



It's about investing in our local youth and empowering them.

Richard Hills

Richard is passionate about youth representation, community development, suicide prevention, and sexual health education. He has been an advocate for the youth voice at the local level and of positive inclusion in society since his high-school years. He is also committed to representing his community of Kaipatiki, where he has been a local board member and Labour Party candidate. Richard's contribution to community building has only just begun.

Richard is of Ngāpuhi descent on his father's side of the family, with European ancestry through his mother, whose family arrived from England in the 1950s. His family still has close links with the north around Whangaroa where his uncle runs the family farm, and at Coopers Beach where his grandmother lives. Richard does not speak te reo Māori, but relishes his experiences and understanding of Māoritanga, which underpins the culture of his immediate family. He also values his links as a politician with local iwi Ngāti Whātua.

Richard's father, Brian, is an accomplished wooden floor tradesman and labourer. He grew up on the farm at Whangaroa and then chose a city life in Auckland to raise his family. Richard's mother, Isabell, grew up in Browns Bay on Auckland's North Shore. Richard and his two younger sisters, Katie and Sophie, grew up in Glenfield, where Richard still lives today. *I'm very grateful to my parents and family for all the support they have given me in everything I've chosen to do so far.*

While at Glenfield College, Richard tried all kind of sports with his father's encouragement, but wasn't very interested in any of them. Instead, he preferred to be involved with community work, drama and acting. At one point Richard thought that he might become a professional actor, but life was to take a different course. He loved to perform stand-up comedy and, aged 17, he won the inter-schools competition held at the Auckland Town Hall as part of the annual Comedy Festival in 2004.

In Year 10 at high school, Richard participated in Project K, a youth leadership programme for students who maybe lacked direction, who don't play team sports, or who are introverted. *They got to do lots of wilderness activities and community work.* He wasn't sure why he got selected, but he thought it was a *cool thing to do*. He went on to become a prefect at school and enjoyed the leadership and organisational aspects of the role.

Richard first became interested in sexual health promotion when he was selected to be on the Peer Sexuality Support

Programme (PSSP) in Year 11. He was one of a number of students selected from different schools; they all went on a 'training camp' to learn about sexuality, and the influence of alcohol and drugs on young people. The idea behind it was that the students would return to their schools and provide peer support. *The research showed that young people preferred to listen to their peers*, says Richard.

Twenty-five schools participated in the programme, run by the Ministry of Health and Auckland District Health Board. Richard was 15 years old at the time and the youngest at the camp; he was particularly interested in the prevention aspects of the work. *Then you go back to school and you have to do health promotions, body image, alcohol and drug prevention, running health classes around STDs and things.*

The programme was innovative, holistic in nature, and challenging. It was awesome. Back then [at school] *they would bring people out with HIV to talk about their experience and all that kind of stuff. That was the first time I'd ever met someone who was transgender and heard their story. This was back in early 2000s. It was just before civil unions and long before marriage equality.* The work had a big impact on Richard; he volunteered for three years at school and continued for some years afterwards. *It [sexuality] wasn't big on the radar. It was a lot more about suicide and bullying and that area. People came to talk to us who had a disability and talked about how that has affected their relationships. It was really an eye opener. Then to go back into school and to challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, body image issues and bullying, was really empowering.*

The work in sexual health promotion, his acting interests, and stand-up comedy boosted Richard's public



Richard at Scott Base, Antarctica 2005 – 'Youth On Ice' programme

speaking skills and confidence; these interests were preparing him, although unknowingly, for his future public roles. His political interests also started at school, when he was inspired by his Sociology teacher, Margaret Baker, in Year 12. *She taught us many lessons on human rights, civil liberties and social change.* Richard learnt about New Zealand history at this time, too, such as the anti-Springbok tour protests, the nuclear free campaign, and the Homosexual Law Reform Bill, amongst other significant events. As a consequence, he developed a will to effect change from an early age.

He also cites his interest in the struggle for same-sex civil unions from 2003 to 2004 as one of the critical issues that fuelled his early interest in politics. He has continued to be interested in seeing how political activism from the community can bring about social and political change.

In 2005, Richard enrolled in a degree in Communications Studies, majoring in Radio Broadcasting, at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). However, just prior to that, he secured a chance of a lifetime, to spend eight days in Antarctica with two leaders and three other young people selected from around New Zealand, through the Foundation of Youth Development.

Yeah, it was amazing to go down there... the nature or the vastness and the quietness. It was one long day really because it was sunlight the whole time. We built an igloo and slept in it one night. Its stuff you can't explain. The quiet was so loud. There's no noise pollution, there's nothing. You can see so far. I thought we'd be able to walk, or at least drive to





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Mt Erebus because it just looked like it was from here to Rangitoto Island away, but it is around forty kilometres away. But it looks so close because there's no haze, no moisture in the air, no pollution. He and his fellow explorers met Sir Edmund Hillary upon their return, at his home for morning tea and we shared many stories. I was sitting there thinking: This is really Sir Edmund Hillary!

