

Paulette Cotter (left) and her sister Sonya (right) are on a mission to help keep Kiwi kids warm in the winter months.



Change *for* good

Many of us have made donations to charity, but what would it be like to turn your philanthropy into a business? Nicky Pellegrino meets seven New Zealand women helping to make life better for others.

Double Happy Kids · PAULETTE & SONYA COTTER

When she learned that 3000 Kiwi kids are living in poverty, Paulette Cotter was shocked. But rather than assuming there was nothing she could do about it, the Auckland business strategist swung into action.

Paulette approached easing child poverty as she would working with any of her clients. “When I’m developing products or strategy, the first thing I do is find out the needs of the customer,” she explains. “So I asked, ‘What are the needs of these children?’ I decided to talk to some principals of low-decile schools because they would have good insights.”

What she learned from them surprised her. For while there are some good initiatives to help feed kids from low-income families, there is a hidden issue around absenteeism, particularly over winter. “Kids get really sick,

they’re not in school so they’re not learning, and education is one of the ways out of poverty,” says Paulette.

Overcrowded, cold, damp homes are a part of the issue but there didn’t seem any way that she as one individual could tackle that. “Then I started thinking about providing warm clothes, like hoodies, and the principals thought it would be a great idea.”

That is when Paulette roped in her sister, interior designer Sonya Cotter.

“She told me the story and I was sure I could do something to help,” says Sonya.

They came up with Double Happy Kids. It’s a “wear one, share one” deal. Buy a cool hoodie emblazoned with a design by a local street artist, and a cosy, good-quality hoodie is donated to a child in need via their school.

“We don’t have to fix the world, we just have to fix our community, and that’s what →

we're attacking," says Sonya.

In that first year the sisters were hoping to help keep 50 children warm over winter, but the response was so positive they ended up giving away 220 hoodies. The next year that increased to nearly 400 and it looks set to continue growing.

"We both have busy full-time jobs," says Paulette. "We do this in the evenings and weekends. And, actually, it can be the best part of the day. I'll come home, have dinner with my daughter, then there'll be 50 hoodies to pack and send out. It just works, you get through it somehow."

There has been great feedback from kids. "Not only because they're warm, but they've got something that is brand new, it's their own and hasn't been handed down," says Paulette. "We've also heard from principals about changes in kids and school attendance, and just general wellbeing."

When they started out, neither sister even had her own Facebook page. Now they are whizzes at social media and have even built a website. They also have a second initiative, Project Wish Wash. This came about after one principal told them there was an issue with hygiene and kids not having clean uniforms. So Paulette and Sonya raised money to install a washing machine, dryer and shower in that school.

"We did things like had friends over to our houses for the night and had them pay \$25 to get in the door. We fundraised enough for a second school as well," says Paulette.

At social functions the Cotter sisters sometimes find themselves being told what they are doing isn't going to fix things or make a big enough difference in the long run. That is not a view they share at all.

"If everyone thinks a problem is too big or too hard then no one will do anything," says Paulette. "You have to start small. If one child is warm, or feels better because they've had a shower, then it's worth it. Winter can be pretty brutal in New Zealand but on those crazy rainy nights we know at least there are 400 children who have hopefully got their hoodies on."

doublehappykids.co.nz

Take My Hands

JANETTE SEARLE

A dislike of the TV soap *Coronation Street* helped change the course of Janette Searle's life and benefit hundreds of others. Janette was living with her parents and making plans to move to Australia with her sons. To earn some cash she had been helping her mother at a medical conference she was working on, and that day she'd had an interesting conversation with a specialist in artificial limbs.

"I asked what they did with all the old legs and was told they'd just dumped a nine cubic bin of them. That didn't seem right to me at all."

So while *Coronation Street* was blaring from her parents' television, Janette retreated with her laptop and started searching for someone who needed a whole load of second-hand, but still entirely serviceable, artificial limbs.

"I found the Hope Rehabilitation Society in Pakistan," she says. "So I emailed them and they came back saying if I could get them, they would take them."

Janette is one of those people with energy to burn. She has spent years working in TV production, where often the impossible is demanded at short notice. So not only did she track down a store of spare artificial limbs in Wellington but also she talked transport company Toll New Zealand into helping set them on their way to Pakistan for no cost at all.

"That was the first project," she says. "We sent 400 kilos of stuff over there. Hope Rehab sent back pictures of the people who had received the limbs so we could see we'd really made a difference."

After that there were another couple of runs and soon it became clear to Janette that there was a big demand for prosthetic limbs and other equipment – such as moonboots and walking frames.

"I realised that either I was going to have to stop this – because clearly it wasn't all going to fit in my garage – or I needed to do it properly."

