



Chris (centre) with other founding members of a local support group for fathers Alfred Ngaro and Jack Scanlan.

Local opportunities open up leadership potential: Chris' story.

Initiative: Glen Innes Family Centre

Theme: Leading in and leaderful

Chris Makoare has lived for 30 years in Glen Innes, where he is now a community leader. He is a solo dad who has four children aged 17 to 25, all of whom attended Glendowie College where Chris worked for eight years as a Sports Coordinator. Chris has been manager of the Glen Innes Family Centre, a local social service provider, for the past two years. He's been active in a parent and youth network and was trained as a community facilitator for the Tamaki Transformation Programme. Chris takes part in Hunga Tiaki, a Maori leadership group, and was instrumental in forming Just 4 Dads, a men's network group, and as a mentor for a young dad's group. Chris is also a member of Mens Caucus, which is attempting to create a mens safe house. His priorities are to help create a safe, caring community. Chris has not always been a local leader, and this is his story of change.

It was many years ago when I found myself standing looking out the window of my state house in Glen Innes. From the window looking across my backyard to Half Moon Bay I saw the dog kennel. Then I saw my dog looking back at me and I remember how sad she looked. In this moment I realised I'd been treating her really badly, and more than that, I said to myself 'I treated my wife even worse than my dog'.

I went outside, across the backyard to the dog kennel. I let my dog out and proceeded to demolish the kennel until it was no more. I took my dog back inside the house, gave her a bath and let her roam inside, warm. And, so my home then became her home.

The following day I planted a rose and cared for it every day after that as I now cared for my dog. I didn't know it then, but roses need a lot of tender care; constant pruning and delicate watering. It was my elderly neighbour who taught me these caring and loving skills.

Over time my dog had a deservedly good life until her very end. When I buried her I replanted the rose bush on her grave in my yard as a constant reminder to me of our past lives and how we had changed and grown together. Through those memories I have realised I have evolved into a patient and approachable person. I am more caring and understanding, especially for my children.

It was on this path of evolution and through the love for my children that my life started to open up. At this time of self discovery, which started when I demolished my dog's kennel, I wanted to be a big part of my children's lives. Upon reflection I realised although I was working to provide financial stability for my children they were missing the supervision and emotional support required to nurture their overall needs. I made a tough decision to leave work and register for the Domestic Purposes Benefit. I felt I needed to "be there" before and after school for my kids.

So I started dropping the kids off at school in the morning, and picking them up after school. It meant I was spending a lot more time at the school, and started to volunteer for school outings and coaching sports teams. One day the school principal approached me and said 'you spend so much time here I might as well give you a job'. So I started some part-time work in a teacher aide role. I supervised children on school camps, day outings and sports events. I met and connected with so many other parents that I would never have talked to before. I was starting to enjoy myself again and after a bit more time the principal offered me a full-time role at the school.

More time passed and my children grew up and went from primary school to college. My desire to continue on a path of self growth gave me strength to apply for a role at their college as a sports coordinator. This opportunity also meant I could still be with them before and after school hours. With no formal qualifications or education (I left school at 15) I honestly believe the only reason I got the job was because of the reference from the principal at my kids' primary school who gave me a chance in the first place.

Life continued and I met more parents, more students and more connections with my community in Glen Innes. I also did a part-time stint as a teacher aide in a decile one primary school and it opened my eyes to the difference and inequality that existed in our community, our schools and our homes. My desire to change this inequality around me was born. I was a changed person, a changed man, because of the life opened up to me through being involved with my children's lives. My children are all grown up now, but I still hold the passion to make a change. This passion for change and support from my local connections I had made over the years helped me hold the courage to apply for so many different roles.

As a result I am now the manager at the Glen Innes Family Centre, and among other titles I hold was also recently elected as a member on the Auckland Council Maungakiekie-Tamaki Local Board. It is through these positions that I can continue to serve my community and make positive differences around me. One of my most proud actions of change is helping to create a local men's network group, Just 4 Dads. This group is about providing support and mentoring for dads who find they are struggling to be the fathers they want to be. I know what it is like to be in that position.

