



Southside stories

South Auckland has long been stigmatised. Local identity COLLEEN BROWN talks to community leaders working to change the narrative. • photographs by TONY NYBERG

Southside, the local name for South Auckland, has a distinct vibe and identity that sets it apart from the rest of New Zealand. It is young, colourful, energetic, proud and home to more than 350,000 people of every imaginable culture.

Systemic issues based on poverty, poorly paid jobs and low educational attainment have stalked the region for decades. Prejudices about communities are hard to shift. Fixing poverty is a relentless struggle. The region appears an easy target.

But ask any Southsider, and chances are they take great exception to outsiders making damning comments about their community. They have long memories, and politicians such as National leader Christopher Luxon will be judged. Asked last December about what was driving youth crime, he said: "If you're sitting in a garage in South Auckland with your two brothers and you're thinking about life and where you're going, consciously or unconsciously, the gang life looks pretty attractive."

"They are the people who have got the money, got all the bling, flash cars and that looks incredibly attractive."

The remark stung. It was a very focused

reference about the Southside community and the prospects of its young people. There was an immediate response as photos of garages adapted for every possible use exploded onto social media. Poorer communities can be easy targets for a derisive political sound bite. Despite a swift apology from Luxon, those comments still rankle six months later. Southside doesn't forget.

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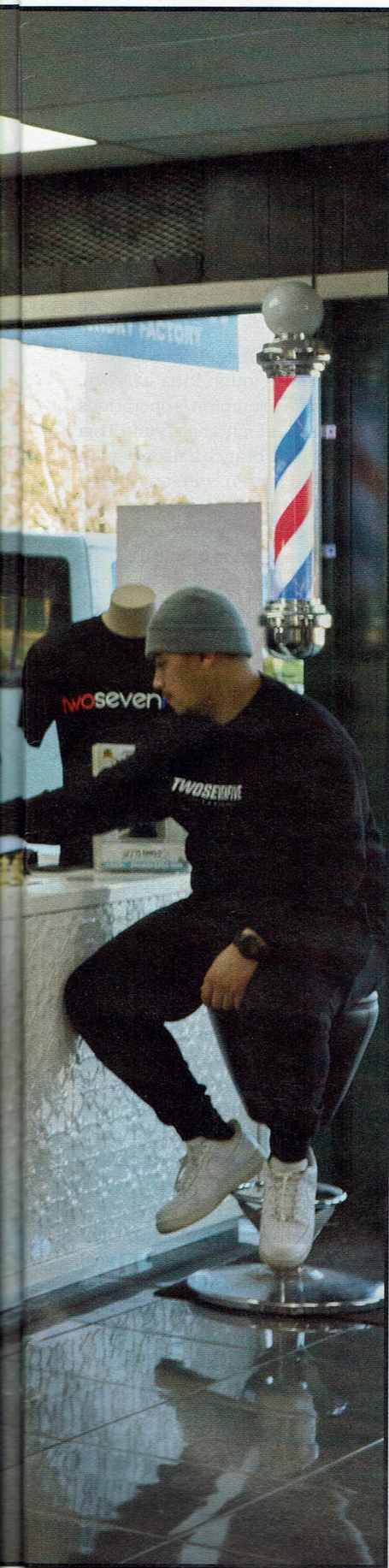
"When politicians talk about us dismissively, for us it's a form of micro-aggression," says Fitz, a community leader and owner of a barber's business. "They use South Auckland as a scapegoat."

"There are many wonderful people here; it puts them all down. At the same time, I don't care, because I can still carry on with my life. We have great things happening here."

Politically, Southside is traditionally Labour. People are acutely observant about politicians' grasp of, and respect for, their community. The region is maturing – like a blended family, poorer communities sit cheek by jowl next to affluent ones. Politicians are expected to straddle this fusion, not play one side off against the other. Politicians who are tone deaf to the needs and aspirations of the community are scrutinised.

"Neither major political party has really improved the situation for us here in Māngere," says Fitz. "Late in May this year, I met with 17-year-olds thinking about their future when they leave school. They are asking the same

Māngere community leader Fitz at his twosevenfive barber's shop, which serves as a community hub.



things about their future as I was asking 20 years ago. Nothing seems to have changed for them."

