**Hariata Kahu, Drug & Alcohol counsellor: Belonging and connection**

A group of people sitting on a couch

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceWhile others watched lines grow at supermarkets as New Zealand went into its most recent Covid-19 lockdown, Hariata Kahu’s eyes were on the local bottle store. “The line at New World was fine. But our bottle store was fully out of stock.”

As drug and alcohol counsellor at Te Tai o Marokura health and social services in Kaikōura, Hariata sees people turn to alcohol and drugs in difficult times. “After the earthquake [in 2016] there were a number of people who were previous users who were coming back because they’d slipped up. And others then who were using alcohol to chill the trauma. The hardest is people who don’t want to be seen to be vulnerable and they do their best to hide it.”

She sees it also in Kaikōura’s periods of unemployment, especially when the town which depends on tourism has been cut off by the earthquake and Covid-19 restrictions, but also during the seasonal downturn in employment each winter.

“Jobs are scarce here anyway, and that idle time is when people will start picking up the bottle. Poverty and hardship would be the biggest thing. We’ve known since the 80s, poverty always leads to alcohol and drugs, and to violence, domestic violence and suicides. We’ve hit the top of the cycle again, we’re starting again from where we were in the ‘80s.”

Hariata’s mother Miriama Solomon started Te Tai o Marokura health and social services in response to the challenges of those times. Hariata herself dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but feels she was born to do her current work.

“Life sometimes chucks something at you and you go for it.” She was a youth worker with Te Tai o Marokura at a time when there were a lot of suicides among young people in Kaikōura.

“Alcohol and drugs were influencers, not the predominant reason but they were definitely involved.” She trained in addiction rehabilitation to save lives and found she loved it. “There’s some really sad situations, but I find it really rewarding.”

Sometimes her work includes accompanying people undergoing detox from methamphetamine, which can include supporting people at their homes around the clock. “I don’t have a magic wand that’s going to save their lives, that’s definitely up to the individual. But we can support them through it.

“When people have addictions and they want to give up or make a change, everything is so hard for them. So, it’s helping them to sort it out and to focus on one issue at a time. Of course, there’s multiple issues why people use. But it’s being there to support them to make positive moves.”

Often that involves identifying who else is available to support them. “Identifying really good support within their whānau, and also finding good networks external to that – friends, clubs, churches. Finding good support, people they trust and that they feel comfortable with. Ultimately the key to success is having that good positive support in place.”

Working in a kaupapa Māori service helps. “In Te Ao Māori, when you talk about the tapu of a person and addiction, it’s like there is a kink in the chain. For Māori, it’s about that connection to Papatūānuku, it’s about that connection to whakapapa. Everybody has a whakapapa, whether you are Māori, English, Japanese, it’s always about wanting that sense of belonging and connection.”

Hariata’s training was in the 12-step addiction programme which recognises a higher power. “I never push my faith on to people, but I always offer, ‘Would you like to start with karakia?’ and most people want something.”

She finds her own faith helps her get through some hard times. “It’s very emotional. People are sharing their darkest times in their lives with you and sharing their journey with you. There’s been situations I’ve been in where I’ve just asked the Lord to guide me. I think if I didn’t have my faith and my background, I probably wouldn’t be able to do the work.”

She says one of the biggest pressures on health carers is meeting the demand. “We are fortunate with Te Tai o Marokura that we are a multidisciplinary service. People may be referred to our service for alcohol and drug addictions, but you actually find that there’s multiple issues that this whānau might have, so we can refer them to others.”

She says the community can be supportive by providing more alcohol-free events. “Like if we could have alcohol-free sports – when the rugby game’s on, regardless of age, just don’t drink. If people want to have a drink afterwards, that’s fine. It would be a hard feat, but if we could do that, it would make huge changes. It would really show the community that we take this seriously.”