

ASB Community Trust's Māori and Pasifika Education Initiative.

The story of an ambitious and uncharted philanthropic journey in search of innovative proposals to address educational underachievement among Māori and Pacific community youth.



ASB Community Trust
Te Kaitiaki Putea o Tamaki o Tai Tokerau

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Rise UP Trust

Rising up for such a time as this to lift the educational achievement of Māori and Pacific children

Rise UP Trust Contributors and Frances Hancock, November 2010

Committed to student achievement

Introduction

Rise UP Trust began life in a garage, as Auntie Sita's Home School. Today, it is a thriving charitable trust with a strong organisational culture and a pool of talented people, comprising six board members, three full-time staff and a number of willing volunteers. Registered with the Charities Commission and currently located in offices in the Pacific Business Trust premises in Otahuhu, Auckland, Rise UP Trust is determined to lift the educational achievement of Māori and Pacific children in South Auckland communities, and eventually to reach others further afield through replicable programmes.

A strategic partnership with ASB Community Trust (the Trust) has had a dramatic impact on Rise UP's organisational development and programme delivery. Rise UP is one of seven innovative projects funded through the Trust's Maori and Pasifika Education Initiative (MPEI), receiving significant funds over a number of years to enable programme delivery to Pacific Island and Māori families and children. The aim of MPEI is to fund educational initiatives that are not only innovative and sustainable but also replicable, so that an early investment of philanthropic funds can, in time, extend its reach across the region and nation.

This story tracks the transformational journey of Rise UP from its early beginnings through to its current form, including factors influencing its development, key contributors, programme developments and impacts, engagement with a rigorous grant-making process, some lessons learned and future horizons.

The early days

The story of Rise UP connects with our personal stories and is grounded in our shared commitment to social justice. Here, Sita Selupe shares her story of the early days of Rise UP, which began life in her garage as Auntie Sita's Home School.

Sita recalls the early days

In 2003, I found myself shipwrecked. I had lost two children in two years and needed to focus on something life-giving.

A new model of teaching and learning was being introduced at the Mangere primary school, where I was employed as a teacher. At the time, the Inquiry Learning Model was considered the cutting edge of teaching and learning. Teachers were encouraged to take risks and explore new approaches.

In teaching my students about the importance of cleaning up the local creek, I found myself considering new ideas and trying out new ways of talking with the children. I witnessed the power in this new approach and was excited by a new sense of possibility. The model transformed my teaching and challenged my thinking about how children should be learning.

In 2004-2005, I took time off to care for a new baby. I love teaching and missed having students around me. I began to teach my own children on a Saturday morning, using the Inquiry Learning Model. I became aware that some of my nieces and nephews had learning needs; they had witnessed some terrible things and were fragile. I wanted to reach out to them and invited them to join Auntie Sita's Home School, which I began to operate from our garage in February 2006.

Children and parents relished the practical and inclusive approach. At Auntie Sita's Home School, we worked on real problems that related to their lives; they liked learning with their family and were highly motivated. Some parents claimed their children were up and ready by 7am each Saturday.



How Rise UP Trust got its name

In September 2006, Sita's young cousin, Riki Harry Mafi (pictured), was killed in Otara during a terrible spate of violent incidents in South Auckland.

The week of Riki's funeral, the media came to town asking questions. Sita recalls, 'I felt rage burning inside me and was compelled to ask family members tough questions: Could Riki's death have been prevented, and if so, how? Could this happen again to one of our other boys, and if so, what are we going to do to stop it? We began to examine what we were doing with our boys and made a commitment to do some things differently.'

In memory of Riki, we renamed our fledgling Home School enterprise as Rise UP, bestowing his death with a sense of meaning and fostering hope for the future of our children. 'We have to Rise UP on Saturday in memory of Riki,' we told ourselves.



'Initially, we averaged eight to twelve children per session and the numbers increased over the year, including new faces and children from blended families. In total 20 Māori, Tongan, Niuean and Samoan children experienced our home school in its first year.'

On the road of transformation

A number of events set Auntie Sita's Home School on the road of transformation. In mid 2006, Sita's path crossed again with Cecily Taufelila, another trained teacher passionate about raising the educational achievement of Pacific and Māori children. Cecily immediately offered to contribute on a voluntary basis. Her presence brought valuable expertise to the home school and her humility and generosity led her willingness to do any task asked of her.

Ideas discussed at an educational conference led by Ruby Payne offered another pillar to inquiry learning and our developing project. Payne is a North American educator with over 40 years experience working in education with children from a background of poverty. Her wisdom resonated strongly with our thinking and her powerful stories offered practical teaching strategies and learning frameworks we could use with children.