FINANCIAL REALITIES

The Budget announcement that the \$5 prescription surcharge would be dropped for all was met with relief by Southsiders. "Five dollars is probably a morning cup of coffee to a politician, but for a family in Randwick Park in Manurewa, that's a meal for the family," says Maree Beaven, a youth and community worker who runs Bloom, a community coaching service. "Families who don't qualify for the Community Services Card struggle to afford to pay for prescriptions," she says. "Not everyone can access the big Australian chemist shops to get free prescriptions."

Pharmacist Devika Sharma, owner of the Papakura Unichem Pharmacy and a member of the Independent Community Pharmacy Group that lobbied for the charges to be dropped, agrees. She spends 60% of her day talking finance with customers who simply can't afford to get the medication they require, and she's known to waive fees to ensure people get their full complement of prescriptions.

"People feel penalised by this charge. One woman confided that now the charges have been dropped, she's stopped worrying about how she will pay for her prescriptions and can focus on what I'm telling her. People here work hard; this policy matters."

As to Luxon's garage-dweller comments, yes, the statistics for young school leavers look bad, but they belie the community and government efforts under way to turn the ship around.

Youth crime in South Auckland jumped last year against a national trend of a slight decline. Police launched 1715 proceedings against 10- to 17-year-olds in the region between November 30, 2021, and October 31, 2022, up more than 300 on the corresponding previous period.

The figures tell the story of poverty, say Southsiders. But the area is changing. Children of second- and third-generation immigrants lead the way in challenging ingrained perceptions about them and celebrating who they are. They provide a range of opportunities for others in the community, often in unique and understated ways. Some of those positive changes may happen in a garage, but more often than not they're happening in the heart of the community.

Fitz created the 275 Māngere brand (from the landline prefix) launched four years ago

to celebrate all things Māngere. The annual Māngere Love event in May has evolved into a regional celebration.

As a teenage father, he could well have been one of those imagined lads in a garage. Instead, he is a respected community leader, who knows and understands what it is like to be "dissed". He grew up as a first-generation Samoan in South Auckland, and for him, it was all about the family, working hard, buying a house, and living by accepted codes of "respect" and "service". The notion of service means that if you are succeeding, you need to give back to your community.

"You have to care about the person before the stats. You've got to see them as individuals."

GROWING ASSERTIVENESS

Fitz sees today's youth as being more assertive than his generation, and aware of their talents as assets. He believes it's time Southsiders created their own narrative, rather than have others dictate how they should be viewed.

And that's exactly what he does. The staff at twosevenfive Barbershop know their regular clients trust them and often use their time in the chair as a therapy session. The stories can be harrowing and the staff have heard it all, including people feeling suicidal. They need to make sure they protect themselves from the revelations they hear as well as making sure the shop remains a safe place for people to share confidences.

Fitz and his two barber colleagues are united in their quest to be the best they can, acknowledging they could have been on the edge of that disenfranchised cohort referred to by politicians. The team has learnt about mental health and joined courses on breathing and meditation, techniques they use daily.

Twosevenfive also runs a chess club – Fitz says 1984 was the last time Māngere had one. "Now, we have all these players in our chess club, whom we've taught ourselves over the past three years, with some support from [local man] Masina Po'e-Tofaeono, whose children are chess champions. At our chess championships late last year, 100 people turned up, players and their supporters. Not quite what people expect from a barbershop."

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CLIFF

Not all stories are as positive. Community organisations and individuals are contracted to stop young people currently disconnected from mainstream society becoming long-term statistics. Sometimes for a family with a dysfunctional young person, the needs can appear overwhelming. There may be deep-seated intergenerational issues requiring significant investment in the whole family in order to effect change.

Brendon Crompton and Willie Iosia know all about the tough kids in town. Former policeman Crompton is operations manager for the Blue Light charity and Iosia is its community and branch liaison person for the Auckland region, with an eclectic background in publishing, sport and local government. If asked, they can recite the problems of all the youth in their care at the Blue Light facility in industrial Papakura, but they prefer to focus on each young person's potential.

Hard-edged kids are referred to the 40-year-old organisation's Papakura campus. The student profiles are daunting: chronic truancy, gang affiliations, abuse, drug use, lack of work-ready skills, all of which combine to make managing each family a challenge.

Blue Light's programmes range from one-day courses to residential life skills and youth-leadership camps supported by the police, Defence Force and other government agencies. The Papakura centre provides both on-site and outreach services to about 7500 tamariki and rangatahi annually, employing 35 social workers. But it is the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff.

