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Life to the Max celebrating 21 years of helping local 'youth at risk'

BY DOUG DAVIDSON

Life to the Max started in 2001 after a group from the Whanganui community were concerned about the increasing rate of youth offending and believed that there was a need for a preventative 'Youth at Risk' initiative.

That initiative is now about to celebrate 21 years having worked with thousands of children and youths aged between 5 to 13.

I interviewed the team recently. Annie Firaza is the manager, and she has been with Life to the Max for 16 years, the social workers are Paul Hausia (17 years) and Alex Pirikahu (12 years) and Liz Hoskin (Finance & Administration) who has been with the group the

longest at 18 years. A new staff member has recently joined the team. Two of the Trust members – chair Lance Rowe and district councillor, Kate Joblin, have been on the Trust since the beginning.

Asked why they had been there for so long, Paul summed it up when he said, "It is the satisfaction of seeing kids growing up successfully and having kids of their own. We are like a village helping out. It doesn't matter

what circumstances we are born into."

The basic principle behind Life to the Max is that "to effectively address offending or negative behaviours, the whole family and the community need to be involved in the solution." And so, Life to the Max will, from the outset, meet with the family of the young person who has been referred to them. Most referrals come from schools, but anyone can make a referral.

The behaviours can be anger, violence, bullying, stealing, inability to process emotions or be completely closed off.

"We offer our services and sometimes after much to-ing and fro-ing, the family including the young person's siblings, accept and are involved. Most parents, step-parents, foster parents and grandparents want better for their kids and avoid the inter-generational trauma." And it is not just working with mothers – "We also work with dads, perhaps showing them how to show love



From left: Alex, Annie, Liz, Michelle Rayner (social work student at Massey University), Paul

– how to give hugs."

The risk factors are what you might expect – alcohol or drug abuse, family violence, anti-social peers, gang influence, lack of positive role models, truanting from school, although this is not always the case "as school quite often can be their safe place." The approach is to focus on the positive – "a clean slate and what they can do when simple clear

boundaries are there. Most of the young people involved are boys.

I was a bit surprised by how young the young people they work with can be, but they said, "We want to prevent kids from going into the Youth Court system."

They work with a maximum of 20 young people at a time, although when you take in family members, it can be up to 150.

They work quite intensely, sometimes with individuals or with the family. A first step is "to calm the brain, help them get over trauma they have experienced."

The caregivers are supported as well. "We have introduced them to activities such as yoga, waka ama, boxing or even just simply taken them out for a cup of coffee – giving them new and different op-

portunities," says Annie. "We will also do baking and craft making with them, initially in their own homes but we also go out and about. It might be to a park, the beach, to Durie Hill tower, the library, museum, Splash Centre, horse riding. As an end of term special, we might go to Palmerston North.

Continued on page 3

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Continued from page 1

Apart from giving them new experiences it helps them feel more connected to our community and to know where and who else they can go to." Once a year a small group will kayak down the river.

The social workers will also show them the likely consequences if they don't make changes, taking them to the Court House where a judge will talk with them. They also visit a Police Station. "We want them to understand the person behind the uniform. The police give us huge support."

They don't succeed with all young people they work with over a year but "70 to 80% make a huge difference to their lives. For others we hook them into other agencies, opening doors to the next steps."

"Plenty of photographs are taken showing their journey and years afterwards, they remember you."

Life to the Max receives 60 to 70% of its funding from Government grants and the rest comes from local sponsorship, gifts, raffles and even a give a little page.

The 21st celebrations will be on October 8 from 11am to 2pm at Springvale Stadium. Life to the Max can be contacted on 344 8555.

Small Flemington Road subdivision aims for shared values and commitments from buyers

Maddie Stanley and Michael Coles bought land in Flemington Road because of the space and tranquility as well as being close enough to town to cycle in. They plan to live there with their own young family but are offering three 5,000 square lifestyle sections with freehold titles.

They aim to strike a balance between independence and connection and will ask potential buyers to sign a MoU that sets out values and shared commitments. These cover a desire for neighbourliness, treating the land well, being poison free, not building high fences and meeting up and sharing resources.



Maddie Stanley and Michael Coles

"It would be a gentleman's agreement" they say.

Maddie and Michael run a weekly education programme from the land and say, "A lot of happiness and satisfaction comes from sharing the land with others."

They add "while Sub-division and new house builds bring some level of disruption and change, we are very committed to respecting the peacefulness of the area."

People interested in the concept and living in the area they call 'Wildcraft' can visit during an open home on Saturdays 24 September and 1 October between 12.30pm and 2pm or by contacting Maddie on 022 1922 321.

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