

# our valued roles

We all have dreams of the future, and nightmares too. As we age we know things are going to change, and not all of these changes will be positive. This is my nightmare.

Like most people I contribute in diverse ways to the lives of others. Our communities are enriched by our actions, as whanau, as committee members, mentors and coaches, through myriad roles on marae, and through sharing baking and crafts, skills and knowledge.

My nightmare is a future where I can no longer do any of these things. In this imagined future I have little ability to do more than sit and wait for someone to assist me. I have become a passive recipient of care.

This imagined future, one that can happen to any of us, is the reality for some isolated and vulnerable seniors and kaumatua, and for many rest home residents. The lack of ability to have an active role in the lives of others takes away our sense of purpose and belonging and can cause depression.

In my work in the disability sector I came to learn how contribution, both paid and voluntary work, is vital to people's self-image. When disabled people manage to get a paid job in the community, even just for three-to-four hours a week, they immediately change their sense of self.



They know this is a valued role. After all, they get paid, and their fundamental identity changes. On introducing themselves, they immediately let everyone know where they work. Our roles in community, whether paid or voluntary, give our lives purpose, meaning and value.

We have many roles as we move through life. Some are through paid work, others are through family: auntie, parent, son or daughter, cousin, or membership of a whanau and hapu. More roles come through participation in sports and clubs: rugby player, committee members. All roles bring both relationships and obligations.

As we age our roles change and for some newly retired people this is problematic. Some fill the gap by diverting themselves with overseas travel as long as deep pockets and good health prevail. For other people new roles develop. A parenting role is replaced by that of grandparent or people use the skills developed during a lifetime of work in voluntary roles or join a club.

I recently received an email from a new member of Eastern Bay Villages. He wrote: "This concept continues to attract me. For too long now, I've been telling myself that 'I need a project-reason for getting outta bed'. Strikes me that this service could answer such a search." It made my day to read this, as it encapsulates a key purpose of our organisation.

I recently managed a project in an Auckland rest home. I have some trepidation in using that term 'rest' as the manager was

A monthly series for seniors by Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages



## grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

clear that this word was not to be used in its name, but, in reality, this is a place where seniors live together during their final years.

They follow the innovative Eden Alternative, a United States initiative that works to eliminate the three plagues of loneliness, helplessness and boredom, which account for the bulk of suffering among our elders." (www.edenalt.org).

My role was to support disabled younger residents. They had held former roles such as manager or nurse, but severe physical disabilities led to them living in a rest home as young as 40. In spite of the best intentions of this innovative home, they were becoming passive recipients of care.

My role was to look beyond their disability, discovering their skills and abilities, likes and dislikes. Together we explored ways they might use these to contribute to their communities, such as joining U3A, or using their knowledge and skills in a community shed.

I arranged a course in teaching English as a second language. This gave them the confidence to support new immigrant primary school children. These residents had immeasurably better lives once they had an opportunity to use their considerable skills and talents to contribute to the community outside the rest home.

We can do something similar here. The skills we older people possess are in demand. Many younger people would like fluent speakers of te reo Maori to support their learning. And recently a Playcentre ap-

proached Eastern Bay Villages, seeking retired people willing to share skills such as knitting with the children and their parents.

So what plans do I have to avoid my nightmare? I guess it depends on what impairment I might develop. If it's physical and I end up in a wheelchair, then I could talk on Skype with people throughout the world. There are websites now (e.g. www.italki.com) that connect people wanting to practise English with fluent English speakers with time to talk.

The future could be bleaker if I live with dementia. Yet, with some support, maybe I could follow in the footsteps of my mother in her last years, walking the beaches to clean up rubbish. She proudly wore her badge proclaiming her role as "Beach Warden".

*Following my last column on the new Disability and Age Friendly Advisory Group (now called Inclusion Whakatane), Whakatane District Council staff met with members. They were reassured that their blue line project to improve accessibility on our streets will be given the priority it deserves.*

*Also discussed was the importance of park benches having arms so seniors can not just sit down but also get out of them with ease. An Age Friendly town is in our sights.*

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