Other research also played a part in our emergent thinking. A study of inmates in an Alaskan prison showed that by eight years of age three quarters had been identified as having learning needs. That study, and others like it, suggested that learning had a big part to play in determining the future opportunities and pathways of children.

Community interest reinforced the significance of what we were doing. Sita recalls, 'I felt deeply concerned about how hungry our Pacific Island and Māori children were to learn but saw many of them becoming lost in the state education system. Just when I decided to ring Auntie Sally Ikinofa, a respected community leader, to share my concerns with her, she called me. She knew a dynamic community leader called Lydia Sosene, who was also passionate about finding a way to lift the educational outcomes for our youth.' When approached, Auntie Lydia relished the opportunity to help develop a programme for our Pacific Island children.



A humble request showed the way forward, when a mother asked Sita this question: 'Would you show me how to do what you're doing in your garage classroom so I can help my kids?' 'I'd love to,' Sita replied. 'Can I invite my friend,' she pressed. 'Yes, of course,' Sita responded. In November 2006, 12 women gathered for a one day workshop in Clendon Library. The focus of the workshop was 'How to do inquiry learning with your children'. It was a wonderful workshop in which we showed Mums how to enjoy and engage the imaginations and talents of their kids. Afterwards women kept asking, 'Will you follow up with more workshops?'

Looking back, the lessons of church were never far from our minds. As Christmas 2006 approached, Sita told anyone who would listen, 'There's a need out there among our Pacific Island and Māori children to achieve educationally.' 'Have a holiday and wait until next year,' she was told. 'But I'm not sure we're supposed to wait,' Sita replied. A persistent conviction said it was time to get started, knowing that 'Opportunities only last in the life time of that opportunity.'

Establishing an organisation and developing programmes

In March 2007, we (Sita and family members, Cecily, Sally and Lydia) decid-

ed to tend our own vineyard. With the help of Frank Stowers, an experienced consultant, we established a legal entity in the form of a charitable trust named Rise UP Trust. We realised it would take time to grow our initiative but figured that our programme must be good if people kept asking for more. We needed resources to extend the programme in the community and wanted to invest time and energy in developing it further.

Continuing to act in a voluntary capacity, we met whenever we were free and created six modules from the material used in the one day workshop. A group of eager parents – six mums and one dad – became the control group for our community research. Interest was high and we carried on the parent workshops, offering one at the Clendon library and another at the Mangere People's Centre. These early workshops allowed us to try new ideas and evaluate our approach, as we worked closely with parents to give them tools for learning so they could help their children to find their genius.

As our programme began to take shape, we encouraged parents to, 'Do it for yourselves, with your kids'. In our minds it was important to foster a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the whole initiative so as to ensure sustainability. Looking back, the programme seemed to evolve more

quickly than the organisation. While there wasn't much structure, our aim was clear: 'Let's start small and respond to interest'.

Realising the need to upskill, Sita began attending management courses offered through UNITEC and in 2008 enrolled in its diploma in not for profit management. Sita recalls, 'I found myself among people who had been working in their communities for years. We all wanted to come to grips with the nuts and bolts of running an organisation. How do you do a funding proposal? What's a strategic plan? What are our legal obligations? What's the difference between governance and management?'

Rise UP gained funding to carry the organisation for six months. The funding covered facilitator fees, salary and operational expenses, and allowed us to deliver two more programmes in the first part of 2008. Looking back, we had an idea and got on with it, without fully realizing the scope of our idea and the organisational capacity needed to realise its potential. As long as people ask, we will respond, we said to ourselves, and when the need arises to extend our programmes, we will do our best to deliver.

Cecily resigned from her full-time teaching job and took up permanent part-time relief teaching two days per week. Cecily recalls, 'I wanted to dedicate myself more fully to Rise UP and part-time relief teaching allowed me to work three days per week on a voluntary basis'. Together, we (Sita and Cecily) worked to build the capacity of the organisation as well as to develop and deliver Rise UP programmes.

In 2007, Helen Robertson came on board to assist with administration. Helen had participated in our programmes and community research. Acting as secretary and treasurer, she played a major role in setting up our systems and coordinating events that would leave footprints on people's hearts.

A new door opens

In 2008, ASB Community Trust announced its Māori and Pasifika Education Initiative (MPEI). We knew immediately it was an incredible opportunity for a project like ours. The timing was perfect and we believed we were doing the kind of work that would interest the Trust. Until MPEI, we had found it hard

to fit into existing funding categories. Rise UP Trust was new on the scene with no track record. To our amazement, we didn't need a track record to apply for MPEI funding; we needed a compelling dream and a convincing business plan.

