



PYC's graffiti-busting teens take it to the streets

Boxing their way to a new outlook on life

"I believe that it is a good idea for people caught tagging to have to paint out their own tags and other people's as well. Equally, youth that have not been caught tagging will learn valuable lessons by doing the same. This will reduce their sympathy for tagging and enable them to see the issue from the point of view of the adult section of the community. I am sure that people who do tagging or condone it are largely unaware of how the sight of it and the effort needed to remove it affects other people. Whenever anyone does some work they develop a sense of ownership and will tend to protect what they have done."

Constable Noel Surrey, Pukekohe Police

When Moana Blake saw graffiti on the fountain in the Pukekohe Town Centre, she reacted. And it wasn't only because she hates graffiti – it was because Moana is the new youth worker at Pukekohe Youth Centre and she considers the town centre to be like the youth centre's front garden – it was personal.

The graffiti didn't stay long – to the great appreciation of people walking through the town centre, Moana and a group of teens from the youth centre went at the paint with rags and cleaning compounds and didn't stop until it was clean again.

"Some of the boys had been taggers and some weren't, but they would know who did the tagging," she explains. "At first they said 'we can't do this – it's hard,' so I said to them – these art works on the fountain were done by little kids, probably your brothers and sisters at primary. When you do this, you show that you are responsible and do good for the youth centre. They felt proud when they finished and had a better appreciation of what it's like to clean up after taggers."

To Moana, the youth centre is more than a drop-in place for kids after school. It's also a place they can call their own, to hang out with friends and play table tennis and pool. There, they get a

chance to practice and extend their artistic talents – on paper. Moana, an artist herself, initially brought in art supplies from home and was grateful for anything donated by local businesses. She was delighted to receive backing from Franklin Arts and Cultural Trust after several of the art works were shown at the recent Matariki Festival.

"I call art a colour therapy – it introduces the kids to new mediums, new ways of expressing themselves. They can progress in their own natural way, find their strengths and work with them. We're still on our little steps at the moment, but if we can get to just one kid at a time, it makes a difference."

The peer influence that is potentially so effective in keeping the town free of graffiti also works to bring more young people into the youth centre.

"They know when they come in here, there are rules – they're not visible, because they all know the core values that should already be in place through home. There are no gang colours allowed – it's a neutral place. There are quite a few programmes for the kids, including table tennis and pool tournaments, school holiday activities, awesome tramping trips – and fire dancing.