

Dream weavers

Why are affluent Aucklanders choosing to spend so much time with teenagers from an impoverished inner-city suburb?

BY REBECCA MACFIE/PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITE

“Coach” Ant Backhouse is up the front, ramping up expectations in a room that bursts with aspiration. His audience is an ethnic melting pot of teenagers and their parents from the Wesley neighbourhood, a pocket of hardship and poverty nestled in Auckland’s Mt Roskill. Just around the corner is McGehan Close, one of John Key’s “streets of shame” where, he said in his famous 2007 “underclass” speech, youth gangs run amok and “hopelessness has become ingrained”.

The assembled kids and their families are Tongan, Samoan, Cook Island, Maori, African, Sri Lankan, Indian. There are white faces in the crowded room, too: those men and women who travel regularly from more affluent parts of Auckland to be alongside these 15-year-olds, gently encouraging them to stay at school, graduate with qualifications, and even go on to tertiary study.

Backhouse, known simply as Coach to the students, talks about goals and commitment, and doles out awards that celebrate success against the odds. There’s Amelia, who was determined to move out of the lowest maths stream and studied furiously with the support of her mentor, Therese Clark, to achieve her goal; Saeli, praised for consistently making wise choices in the face of peer pressure; Robert, whose school performance and behaviour were going downhill until he was sent to

live with an uncle, and who wound up collecting two awards at his school’s final assembly.

But this is the beginning of Year 11 – the first year of NCEA – and so many things could go wrong for these kids. Backhouse exhorts them to rise to the challenge and decide which “team” they are on: the team that will go on to successfully graduate from high school in 2012, or the team he calls the SADSADS – “sometimes a dreamer, sometimes a dropout”. He warns that some of their peers have been playing for the wrong team, getting into trouble and neglecting their school work. “We need to take this seriously. We need to make sure the investment matures and we can do well and achieve our dreams,” he tells them.

A parent, Mark Iakopo, comes forward to offer gratitude and prayers on behalf of the families. “There are white



people here and I am grateful. It opens another door.” He tells the students, “I promise you will never go wrong in this programme. This is an honour and a blessing.”

The programme is called I Have a Dream (IHAD), and it has been part of these students’ – and their families’ – lives for seven years. In 2003, when they were in Year 4 at Wesley Primary, a decile 1 school, they were “adopted” by philanthropist and entrepreneur Scott Gilmour, who promised to support the entire cohort with tutoring, mentoring and enrichment activities for the following 10-15 years of their education, including paying the fees of those who go on to university.

Gilmour set up a charitable trust, and the revenue it earns pays for the salaries of project co-ordinator Backhouse and mentor co-ordinator Lynn Su’a, funded the construction of the Dreamer Centre in the grounds of Wesley Intermediate where after-school tuition is provided four days a week, and pays for camps, trips and other experiences. Volunteer after-school



Saeli Alatasi (left) with his mentor, Brendan McFadden.

tutors are recruited from the senior ranks of local high schools, and almost every student in the cohort has a dedicated adult mentor whose task is to reinforce the importance of education and provide new experiences.

As the students have moved through the education system and scattered across nine Auckland high schools, an increasingly important part of Backhouse's job has been going in to bat for those shunted into low-streamed classes and directed into doing unit standards rather than the achievement standards they need for university entrance. He has a good relationship with the schools – Mt Albert Grammar and Mt Roskill Grammar, where the majority of Dreamers go, even provide him with working space. But “it’s a numbers game. High schools are dealing with thousands of kids and it’s an organisational nightmare to uniquely identify individual skills and talents.”

And the schools have their own interests to attend to. “They are competing with each other for pass rates. They don’t want kids to fail and they don’t want to take that risk that it will look bad on their statistics.”

When the project began, 34 students

were in the Year 4 cohort, although the number grew to 53 as new students joined their year at Wesley Primary. Eleven have since moved away from Auckland, although most of them remain in contact with the programme.

Without intervention, the odds of academic success for these kids are not good. Over 70% are from Pasifika families and English is a second language for two-thirds. Most were reading at below their

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chronological age when the programme began in 2003, “so it’s always been a catch-up academically for our kids”, says Backhouse.

NZQA figures show only 45% of decile 1 Pasifika students achieved NCEA level 1 in 2008, compared with 71% of the overall population, and only 28% achieved University Entrance compared with 66% nationally.

Backhouse says many parents – particularly those who are the first generation to have emigrated from the south pacific – have little grasp of how the NCEA system

works, or how to advocate for a better deal for their kids at school. Long hours, shift work and low wages are the norm. Housing is crowded, often with several generations under one roof and no quiet spaces for homework.