MPEI opened a new door for us. In February 2008, ASB Community Trust hosted its first MPEI fono in a church hall in Otara. Unlike a number of other participants, it was one of the first fono we (Sita and Cecily) had attended and we didn't know what to expect. We came from the classroom and fono was the kind of thing they did in community. Our first impression was that most fono participants had been working in community for many years and their organisations were well estab-

lished, whereas it was all new learning for us. To hear the journey of MPEI told by the Trust trustees and staff encouraged us to pursue this rare funding opportunity and, despite huge interest, we felt quietly confident.

Following the fono, the Trust called for a 400 word expression of interest with a deadline of mid April 2008. Our main challenge was deciding what to include in our expression and what to leave out. We knew what worked for our children and were confident that Rise UP was addressing a strong need in our communities. The stories of families taking part in our programme convinced us of its merits. Academic research underpinned the programme and an evaluation component helped to guide developments and ensure we remained on track. When

A vision of hope

In 2008 I said goodbye to a full time teaching salary so as to join Sita and others in establishing Rise UP Trust. It was hard at the time but I have no regrets. Through Rise UP, I've come to see hope and a great future for our Māori and Pacific families. I see an up-rising of our children, families and communities; I see our people being able to take up opportunities to do great things and make a valuable contribution to our families and communities. I see our youth succeeding in many fields, not just on the sports field or as music artists.

We are truly blessed to be working alongside our families. Many children and families in our communities experience the effects of poverty on a daily basis. Rise UP is committed to working with families in greatest need and making our programmes accessible to them.

Schools are under so much pressure and teachers often don't have the time to offer the individualized support and programmes that many of our children need. Rise UP allows us the freedom and flexibility to create programmes to meet individual needs and complement the work of schools.

Our families keep us on our toes and constantly remind us of what's important in life. Their courage to find ways to overcome daily hurdles and their enthusiasm to learn encourages our passion and commitment. At Rise UP we know what we're doing is important. We see the progress our families are making and feel excitement when children and parents consider new ideas and learn new tools to support learning.

– Cecily Taufelila



we submitted our expression to the Trust however, little did we know that so had over 300 others!

We passed the first hurdle and the Trust invited Rise UP Trust to submit a business case. We had never done a business case before and soon got stuck. The Trust was willing to walk this unknown journey with us however, and arranged for Rachael Trotman, an experienced consultant, to work with us to articulate and refine our goals.

Reviewing Board Membership

During this period, as we became more aware of conflicts of interest, we reviewed our Board's membership. Some family members stood down to avoid conflicts of interest and parents who had participated in the programme took their place at the governance decision-making table. The presence of parents on the board was crucial in our minds; we needed people who shared our passion for Rise UP and believed in the programme. We also believed strongly that a community initiative needed to come from and have the support of its own members. We knew we'd be swimming upstream without the support of community and shared a conviction that Rise UP would only go where families and communities want us to be. New board members brought a fresh sense of energy and passion, while experienced hands brought knowledge of our journey so far and a clear sense of purpose.

More hurdles to cross

We expected to hear the outcome of our MPEI application after submitting a business case to the Trust. Instead, Rise UP faced two more hurdles to cross: a 15 minute presentation to the MPEI Selection Committees and an organisational review conducted by external consultants.

The presentation was a daunting experience. Prior to MPEI, the only presentation we (Sita and Cecily) had delivered in public was to the Mangere Community Board, when seeking a grant for our programmes. With MPEI, the stakes were far higher. We felt anxious as we walked into the board room; for us it was like walking into Parliament. We were primary school teachers used to working with children. We had almost no experience of speaking in front of a large group of adults who were leaders in their fields. At the same time, we felt a sense of

What does Rise UP do? We build learning communities

In 2010, the Rise UP Trust rolled out the following programmes through its 'Building Learning Communities' Project.

- **Hearts & Minds** – This is our parents programme which consists of seven two and a half hour long modules. In this workshop we cover Learning Styles, Love Languages, Inquiry Learning using the Rise UP model, Thinking, Questioning and Culture. This programme is held during the week, usually 6pm-8pm.
- **Synergy** – 'Developing Beautiful Minds'. This is our family programme which consists of five sessions which are an hour long. Our three way learning approach is where the educators work parent and the child to develop thinking, and problem solving skills using real life parents and children experience quality
- **Kidz Club** – This is our children's programme – a seven week programme of an hour of power learning. We use real life scenarios to develop the children's thinking, questioning and problem solving skills. This programme is offered after school usually 4pm-5pm.



