

Content Warning: This interview has mentions of sexual violence and suicide.

Huia O'Sullivan



Ko wai koe? A brief history on you! How you got started on your mahi, what are you working on?

Ko Taranaki ahau, although I was raised in Whakatāne.

I am now the executive director for Ngā Rangatahi Toa, an organisation that works with youth from South Auckland and uses creative workshops and self-care strategies to engage them with education and other opportunities, and make pro-active plans for their lives. When I was younger, my mother was working at the Whakatāne Youth Centre, and I worked under her and the experience kind of opened my eyes to a whole lot of things, including the pathway of where I was headed if I didn't sort out a number of things in my own life.

A lot of my issues were centred around trauma that I experienced as a young girl of the age of 7 in terms of sexual abuse. As a teenager, I had gotten in trouble with the law and was placed on diversion. I knew I had to sort myself out, and I saw how my mum's work was helping a lot of other kids envisage more positive futures for themselves. So my mahi started back then, and now I've been working with young people for the last 22 years to create safe spaces for young people, and to use my voice to advocate on their behalf until there able to find their own voices. This is because of what happened to me when I was little - I never felt that anyone actually listened to me or kept me safe.

As I've gone through the years I've done various roles, all of them working with young people. I became an outdoor instructor to begin with, and as I started to get into my 30s I recognised that I needed to retrain within social work to ensure that I had best practice.

Growing up in Whakatāne, too many of us were touched by youth suicide. One of our strategic objectives for Ngā Rangatahi Toa is reducing youth suicide. We look at how we build protective factors and coping strategies for young people around resilience. Youth suicide rates are still horribly high; as an adult I have a responsibility to help ensure that I'm changing that trajectory for our rangatahi.

He aha te whāinga matua mō tō mahi? What is the main goal for you work?

The goal of my work is to always be able to advocate and create safe spaces so our rangatahi are able to flourish, shine, have rangatiratanga or enable them to be able to move towards self-determination - whatever that looks like for them. My role is to kind of protect them from the periphery and ensure they have the tools that they need. We bring in creative artists to work with our rangatahi to help them see the best possible version of themselves that they can be. That's how I see my role: using creativity to reduce youth self-harm, suicidal ideation, reduce recidivist offending, and create more opportunities for our young people.

Hei aha o whakaaro ai e pā ana ki te whakamahia e ngā wāhine i tō kaupapa mahi rānei? Why do you think it's important to have wāhine Māori in your particular industry/business?

It's important to have wāhine Māori in my particular industry, but what we don't have enough of is wāhine Māori in positions of power to create change. Some of our narrative internally is asking ourselves, 'are we good enough?' Of course we are, we just need to actually put ourselves out there to whakamana each other and ensure we're in positions of power to create change. We are excellent at what we do, but we lead in a different way. We lead with heart, and I don't necessarily mean that in a fluffy, soft way. I mean we lead with empathy, and we have high levels of emotional intelligence. Which, alongside our tāne - and don't get me wrong, there's a place for them - we have the ability to grow communities of people rather than individuals. We can focus on the collective for the betterment of whānau, hapū and iwi. It's really important that, if we look around at who our movers and shakers are within Aotearoa, there is a wāhine at the helm or close to the helm. It's vital that we have more wāhine in those positions of power to create change and move the dial for Aotearoa.

Ka huri koe, te whakakitenga ki mua he aha ngā wawata mō te āpōpōtanga o Aotearoa? Looking at the future, what are your hopes/aspirations for your industry and Aotearoa?

My hopes and aspirations for my particular industry when it comes to creative arts and youth development is that we have a professional benchmark of how we're actually engaging in safe practice with our most vulnerable communities. Whether that be young people, or homeless young people, we need to have robust aspirations and benchmarks for how we are bringing about systemic change to ensure that our most vulnerable are being cared for. For me, it's the hope that we're addressing our public policy around putting wellbeing at the centre of that.