



*communities where whānau are housed, connected,
valued and thriving*

Life growing larger – Keri’s story



Keri has a large number 13 tattooed across his right cheek. It’s unmissable – but it’s slowly starting to fade as Keri undergoes laser tattoo removal.

“It’s been a bit of a process,” Keri reflects. “I’ve done six or seven sessions now. Got three or four to go – do them every six weeks.

“It fuckin’ hurt getting it put on – but getting it taken off! Yeah, it’s not really getting easier...”

Keri is working with DCM’s Aro Mai Housing First team, and his key worker Riley has been accompanying him when he goes in for tattoo removal procedures.



Keri and Riley. Photo by Mary Hutchinson.

Keri has been judged harshly for his tattoo, with many people and organisations unwilling to engage with him.

He explains why this might be. “Number 13 is Mongrel Mob. We do all of our patchings on the 13th.”

But Keri threw in his patch six years ago – and he hasn’t looked back since.

Keri was born in Hamilton, and along with his brother was adopted out. He describes family life as up and down – but not too bad.

“I grew up with a Māori father and a blue-eyed, blonde-haired Pākehā mother, so you’ve got the best of both sides!”

The family ended up moving to Rotorua, where Keri’s father worked as a school principal. Despite his father’s job, Keri describes school as “shitty”.

“I just hated school – only went for the bone carving. But that was only an hour a week.”

Keri started hanging out downtown, where at around 12 or 13 years of age he began to engage with the Mongrel Mob.

For Keri, it was like gaining another family. “Gang life was good. Just like having brothers,” he says, while adding, “The young ones have burnt a lot of bridges over the years.”

It is those in-between years that Keri doesn’t like to talk about much. He is too focussed on the future to dwell on the past. In the past there was prison, violence, and injuries. Keri wanted change – which led him to Te Aro Health Centre.



Photo by Mary Hutchinson.

Te Aro Health shares DCM’s kaupapa in every way. People are not talked down to, or judged, when they visit Te Aro Health. Instead they are welcomed, and experience respect. For Keri, this was a game-changer, and led to a phone call to Regina for help with housing.

Regina was Keri’s first key worker at DCM, and they quickly found they had a close connection.

“I was couch surfing with my sister in Strathmore,” Keri explains. “Straight across from me lived Regina. I used to go diving with her husband! When I went to DCM I finally met her – then I clicked!”

Regina sorted out some emergency housing for Keri. Despite the dire state of emergency housing in Aotearoa, for Keri, the stability that comes with having a roof over your head meant everything.

From there Keri rapidly went from strength to strength, and he now has his own whare thanks to the Aro Mai Housing First collaboration, which involves moving people from homelessness into housing then providing wraparound support and regular home visits to ensure people can sustain their tenancy.



“Keri’s super self-sufficient in a lot of ways,” Riley shares. “Because he is really well connected and supported in his community – and with his whānau as well. So he will ask mates for help when needed – or they’ll offer – which is awesome.

“Our help has mostly been with finances, kai, stuff like that – and connections to services. Assistance with filling out forms and explaining information.”

Former key worker Regina was blown away to learn of Keri’s progress.

“We can always offer support – anyone can do that – but it’s whether or not the individual chooses to take hold of that support. And it takes a lot of humility – especially, I know, for a man of Keri’s background – to be able to come to that place where he knows that he needs to accept it.”

Keri is connecting with his community, with his kids – and he’s even got to know the landlord. In the future, he wants to start carving again, in his own whare.

“Life has got a hell of a lot better – especially since I met you guys,” Keri says. “Everyone at DCM has treated me well.”

Riley has now moved into full-time study, and so Keri will work with a new DCM key worker, Raya, who will continue to accompany him for his tattoo removal procedures.

Keri filled out the 2023 Census with Raya’s help. This was his first time doing the Census, and after Raya explained how important it is to be counted, Keri found it comfortable and easy to complete.

Riley shares, “Keri has always been the same guy. Always charismatic and confident, and able, but watching him settle into being housed again, so he can have the confidence to have his kids over, has been awesome. I’ve seen him blossom and flourish in slow but steady ways.

“Life for Keri is growing larger – bit by bit.”

WORDS: MATTHEW MAWKES / PHOTOS: MARY HUTCHINSON / DCM.

Tatau tātou – all of us count Census week at DCM

The Census allows us to reflect on who we are as a country. We are each a thread of the interwoven fabric that makes up the rich tapestry of Aotearoa. The whānau we work with here at DCM – those experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness – are an important part of that tapestry. We know that they have a lot to give, but that outcomes in health and housing aren’t always the greatest for them. And so we wanted to ensure they were counted in this year’s Census – [just as we did in 2018](#) – because tatau tātou, all of us count.



Benna Seveali'i-Siolo and Graham Streatfield from Stats NZ.

Stats NZ joined us at DCM for the week of 20-24 February, during which 70 whānau were assisted to fill out the Census, either in private rooms or in the courtyard, on paper or using a tablet with a Stats worker supporting them throughout the process. We know that without support these whānau may never have had the chance to take part, and it is thanks to the wairua of the Stats NZ workers that our whānau were both comfortable and empowered to fill out the Census.

A member of the Stats team commented that it was important to make sure “This community is not forgotten”. When asked how they felt about their time at DCM interacting

with our whānau, another Stats worker commented that the conversations they had here were “Amazing and worthwhile” – a real highlight of the experience as a whole, and something that they had not experienced anywhere else.

Whānau even shared some of their life stories with the Stats team while they filled out the Census – a special moment of whanaungatanga between the team and whānau and an “Interesting and fulfilling experience”.



Many whānau filled out the Census in DCM's courtyard. Here Lua assists Monty to complete the Census on a tablet.

Whānau recognised the importance of taking part in the Census. They strongly wanted their “Voices to be heard” and felt “Our word counts”. Being able to fill out the Census in a safe environment with familiar staff and access to the usual services running at DCM was important in making the Census a positive experience. Goodie bags and kai helped too!

Some whānau were harder to reach than others, but overall they saw the Census as an opportunity to contribute directly toward government feedback and initiatives. Whānau found the Census to be “Simple and non-invasive” and “A positive experience”. For some, taking part in the Census was an act of service to others, as collecting information “Is important for people in the same situation as me” and for “People who have been on the benefit for a long time”. This was because information from the Census plays a large part in “Deciding where the money goes”.

During the week we were delighted to see some of our deaf community assisted to take part in the Census, both with the help of DCM staff with sign language skills, and the Stats team themselves. We were continually surprised to see other whānau with a great mistrust of government take part as well.



Graham assists Smurf to fill out the Census.

One such person was Smurf, who experienced trauma at an early age at the hands of the Cyprus government. Through his relationship with DCM, built upon layers of trust and mutual respect, he was able to see the benefit in filling out the Census and found it to be a positive experience, this being the first time he had ever done it. Smurf found it “A lot easier than I first thought – I thought it would be more personal than it was”.

Graham helped support Smurf to fill out the Census, sharing parts of his life story and reassuring him of the confidentiality of the information shared.

Smurf’s is just one of [70 such stories shared during DCM’s Census week](#), and we thank Stats NZ for lifting up the mana of our people. Cyclone Gabrielle has had a big impact on this year’s Census, and we know the Stats team have been under a lot of pressure.

We also lift up our whānau for having the courage to take part. Their stories are taonga, and the data they have provided will help build a better Aotearoa where everyone has the chance to be housed, connected, valued, and thriving.

WORDS: MIRIAM HENDRY / PHOTOS: SUPPLIED.

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