Modules cover a range of topics and reinforce key elements of the New Zealand school curriculum, encouraging parents and children to be active participants in the learning process. Our community-based programmes run during the school term. We advertise programmes through word of mouth, the Manukau Courier, brochures, church notices and flyers. We seek to create a warm and inclusive atmosphere, and foster a strong sense of belonging so that everyone feels welcome and encouraged to participate. Where possible, we translate the discussion or key concepts into the first language of participants so as to help them to understand the material. In our Hearts & Minds programme we end with a quote we heard from a Pastor that says: Information + Application = Transformation. We encourage our parents to apply the tools they have learnt over the seven weeks with their own children so they can set them up for success in learning.

Rise UP programmes harness inquiry learning and we explain the process as we go so that parents can understand the approach and use it with their children. The workshop process is interactive and includes small group work usually presented back to the whole group with laughter and story-telling. We use real-life scenarios to support learning and also introduce parents to current educational thinking, including the work of Edward De Bono (Thinking Hats), Ruby Payne (A Framework for Understanding Poverty), Margaret Underwood (Learning Styles), Gary Chapman (The Five Love Languages) and Benjamin Bloom (Blooms Taxonomy) among others.

Our 'Building Learning Communities Project' also offers face to face follow-up with families. Through follow-up, we provide parents with individualized support to maintain momentum, supporting families to apply the ideas and tools presented in our workshops to achieve their goals. Rise UP educators respond to questions, provide information and help to nourish relationships among families in local communities. Another important aspect of follow-up is to strengthen family connections with school. Rise UP educators advise parents on how they can access school support services such as resource teachers: learning and behaviour, encourage parents to ask questions at school and who to direct particular questions to.

privilege in being able to share our vision with others. Our vision represented hope in response to the grim statistics of the educational underachievement of our Pacific Island and Māori youth. From our point of view, the statistics represent the failure in the state education system to meet the learning needs of our Pacific Island and Māori youth. We believed that creative community initiatives, like ours, were needed to help address this problem, and knew Ministry of Education officials who agreed with us.

Following the presentation, Rise UP Trust underwent a comprehensive organisational review and the contributions of the Review Team were a blessing for us. The team understood the requirements of best practice and appreciated the challenges we faced in wanting to develop and deliver programmes that could be duplicated around the country. There were tough moments in the review process as we came to grips with what was required. For our idea to become a reality we needed systems and structure to focus and organise the people involved in our initiative.

At the end of the application process, the Trust informed us that our initiative had received approval in principle for an MPEI grant. We were overjoyed by the news and thrilled to be one of only seven groups to receive significant multi-year funding. The prospect of the Trust funding meant we could now put a more professional touch on our work and further develop and deliver our programmes. But first we had to prove to the Trust that we had sufficient organisational capacity to manage a large grant.

The setting-up stage

In 2009, we continued working from the garage and entered what we called the 'setting-up stage' of organisational development. We spent three terms developing organisational infrastructure and delivered no programmes until term four. The Trust allocated one of the Review Team, Dave Booth, to act as an external advisor and assist us in developing our work plan and budget for this stage of organisational capacity-building. We found it challenging to define our goals in more concrete terms and drill down to milestones. Our programme was raw but parent feedback convinced us the potential was big. We developed three distinct programmes based on



An external advisor point of view

My role as an external advisor was not only to ask difficult questions and lay down a challenge when necessary but also to provide useful advice, suggest other options and look-out for potential cost savings. MPEI groups were under considerable pressure, so it was also important to offer moral support and encouragement, provide a listening ear and draw attention to a big picture business development perspective.

With Rise-Up I felt compelled to nurture with a sense of urgency. I was keen for their initiative to work and totally confident they could rise to the challenge. When I work with young entrepreneurs I'm on the look-out for certain attributes. Have they demonstrated they can deliver? Are they coachable? Do they have networks and other ingredients? With Rise UP, the answer to these and other such questions was YES! Rise UP fitted the bill but needed organisational structure and business disciplines. Rise UP could have carried on without major funding, but their efforts would have been capped pretty quickly.

Looking back, I was a hard taskmaster. 'This isn't working for us,' Sita protested at one meeting. I didn't mind the push back however, because I could see the end game in sight and they were on track to win the game.

