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Marae kitchens dish up healthy change to Far North food system

Marae-led transformations are spreading in the Far North as whānau embrace a resurgence of healthy eating and challenge the current food system.

For the past several months, Healthy Families Far North has been supporting the Te Puna Ora Papakāinga marae-based initiative – a wānanga series based around the practical applications of hauora that uses the concepts of Atuatanga to reconnect people to their local environments and natural food sources.

The initiative has been delivered so far at Kohewhata Marae in Kaikohe and Waiora Marae in Ngātaki, with other marae based in Pawarenga, Ahipara and Matauri Bay expressing keen interest to join the movement.

Te Puna Ora Papakāinga is facilitated by Lorinda Pereira (Te Rarawa), who is on a personal crusade to empower Māori to reclaim traditional Māori practices that optimise holistic health and wellbeing.

That starts with knowing your environment, knowing how to sustainably harvest the natural kai that is readily available, and knowing how to prepare it with the dignity it deserves, she says.

She adds that marae communities are teeming with expert knowledge and people who know how to apply it. “That’s the beauty of Te Puna Ora Papakāinga – it’s about scratching the surface and finding that spring of wellness that exists at every marae,” she says.

The first two wānanga at Kohewhata Marae have already had lasting impact on its participants who are transforming how their whānau are engaging with food.

Like Georgina Clark, who has taken to preparing the salads learnt for her 88-year old father, who she says loves them. Or Robin McClintock, who has stopped buying bread and started consuming more fresh vegetables. Or Horace Davis, a diabetic who has made changes at home to the point that she is bringing her family up to want healthy food more.



Now, the Ngāti Kuri whānau at Waiora Marae have a hunger for change after their recent wānanga from June 14 to 15. Learning to prepare a readily available staple kai – tuatua – in different ways to feed a large whānau was just one of the learnings captured that has triggered its participants reflect on how much they rely on the current food system.

Whakawhiti Ora Pai health promotor Victoria Brown says the wānanga will have a long-lasting and major impact on iwi Māori.

“We're so rural and living and working in a rural community. There's kai all around us that no-one knows about, that we didn't know about until we came to this wānanga. Just stepping outside your marae and there's kai all around you. Rongoā all around you,” she says.

She adds that in her professional capacity as a nutrition and physical activity advisor for New Zealand's most northern health service servicing a largely Māori population, the extra knowledge gained engaging with health systems through a Māori lens will be invaluable going forward in the effort to reduce preventable chronic disease.

Healthy Families Far North kaiwhakahaere Shirleyanne Brown says the investment in helping to bring Te Puna Ora Papkāinga to some of the 150-plus marae in Te Taitokerau has been a rewarding experience.

“Healthy Families Far North is about working collaboratively with community leaders to activate the return of Māori systems that support health and wellbeing. Witnessing marae-led disruptions to food systems that haven't necessarily kept Māori well is exciting; it signals a significant shift in food sovereignty as whānau reconnect with traditional kai sources,” she says.

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Media enquiries:

Erena Hodgkinson

Healthy Families Far North Kaiwhakapā

MOB: 0220102042

EML: erenah@terarawa.co.nz

