



# STORIES OF CHANGE

Ariana Simpson and Ruahine Albert

Te Whakaruruhau  
Māori Women's Refuge



“We work with the tane because they’re just as lost today as the wahine. If you get to the men, you protect the women and children.”

We’d been housing Māori women in our homes, long before we set up the country’s first Māori Women’s Refuge, in 1987, here in Hamilton. There was a need.

I moved here in 1984, with Rape Crisis and Te Kakano O Te Whānau, and started working with the Māori Women’s Centre. They worked with men, women, whānau, sexual abuse, counselling – you name it. We soon saw a lot of women who were dealing with family violence and needed a safe place to go, which started our relationship with Women’s Refuge.

Back in the 80s it was unheard of to have a Māori anything, let alone a Māori Women’s Refuge. But we had women saying, “We need a house for Māori women. The way things are done at that house cuts across my culture.” We almost all came out of the Māori movement, and were in fact still involved with it. It had been a period of great education for all of us. We’d learnt things about our culture that our parents had never told us: that we’d been colonised, why we’ve had

to find other ways to survive. And we learnt things about being women that our mothers had never told us: that we didn’t have to put up with abuse.

So Te Whakaruruhau, the first Māori Women’s Refuge in the country, came out of all this. We were angry, and I’m still impressed with how gutsy we could be.

The name Te Whakaruruhau basically means to shelter from the elements. Our logo has a whareniui, surrounded by wind, with three women bearing weapons: mere, tewhatewha, that kind of thing. They represent the tools of our trade. Each of our kaimahi are kaitaki of this whare. We don’t have a specific role for our refuge workers – the role is to do everything that is needed for that whānau. You’re a negotiator, a facilitator, a mouthpiece in courts, a driver. You’re not just negotiating with Work and Income, you’re taking the wahine and the tamariki



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back to their whānau to negotiate terms for a transition back home. You have to be clever. We have one of the most comprehensive intervention programmes in the country, and we’ve helped over 8,000 families over the past 25 years.

When we started Te Whakaruruhau we needed to understand what set us apart – we needed to understand a women’s refuge in our culture. That meant understanding the place of women, and family violence, too. What’s the first thing you hear, coming onto the marae? A woman’s voice. And what’s she saying? She’s doing whakapapa, she’s making connections. So when women came to our whare, we wanted to know who they were, and where they came from – that’s whanaungatanga. And from early on we wanted to engage with their whole whānau. That’s because we were used to this process, the whakaeke process onto the marae. The marae atea is where you lay all your issues, no matter how heavy they are.

The whole idea around Whakaruruhau was never to isolate. Being isolated is the crux of the problem. Family violence is not our traditional way. If you harmed your children, you harmed your tipuna, your whānau, your future and your past. It would get you killed in the old days. Failing that, you’d work for that whānau for the rest of your life. In a just Māori society there were ways of dealing with it that we don’t have anymore. Now we have a justice system that demands people provide evidence, and doesn’t appreciate that doing that can jeopardise your relationship with your entire whānau, and jeopardise it for your kaumatua and your tamariki too. We work with the tane because they’re just as lost today as the wahine. If you get to the men, you protect the women and children.

We watch our men get put into jail, come back out thinking they’ve done their time, and reoffend. But we think, “No, no, no. You haven’t done



anything. You’ve just had a holiday.” When a man wrecks a home, for example, and is sent off to prison, who do you think cleans that up and pays the bill? She does, and we help her, after five o’clock when we’ve done everything else we’ve got to do. We’ll sometimes clean and repair five houses a week, it can be that bad. So we’ve started working with the prisons to bring teams out into the community to help us with this. They come out, repair and clean, and go back to prison to sleep. I’ve seen the emotional impact this work can have. Some of them question themselves: “I did this. I did this to my own wahine. I left my children in that state.” Some have admitted to me what they did to their families, and what they went through as children.

They’ve been a part of the rebuilding process, but they’ve also seen what we’re like, and the work we’re doing, and I think that’s big. The problem is, this kind of work has been hidden away for too long. Who can truly say in any community that they work with the local women’s refuge to stop family violence? Who has that knowledge and experience? That situation only benefits the perpetrator – that’s probably why nobody notices the plight of battered women. We should tell them who we are and where we are, and who’s in our houses, and who should be afraid of *us*.



When we opened our new purpose-built refuge here in Hamilton, we had hundreds of people show up. It was in the papers. We had police, city councillors, DHB people, politicians. We wanted to be loud. I absolutely believe, and this is what I've learned throughout the years, that central to the problem of family violence is the silence and the isolation. Safety isn't about keeping silent.

In this house our women have time to think and plan a future. This is the space for a lot of women to realise, just like we realised way back when, "Hey, I can do anything." It's about moving them beyond crisis to stability and career aspirations.



“ Our model involves a whole range of local organisations and agencies working together, as opposed to one organisation working alone, not connected to the community. You have to be connected. We work with anger management programmes, stopping family violence programmes, education programmes – anything that helps to build a woman's resource and trust. ”

– Ariana

“ It takes a whole community to keep a family safe. You need short cuts so families receive the assistance they need, when they need it. Our work is all about building relationships with those systems and agencies – Police, Work and Income, CYFs, the courts, schools – to try and cut through the red tape so these families aren't waiting a week, a month, a year down the track. ”

– Ruahine

And when we do speak up, exciting opportunities can emerge.

We recently brought the fashion designer Annah Stretton to one of our houses, and she was shocked by some of their stories. She hadn't realised how prevalent domestic violence is in our country. We've now started RAW together – Reclaim Another Woman. It's about creating life opportunities that have never been there before for these women, whether because of their violent relationships, their children, money, education, whatever. It's giving them a chance to dream about their future. In this work, it's important to be creative. ■





## Reclaim Another Woman Annah Stretton

Reclaim Another Woman (RAW) is about a woman like myself, a significant other, walking alongside a woman that's come from a domestic violence environment. Our goal is educating for choice. We want to show these women a different path and head them towards a great life, and that comes through education.

It's a simple model really, but it's exciting, because we are starting to make some massive in-roads. It's only six weeks old and already we've got 70 women matched with mentors like myself, really pushing education as the way forward. Our goal is to have all these women off a benefit, within a five-year timeframe.

My collaboration with Te Whakaruruhau is an obvious one. All our women bar one have come through Te Whakaruruhau. They are so pivotal in stabilising the lives of these women. They've created the safe environment for women to think, 'maybe I could change my life'.

The women that Te Whakaruruhau work with are not women I would have normally come into contact with. They're an invisible generation. They're women we have stopped seeing. But they are women that I believe I can get making a real contribution to society.

At the moment, 95% of women in abusive situations go straight back into the environments they've ostensibly been rescued from. That's absolutely crazy. The women need to value themselves more. We need to give them that confidence and believe in them.