Along the way, I encouraged Rise UP to undertake a benchmarking exercise. 'Find an organisation that offers programmes like Rise UP's; meet them, ask them what they do and see what you can learn from them.' Rise UP identified Barnardos and Parents Inc., and off they went. In their favour, Rise UP could say, by way of introduction, 'We've been funded through MPEI for five years'. This kind of achievement earns credibility and possibly helped to spark interest in a meeting. Rise UP staff came back with a wad of information and an offer of office space! Benchmarking is a powerful tool and can provide a source of inspiration, collaboration and learning. Importantly, the benchmarking visits helped to increase Rise UP's confidence in the value of their own programmes.

– Dave Booth

our original six module programme and underwent professional development, including governance training.

We expected Dave's work with us to take six weeks but he stayed in the background for over six months! We were blessed with Dave; he challenged us to the core but also ensured we met our milestones. Sita recalls, 'Sometimes I had to cross my arms when listening to his advice; he was a hard taskmaster who never held back, but I understood that in order for the organisation to be built to last we needed the best working with us.' Frank Stowers remained a loyal supporter in the background, as did Ina Michael, who also provided valuable advice on organisational systems, policies and procedures and eventually took us over the finish line.

Some lessons of our journey

The unfolding story of Rise UP reminds us that only when we look back can we see how things were knitted together. A compelling vision can touch hearts and call people to action, but it takes commitment, faith and boldness to step out. Rise UP allowed our shared commitment to social justice to find tangible expression. Without faith, we would have crumbled. Our faith reminded us constantly that we were doing this work not for ourselves but for our communities. Boldness showed confidence in our vision.

Various hurdles in the grant-making process convinced us that Rise UP was ready for the challenge and had something to offer. But we didn't anticipate the time it would take to complete the MPEI application process, or the work involved in complying with funder requirements. We weren't afraid of hard work and knew it was necessary, but the workload took a huge personal toll on our voluntary labour and on the goodwill and commitment of our own families. As much as we wanted to, we couldn't stop our lives to focus fully on Rise UP and had to work hard to co-ordinate our time and efforts. Perhaps if we had known earlier what the Trust required, we could have managed our time better.

Access to consultants willing to work alongside us enabled Rise UP to take huge leaps in organisational development. Until we gained ASB Community Trust funding, we delivered programmes

How is Rise UP making a difference?

The Rise UP programme is relevant, logical and useful; it opened my eyes and my mind. I was given an opportunity to learn more about my children and their education, at the same time as learning about myself as a person and as a parent.

Before attending the Rise UP workshops, I had never read academic literature. When exposed to educational research, my response was, 'WOW! This is great; why doesn't everyone know about this research? Why don't schools share this knowledge with parents?' When your awareness is raised, it makes a big difference; you become more of a stakeholder in what happens in the lives of your children and in the educational outcomes they achieve.



I have six kids aged 6 to 15 years. Rise UP helped me to better understand and appreciate their differences. The Rise UP workshop enriched my relationship with my children and now I am more involved in their lives and their interests. My interest in their lives tells them that they are important in my life. Now I'm into planning their education and their individual pathways, instead of letting someone else do it. I'm looking ahead, instead of living day by day.

Rise UP values the role of parents in the education of their children. Everyone loves their kids and wants the best for them. The Rise UP workshop takes a parent's love to another level and shows you how to express it in other ways. The workshop also encourages parents to work with teachers and whoever else is involved with their child's education, such as a music teacher or Sunday School teacher.

The Rise UP workshop challenged and changed my thinking. We discussed learning styles and kinds of intelligence. I was raised with the idea that you were either intelligent or dumb. Rise UP introduced us to the work of Gardner, which focuses on the kind of intelligence you have. I remember saying to my husband, 'You have to go to the next workshop'. I knew the ideas about intelligence would help to change his thinking about himself. When he was child he was told that he wasn't smart. He grew up believing that everyone else was smarter than him. At Rise UP I was able to better appreciate that my husband has very practical hands and being able to do things with your hands is an authentic form of intelligence. Not everyone can use their hands the way he can; he's clever with his hands.

I encouraged Rise UP to hold a workshop in our community and, when they did, my husband went along. He loved the workshop, the atmosphere and the ideas; he loved learning with other parents in our community. We met people on our street we'd never met before and made friends with neighbours.

When I have a question about my child's learning, I return to Rise UP. My eldest daughter is interested in hairdressing and I went back to Rise UP to ask, 'What's the pathway she needs to take to pursue a career in hairdressing?' Rise UP gave me clear directions and useful contacts. I trust the personal approach of Rise UP staff.

My message to funders of Rise UP is that you're not only investing in a programme, you're also investing in people and their passions. From my point of view, it's a very good investment; I see and experience the effects on my family. My children and family are my focus and my touchstone. I'm not a trained educator but I've learnt many things I can teach my children and have developed many friendships through Rise UP. My experience encourages me to believe that Rise UP programmes will support many other families to make positive changes.

