



# Rebecca Harrington

Guided by the principles of self-determination (*tino rangitiratanga*) and community-led development, Rebecca's developed her own critique of charitable models of community work and advocates for a more just approach to sustainable development in communities. As a young person Rebecca first developed an intuitive approach to community work, which was later strengthened by the mentoring she received, her academic study, and the community placements she has had.

Rebecca was born in Canada and moved to New Zealand when she was two years old. She, and her two younger brothers, spent their childhood in the East Coast Bays area of the North Shore. She attended Sunnynook Primary, Mairangi Bay Primary, Murrays Bay Intermediate and Rangitoto College. Rebecca grew up in a family that embraced the teaching 'love thy neighbour' by being active members of their local community, hosting people in their home, and participating in their church community through The Salvation Army. Her parents had met through The Salvation Army in Canada, and Rebecca was brought up being part of a church community, attending children's activities, belonging to youth groups and enjoying social events. Her mother, Sharon Sawyer, was an ear specialist nurse and long-standing manager of community and public health services, and father, Haydn, is an architect and designed The Salvation Army building that now stands in Albany.

*Even though we were transient, renting in different neighbourhoods till I was ten, my parents made an effort to be present where we*

*lived, so we always knew who the neighbours were. I can remember different aspects of my childhood involving the local kids or the local babysitter, or helping before and after school with the neighbour's child. Wherever we were, they made sure we were connected to the people around us.*

The values of unconditional love, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, respecting elders, and giving back to your community all shaped her growth as a young adult. *My family on both sides are fourth-generation Salvation Army members. We grew up in a household with a Christian framework around loving others and our environment, treating people as we'd like to be treated, having an awareness of social justice and practising gratitude. Knowing that what we were given, or blessed with, meant that we were also responsible for giving back and contributing to the world. I'm really grateful for that heritage.* Her parents demonstrated to Rebecca the value of getting to know neighbours, helping people out in times of need and receiving help themselves, listening to other people's



*Rebecca (August 2006) organising a garage sale fundraiser at the East Coast Bays Salvation Army. Funds raised were put towards a newly-established Tongan preschool.*

stories and providing hospitality. As she was growing up, the family hosted several international students in their home. This gave Rebecca an opportunity to learn of other cultures, languages, religious and cultural values. *We were brought up to be very 'others-centred', thinking about how we could contribute to the world in a positive way, mostly through being friendly and kind and connecting with other people wherever we were.*

Being raised through a 'Gospel lens' provided Rebecca with a strong intuitive understanding of social justice, of the structures in society that create oppressive systems, and of the need for social, political and economic change to create sustainable futures for communities, and for nations. All these topics were discussed around the family dinner table. *I developed an awareness that as a society, we are never fully whole if a lot of us aren't doing well and if there is inequality. Part of our response to that, is to be mindful of this reality and do something to bring about change, no matter how small. We must let go of the 'God complex'; we can't actually save the world, but we can make a positive and humble contribution each day. It's about raising awareness of the issues and being aware of*

*our little, but not insignificant, part to play. It's also having a global perspective of poverty, too.*

When it came to what can be done at an individual level, the message Rebecca held on to was *'to journey with people where they are at, and just being there for people in whatever shape or form with whoever crosses our path each day is important. It's about being open and available while caring for ourselves too'*. Growing up, Rebecca, her parents and brothers, all helped out with The Salvation Army's annual Red Shield Appeal, and she remembers standing outside supermarkets, talking to people about the work of The Salvation Army.

When she was 17, Rebecca became a childrens' and youth leader. There was a dedicated youth space at The Salvation Army in Browns Bay, and the role of youth leader was to provide mentoring for young people along with generational support. These were young people often disconnected from their community, family and surroundings, and most didn't belong to the church. The focus was on walking alongside them and being available to them, not about growing church membership.

The youth initiatives were open to young people from five years old upwards. Every Thursday evening they provided a space to hang out, talk, eat fish and chips, play games, listen to music, be creative, and to share their stories. Rebecca and several other youth leaders—including her now husband, Miles,—supported dozens of young people who had troubles at home, and a range of issues from alcohol and drug abuse, anti-social behaviour, homelessness, bullying, teenage pregnancy, suicide, cancer, and so on. Their team met with them at the centre at least once a week, for around ten years. *The goal wasn't to get them to come to church in the traditional sense; it was just about being with them, having fun, and building relationships.*

Over those years Rebecca learnt skills in public speaking, group leadership, facilitation, collaborative practice, and working in project teams but, above all, she learnt something about herself.

