



“Never feed a starving man but teach him how to fish” – Gandhi

Growing more than trees at Te Whangai

Take one bare paddock and a group of people with a vision – then add a lot of hard work and 18 unskilled workers over less than a year; this is the success recipe of Te Whangai Trust, creating a commercial nursery of 120,000 native plants - and much more. The nursery project near Miranda cuts across systems that have habitually locked people into cycles of unemployment and welfare dependence. It takes at risk youth, long-term unemployed, probationary prisoners, drug addicts and those with mental health problems for 12 months and literally gives each individual a unique place on this earth.

“People are our most valuable and undervalued resource,” says Adrienne Dalton, joint initiator of the project along with farmer husband Gary. “Creative and dignified management of our people resource is the key to Te Whangai Trust. The best way to nurture people is to get them out working with plants in a natural environment – we nurture people so they can nurture the environment. The emphasis is on the community taking responsibility for making our communities safer and offering a supportive and caring workplace, where everyone works together as a team and individual skills are encouraged. We have been told this model could change the welfare system as we know it, to one that expects all participants to contribute to the economy and allows them self esteem and dignity.”

Giving people a chance to work has huge benefits – the self esteem and confidence gained prepares nursery workers for employment elsewhere – so far, 13 have graduated to jobs but still retain a strong loyalty to the Trust. Every success story means a

person who will not be on welfare. People change here. They stop using their natural initiative “on the wrong side of the fence”- in illegal activities, meaning safer communities. The nursery offers a foundation for families at present lacking in basic skills, those in dire need, but not receiving vital services. Te Whangai cares about each of their workers - and they know it. Their response is a deep commitment to the work, a new understanding of a job “from the employers’ viewpoint” and appreciation of the genuine, supportive environment. Along with learning work skills, team members receive help with personal, medical and dental issues – many have serious eyesight and hearing problems. Some of the most important learning takes place at meal breaks, where everyone rosters to cook, learning about nutrition. People also open up and talk about their problems, as they realise they can trust those who guide them, and gradually, the positives in their lives replace the negatives. There is no shortage of workers – people turn up asking to work.

One 12 year old was brought by his father after being suspended from school, where he was violent and a danger to other children. Adrienne: “He was virtually illiterate. We taught him a tallying system and set boundaries. He was perfect. Another of our workers is 50 and is learning to read and write. He has been known to be violent, but is an absolute teddy bear with us. He knows we value him and his natural leadership skills have blossomed. Another real problem is the lack of facilities for men who are beaten by their partners – it is not acknowledged by society and there are no safe houses in our area for men. Many workers need the right people