The mother-of-four abandoned the idea of moving to Australia and in 2012 set up Take My Hands, a social enterprise that saves unwanted medical equipment, from going to landfill, and gets it to those

who can use it in the Asia Pacific region.

On a tour of health clinics in Fiji, Janette saw for herself how badly this equipment is needed. "One still had hospital beds from the 1940s. They had two oxygen tanks but only one flow meter, so if you had two people needing oxygen at the same time, one was out of luck. And there were wheelchairs that had plastic picnic chairs jammed into them. It's just nuts when we've got all of this resource here."

Janette describes Take My Hands as "like Tinder for medical equipment". There is no point sourcing things that can't be used – a high-tech electric hospital bed might be impractical on an island with an unreliable power supply, for instance. "So we're sending what they need. They're not getting a container full of stuff that is going to end up in their landfill."

There have been some challenges, in particular building relationships in the Pacific. "They work in a really different way. The politics and infrastructure are different. There are cultural issues and even corruption. It can be a long process and sometimes you get so close, then nothing happens, which is frustrating."

This isn't Janette's only job – she also works 30 hours a week for an education initiative in West Auckland. But she believes that, in time, the Take My Hands approach could be used with all sorts of equipment – from building to farming.

"Essentially it's a simple idea; it just requires some co-ordination."

Costs are kept low by using spare space in warehouses and shipping containers. And the recipients pay a small amount for the equipment they are sent.

"That covers our costs and the idea is any profit then allows us to do other things. We're also part of the One Percent Collective and get donations through that, which helps with the ebbs and flows."

There are days when Janette, 47, is a bit daunted by how much she has taken on. "But I'm not very good at sitting down and doing nothing, really bad at it in fact."

Her advice to anyone who is dreaming of helping to make the world a better place, is simply to get started. "Just do one thing, then do another," she says.

takemyhands.org →

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Make Give Live

CLAIRE CONZA & BECKY SMITH

“Knitting is so enjoyable and meditative. It has proven therapeutic benefits... and you’re making something beautiful and useful.”

Claire Conza (right) found a way to use her knitting skills for the good of others and was soon joined by fellow knitter and business partner Becky Smith (left).

Sometimes the best things can come out of the bleakest times. Following a tough period of depression, Claire Conza didn’t want to go back to the high-stress communications job that had pushed her over the edge in the first place, and began wondering what else to do that would be more fulfilling. She liked the idea of some sort of social enterprise, a business that could be a powerful force for good.

“I also knew I needed to be creative again,” says Claire, a former fashion designer who used to have her own knitwear label. “There had been a voice in the back of my head for a while saying, ‘This isn’t you, you’ve got other passions and talents.’”

Browsing round a market one day she came across some women selling beautifully made but unfashionable home knitting. “I realised they had missed the mark in terms of design if they wanted to appeal to mums,” says Claire. “People are starting to appreciate hand-made knits but it needs to be a certain look and style.”

An idea began to form. Claire realised what had benefited her most when she was feeling low was connecting with friends and getting back into knitting. The 36-year-old found a way to combine those things and enrich the lives of others.

The first community crafting Make Give Live session happened at Claire’s local library in Whangaparaoa. From there it grew and grew. Now there are 10 Make Give Live groups in the Auckland area. People (yes there are some men) gather weekly or fortnightly, and are supplied with pure New Zealand wool and patterns for cool beanie designs and they knit while having a cup of tea together. For each beanie sold, another is donated to a homeless or elderly person in need.

Becky Smith first met Claire when Claire was out selling Make Give Live beanies at the Coatesville market. A dedicated knitter, Becky thought it was a great idea.

“Knitting is so enjoyable and meditative. It has proven therapeutic benefits – you have to be in the now, and concentrate on what you’re doing. And you’re making something beautiful and useful out of two sticks and a ball of string,” she says.

Becky, 49, now helps run Make Give Live. She combines it with her work as a teacher’s aide while Claire still does some communications and design. Both are looking forward to the day they can focus full-time on their social enterprise.

“The potential we see is huge,” says Claire. “We’ve only scratched the surface.”

They have a waiting list of people wanting to join groups. “There is a real desire to be involved,” says Becky. “They enjoy the knitting, the community and connection, and they also like that they’re doing it for a purpose.”

Strong friendships have been formed already. “A lot of people see each other outside the groups. If someone is struggling they’ll support each other so it’s really quite special,” says Claire. “Many of them tell us they don’t know what they’d do without the group now.”

The reaction from those who have been gifted beanies has also been gratifying. “Most can’t believe it’s free and that someone has hand-made it for them out of beautiful wool,” says Becky.

Two-and-half years on, Make Give Live is branching out from beanies into other designs – like cowls, fingerless gloves and crochet washcloth sets – and it is continuing to grow. Prior to Christmas they ran a pop-up store in Auckland’s Ponsonby Central and their designs have been stocked by national fashion chain KILT. The end goal is to have knitting groups throughout New Zealand and hand-knits selling in many more outlets.