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*Being who you are in the world is your gift to others.* She recalls that she was blown away by the fact that these kids just wanted to hang out with her. It was a defining moment for Rebecca, *I realised that I can just be myself and that in itself makes a difference. I think this time of my life formed a lot of who I am today as a person.*

The theoretical frameworks of community development and how they inform community work practice is central to Rebecca's story. Rebecca gained a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and later studied part-time towards her Master of Social Work, both at Massey University's Albany campus. Her thesis centred on migrants' experiences with neighbour relationships and she was awarded First Class Honours. Her first full-time role was with Pathways Trust, a national mental health service provider with a residential facility in Hillcrest on the North Shore. Rebecca was struck by the isolation of people who experienced mental health issues. She wasn't sure if the delivery of services without any community interaction actually enabled the person to move beyond dependency to independence.

Throughout her master's degree studies, she took on social work placements with the Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) initiative, working with families in Otahuhu and Onehunga, and with the central-government long-term initiative Tamaki Transformation Programme in Glen Innes. During these experiences Rebecca began to understand more about how theories of community development and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) informed one's own practice as a social and community worker. This started a gradual move away from The Salvation Army as she worked through her own critique of charitable models of social service delivery in contrast to community-led development. She came to understand that the latter contributed to longer-term sustainability, and empowered individuals to contribute to the well-being of their own communities. Knowing there is indeed a place for charity, her focus, however, changed towards development.

During this period in her life, Rebecca was married to her 'high-school sweetheart' Miles and began supporting him to achieve his secondary teaching qualifications. Then, in 2007, at a point when she didn't have any paid work and was wondering what her next career move might be, Rebecca saw an advertisement for a community development worker with Takapuna Methodist Church and Methodist Mission Northern (now Lifewise). This was a move away from her individual work with people experiencing mental health difficulties, but opened the door to a new practice framework. She was employed without a structured job description; rather, the church leaders and reference group wanted to find a role for the church and for the social service agency Lifewise to play in community building on the North Shore. Takapuna Methodist Church was motivated by concern for those living on the margins of society and wanted to participate somehow in the creation of positive, constructive and inclusive communities.

Rebecca spent several months meeting with community workers and service organisations on the North Shore to assess where there might be a contribution for the church to make. She wrote monthly progress reports and met regularly with an external supervisor, Frances Hancock, to discuss any 'noticings', ideas, and the emergent strategic direction of the initiative. The path was not immediately clear as to a distinct role for the church, but eventually, through discussions and planning, the seed of something significant came to the surface.

Rebecca realised that she was again concerned at the isolation and disconnection some people experienced in their communities of place. If people were disconnected from their neighbours and their local community then they could also feel afraid, disempowered, depressed, lonely, unmotivated or apathetic to do

anything to change their situation. *All of it began to make sense. We're not focusing as much as we could on building relationships with people in our local communities. If we did this, what could our contribution here look like?*

Rebecca took the initial strategic ideas back to the project's reference group and suggested that a tangible project might be to support people to get to know their neighbours. The reference group comprised Takapuna Methodist Church members Mike Dye, Jennifer Moor, Dale Kelly and Lorraine Parker, and three senior Lifewise representatives, Lesley Mynett-Johnson, John Murray and John McCarthy. They all supported Rebecca to build on the idea. The premise was that building better connections between residents could make neighbourhoods healthy, fun, safe and more vibrant places to live.

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With support from other community workers, Robynne Pringle, Jamie Adkins, and

community centre staff, Carole Blacklock, Marion Hill and Bronwyn Bound, Rebecca trialled a few ideas to shape the Know Your Neighbours project (KYN) in two neighbourhoods: Unsworth Heights and Sunnynook. Ray White Real Estate in Sunnynook helped to print the first flyers which were put in letter boxes and then Rebecca went door to door, speaking to the people who lived in these areas. The feedback was positive. One of the first doors she knocked on was that of an Iraqi family who said, *'Thank you very much for talking with us; we didn't know if knowing our neighbours was part of Kiwi culture.'*

The project focused on enabling 'neighbourliness' rather than attempting to provide it. The vision was clear; KYN was about *'enabling supportive, inclusive, creative, healthy and connected neighbourhoods with strong leadership'* to build social capital within

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streets and neighbourhoods. People would be helped to increase their levels of communication with one another as neighbours, and increase their interaction and support for one another.

