

# GOOD NEWS STORIES FROM HOUSING NEW ZEALAND

> So often, we're hearing doomsday reports when it comes to community and social housing, with the happy tales seemingly few and far between.

In this focus on New Zealand, *Housing New Zealand* turns the tables to give us a series of positive stories from their housing communities that are sure to put a smile on the face of HousingWORKS' readers and provide some inspiration.

## 1 Opening cupboards to the community

Understanding the daily struggle many families face to put food on the table has prompted a Housing New Zealand tenant to open her own cupboards to help feed the local community.

A *pātaka* (which is the Māori word for 'pantry' or 'larder') in Otangarei has been running for two months, thanks to the efforts of a local resident and Housing New Zealand tenant, Diana.

"The idea came from my daughter who had seen something similar and thought it would be a great idea for our community," says Diana.

The *pātaka* started out as a shop but Diana moved it to outside her Housing New Zealand home and stocked it with a range of donated food items.

“ The *pātaka* started out as a shop but Diana moved it to outside her Housing New Zealand home ”

"We have people dropping off all sorts of food – cartons of eggs, boxes of avocados, fruit and vegetables, staples like bread, flour and sugar along with household items like washing powder and toilet paper."

Diana's *pātaka* is designed to allow people to take as much or as little food as they please. She confirms, "Some people take just the essentials like flour, bread and tea, some take more and some may only take a potato to bulk out their dinner that night. It really varies."

The stall is also not just for Otangarei residents, she explains. "It is to help people wherever they may come from. I just encourage people to only take what they need, as there are people who are far worse off than they are."

Diana often reaches into her own cupboard to stock the *pātaka* and makes up to 25 school lunches every Monday to give out to kids. She finds, "Weekends are a real struggle for many families and, come Monday, there is not much food left. This means some kids don't go to school on a Monday as they have no lunch."

When it comes to donations, Diana only asks that people give what they can. "It does not have to be a lot – it could be a loaf of bread or a can of spaghetti, just something as it all helps."



Diana's street *pātaka*

The support Diana has received from her local community has been great, with many people regularly donating, some as far away as Australia – "There are some people with big hearts in this place."

“ There are some people with big hearts in this place ”

"I am really thankful for the people in my community who donate, especially local New World owner Eric Rush who has gifted so much food to help feed this community."

The fruit and vegetable donations are especially welcomed, says Diana, as they are often too expensive for struggling families to buy. "We get donations of cabbages, carrots, fruit, boxes of bananas. I put these in the fruit and vegetable baskets on the fence and it's great to see kids grab some fruit on their way to and from school."

When asked what the most requested food item is, Diana says milk powder is always number one for the kids. "It's surprising but, like all kids, they just want to be able to have their cereal in the morning and a cup of tea."

- If people want to donate to Diana's *pātaka*, the best way is to purchase the items through Countdown or New World's online shopping websites, and enter the delivery address – 34 William Jones Drive, Otangarei

## Every community needs a Natalie

Every community needs a Natalie, and Mosgiel's Murray Street community has struck gold with theirs. Natalie was a driving force behind last year's Murray Street Block Party... and she's a driving force behind this year's bigger, better, brighter one.

She has helped to build up volunteers, get the local kindy on board and delivered hundreds of pamphlets to make sure that the Block Party lives up to, and exceeds, the high standard set by last year's event. And that goal looks to be right on track.

2



Natalie and Azizah

Natalie successfully applied for a \$500 grant from the Dunedin City Council. Three hundred dollars of that grant has covered barbecue food, drinks and surprises for the children from Countdown – and the balance has gone towards gifts and chocolate for the chocolate wheel for children. Housing New Zealand and Natalie have also enlisted the support of a long list of sponsors.

Given Natalie was instrumental in the success of last year's event, the positive feedback from the community has spurred her on.

“It was great to see that the Syrian refugees who didn't have English wrote their feedback in Arabic”

As she says, “We put some paper out for people to give us feedback and ideas, and lots of families said how great it was and how much fun they had. The kids who couldn't write drew pictures, and it was great to see that the Syrian refugees who didn't have English wrote their feedback in Arabic.”

So, what is the motivation behind Natalie's drive? “We wanted the community and Murray Street to have a better name than it has in the past, and we wanted everybody just to get to know each other and work together as a street.”

Like most successful ideas, it's simple and direct.

Natalie's not one to rest on her laurels. As a matter of fact, ‘rest’ is a word you'd struggle to find in her vocabulary – this sole parent's five children, ranging in age from 13 to 3, make sure of that. Add to that her unflagging efforts to improve and enrich her community, and there are not too many spare moments left.