“There is often a view that it’s all the parents’ fault and if we could just fix the parents everything would be solved. High schools especially are good at giving you that line, but from what I know of these kids, I would say 90% of the parents believe in them they all want them to do well and have high aspirations. The trouble is they have fewer tools in their toolbox to be able to help them.”

Experiences that middle-class Pakeha kids can take for granted are often missing from their lives. Gilmour recalls one of the first IHAD outings, when they took 90 students and parents to Rangitoto Island: “Eighty-nine had never been on the harbour. A couple of years later we went to Waitomo Caves, and when we were driving over the Bombay Hills, we noticed one mother was crying – she had never seen green fields like that. She had never been out of Auckland city and she was 35 years old.”

For Jade Nicholas, of Cook Island

descent, there's no doubt her eight years in the IHAD programme have given her a distinct advantage. "Once a Dreamer, always a Dreamer – that's how they make you feel. We are like the chosen ones. We have a better chance of getting anywhere. We have everything we need.

"The teachers don't expect much of us. We want to prove them wrong. It motivates you because there are people who actually have faith in you. Coach has always taught us that there are a lot of people that believe in us, like Scott and the tutors. All they want is for us to do our best and do well."

Robel Hailu, who came to New Zealand with his mother after years in a Kenyan refugee camp, agrees. The fact that his mentor, Anthony Ford – who has three young children of his own – comes regularly from his North Shore home to spend time with him is "cool. He's like another guy I can open up to. We speak about anything."

Street gangs are an ever-present distraction and risk. "They get involved in a lot of violence, mostly against other gangs," says Robel. "These guys go out with weapons, knives and stuff." He has been offered gang positions and was tempted when he was younger but is no longer interested and works hard to keep his friends out too. "Dreamers is a big part of resisting that pressure."

He believes many of his peers in the area simply lose hope. "Around here, they say, 'I hate school', and stuff like that. I say it's not because he or she hates school, it's because they have just given up on themselves. I've seen that a lot. Dreamers makes sure we don't give up on ourselves."

Gilmour describes the I Have a Dream programme as a franchise, and waves a fat operations manual to illustrate the point that it's ready to be rolled out by anyone with the means and commitment. It was started in 1981 by wealthy US industrialist Eugene Lang, who returned to his old school in Harlem and learnt that three-quarters of students dropped out. He spontaneously promised to fund the college tuition of any sixth grader who graduated from high school. Since then the programme has been replicated in 27 US states, with donors (most of them private philanthropists) committing to a long-term programme of enrichment and mentoring for a cohort of students, and funding their college fees. The programme has been shown to improve grades and graduation rates, help students resist peer pressure, and promote aspiration and positive attitudes to education.

Gilmour had harboured thoughts of setting up the programme since reading

about it in 1992 while living in the US. A decade later he had both the time and the capital to do so, having finished up as New Zealand managing director of Intel and then selling out of ABC Technologies, a successful accounting software company he co-founded in the US.

Through former policeman and crime prevention specialist Nick Tuitasi, he was introduced to Wesley Primary, where Backhouse and his wife, Nina, were already deeply involved in youth work. Gilmour recalls they were so committed they

himself as a member of the "lucky spoon club" – born to white parents who spoke English, read him books and expected him to succeed, and he went to university in an era when it was free.

But he also sees the IHAD programme in pragmatic business terms: it's an investment that ought to turn a profit – it's just that the return will be reaped by society rather than shareholders.

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worked as posties so they could devote their afternoons to running after-school programmes. Backhouse had also been drafted onto the Wesley Board of Trustees – eventually becoming chairman – even though he and Nina had no children.

Backhouse was clearly the ideal person to run the IHAD programme. Gilmour recalls how he and Nina asked him the obvious question: why would a wealthy cashed-up businessman tie up a whole lot of money (he won't say how much) for a bunch of kids he didn't even know?

It's a question Gilmour has grown accustomed to answering. Yes, there is a moral duty to give back to the community and be a force for positive change. He describes

in it." Without targeted intervention to reverse massive educational underachievement, he says, the future is bleak for these kids. "So we have a time bomb."

Gilmour sees his contribution to the Wesley community in much the same light as he sees his parallel life as a mentor and investor in young technology companies. "If New Zealand doesn't start high-tech, high-growth, high-wage companies, then guess what – I have four kids, and they won't be living here because there won't be jobs for them. Nor will they if we have a society that's gone to hell in a hand basket, with gated communities and so on."