Once the vision and scope for KYN had been established, Rebecca then presented the project's findings to community organisations, the North Shore community coordinators, and at the North Shore Community and Social Services (NSCSS) bimonthly network meetings. Interest and support was positive, as this wasn't a conversation they had previously had in the sector. People wanted to know what would happen next. When would the KYN project extend further into other parts of Auckland? The project was now *'a part of the puzzle in community development'*.

Rebecca had been looking at examples of similar neighbourhood-building campaigns in the United States, Australia and Ireland. She approached the project reference group and put forward the idea of having a national campaign. *They probably all thought, What is she thinking? Calm down, Rebecca.* However, in 2009, with increased support from Lifewise, the first Auckland-wide Neighbours Day was launched. The media publicity was phenomenal—Rebecca received many requests for interviews. KYN had become a campaign as well as a local initiative, and had begun to employ a number of strategies, including use of social media, networking, and community workshops, to raise local and regional awareness of the power of healthy neighbourhoods.

The impetus for Neighbours Day was that it should be a catalyst for change, inspiring and motivating communities to focus on neighbourhood building. In 2011 the first nationwide Neighbours Day Aotearoa (NDA) was launched in partnership with Inspiring Communities. NDA's impact continues to grow each year with thousands of neighbours taking part throughout

New Zealand. The campaign is driven by Lifewise, Inspiring Communities, the Mental Health Foundation, Neighbourhood Support New Zealand, and the Public Library Association. The Tindall Foundation has provided significant funding for the campaign.

Rebecca's last input into KYN and NDA was to reflect on her own process and learning in developing the initial Know Your Neighbours project. In 2012, with funding from The Tindall Foundation, Point Research was contracted to write a report on the project, its inception, early development, findings and how it then informed and shaped the nationwide Neighbours Day campaign. Rebecca saw this as an important part of her work.

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The report has integrated the theory behind supporting the building of healthy neighbourhoods with the practice of getting the project off the ground and then leaving communities to do their own thing. Rebecca argues that the reason the KYN project, and then the NDA campaign, have been successful is because they happened organically, through word of mouth. She also acknowledges that the residents she met and worked with in the early communities informed her practice as a community worker. *They shaped my thinking, and really encouraged and built me up as a practitioner.*

In its executive summary, the Point Research report stated that: 'It appears that the practice of others who work or have an interest in strong, connected neighbourhoods has been influenced by the KYN initiative. It has informed and helped influence a model of support-based community-led development. Some community workers have started to apply the KYN practice principles in their own communities or with their own organisations. One of the biggest outcomes for these workers has been to understand the value of the micro-contact, the doorstep conversation.'<sup>1</sup>

In 2013, Rebecca worked with Lifewise as a community development leader in the suburb of Glen Eden, in Waitakere, supporting families and community services. She was instrumental in establishing the Glen Eden Stories project, an oral history community storytelling project. Today Rebecca works part-time for another neighbourhood building initiative, a social media website called Neighbourly, where she is the Neighbourly leads development manager, working with residents around the country to help them create and support local communities both online and offline.

Neighbourly aims to create an easy way for neighbours to talk and share information, to help build a sense of community in their neighbourhood. The website enables people to connect with one another using a private neighbourhood-only designated platform. *Members use the website to meet their neighbours, find out about local events, be informed of crime and safety concerns, engage with council issues, know about local services, participate in community projects, or find lost pets.* Each neighbourhood has voluntary Neighbourly leads and Rebecca liaises with them, giving them advice on how to maximise benefits for local communities, and how to participate in NDA.

She also enjoys being part of their local community's Playcentre in Torbay, with her two-year-old daughter, Stella. Rebecca also helps to organise her neighbourhood's annual street party in Okura to celebrate NDA.

Looking back on all the things she has been involved with to date, Rebecca concludes that: *The awesome thing about community development, is that it's so ongoing. You try to plant seeds for other people to come along and breathe life into the work. It's been an incredible humbling learning opportunity, centred on building relationships.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Evaluation of Know Your Neighbours: An initiative of Lifewise and Takapuna Methodist Church* (Executive Summary), Point Research, September 2012