In regards to his later involvement with the Local Board, Richard thinks that part of the reason he was elected was because, as a teenager, from the age of 14 onwards, he had worked in a number of local places. From Lollipops Playland on Onewa Road, to the SOUNDS music store in Glenfield Mall, the Glenfield Tavern and the Slipp Inn in Birkenhead, where he got to meet many different people in the local community. Apart from a couple of short periods living overseas, he has lived in the area his entire life, so he argues that he is *well placed to represent community interests and issues.*

Now referred to as the Kaipatiki region, since amalgamation in 2010, the area has one of the highest mix of ethnicities and migrant populations on the North Shore. It is this multicultural environment that Richard particularly values and enjoys.

While he does not consider that his sexuality has ever been problematic, personally or in his work and public roles, Richard is, however, only too aware that other gay men have had significant difficulties, with their families particularly, and also with the state. He engages with the wider LGBT community through his work in supporting many young people in the Queer community, and promoting positive sexual health at events such as the annual *Big Gay Out.*

Richard took up his part-time role with the Auckland Sexual Health Education Unit, based at Greenlane Hospital, just after he was elected to the Kaipatiki Local Board in 2010. It was a

flexible job which allowed him to serve the demands of the Board, which is a minimum of 25 hours per week, and to continue the work he enjoys. *It is cool having that connection with a lot of people in a different way. It's always growing; you never stop growing the discussions, or the connections. I think a lot of the time that's what it's about: it's about connections, connecting your community up, the neighbourhoods, and the families.*

Richard says that he particularly honours the place and efforts of women in local community development work. *I take my hat off to the women in our community that really do so much of the groundwork and don't often take any credit for it, and don't often take too much pay for it, or any pay sometimes. There are lots of awesome men doing community work too, but 70 per cent of the time or more it is women doing lots of the community work.*

In terms of furthering his political aspirations, Richard first had his eye on standing for a Labour seat after the Labour-led government, under Prime Minister Helen Clark, lost the 2008 election. In his own way, *he measured the state of youth representation in the Labour Party and the nation politically.* In 2011, Richard was asked by Phil Goff, then leader of the Labour Party, to stand as a list candidate for the *very blue* Hunua electorate because the seat wasn't covered, and because it was likely going to be good experience for him. He was not elected, but undeterred and much closer to home, Richard stood again for the Northcote electorate; again, however, he was not elected.

In 2010, he stood for the newly formed Kaipatiki Local Board, encouraged by Ann Hartley, who also helped fund his campaign. *She wanted young people to stand, it was very encouraging,* says Richard. Nomination and campaigning for the Local Board was the first step and he loved the process. *Yeah, the campaigning is*

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one of the coolest parts because otherwise it's weird to walk up to strangers or people in the community, but when you've got pamphlets in your hand or a badge on it gives you the opportunity. People tell you all sorts of things or ask you a lot of different things. Plus, you end up knowing lots of people and making all sorts of connections such as people saying, 'You used to go to school with my son' and so on.

Richard didn't expect to win a seat on the Kaipatiki Local Board, but he did; at the age of 23, he was one of the youngest ever to do so. The average age of representatives at the time was 60. *Kaipatiki is quite connected, so it's really cool to stand in this community. There were 24 people standing and so I thought it's pretty unlikely I'm going to get on but it will be a good experience. Then on election day [the campaign results] were just refreshing and then it popped up that I was the eighth out of eight that got on. It was a party then and really exciting!*

Richard placed his feet firmly on his platform of representing the youth voice. He was given the youth, community, social development, and events portfolios in his first term. Now in his second term on the Local Board, he holds the transport, community development, and youth portfolios.

Joseph Bergin was elected at the same time as Richard, but for the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board. They were initially pitched side by side in the *North Shore Times* as being from the two sides of the political spectrum. Today Richard recognises *that differing views are important when there is an intention to care and achieve positive results.*

Richard has actively promoted civic education in schools and youth participation. He worked in partnership with Kaipatiki community coordinator Jill Nerheny to establish children's panels in schools, whereby children can learn how to participate and get involved in community-based initiatives. Sonia Nerheny, of the Kaipatiki Community Facilities Trust in Glenfield, now convenes the children's panels in schools. Richard has also supported the development of a local Youth Board, currently with 18

representatives, which is also supported by the Kaipatiki Community Facilities Trust.

He has worked with his Kaipatiki Voice colleagues on the local board, the Kaipatiki Local Youth Board, and the Kaipatiki Community Facilities Trust, who are all behind the proposed development of a youth centre for 12 to 24 year olds at Marlborough Park, in Glenfield. Kaipatiki community coordinator Jill Nerheny has been behind the project in partnership with the local board. Richard says the centre will help youth make better decisions in the future. *It's about investing in our local youth and empowering them.*

The idea for the youth centre has been around for some years, it has had a budget of \$800,000 allocated, and in 2016 the Marlborough Park youth centre is now in the construction stage. There will be courses in employment development, parenting skills, learning development, mental health and sexual health, amongst other, more recreational, activities.

Looking to the foreseeable future, Richard wishes to stand again for the Kaipatiki Local Board and expresses a great interest in continuing to get things done at the local level.

I will continue to fight for positive change in the community first and then work on government next.



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