So is IHAD producing an adequate return on investment? Gilmour admits he is dissatisfied with the academic results so far. "Out natural bell curve is below the national mean and we haven't moved it as much as I would have expected. We have moved some kids from below the mean to way above the mean, but we still have too many below the mean."

Backhouse says he has sometimes asked himself “what is it that you have to do to get these kids through?” But, like Gilmore, he points to evidence of improved attitudes to school and homework, greater confidence, and career aspirations as proof the programme is having an impact. There’s also the ripple effect within families, with stories of Dreamers reading to younger siblings, and the involvement of parents in IHAD activities.

Educational researcher Jan Hill, who has tracked the IHAD programme since

a reputation for being a muscle man at school – if you have those triggers, they may be steered that way ... There are a lot of signposts for kids pointing in the wrong direction.

“For us in the programme it’s about having many people pointing in the right direction. We often tell our mentors, ‘You are a signpost.’”

Brendan McFadden is one of those signposts. Every second Saturday for the past six years the 62-year-

And I make a point of subtly reinforcing all the good things I know his parents do for him, and reinforcing the things that I know his mum and dad would like me to reinforce.”

Every mentor-mentee relationship is different. Business adviser Ant Howard sees his relationship with Tevita Fualalo as one of encouragement, reinforcing the importance of education, and helping to prepare his mentee for the fact that if he succeeds academically, he will become a leader in his community. “I just think you are a presence, and that presence evolves and changes.” He likens it to being on the sidelines – “they see that you are there and taking an interest”.

Businesswoman and mother of four Jackie Petter is mentor to Aroha Ireland, the girl plucked from the obscurity of McGehan Close by John Key in 2007 and swept up to Waitangi in a blaze of media attention. Aroha hasn’t been attending the Dreamers centre lately, and Petter says one of the goals for this year is to try to reconnect her with the IHAD programme. “It’s going to take a further commitment from me beyond what has been my brief over the past couple of years, which has been to make the connection with her and her family and introduce her to different things. But now it has become more serious. From an academic perspective, if she is going to achieve the kind of loose goals she has – as much as you have at 15 – she is going to have to do some serious work at school.”

Petter says Aroha and the family have aspirations, but the household has no resources. “They have no car, no money and no way of providing anything extra for her at all.” There are five children in the family and Petter admits she sometimes feels like bundling them all up in her car. “But you can’t. That’s one of the things we were taught at the start. This is about Aroha, and hopefully if we can do something good for her it can break a cycle or change the role modelling in their family.”

Is she making a difference? “Sometimes I don’t think I am, if I’m honest. But we’re at a real crossroads now and that’s why I have decided we have to step it up this year. And if things do turn out better for her and she manages to get a reasonable job and get out of the poverty they are in, will it be because of this programme? We won’t really know for sure, because she is a nice kid with a neat personality. But the scales are tipping towards me thinking we are making a difference in her life. And no one else is going to have that influence. So I still believe it could work. I certainly wouldn’t walk away from her.” ■



Left and top right: Scott Gilmore, founder and backer of I Have a Dream in New Zealand, helps out at the Wesley centre.



Bottom right: “Coach” Ant Backhouse, helps a “dreamer” with her school work.

it started at Wesley, says expectations and attitudes are at least as important to the students’ futures as academic gains. “It will be their ability to stay on at school, the number of pregnancies that don’t happen, the number that stay out of gangs – all of those things will count towards my qualification of success for the programme.”

And Backhouse has no doubt IHAD is providing the street gangs with real competition for the Dreamers’ loyalties. He cites the case of one boy, whose mother worked 12 hours a day, six days a week to make ends meet, and who had two gang houses nearby, who would almost certainly have ended up in a gang without intervention.

At the moment, he says, one of the Dreamers “would probably consider himself in a gang. If lots of other parts of their lives are falling apart – if all their friends and associates in the street are in gangs, if Mum and Dad’s relationship is abusive, if they are in trouble at school and have

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old former policeman has driven from the North Shore to meet Saeli Alatasi. They go to the park, visit places such as the art gallery, Motat and Kelly Tarlton’s, play mini-golf or go 10-pin bowling. At first, McFadden wasn’t sure he was making a difference, but gradually Saeli opened up and began sharing his thoughts.

“But I don’t think for a moment that I keep Saeli on the straight and narrow. The family environment, as in most Samoan families, is loving and caring and church-oriented, and they set high standards ... The reason he is the good young man that he is because of excellent parenting. All I do is answer questions and make observations as they are called for.