

# THE MATIPO GARDENS PROJECT

**MATIPO ST**, in Whanganui, NZ was a bleak place: full of rundown state housing occupied by unemployed people, most with strong connections to the Black Power gang. But the leadership had decided the world of crime and drugs was not the way forward for their children.

They joined a group of locals, who presented a plan to the Rotary Club of Whanganui for developing Maori interests in the region, and sought the club's help. They had plans for dairy goats, market gardens, quarrying and more. The club decided the economic development of Maori people in the whole region was beyond its capacity, but it could be useful in supporting the initiative of the Matipo group in starting a community garden.

The former Black Power members had almost no resources in terms

of funding and skills. But they did have determination to do better for their kids. Rotary club members donated garden tools and purchased a number that were missing, such as a wheelbarrow. The club also bought a trailer for compost collection and other garden uses.

The club was fortunate that president-elect at the time, Lei Graham, had worked as a literacy and numeracy tutor at the Wanganui prison. As a result, she already had the confidence of some of the Black



Past district 9940 governor Anthony Scott, left, with past president of the Rotary Club of Whanganui Lei Graham, who was the main driver behind the Matipo St project.

Power people and was accustomed to interacting with them – a feat that was rather challenging to many members at first.

Lei, through Landbased Training, set up a horticultural education program to be delivered in a house that had been supplied by Housing NZ. It grew, and soon other groups started



providing courses. Former Black Power members gained NCEA certificates in Horticulture Level 2 and Level 3.

The garden prospered and the trailer was usefully employed in carting surplus vegetables to the Whanganui Foodbank. Everyone in the street and beyond could come down and help themselves to vegetables for their family meals.

Some members of the community were also inspired to begin a carpentry course. Soon, eight young men had gained their Level One certificates and were progressing to Level Two. At the presentation ceremony, when these young men received their certificates, they told the press, "We could never have done this without Rotary's help".

When the Matipo St group needed to set up a Trust for their operation, Rotary provided much-needed advice to bring the Matipo Community Development Charitable Trust into

existence. When they needed safe storage for the trailer and the garden tools, Rotarians bought them a shipping container and helped them paint it. When they needed a shade house to grow the seedlings, Rotary helped with an application to another local trust for funding, and the men in the carpentry course gave their time towards construction.

It didn't stop there. The club president supported an application to Vodafone, which was successful in receiving one of only five national contracts for NZ\$100,000. The funding was used to employ veteran community worker Des Warahi to work with the Matipo Community Development Charitable Trust. Using his huge experience with not-for-profits, members of the Trust were mentored in all facets of running a training organisation, including meeting procedures, fundraising, marketing, strategic planning and negotiating contracts.

Des had his work cut out for him. One of his first tasks was to persuade the men that they really should have driver's licences. Not all Black Power members were convinced about the group's change of direction at first, though most have now come around.

A number of Black Power members have now gained employment from the initiative. Those who participated in training have either gone on to higher learning or are looking for employment.

The Matipo St group now has a contract with the local council growing seedlings in the shade house. The carpentry students are building a prototype granny flat to market to potential buyers and thus create further employment opportunities for members.

One of the wonderful things about the project is that the Matipo St people

are doing it themselves. Rotary is just there to provide assistance, expertise and some funding to help them over the hurdles.

While the Rotary club thought helping the whole Maori community in their region was beyond their scope, in fact, helping with the garden has grown into a powerful force that is doing just that. There are no big "Rotary Project" signs at the gardens. It is their project and it gives them great pride.

Recently, a tunnel house has been completed and opened by the Deputy Mayor. This will allow the group to provide further community vegetables, as well as hopefully enable them to qualify for a contract to prepare seedlings for the Regional Council's riparian planting program. In June this year, the club donated and helped plant enough trees to create a shelterbelt for the gardens. Participants are reaching higher educational targets, with NCEA Levels 3 and 4 currently being achieved.

The downhearted Matipo St of the past is no more. Instead, the street is a passage to a bright future, with the community joined together with the determination to build something better for everyone.



**Matipo St community members and members of the Rotary Club of Whanganui joined forces to bring the once bleak street to life and change the future of its residents.**