– Liz



Putting ideas into practice – a parent speaks

Rise UP taught us 'backward planning' as a way to encourage our children to be independent and to take responsibility for their learning. My daughter had two weeks to complete a project for school. I said to her, 'Let's do some backward planning so you can finish your project on time.' We started with the due date and worked back.

'What will you be doing the day before you hand in your project?' I asked. 'I'll be checking it,' she said. We talked about what resources she would need and how she would use them. We couldn't afford to buy the resources and she asked, 'Where else could I get them, Mum?' 'It's not all A to B,' I replied, and encouraged her to use her imagination.

My daughter realised she could reuse paper from another project and go to the library to gather resources. I helped her with the plan and then left her to it. My daughter knew what she was doing and handed in her project on time. It was so well done she received a principal's certificate at school assembly and her work is now on display in the school office.

Witnessing her efforts and knowing how much she put into her project, I felt so very proud of her achievement. Her achievement is a real testament to Rise UP. Before Rise UP, my daughter would have said a day before the project was due, 'Oh Mum, my project has to be in tomorrow,' which would have put stress on everyone.

My daughter now has another project coming up. 'Remember what we did last time,' I said to her.

voluntarily, raising small funds through garage sales, cake stalls, donations and by using free community venues. We desperately needed help with planning, budgets, policies and systems. We also lacked basic office equipment and for a long time operated with one computer between us, often taking two hour turns. Looking back, if we had had additional capacity-building funding earlier, we may have travelled more quickly.

Where things are now and what's on the horizon

When we began 2010, our aim was to work with 50 children and their families. It's now November and we're proud to say we've exceeded this expectation. We are currently working with 60 children and 32 parents. Rise UP programmes are being offered at two schools and two churches in Mangere and Manurewa.

Looking ahead, Rise UP Trust will continue to reach out to Pacific and Maori families living in South Auckland communities as well as stay open to new opportunities. We'll continue to deliver our three core programmes, develop programme resources, and provide follow-up through individualized support to families. We'll evaluate and extend our programmes and initiatives, responding to interest and feedback. Our board and staff expect to grow in their roles and find ways to learn together so we keep our vision alive and don't miss a step.

Conclusion

Our story so far spans a seven year journey in which vision, people, passion, faith, programmes, hard work, professional and organisational development, and a partnership with The Trust have woven together for a special purpose.

We feel a huge sense of relief, pride and accomplishment in what Rise UP has achieved. To begin with, Rise UP was a baby organisation and our team was so green. Over a number of months, our team jumped through hoops and over hurdles to establish an organisation from the ground up. There were challenging lessons to learn in the face of many ifs and uncertainties. Like many Pacific groups, our team offered huge vision and heart but struggled with the paper work required in developing a new organisation. When encountering

The role of the Aunties

Here Auntie Sally Ikinofa (the Board Chair) and Auntie Lydia Sosene (Vice Chair) reflect on the special role and responsibilities of the Aunties in nurturing community initiatives like Rise Up.

Aunties know exactly where they're coming from and have a track record others can rely on: We've been involved with our community in various sectors and in numerous projects for over 30 years. We totally support anything to do with education that will benefit our Pacific children. We put our children, families and communities at the centre of everything we do; improving their future is very close to our hearts.

Aunties carry a number of responsibilities. We're constantly on the look-out for projects and initiatives that can help our community. We contribute by sharing the knowledge and experience we've gained through all our involvements. We're always scouting for good people with whom we can work and who will fit into the groups we're working with. We try to fill gaps and pull together the right mix of people to ensure things get done properly.

Aunties make themselves available. We said to Sita, 'We're here if you want any help at any time and you can always rely on us turning up.' When people come and ask for help they know we will open our doors and open ourselves to all kinds of opportunities and requests aimed at helping our communities, which usually comes with sacrifices from another pending project.

Aunties slow things down to ensure things are done properly. Early on, we had to pull on the breaks to slow Sita down. We said, 'Sita, you need to document everything, such as the lessons you give to the children, attendance rolls, record of monies spent and where the funds comes from. You will need this information, when you're ready to grow the project and formalize its organisation. If you don't have this information on hand, you may in the future find yourself having to go back over old ground to get it.'

Aunties act with strong conviction and give sound advice. We've learnt over the years that when things get too hard, it's time to call in the aunties because they'll know how to help. Often we're the ones who advocate for a bit more balance and a little less haste, so that people don't over-do things or make poor



Sally Ikinofa

decisions. And if people ask for advice and we don't know the answer, we'll be straight-up rather than patronise them.

