

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day

Welcome to The Gisborne Herald's International Women's Day feature for 2022. This year's international theme is #BreakTheBias, which sets the bar to raise awareness towards a world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination — a world where women's achievements are celebrated by increasing visibility and taking action for equality. A journey of growth and self discovery. In this feature, features writer Gillian Cowperthwaite talks to three inspirational women — Calais Kohunui, Alice Kibble and Victoria Williams — who have broken barriers to be where they want to be in life, while Herald journalist Akula Sharma talks to Melanie Thornton about her extensive career and how a holiday to Tairāwhiti turned into a lifestyle/career move. Take the time today to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of women in our community of Tairāwhiti.

Calais Kohunui-Carman

Working towards becoming an electrical engineer was always what Calais Kohunui-Carman wanted to do and a mentoring programme at Lytton High School offered her the encouragement she needed.

The programme was designed to support young Maori women interested in training in traditionally male-dominant roles.

With support and encouragement, Calais stepped on to the pathway and initially worked part-time at Eastland Network while still studying at school.

When she left school at 18, joining the Eastland Network "family" as a full-time

data assistant was the first logical step in continuing on this career path.

Her father (Murray Carman) is an electrical engineer who has clocked up 22 years with Eastland Network, so she has witnessed firsthand his milestones over the years.

"I wanted to be an electrical engineer and work with Dad and it all sprouted from that," Calais said.

"I feel lucky and blessed to be there. Dad always encouraged me to do something I was passionate about while Mum (Vanessa Kohunui) has been my constant cheerleader along the way."

In the five years Calais has been at

Eastland Network she has continued the journey fully supported by her employers.

"I have built on the basics that I learned as a data entry assistant which gave me a good base to start with."

Calais has also completed electrical and project manager papers paid for by Eastland Network.

From data entry assistant, her role has grown into that of project manager, where she oversees inspections of overhead assets, poles, transformers and switches, organises contractors, manages asset replacement and overhead line defects, and provides support to main network controllers during power faults.

Calais admits she "finds it hard to switch off from work and I am always making mental notes about loose ends that need tying up".

Playing music is one way she unwinds and finds her "downtime".

"Music is always a calming thing. I play guitar, piano and sing. Mum and Dad both have musical backgrounds."

Calais is also embarking on another new and exciting journey into motherhood, with her first baby due in the next few weeks.

She is taking six months parental leave from work to bond with her child and enjoy plenty of family time.

PASSIONATE ABOUT HER WORK: From data entry assistant to project manager at Eastland Network, Calais Kohunui-Carman has always wanted to become an electrical engineer.





SERVING HER COMMUNITY: Alice Kibble is breaking barriers as a woman in tech and bringing technology to grassroots level.

Alice Kibble

Meet Alice Kibble — a community-minded, passionate and motivated small business entrepreneur in technology, who is going from strength to strength and taking it all in her stride with determination and resilience.

At 21 years old, Alice is an accomplished young woman who hasn't been afraid to take a leap of faith and allow her journey to unfold with support from family and community groups, and a bucket load of self-belief.

A background in numerous voluntary roles for various community organisations from a young age laid some solid foundations for Alice.

"I have been a community person my whole life."

That willingness to serve her community has not gone unnoticed. From age 13 to

16, Alice received three youth awards for volunteering, was a 2017 Kiwi Bank Local Hero medal recipient and that same year was nominated for Young New Zealander of the Year by the local branch of the Women's Institute.

An inspirational moment for Alice during her teenage years was attending the Festival for Future where she heard Alexia Hilbertidou (GirlBoss NZ creator) speak.

Alexia challenged the status quo to break through barriers of bias and change the gender gap in science, technology, engineering, maths, leadership and entrepreneurship.

Alice and Alexia went on to work together on several girls' leadership and tech projects in Gisborne.

Alice finished school in December 2018

and along with mother Jane visited the United Kingdom to spend time with family and friends.

While there Alice suffered a broken ankle with complications arising after the long flight home. Three surgeries later and having to overcome associated stress, anxiety and panic attacks, she had to adapt to a change of direction in her life plan.

Running for the Gisborne City ward in the local body elections in 2019, Alice gained over 3000 votes, which was a huge turning point in her confidence and vision for Tairāwhiti.

Having worked two part-time jobs in 2020, Alice was invited to attend a business workshop run by Tairāwhiti Technology Trust (Tai Tech) and her business idea was born.

She recalls a quote she heard during the workshop which spurred her on: "if you want

to serve your community and not sell to your community then you should have a business."

It was a light bulb moment.

"All the things I had done prior to starting a business all started to make sense. I went away from that workshop, designed a logo and registered a business."

Those years of voluntary work, collaborating with Alexia, and recognising her desire to work alongside community groups led to her creating the small business, Ask Alice.