I also believe that these attributes are strongly aligned to Christian values. During this journey my faith has helped and supported me and my family. It has strengthened my values;

- Integrity
- Fellowship
- Family
- Love
- Honesty
- Repentance
- Caring
- Hope and connection

I am grateful for the Christian values that have been strengthened through my religion. Without these values being fostered the final outcome, or personal change, would not have been possible.

Although people will know me for the many hats I now wear, they won't know the stories under the hats. I remember that day standing at my window so clearly. It was a painful time for me, but it led me here today. To a better place.

This is a poem written by Chris which accompanies his story.

EASTSIDE

I'm a Maori boy from way back in time,
I'd even say I'm still in my prime.
Crossfield, Mt Taylor were there in my time,
life was a little different in 69.



We grew up with the strap on da hand in primary,
When you got to college it was the cane from behind.
I'd say I learnt my lessons of life on da streets,
school wasn't for me, too smart you see.

'Been there done that' was the motto back then.
When I say bin there, done that I mean it for sure.
You ain't seen nothing till you been in my shoes!
A load of lessons can be learnt from my life,
The tattoos are there still to remind of my past.

Mistakes galore were made in my teens,
There on my arms where still they sit.
Life can be good when you're young and smart,
Clever and quick, you think you all that.

Let me tell you all with those plastic ears,
To learn is to listen and always be there
For the people who care whether you like it or not.

Look behind at the losers I thought had my back,
Left sprawled in the dust of my almighty wake.
Took a long time to see life ain't that short,
Could of got so much more if only I thought.

If I had listened and learnt from those in the know
Life could have been better a long time ago.
Put my life on the good tracks, new engine and all,
Straight and true she runs as you can see true and blue.

What you think and what you say are two different things
and some things should not be said,
some things that are written aren't meant to be read .

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Intent: To be a better father and have a deeper involvement with his children's lives. And, to be a better local citizen and contribute to local neighbourhoods and communities in a positive way.

Key Learnings

- Take responsibility for your actions and who you are. Self reflection can be painful and difficult, but you have to be brutally honest with yourself and what needs to change if you are actually going to change anything at all.
- Our children need our love, support and total involvement in their lives. They may be embarrassed by us at times, but they will always respect and love us back if we are involved with their lives. To be "good role models" we actually need to role model the behaviour and values we want to see in them.
- Everyone has something to teach others, and everyone has something to learn from others. My neighbour taught me how to care for a rose bush. Simple things like pruning, watering, etc. If I had never taken the time to learn from her I would never have been able to use these caring skills in other parts of my life.
- Schools are a great place to make a difference, and it is not only the students who benefit. Parents, teachers, and the whole community also benefit.
- Give others a fair go, and a chance. I probably didn't deserve it, but by getting a fair go and a chance at my children's school I gained the strength and confidence to keep on making better informed decisions about my life and my children's lives.

Key outcomes

- An action of change needs to be ongoing, and built upon. My first action of change to demolish the dog kennel was symbolic, but it would just have represented a smashed up kennel if I didn't keep making changes in my life. One choice, or action, or thought, needs to lead to another, and these actions need the support of others around you. With a little help from each other, from organisations, we can make bigger actions of change. I am still changing and my passion for positive change is still strong.
- By "getting involved" with my kids I became a "better dad", and today that has led me to mentor other dads in my community. At the Glen Innes Family Centre we have a dad's group who meet to not only share stories and support each other, but we offer them very real tools to be a positive part of their children's lives.
- Relationships that started with my neighbours, with other parents, with the wider community helped me to my current role as a leader in the community. I have the confidence and ability to work with people on the ground and also advocate for my community needs on a higher level, at a local and national political arena. I can hopefully influence, or at least be at the table, when decisions are made that affect my community.

Contact

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Story by Chris Makoare with Candice Thum, **May 2012**