



There is a real myth on the North Shore  
that violence doesn't happen here.

# Tracey Swanberg

Tracey knew that she had found her place and vocation when she began work regarding the issues and interests of women. She has touched the lives of thousands of women and their families, supporting and easing their way into better lives. She approaches her life and work through an informed and committed feminist framework; her daily interactions with women demonstrate how vital it is to make a stand for women's lives and aspirations.

Tracey's feminism has not been developed and expressed in the abstract. She has always worked at the practical, and sometimes very volatile, edge with women and families experiencing high degrees of dysfunction and danger in their daily lives. Her work has largely been at the cliff edge of crisis, alleviating the effects of violence, murder, physical and psychological abuse, and poverty; the plight and the potential of women and families in all manner of situations has been her primary concern.

A well-publicised example of the women whom Tracey works with is that of Cheryl Pareanga. Cheryl was a young woman with a partner and children living in Northcote; she was Tracey's client. She was terribly abused within her family when she was young and later even more substantially abused by her male partners. Tracey worked with Cheryl for some years and, at one time, spent the day at the dentist with her when her partner had smashed all her teeth out with a brick. Despite all efforts, refuge care, protection orders and agency support, Tracey feared that Cheryl's partner of

some years would kill her one day. And he did. In 2003 Cheryl was stabbed 26 times and had her throat cut. Cheryl's tragic case, albeit to varying degrees of severity and expression, is unfortunately too common on Auckland's affluent North Shore and Tracey's courageous work is a never-ending campaign.

Tracey's commitment to champion the needs of women in the community began in her own family environment. She grew up in Pakari, a small coastal farming settlement 20 kms outside Wellsford, in a large mixed Māori/European family, which was frequently expanded with fostered children. She is of Ngāpuhi descent, from Tuhi Rangi marae in the Far North, with which she had strong connections growing up.

Tracey's attributes her wanting to give back to society and work in the community to her experience with fostered siblings. The family, with five biological children, frequently cared for other fostered children from the local area by formal arrangement or sometimes as whāngai (family members).



*Tracey with her son, Ben, 1990*

The family was always involved in local community work through fostering, sport, the local Returned and Services Association (RSA) and the toy library. Tracey's step-father, Pete, was a farmer, and both he and Tracey's mother, Chris, shared farm chores and domestic duties around the house, demonstrating a level of cooperation and equality that was unusual for the time. Tracey's mother, at 67 years old, still works full-time with Educare and Kowhai Kids at Mangawai. Her parents were nurturers—giving was natural to them—and this resonated with Tracey, and even more so as she became involved in community and began to study.

*I grew up in a chaotic household, like really, really noisy and lots of children, that kind of atmosphere is all I've ever known. Actually our family is still like that today, we are still together a lot and it is noisy and it is busy and we have got lots of children and that is what we do.*

Tracey attended Rodney College in Wellsford, which had just 300 students including many Māori. Te reo was compulsory up to the Fourth Form (Year Ten) but even so Tracey has never become fluent in the language. The intergenerational flow of whakapapa, of Māori history and te reo was interrupted in her grandfather's generation, and so the deep Māori cultural influences in her family became diluted over time.

Teenage life for Tracey was reasonably tumultuous, a significant feature being that she had her son, Ben, when she was 18 years old. She was on her own when Ben was born and returned to her parents' home for the first year to raise him, continuing to have family support when she returned to Auckland. Ben is now 26 and Tracey has a grandson who is six years old. *I started young and he started young.* After two years at home with Ben, and with such good family support, Tracey went to study Humanities at Carrington Tech (now UNITEC). She was motivated to work and had an interest in the *helping professions* and in understanding *what made people tick*. Working with women and feminism came later. Her first experience of social work came while she was studying, working with people with disabilities in Glenfield. She was also involved as a volunteer with an organisation called Pillars, based in Sandringham, which supported the families of inmates. It was Tracey's first experience of residential-based care and it involved high exposure to stories of trauma and violence. She describes the work as completely chaotic and, understandably at 21 years of age, she found herself in work where she felt out of her depth.

Her following work, was with De Paul House as an education coordinator. Initially, she was part-time and ran a number of classes for families but later applied for the position of family

support worker. It was a big deal; the sisters, the Daughters of Charity, were slowly withdrawing from De Paul House and Tracey was the first non-Catholic layperson to be appointed to work in the organisation. *I was working in peoples' homes, right in the community, and I was starting to see lots and lots of needs. At De Paul House we were dealing with a lot of poverty and we were dealing with a lot of violence.*

During this period Tracey was coming to understand first-hand the complexity of issues families were facing like housing, drug and alcohol addiction and violence, and the need for services to reflect these specific issues as well as the overall dilemma. The work at De Paul House involved residential care and outreach across Northcote, Birkenhead, Beach Haven, Birkdale and Albany. Tracey attributes her skill development to the experience gained from five years in the role, up to the year 2000. *I talked a lot with the whānau at De Paul House about what worked for them and about what didn't, and about it being their process. I guess it was my job to support families in the journeys that they were on, as well as to provide resources for them.*

*We were working with a lot of different ethnic groups across the board; with a lot of the Pasifika community—Samoan, Tongan, Rarotongan. I remember a period of time when I was working with a lot of Sudanese families that had come in and were housed down in Northcote, and Burmese families as well. We were working a lot with an immigrant, refugee and migrant population at the time. In their homes, what I was seeing were usually lots of kids in a very small, cold house. Some of those houses did not have power and there were often newborn babies in those houses without power.*

Her experience at De Paul House has shaped Tracey's career up to the present day. She witnessed such violence and abuse towards women and children and strong gender inequity. She remembers

seeing women and children at De Paul House's residential home with black eyes. *It was very dangerous, there were machetes and knives.* Elimination of violence became a passion. She began to see patterns of abuse, which began her identification with women and sparked her understanding that working with women was her strength. When Tracey came to further study in social work at Auckland College of Education in 1998, she found that she was essentially only adding a framework around work she had already been doing.

