the agenda items after input from council staff, and after Board members' questions, but before consideration by the Board. As a result, everyone had the same information and was able to make more relevant and considered comments. Mike has also been aware that the council staff who advise local boards do not always have all the information and that the boards benefit greatly from the knowledge, experience and expertise of local people.

In conjunction with his work in local government on the North Shore, Mike has also been able to promote and protect the interests of local communities more widely. He was appointed a director of Waitemata Health Ltd in 2000 to represent the community, and served on the Waitemata District Health Board from 2001 to 2007. From its inception, Mike chaired its statutory established Disability Advisory Committee, responsible for disabled and older people. In 2001 he became chair of what eventually was called the Auckland Region and Far North Community Boards Inc. He was a member of the National Community Board Liaison Team between 2000 and 2001, which evolved through a memorandum

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of understanding with Local Government New Zealand into the New Zealand Community Board Executive of Local Government New Zealand. He was elected deputy chair in 2003 and chair in 2009. Mike is the current deputy chair of Age Concern Auckland. He has been a board member of the YES Disability Resource Centre Services Trust, stepping down in May 2014. He has also had a long association with the Devonport Peninsular Trust which employs the Devonport community coordinator. Initially he was on its management committee under the auspices of North Shore Community and Social Services (NSCSS), and then became chair once it was formalised as a trust, only stepping down from that role in 2014.

In the lead up to the establishment of Auckland City Council in 2010, he was instrumental in presenting the views of the community boards, and lobbying for having more than the proposed six local boards across the region. Mike had an 'excellent working relationship' with then Minister of Local Government, Rodney Hide, which helped to enshrine the principle of 'subsidiarity' where issues would be decided politically at the lowest level, as closely as possible to the citizen, rather than by a central authority.

For Mike, being part of local government is about '*championing community development at the coal-face*'. He argues that this is why the local boards have an important role to play under the one super-city model. *Experts aren't the fount of all knowledge. That may be the best engineered approach to the amalgamation, but there's more to it than just social engineering and social landscaping; there are various things to consider that come out of community. This is one of the things that has always guided me in local government. You endeavour to make people part of the solution rather than seen as part of the problem.*

In May 2015, Mike stepped down as the chair of the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board, but remains a member with portfolio responsibilities for community development, arts, parks and natural environment, and Civil Defence. One of his last duties as chair was to open the new Devonport Library. *It's a library of books, but the crucial thing is it's a place for people; a place of enlightenment; a great family and community focal point.*

One of Mike and Julie's daughters lives in Israel and they endeavour to return regularly to visit her and catch up with friends. Looking back on his 20 years' involvement in community and local government on the North Shore, he likens the experience to being a *'student at the University of Community Building, majoring in the art of social democracy'*. For the future, should the opportunity arise, he would like to take part in a form of community development think-tank.

I've met some amazing people, and I'm in a great area where so many people want to make a difference in making their communities an even better place to live. Our role is to empower and enable great ideas to happen. I'm so lucky. It's like being at university all the time, because we deal with all sorts of different issues. Today it could be storm water, tomorrow it could be something to do with parks, community development or the arts, and you see some really cutting-edge stuff.