In Alice's words, her business is "about making technology accessible, approachable, affordable and understandable for all ages and abilities — bringing technology to grassroots level in education and design services; breaking the barriers as a woman in tech and working for not-for-profit organisations, small businesses and individuals".

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LIVING THE LIFE SHE WANTS: Victoria Williams left her career as a lawyer in the United States, took up yoga and shifted to Gisborne with her husband. She has not looked back.

Picture by Lana Mua Media

Victoria Williams

Victoria Williams hails from Oregon USA and in a previous life was a trial lawyer.

That is until she was drawn into the world of yoga and a new way of living, and two years ago Victoria and her husband shifted to the other side of the world to Gisborne.

Victoria “retired” from practising law 11 years ago.

“I have now been a yoga teacher longer than I was a lawyer and that’s a good milestone to pass.”

The stressful environment of practising law steered Victoria in the direction of yoga, which ironically started in the workplace.

“The law firm I was working for brought in a yoga teacher to boost staff morale. We would practise weekly in a conference room and after a while a light bulb went on for me — I wasn’t living the life I wanted.

“I left law and set sights on sharing yoga as a teacher.”

Victoria completed her first 200-hour teacher training in 2010 at a Blissology yoga school that teaches “nature-inspired” yoga.

She has been teaching ever since, completing over 500 hours of training and hosting retreats in Oregon and Mexico.

Victoria’s husband discovered

Gisborne on a surf trip with his mates in 2016 and from then the desire to return to Gisborne began to brew.

Victoria, who has family in Hawaii and had never been to New Zealand, laughs when describing Gisborne as being “like Oregon and Hawaii had a baby”.

The couple made their move in 2020.

Her husband grabbed the opportunity to work abroad as a doctor in the emergency department of Hauora Tairāwhiti while Victoria taught yoga and made connections within the Gisborne community.

As well as teaching yoga at local studio Reset, Victoria offers community yoga classes through Gisborne Boardriders Club and takes summer-time sunrise classes at Tatapouri Bay on the beach.

A keen surfer, she is also the women’s event coordinator for the club and a contributor to online forum Gizzy Local.

Victoria’s belief is “the real value of yoga is a deepening connection to ourselves, our community and to nature”.

“That’s the best source of health and happiness.”

She feels she is still using the persuasive skills developed as a lawyer.

“Now I just want to persuade people to slow down and strengthen those connections, try new things and continue to grow.”



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Adorn the bird with feathers, so it may soar*

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Melanie Thornton

The new engagement manager at Gisborne District Council, Melanie Thornton, says following your passions without doubts opens many doors and leads to true satisfaction.

By her early 20s, Melanie had already decided to live “an interesting life”.

That philosophy has seen the journalist experience an extensive career path ranging from Radio New Zealand to the Wellington regional council to executive director of the Zealand Institute of International Affairs.

“I was always drawn to journalism,” she says. “I did end up being one but not with any training.”

“My first job was as a science journalist.”

Last year, Melanie and her husband (Hugo Sandall) came to Tairāwhiti for a holiday and after spending a couple of weeks on the East Coast, they made a decision to move here.

“Prior to that trip we had absolutely no plans to come here,” she said.

“I was brought up in Nelson and I didn’t want to go back there after living in Wellington for such a long time.”

“I wanted to move somewhere new and interesting where I had never been before because it’s an adventure. You are challenged as an individual — whether people will like you, whether you’ll find work and have a group of friends.”

“Moving to a new town in your own country can have its own challenges.”

Melanie says Tairāwhiti is unique, an even split of Māori and Pākehā — “a place where Te Tiriti is lived in practice”.

“In Wellington you can sit in

your offices and kind of know you have to apply the Treaty but here in Tairāwhiti, you can experience it.”

She is lucky not to have experienced institutional sexism in her career, she says

“Here at the council there are a lot of women in higher level positions than me. There’s quite a number of female directors.”

Melanie describes her position at the council as busy work but says, “my team are really good — a mix of ages, who always try to do the best they can for better community engagement, and are ready to improve on their skills”.

“They are all enthusiastic and do different things because we are incredibly busy.”

“On a personal level, I never mind exactly what work I do but it’s got to have three qualities — be intellectually interesting, do public good and it should involve working with the community.”

“As long as I have those three, I will have a lot of satisfaction out of the job.”

Melanie’s motivation during her radio career was “moving people’s thinking . . . expanding the way they thought”.

In today’s world, seeing women diversifying, doing amazing jobs has been inspirational, she says.

“Look at Amal Clooney. She’s an extraordinary woman in her own right. Originally from Lebanon, a human rights lawyer at the highest level doing incredible things in her area of expertise — social justice.”

“At the council we try to be good Treaty partners and we can always improve on that.”

Her advice to young women aspiring to follow a similar career path as herself is “to be interested in everything”.



MAKING LIFE INTERESTING: And to do that, Melanie Thornton says “be interested in everything”.

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