“ Like most successful ideas, it's simple and direct ”

“You just make time,” she says in her typically modest fashion. “I help a lot down at the kindy and try to go to school trips... I just like doing it. I like helping people and I like being busy.”

And her busy schedule is set to become a whole lot busier, thanks in part to the local community profile she's earned for herself, with Natalie being offered a part-time job with the East Taieri Church.

The 300 invitations have gone out in both English and Arabic (to reach the refugees who've recently settled in the community). The food, drink, fun and entertainment are all organised – all that's left is for Murray Street community residents to come along and have a family fun time. And they'll also be helping to celebrate Natalie's daughter's eighth birthday.

With Housing New Zealand's help, Natalie is determined to make this a real family festive occasion and just as determined that it should be stress free for everyone who comes along, so it's all free, thanks to the huge level of support given by a long list of sponsors.

- Sponsors for the Murray Street Block Party include: Bidfood, Blend, Countdown Mosgiel, Good as Gold Mosgiel, Harraways, Harvey Norman, Highlanders, Kmart, Leap Dunedin, Living N Party, Made, Mitre 10 Mega, Monarch Wildlife Cruises, MTF, My Mate John (Furniture Company), Nood, Ocho, Orokonui Ecosanctuary, Paper Plus (Mosgiel), Pizza Bella, Pulse Energy, Rialto, Soap Heads, Stirling Sports, Taieri Gorge Railway, Taieri Rotary, The Warehouse, Video Tech, Wals

## Growing a sense of community

3

When a group of people living in a Housing New Zealand neighbourhood in central Auckland came together one hot summer's day, the plan was to build a shared garden. But what they created was something far greater.

The shared garden has led to a greater sense of community and collaboration between neighbours. It has fostered a sense of pride and accomplishment, and provided an ongoing source of nutritious food for the residents and their neighbours.

The idea for the garden came from one of Housing New Zealand's case managers, Marianne Halaar, who had worked closely with many of the tenants at the Auckland complex. Marianne says some of the tenants had never planted a garden from scratch before but were keen to learn.

Before planting day, planter boxes, organic garden mix, plants (flowers, vegetables and herbs), seeds, tools and garden seats were bought and supplied by Housing New Zealand. Tenants tidied up around the complex, including weeding the communal areas.

Tenants from four separate buildings joined in to help with the planting and Marianne described there being a real “buzz” in the air as everyone saw the garden come to life.

As well as being stoked with seeing all their hard work come together in overflowing planter boxes, the gardeners were also excited about the healthy, fresh food they could harvest and eat in the future.

Following the day of hard *mahi*, Housing New Zealand hosted a barbecue. One resident said that working together in harmony on the garden day was one of the happiest times in their life. Others said they felt a real sense of pride in their achievement, and felt that community spirit was alive and well.

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The garden group continues to grow from strength to strength, with new members joining all the time. The group is also responsible for maintaining the gardens and ensuring they continue to thrive.

“It’s all part of building a sense of community where people like where they live and get on with their neighbours, which is the outcome we wanted,” Marianne says.

In another part of Auckland, Housing New Zealand tenant Noel Le Noel is growing 23 different fruits and vegetables in a small

garden at the back of his unit. He doesn’t have a lot of space to work with, but he produces a bountiful harvest that he shares with his neighbours.

“ Noel’s passion for gardening began a few years ago when he was diagnosed with lymphoma and started researching natural remedies ”

Noel’s passion for gardening began a few years ago when he was diagnosed with lymphoma and started researching natural remedies. He read that eating chillies may help with some types of lymph node cancer so was willing to give it a go, in addition to chemotherapy and radiation.

“At one time, I was growing 14 different types of chillies, from very mild ones to the really hot ones,” Noel says.

Noel’s cancer has been in remission for seven years and he feels the chillies helped. Since his chilli-growing days, he has managed to keep his green fingers busy.

“I grow just about everything in my garden,” he admits. “You name it and I probably grow it.”

Noel gives away any vegetables he doesn’t need to neighbours and friends – “Fruit and vegetables are really expensive to buy so, if I can help out, I always will.”

In his spare time, Noel uses his many creative talents to make garden ornaments, which he paints and decorates with paua shells and beads.

In recognition of all his hard work, Noel received a Housing New Zealand Garden Award. It’s hoped that Noel’s initiative inspires others to have a go at gardening and growing food for themselves, their *whanāu* (extended family) and neighbours.



Shared garden in central Auckland

4

## Remaking and giving back

Wellington-based charity The Common Unity Project Aotearoa has helped a Housing New Zealand tenant find purpose and use her skills in a sustainable way.