"Where do you start when you have a young man who has to sleep out on the porch like a dog because the whānau is riddled with meth?" says Crompton.

Starting from that baseline creates a very sobering template to "saving" a young person.

"While there is always rhetoric by governments that 'prevention' is their No 1 goal, our funding is predominantly provided to intervene once a problem has occurred."

TRUST COMES FIRST

Iosia knows children can be touched by stories. Like Fitz, he believes that as a people, Pasifika have lost the power of the narrative.

"We excelled in oratory; we need to retell those stories and reclaim who we are. We need to wrestle that narrative back for our young people to give them pride in who they are. We cannot rely on



Blue Light's Willie Iosia, left, and Brendon Crompton: investment has to be long term.

the mainstream media to do that for us.” Both men have strong views about how to raise young people. They agree the organisation needs to be fully resourced, and listened to, to achieve their long-term goals. In Southside, trust has to be the first milestone from any young person in order to make further progress. Both men take their roles seriously: lives are at stake and

although they see some astonishing turn-arounds, they also know the investment behind them is long-term and expensive.

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PILLARS OF THE COMMUNITY

Johnnie Timu knows how to invest in the future. At 27, two years younger than the median Southside age, he runs a gym in Manukau, Brown Pride, that is much more than a place to pump iron. Timu and five other ex-classmates from Catholic boys' school De La Salle College have created a hub

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centred on the premise “for the people, by the people”. He, Peter Tee Faalili and Jairus Smith are employed full-time at the gym; two others work there part-time and the other lives in Australia.

The grin on Timu’s face is infectious.

The tight team epitomise the four pillars of their old school: faith, service, community and excellence. He is unashamedly proud of his heritage: the gym’s logo, “Pride – Est. 1929”, refers to the Samoan Mau independence movement’s clash with New Zealand colonial rule on December 28, 1929.

After his father died and his son was born, it was Timu’s ambition to do better than just working random labouring jobs that got him thinking about what was possible.

“Hey, we don’t even have a garage,” he jokes. “I thought a lot about what this place could be in my mum’s carport.”

He reveres his parents. He’s combined his mother’s hard-work attitude and tertiary education achievements as a mature student with his father’s entrepreneurial streak to good effect. Before starting his business, he spent three years studying business management and taking an entrepreneurial course.

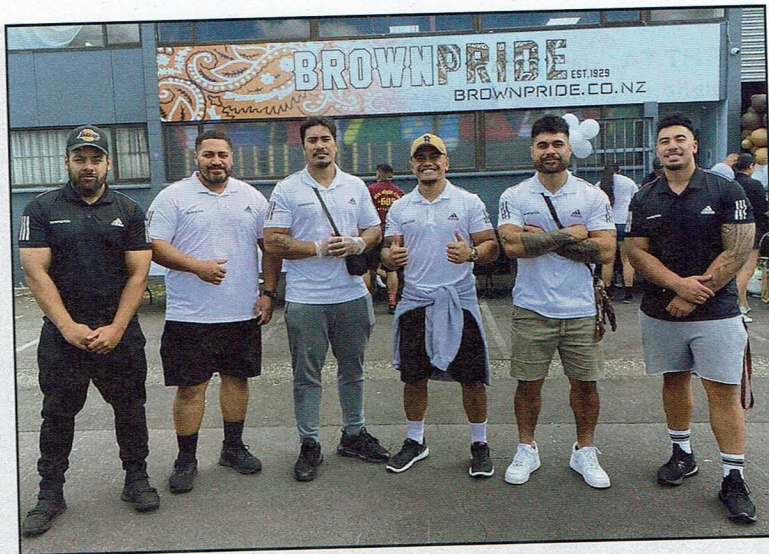
BrownPride began with boot camps back at his old school, paying for the use of the facilities with free exercise regimes for staff and students. Two years ago, the opportunity for a gym opened up and he took it.

PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS

For Timu, Southside has a unique culture. Pressed to define it, he says, “We certainly aren’t a flock of sheep being rounded up by a sheep dog. In fact, we are more like an exotic zoo without the cages. We are a bit of everything, without everyone following each other.”

He gets serious. “You have to care about the person before the stats. You’ve got to see them as individuals. People in the south are humble; they are grateful for what they have. They aren’t show-offs, they are less materialistic, more spiritual, and appreciate the mana of each other, at the same time taking comfort in each other.”

