



We had a Tongan comedy group here – that was hilarious, and it brought Tongan youth into the centre. Because the role of family is so important with teenagers, there are programmes for parents organised by Helen Pulman. These including Positive Parenting, Back to Basics and Anger Management and Safe Relationships for Men.”

Boxing is the latest attraction for the youngsters, and is proving to be hugely popular. Trainer Wilz Ormsby is in no doubt that giving teens a chance to take part in a training programme like boxing is vital.

“The boxing promotes health, confidence and wellbeing in the kids. Sometimes people say we are teaching them to fight, but any boxer will tell you that you can’t just jump in the ring and flail your arms around. It takes control and calm to keep the form and technique right. There is a lot of self-discipline involved. We are starting at the elementary level and will go through to advanced stages – then if anyone wants to take it forward, there are people I can refer them to for preparation for tournaments. But right now, it is giving the kids the feel of being part of a team and experiencing that camaraderie that is so important to young people. The main thing I like is that the older ones are starting to take on leadership roles – stepping up to help the younger ones. They weren’t like that in the beginning.

“The bigger kids have found that the smaller kids have more energy and can keep going longer, so that encourages them to push themselves a bit more and keep up. There are a couple of girls who can take the boys – they have the highest attendance

and I can see them improving because they listen and they try. I’ve noticed the punches in the punch pans are getting harder, as they all improve and gain confidence.”

Wilz knows how important it is for youngsters to steer into the right peer groups. He talks of how it was for young people growing up near Hastings, where there was a strong Mongrel Mob presence. Young boys drifted toward the gang because it was often the only male role model around. One of these youngsters decided to go instead to a local youth centre gym where he learnt karate. The instructor became a mentor, encouraging him to take up an apprenticeship as a personal trainer. Today that boy is qualified and works in Australia, living a very different life from that offered by the gang.

“There are good role models and I want to be one of those – a friend,” says Wilz, who recently switched from volunteer to new youth worker at the centre.

Training youth mentors – Big Brothers, Big Sisters - is top of the list for a new approach the team at Pukekohe Youth Centre have put together for an innovative out-of-school programme – at present a volunteer takes literacy and numeracy sessions for those who are effectively in a no-man’s land outside the education system. The programme invites the involvement of several key groups, including the truancy service, police, school and parents.

“Everyone deserves the chance to make a difference to their lives and their futures,” says Moana. “Kids who are at the youth centre are gaining a lot and are less likely to be out getting into trouble.” □



Moana with Helen Pulman



Trainer Wilz with young boxer

