

Passionate about working with people

By [Sasha Borissenko](#)

Wellington and Hutt Valley Community Law Centre rōia hapori (community lawyer) Julia Whaipooti was working at Fresh Choice in Blenheim when a regular customer told her not to start a new job at Mitre 10 but to instead work for her as a legal secretary. Two years later she decided to enrol in Laws 101 at Victoria University.

“I was the first in my family to go to university. I really didn’t know how to go about it. The lawyer I worked with, Caroline McCarthy, and who I followed to different firms was really supportive and encouraged me to continue learning. One day I thought, I want my own legal secretary, so off to law school I went.

“Admittedly law school wasn’t that foreign a concept for me. My family instilled a confidence in me where I thought I could do anything I put my mind to. I had three aspirations – to either win the (entire) Olympics, be a lawyer or to be a psychologist/Dr Phil.

“I talked a lot as a kid and apparently that’s what you need to be a good lawyer so I was told a lot that I should be a lawyer. I also wanted to make sure I had a job where I could provide for my family as in provide kai and a roof I could rent. I thought that being lawyer could do that.”

In a minority

Hailing from the East Coast, it was at university that Julia noticed she was a minority among a sea of “male, stale and pale” law students, she says.

“Law reflects the privileged bubble that is inaccessible to many. Unless people have whānau or lawyers as family members, it’s an unlikely profession for some.

“There were times sitting in criminal justice classes where Māori overrepresentation was the talking point.

“It sometimes felt like I was being spoken about, and that can be uncomfortable. It made me curious to know why public perceptions, statistics, media painted Māori in a negative way when I found myself surrounded by heaps of awesome Māori.

“I suppose that got me to then ask the ‘why’. Why are Māori overrepresented in crime statistics? Why are stereotypes of Māori so ill informed? Why are we underrepresented in the administration of justice?

“I think it’s so important to have more Māori in the criminal justice system. If you go to a courtroom, the majority are Māori but they’re on the wrong side of



Julia Whaipooti

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the bench. What’s considered ‘normal’ is a problem and it only adds to the idea of structural discrimination.”

Social justice focus

It was because of a natural driver towards social justice issues that Julia started volunteering at the Community Law Centre while at law school and before long, she landed a job there.

“I feel quite passionately about what community law does and what I’m doing. I’m really passionate about working with people. I think there are thousands of people who fall through the cracks and I want to be a part of the process to make a difference.”

Julia is also conscious that she has a special rapport when dealing with Māori clients, she says.

“Community Law increases access to justice, access to the law. I know because I am Māori, I ‘look’ Māori, therefore, I can be a less intimidating doorway for some Māori clients to access our services. If you can relate to your client, and them to you, they are going to tell me more and that can make so much of a difference.” ■