When I visit, the gym rocks to music, a barbershop to one side is sectioned off, Smith is putting the final touches to a design. The deep-tissue sports masseur arrives and



The De La Salle old boys whose Brown Pride gym provides wide-ranging services in Manukau. From left, Reginald McFarland, Jairus Smith, Taalili Wilson, Johnnie Timu, Tino Mafoe and Peter Tee Faalili.

sets up in one of two outside cabins where the physio holds a clinic on a Wednesday and the psychiatrist on a Friday. It also doubles as a recording studio for aspiring musicians.

Having one voice speaking for all reflects a box-ticking mentality. “We’ve got this one Pasifika person, we’ve got them all.”

Timu says they hear some pretty heavy stuff at the gym and in the barber’s chair. He’s grateful for the Le Va Pasifika Suicide Prevention Community Fund, which has funded mental and emotional support for his team and his clients. Brown Pride also received a grant from Le Va this year to extend its “Yeah the Boys” counselling programme to women.

A whiteboard at the gym details activities from training a hip-hop squad for the nationals to arranging a sports competition between four major accountancy firms.

SUPERFICIAL CHATTER

Like Timu, Christyanna Saufoi, of Samoan, Tongan and Chinese heritage, is a force of nature: articulate, gregarious and assertive, reflecting the face of the future for Southside. She is studying for a conjoint degree in global studies and arts at the University

of Auckland. Saufoi is straight up in her views and – from her own experience – brutal in her assessment of how those in power see young brown people: in particular, government and non-government agencies acting as if they know and understand the lives of young Southsiders.

To her, these groups reveal their tokenistic side with superficial chatter. “If you really want to know about young people, be quiet

and let them talk.”

She says having one Pasifika voice at the table speaking for all is not the right way to represent the people of South Auckland and reflects a “tick that box” mentality in government and other spheres. “It says, ‘We’ve got this one Pasifika person, we’ve got them all,’” she says. “Controlling is not enabling, regardless of how you dress it up.”

She stands firm in her belief that Pasifika voices are not homogeneous, and speaking about someone else’s story is not the right way to do things.

Identified as a future leader, Saufoi spent three months last summer working as one of 40 Pasifika interns in Wellington through the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment’s Tupu Tai Pasifika public-sector internship programme.

As for politicians’ comments about Southside, she, like Fitz, cares and doesn’t care. “I don’t need to prove myself to politicians. But I do care when I can see the repercussions right-wing policies will have on us here in Southside. If they hold the power over us, it will affect us. Auckland Council is already trying it [with proposed community funding cuts]. It’s all the same. The narrative about us [has already been set].”

Saufoi has key messages for any wannabe politician thinking of coming into Southside: “Take off the smart suit, walk a mile in our shoes. How would you like it if someone said your child was a ram raider, doing drugs, joining gangs, and you know it’s not true? How do you get past that? This is our reality.” She shrugs. “White politicians coming to poor brown communities launching policies. It doesn’t mean a thing to us.”

PUT IT IN WRITING

Maree Beaven has been a youth and community worker for most of her working life



and opened Bloom in 2019. She is another trusted stalwart who epitomises the concept of giving back to the community. She draws on the example set by her parents, who shared everything including fruit and flounder over the neighbour's fence.

Based on her experience with young people, she says the picture painted by outsiders is not as ugly as some people would have it. "Sure, there are some depressing parts to our story, but it's not all the story."

"We work hard and it shouldn't be so difficult to shift perceptions, but it is. We must paint the picture ourselves, tell our own stories. It doesn't have to be so ugly or bleak."

Beaven works with youngsters who question whether they have anything of worth to offer society. They rarely if ever have been told they are good at something. They often

have family who don't know how to navigate the "system". She helps them to discover their strengths and figure out how to use them to get where they'd like to go.

She also works with The Pride Project, based in Clendon, Manurewa, a community-led initiative supporting people with complex needs. She engages with young

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Youth and community worker Maree Beaven: "It shouldn't be so difficult to shift perceptions ... We must tell our own stories."

people to write positive stories about their future, thereby changing the narrative. For some, it is the first time they can see an alternative ending for themselves.

"I love seeing people walk out a little taller and a little bolder than before. We need to focus on what's right about people, not what's wrong."

"Southside's garage stories are being written every day. Some don't end well, but you should read the ones that do. Tell those stories." ■

Colleen Brown is a former teacher and local body politician in Counties Manukau.

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