



Sounds of Healing!



Singing with a group never fails to leave everyone feeling fabulous. That's how clients and staff feel every Monday after waiata practice at a Gisborne centre for people living with mental and physical disabilities. Clients, or whānau as they are known at the Vanessa Lowndes Centre (VLC), have been singing for five years and recently made their stage debut. *Words: Hayley Redpath. Image: Alexandra Green.*

Singing is good for the soul The Vanessa Lowndes Centre is about building confidence and preparing people with mental, physical or intellectual disabilities for independence and employment. The Centre's dedicated staff guide and nurture around 45 whānau through a wide range of educational and fun programmes and activities. One favourite is singing. VLC Manager Laura Biddle says singing delivers a host of physical and emotional benefits including improved mindset, confidence and self esteem. "While singing alone is good, singing with others can be even better". She says a significant barrier for people with disabilities can be the stereotypical assumptions and attitudes about what people can and cannot do." By encouraging singing and performance, VLC can create normal experiences for the whānau and improve community attitudes.

Mauriora! Numbers at VLC's Waiata Group practice are swelled by Turanga Health staff. John Pomana from Turanga Health is a guitarist for the group and says Waiata Group began as a natural addition to the te reo Māori lessons he was running at VLC. He believes strongly in the educational, therapeutic and healing powers of song. "Even the odd off-key note or wrong lyric can't detract from how good singing makes everyone feel." Whānau and staff leave the session uplifted. "I love seeing the enthusiasm and excitement they generate themselves. The ihi, wehi, and wana comes through. Its' about Mauriora!

On Stage VLC staff are always looking for ways to instil a sense of worth and wellbeing for the whānau and at the same time encourage the community to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. Inviting the Waiata Group to perform on stage at the Tamararo competition was a suggestion from the group's singing leader Mere Waihi. Mere says VLC and Turanga Health wanted to support the local event but "do you think we could find enough Turanga Health staff to be in the group to go on stage? No!" The idea was abandoned. VLC whānau never waived in their enthusiasm and a week before the March event a team was entered. John says it was important those on stage upheld their own mana and were treated with respect. When the Waiata Group walked on stage the crowd loved them and once the music started there was nothing but support and admiration. Guitarist Denzil Moeke said when Waiata Group member Bos Apelu unexpectedly presented a patu and delivered pūkana it was amazing!

Do you hear the people sing? Waiata Group's next performance is likely to be a Christmas concert for friends and whānau at the end of the year. Laura is in awe of the passion and enthusiasm shown by whānau, and thanks staff who have nurtured the group with their musical teaching. She says in the words of Ella Fitzgerald, "the only thing better than singing – is more singing!"

Bos Apelu

Powerfully built with an equally powerful voice Bos Apelu is an enthusiastic Waiata Group member. He was singled out to use his formidable voice and lead the group into *Taku Rākau e*, a mōteatea about a kuia returning to her homeland now bereft of her family. "I felt proud to do that," says Bos. Bos has Niuean heritage and says other family members sing well. He loved being on stage with the Waiata Group and smiles with delight when reminded he surprised everyone with his patu. "It felt marvellous." Advice from his waka ama coach to channel any nerves into the activity being performed kept him calm and he said the only thought going through his head was to make VLC proud.

Leanne Smiler

"It was the first time I had been on stage in front of everybody and I got the shivers," says 34-year-old Leanne Smiler who has an amazing set of pipes. Stage fright was out of the question "because I am a music lover and it was natural. The words came and they stayed." Leanne's singing ability was obvious to Mere who suggested to Leanne last year she lead a waiata called *Heke Tuna*. The song tells the story of the mysterious migrations of eels, and Leanne has made it her own. Her powerful soprano voice exploded over the group as she sang the first lines of the song on stage. "I know the song now and I know the tune," says Leanne. Leanne lives at home with her mother and comes to VLC every day where she is supported by her grandmother Queenie Takurua.

Queenie helps her with activities and personal care. She says her family is blessed to still have Leanne after a car accident nearly 10 years ago left her with neurological and physical challenges. Her singing voice never changed and they were proud when Leanne was on stage. "She is a survivor and we were so happy for her."