Tracey did not have a background in feminist practice or principles; she would not have described herself as a feminist in her early years. Nevertheless, as she worked, her feminist critique was developing in response to what she was experiencing. She was also influenced by friends and colleagues who were feminists

and by the people she worked with, including Sister Joan who managed De Paul House. Tracey describes Sister Joan as having *a strong political critique* and as being *a powerful feminist*.

Sister Joan and Sister Margaret encouraged the young Tracey to do her Diploma in Social Work in 1998.

Tracey was introduced to the work of the North Shore Women's Refuge while at De Paul House, and began to work for the refuge in around 2001; it was a natural transition for Tracey. She spent ten years with the refuge, eight of these years as manager of the North Shore branch, which was then known as Safer Families. A number of the clients she worked with at De Paul House also became clients at the refuge. Tracey is keen to dispel the myths around the client group of the refuge. *In my time at refuge, we worked with women from across North Shore. We worked with women from every single socio-economic group, from very high income to very low income, and we worked with ethnicities from across the board. So European,*

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*Māori, Pasefika, Middle Eastern, Asian, the whole bit. Migrant and refugee population as well. There is a real myth on the North Shore that violence doesn't happen here. Or that it only happens to people with a lower socio-economic income or in Māori and Pasifika families, which is an absolute myth and absolutely not true.*

Tracey adds that the client group could as often include lawyers, schoolteachers and accountants as it does cleaners. Professionals, especially, often feel embarrassed to seek help until they are informed that many others like them experience similar issues. *I remember a woman who lived in a \$2 million villa in Devonport, but she hadn't fed her kids for three days because he was so controlling about money. So the financial abuse was really big as well. She would have to go to the supermarket and show him what she'd bought, what she had spent, every single dollar! And you know that old thing like, even seeing things like tampons not as necessities, like having to justify their position completely. That sort of stuff was just one of many stories.*

Tracey has learnt that the perpetrators of the violence are likely to be high-salaried businessmen, they might be the coach of a local sports team, and they might have a good community profile. *A frustration with the work is that very few people in the community know what is actually going on behind closed doors. Confidentiality strictly limits what might be picked up by the media and made known publicly. Change is therefore hard to achieve.* Another bone of contention is the way that the court systems re-victimise women in rape and violence cases, even allowing the accused to interview the victim.

Out of the learnings gained from Cheryl Pareanga's case and another terrible incident at the refuge where a mother suffocated her baby, a new way of working arose. This model came to be known informally as 'The Takapuna Model', and it came to influence working models around New Zealand. The model was essentially about the holistic sharing of knowledge previously

held by different people and agencies. It also involved placing key workers inside the police structure and having Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) workers employed to upskill agencies—all to enable the flow of information with the refuge. *Clear reporting protocols were put in place.*

Tracey spent three years working in Wellington, from 2008 to 2011, at the national office of Women's Refuge, supporting the 45 refuges located throughout the country. One of those years she spent travelling the country assessing capacity. Another year she worked with Hau Porea, the Māori arm of Refuge. Then, in the third year, she was working with CYFS and the police introducing the Takapuna Model. She also sat on the *Are You Okay* campaign, which engaged in social message marketing.

A change was welcomed by Tracey, as she was experiencing burn-out at the Refuge. She sat on the Community Organisations Grants Committee as a representative for Refuge from 2006 to 2008, and had the opportunity to visit many different community organisations seeking project funding.

Tracey left the Refuge in 2010 to work part-time, with less organisational responsibility, as a women's advocate at Heista, Rodney Women's Centre. She relished the opportunity to sit in front of women, working one to one. It suited her family situation and her professional capacities at the time. She also worked with the North Shore Women's Centre part-time, where as a younger woman she had hoped she might work some day.

Tracey found her niche and vocation. She has loved working at the Women's Centre; it has provided the balance and the true focus she was seeking. She understood the Centre's origins as a health initiative for women and it was a good fit for her personal values. *I appreciated the kaupapa and values around the elimination of violence, and the whole idea around equity, and the idea of*

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*supporting women's choice and working with them where they are at.* Tracey became manager of the North Shore Women's Centre in 2011.

Tracey is mindful of, and acknowledges, the many wonderful people that she worked with at De Paul House, the Refuge and the North Shore Women's Centre. Many great relationships were developed and they cared for one another in the same way as they cared for their clients.

Tracey and her colleagues at the North Shore Women's Centre remain attentive to the myriad of other abuses experienced by women every day in Auckland. The centre has developed strong relationships with many groups and agencies, and it has a very reputable track record in facing local and national issues. Tracey continues to be a strong, courageous, passionate and highly skilled advocate for women.

*Supporting women to emerge out of abusive situations is not about what I want to see happen, or what anyone else wants, or all the other pressures she is facing. It is about recognising her story because she has already been in a situation where she hasn't been heard and often hasn't been believed or told she is crazy. So to kind of hold that with some integrity and to work at her pace is vitally important. It is about being with her at her pace. Only then does change come.*