Based in Fairfield, Lower Hutt, The Common Unity Project has been supporting locals since 2012 by growing food, providing meals and, from their community hub The ReMakery, offering people a place to share knowledge and skills.

A Housing New Zealand tenant, Linda, is one of the volunteers at The ReMakery. She says the Common Unity Project Aotearoa has given her friends and a reason to get off the couch everyday – “I’ve smiled more here than I have in the past ten years.”

“ I’ve smiled more here than I have in the past ten years ”

An experienced sewer, Linda repurposes old fabrics at The ReMakery and turns textiles into handbags, reusable lunch bags and the charity’s famous Shirty Shoppers.

“Before I came here, I was so depressed. I sat on the couch and knitted 100 jumpers. But when I found this place, I had a reason to get out. I just love it here – it’s what I do now.”

The Common Unity Project Aotearoa Project Coordinator, Julia, says the charity’s success depends on its people and the value of reciprocity.

“The Common Unity Project Aotearoa is not a service, we are about giving and receiving. For Housing New Zealand tenants, that is very safe and it makes them feel supported and needed.”

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The Housing New Zealand Hutt Valley Area Manager, Alice, agrees and says community groups like these are crucial when building vibrant, healthy communities.

*The ReMakery’s experienced sewer, Linda*



“The support and sense of purpose the Common Unity Project Aotearoa gives our tenants is truly life changing, not just for them but also their *whanāu* (extended family).”

“We want our tenants and *whanāu* to live well in our homes, and a key part of this is enabling and fostering connectedness with their local community. Therefore, we work very hard to encourage and put our tenants in touch with groups or services that can help them.”

■ Find out more on Common Unity Project Aotearoa’s website: [www.commonunityproject.org.nz](http://www.commonunityproject.org.nz)

## From Christchurch, with thanks

Two of Housing New Zealand staff have been instrumental in helping the HNZ community navigate the terror attacks on two Christchurch mosques. As a show of gratitude, each was gifted some *pounamu* (New Zealand stone pendants).

Ahmad and Mohammed were hurting – for their friends, their Muslim community and New Zealand. It was a moment where all would have understood the need for time away from work. Instead, the pair, ordinarily based at Housing New Zealand’s Wellington and Auckland offices, did the opposite. They jumped at the chance to travel to Christchurch and make a difference.



*Mohammed chats with Liz about the pounamu*

Ahmad would eventually learn two of his friends were victims of the terror attacks on Masjid Al Noor and Linwood Masjid. For Mohammed, like many, there was a sense of loss in a community with which he was closely connected.

“It’s not just the Muslim community but everyone else is finding it difficult to digest this, and just a simple act of kindness – just coming up and talking to someone – [makes a difference],” says Mohammed, Customer Support Advisor at HNZ.

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5

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"We've had friends and Muslim colleagues in Christchurch who've just got random hugs, you know, from strangers. That, in itself, shows who we are as New Zealanders. We're kind, caring people."

Over two weeks in Christchurch, the pair worked with staff to help them support grieving tenants. Four Housing New Zealand families have had to come to terms with the death of loved ones.

Ahmad and Mohammed also gave presentations about Islam to those working in the Christchurch office. It was a chance to share their culture and beliefs, and both identified the positivity that could come from a moment of such darkness.

“ There'll be the sadness, the anger, but... ” he pauses. “ We will learn from this that to get to know everyone is a lot better ”

"[At Housing New Zealand offices] you'll see people of different races, different nationalities," says Ahmad, Capacity and Availability Manager. "This is about opening up ourselves to other cultures as well. This is one of the better outcomes of this whole event."

"There'll be the sadness, the anger, but..." he pauses. "We will learn from this that to get to know everyone is a lot better."

Liz, Assistant Regional Manager for the Wellington and Southern region, says Mohammed and Ahmad "truly

epitomised" Housing New Zealand's values.

"Their patience, kindness and compassion for our tenants, our staff and the wider community, was astonishing."

Both Ahmad and Mohammed remain humble about how they have impacted staff and customers affected by the attack. Each is grateful for the opportunity to make a difference.

If Mohammed could ensure people took one message away from his work in Christchurch, it would be for them to 'find out just a little bit' about Islam. That went for people of all cultures and beliefs.

"It doesn't have to be a lot, just enough for you to understand and be able to have a dialogue with a Muslim colleague, Muslim friend or someone who's been affected."

(left to right) Area Manager Tim, Assistant Regional Manager Liz, Customer Support Advisor Mohammed and Area Manager Fraser



Regional Manager Jackie, right, gifted Ahmad his pounamu