Aunties have a lot on the go. We often remind Sita, 'This is only one of the things on our radar. We're involved in so many things.' Our own commitments remind us to be mindful of all the other commitments that people have in their lives and to be careful not to overload anyone. When our energy is depleted, we step back and let someone else take up the work. In time, the commitments we've made to the organisation and our community restores our energy and challenges us to get going again.

Aunties learn by doing. There are so many ways to learn but for us it was all trial and error. This is called Life Experience. There were no yardsticks to go by, or a map to follow. We've learnt by doing, juggling family priorities with work commitments and community obligations. We've lived through a lot of close calls and learnt to rely on our intuition, gut-feeling and doing right by the community. We're always reminding Sita to, 'Get information from reliable sources and make sure you check it out because checking things out is a step you cannot miss.' And to the Rise UP Team, 'It's not how we started that counts; it's how we finish - our challenge is to finish well.'

Aunties walk alongside and provide support where needed. With Sita, at times the contact was frequent and at other times we gave her space to do her own thing. Now the organisation is growing, it's important for us to have regular contact (especially for Sally in her role as Board Chair) so that we keep ourselves fully informed and have time to think things through rather than react on our feet.

Aunties take time to think. We take time to think laterally and consider the implications and ramifications of certain options. Sometimes it's better to mull things over or else to ensure that everyone has had an op-



Lydia Sosene

portunity to contribute their points of view before determining which pathway to take. We tell Sita, 'Look, we know your excitement wants to hurry things along, but we need time to digest everything you put in front of us so we can make proper decisions.' Gut feeling is a good thermometer.

Aunties question everything. With Rise UP, we've drilled hard with critical questions and bounced ideas off one another. We're fearless when it comes to drawing a line in the sand, if one needs to be drawn. For instance, we challenged some of the Trust's deadlines and pushed back when pushed too hard. Many a time, we've seen aunties exercise the courage of their convictions. That's the horizon we're constantly reaching for and live in; it's trailblazing work.

Aunties think ahead. We're constantly thinking about what we need to put in place so the work continues. We know we won't be here forever and we want to be sure we leave a good foundation. We're always looking for future leaders, like Sita. Future leaders are marked by certain characteristics: They have leadership qualities; they often have a project they're trying to get off the ground that will help our people, and they're passionate about sharing their knowledge with others. We're constantly grooming future leaders to contribute to the organisation and take over from us.

Aunties exercise authority and judgment. We're always thinking always about what's best for the organisation and our people. We're not afraid to dig our toes in when required. We never leave things up in the air; we deal with friction and resolve disputes so that the work can carry on. When things go off track, we take a deep breath, step back and readjust our view. It's so easy to become too involved in detail, especially when the pressure comes on. We tell the Rise UP Team, 'We must always set our sights on the horizon we're moving towards and focus on the future of our children.'

the language of business and a whole new structure, we had to learn how to plough ahead and navigate a way forward. By working together and digging deep, our team found the confidence and courage to keep going. Laughter, faith and commitment washed away the friction and tears. We were determined to be accountable and earn MPEI funding, whatever it took.

We feel grateful for pathway we've taken and do not despise our humble beginnings. It was a huge and exhausting journey for everyone, requiring so many voluntary hours and pioneering boldness. But hard work and perseverance helped us to overcome times of adversity and taught us to appreciate what we now have: board members, staff and volunteers passionate about Rise UP, a solid organisation from which to operate, programmes that are making a difference, and a strong partnership with the Trust.

When hearing about Rise UP, so many have said, 'I've got some skills; I can help.' We're grateful to parents and others who have offered assistance, including providing refreshments for workshops, opening their homes for meetings, helping with funding applications, participating in business planning, co-facilitating workshops among other things. These acts of generosity remind us that we have to be a community who cares for one another. We have to live our vision by choice, be prepared to work hard and get on with the job. Our shared purpose is to become a beacon for others by striving for community.

It's important for us to record and keep our story alive so that we remain faithful to its memories and move forward towards our vision. We're convinced that Rise UP was created 'for such a time as this'¹ and has a unique role to play in working alongside Pacific and Māori families and communities to help lift the educational achievement of youth as well as nourishing family and community life.

We have so much more to learn on this unfolding journey but we're certain about one thing: our organisation is not about us; it's about our families and our communities. We're convinced many more Pacific Island and Māori youth will benefit from and be encouraged by Rise UP. Other Pacific groups are

now asking us, 'How did you go about establishing your organisation?' 'How did you achieve major funding?' We need to share the jewels along the way; there's a lot more to be told.