“But we have to get the balance right,” says Becky. “We don’t want to have our makers feel pressured. It’s not about producing a certain amount. The whole purpose is for them to be enjoying the process, and building up their wellbeing. This has to be a joy.”

Claire’s grandmother taught her to knit and now she is passing on the skills to her own daughter. She says one of the great things about the groups is the way people are learning from each other.

“We’ve got older women who have been knitting for 30 years and really young ones who are self-taught from YouTube and know all the fancy new tricks.”

makegivelive.com →

Support crew

KELLY BANKS & JANINE WILLIAMS

Three years ago when her partner Randal was diagnosed with stage four bowel cancer Kelly Banks discovered just how difficult it can be asking for and accepting help. As Randal was going through gruelling surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation, people kept wanting to know what they could do to support her.

"But I felt this massive need to take on the full burden myself," she recalls. "It's no one's super-power is it? No one ever says, 'I'm really good at asking for help.'"

Kelly, 41, realised she wasn't the only person acting as if everything was under control when it absolutely wasn't. And she began to wonder, was there some way of harnessing modern technology to make life easier, both for those going through tough times, and the friends and family trying to support them?

That is how Support Crew was born. It is basically an online help roster that makes it simple to co-ordinate giving anyone in need the practical help they require – whether that means supplying meals, transport to medical appointments, cleaning, or just giving companionship.

Developing the platform has meant Kelly and her friend Janine Williams, 41, giving up successful corporate careers and taking a huge leap of faith.

The pair had been working together for 10 years in sales, marketing and business development roles.

"We were getting scratchy and feeling like we needed to do something bigger and more meaningful," explains Janine. "I guess Randal's journey nudged us along."

The prognosis for stage four bowel cancer isn't great and it brought home just how short life can be. "That throws you into a bolder mindset," says Kelly. "I didn't want to look back in five years time and wonder what would have happened if I'd given it a go."

Support Crew is a social enterprise rather than a charity so it is run as a business. Setting it up, Janine and Kelly were able to use skills built during their careers, but there was still a lot to learn. "We believed in ourselves," says Janine. "We thought, 'We can do this, we can totally pull this together.'"

They followed the Lean Startup method, which is about working cost-effectively to build your product and take it to market.

"We had about 54 per cent of the skills we needed; we acquired some of the others, then out-sourced the rest," says Kelly. "Although personally we find it difficult to ask for help, professionally, when it came to Support Crew, we were a lot braver. And we found when you're doing something with such purpose, people want to help or connect with you."

While it is free for users to set up and run a Support Crew page, there is the potential for Kelly and Janine to make a living from products bought via the website – you can pay for a meal to be delivered to someone, for instance, and a gift store has been popular. Sponsorship from insurance company AMP helped get the project off the ground last year.

Both women work from home – they live within a couple of kilometres of each other in Howick, Auckland – and Janine juggles work with parenting her sons, aged 10 and eight.

"There's a lot to do and only two of us, so it's important to maintain our focus, but we're sometimes blown away by how much we can achieve in a week and how quickly we can build momentum," she says.

Kelly even used the Support Crew service herself last year to organise an online meal roster when Randal was having more treatment. "We got meals from family in London and Whakatane and friends in Cambridge," she says. "People don't have to be physically close in order to help like they did in the past. Technology has isolated us from our communities in a lot of ways. This is bringing it back together and kind of creating a community again, but online."

Randal has now marked 12 months cancer-free and Support Crew has almost 2000 people using the platform, with about 150 pages created. There are still challenges to overcome but already they are seeing the difference it is making in the lives of people struggling with anything from mental health problems to cancer. One woman simply needed help to walk her energetic dog. Another wanted a play-date for her husband while she was having treatment.

"It's so cool to be working on something like this," says Janine. "I love what we do every day. When you talk to people who are going through massive times, and you get to try to help them, it's so rewarding."

AWW

supportcrew.co



Kelly Banks (left) and her friend Janine Williams (right) gave up corporate careers to run their online service.

HAIR & MAKE-UP BY CLAUDIA RODRIGUES; PAULETTE WEARS BLUE DRESS FROM LEO • BE • SONYA WEARS WHITE SHIRT FROM TAYLOR AND NAVY SATIN TROUSERS FROM INGRID STARNES; JANETTE WEARS DRESS FROM WITCHERY; BECKY WEARS LINEN SHIRT AND EARRINGS FROM FARMERS; CLAIRE WEARS KNITTED CAMI AND PANTS FROM WITCHERY; KELLY WEARS DRESS AND BELT FROM WORLD; JANINE WEARS TOP FROM WITCHERY AND TROUSERS FROM INGRID STARNES.