¹ From the Book of Esther

Pillars of Rise UP

- A social justice commitment to improve educational outcomes for Māori and Pacific Island children
- Relevant programmes and individualized follow-up
- An inclusive and flexible approach that works with the whole family
- Encouraging parents, children and educators to share with and learn from one another
- Passing on to families evidence-based research, knowledge and skills
- Creating, adapting and evaluating programmes as we go
- Being open to change the way we do things
- Going where families and communities want Rise UP to be.

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How is Rise UP making a difference – Fapiola's story

I have six children aged from 18 months to 10 years, and we live in Manurewa. I saw a tiny Rise UP advertisement in the Courier, offering a workshop to Māori and Pacific families on teaching our children how to learn problem solving and other skills. 'Here's something my kids can do together,' I thought.

I knew no-one at the first workshop I attended. It was a new experience meeting people who live near to me. The Rise UP facilitators looked after us, creating opportunities for us to connect with each other through ice breakers, other activities and a cup of tea. The participants were women and we created a woman space where we could express how we felt about issues. I looked forward to seeing the women at class and missed them when they didn't come. Someone always offered me a ride home.

Rise UP taught me that I can help my kids with their learning and gave me new ideas and practical tools. The Inquiry Learning Model blew my mind. I knew, for example, there was something different about each of my kids but I couldn't work out why my third child was not learning to read as quickly as my first and second. I wondered if he had a problem with learning. Rise UP helped me to understand the learning styles of my children and appreciate that my third child is a tactile, hands-on learner. I remember buying a multiplication chart and singing times tables with him, and thinking, 'Why doesn't he get it?' Then I got out the blocks and showed him physically and, eureka - he got it, just like that. It was like a light bulb going off. I now realize my fourth child is like my second; now when he brings home his homework I know where to go with him.

At Rise UP I am learning new languages. Learning 'love languages' has helped me to understand why my kids touch me all the time. I remember one day being with my son at the shops and he didn't want to walk home. Through Rise UP I'd learnt that his love language is physical. When he complained, 'I don't want to walk', I gave him a big hug and said, 'When we get home I'll make you weetbix and you'll feel better.' 'Okay mummy,' he replied, and started to walk home nicely. He needed attention. On the way home I kept distracting him by pointing to things, 'Look, son, there's an ambulance', and we had a good walk home.

Through Rise UP, I'm developing a better understanding of my husband's learning style and love language. I remember thinking during a workshop: 'No wonder we clash; we're so different!' I came home and talked to him about what I was learning. Rise UP has given us a language to talk to each other and a positive way to talk about our children. I've learned that I'm an audible learner; I like to discuss things and bounce off ideas, but my husband isn't like that. We're learning to understand one another and negotiate our differences.

Rise UP opened my eyes and searched into our lives. It challenged us to think about where we're at with our kids. It was nice to know we weren't the only parents having challenges and to realise the good points in our parenting. I realised I wanted to do the opposite of what my parents did when raising me. When Mum and Dad sent us school, they assumed school knew everything. Dad was from Tonga and Mum was from here. If we had no lunch my mother would make us stay home. One day my son said to



me, 'Mum how come the other children have so many things in their lunchbox and I only have one sandwich.' I replied: 'Son, our family can make a little go a long way. If we make one sandwich today, then we can make another one tomorrow. In our family we work hard to make ends meet.'

Rise UP reminds us that as parents we will be tested from time to time and that it's important to make space for family time. They encourage us to have a date night with our family and they show us where we're going so we don't get lost. Our fifth child was a challenge for me. I wasn't connecting with him; he was in my face every day for so many hours and I was growling at him all the time. Rise UP has helped me to have a better sense of what he needs from me and I'm here for him now.

Rise UP says that if you have knowledge it's good to share it out. I remember Sita taking three of us to a learning hub at another school, where we learned so many great ideas we could use when helping our kids with their learning such as a puzzle that teaches children different geometric shapes. I made a set for my daughter's class and told the teacher, 'Here's an awesome puzzle I came across and thought you might like it for your class.' My son said, 'Why didn't you give our class one!'

What has Rise UP done for me? Rise UP rises me up. It's made me feel calmer and more relaxed. I now have a better understanding of each of my children and can help them in a way that makes a positive difference for their learning. It's all about them now. I know I am helping my kids and changing their future. I want my children to have passion and not get in a job where they feel stuck. I want them to have options. I believe the Rise UP Programme should be exposed to everyone. It's so well organized to influence Pacific Island families; the teachers are Pacific and know how to use visuals and a practical approach to get through to our people.

