

## LOCAL &amp; REGIONAL

## PGF helping Coast offenders

Teresa Smith

A driver training programme which aims to keep young people out of prison and away from crime has come to the Coast, thanks to the Provincial Growth Fund (PGF).

The programme is an initiative of the Howard League, a charity which works to reduce the prison population and re-offending rates as well as helping former prisoners integrate into communities.

Chief executive Mike Williams said the PGF was giving the league \$2.5 million for three years so it could roll out its driving programme to a dozen new sites, including the Coast.

The organisation worked alongside probation officers to help offenders get their driving licences so they could get jobs, he said.

"The idea is to basically get them off a path to jail and it's working."

The league has employed Hokitika man Maui Weepu to work Coast-wide.

It has put Mr Weepu through driver instructor training, as it does with all its driving staff.

Mr Williams was recently in Greymouth to introduce Mr Weepu to Coast probation staff.

More positions could be created if needed, he said.

"In Whangarei, we started with one - demand was huge and we appointed another out of the PGF."

Goldman Sachs' Lighthouse Trust paid for a third Whangarei position.

The same could happen on the Coast as the context mirrored that of Northland, Mr Williams said.

People in both regions lived rurally as it was cheaper but there was no public transport so they had to drive.

Referrals for the Coast programme have already begun, with one made in

**'We create safer, legal drivers, we help keep them out of jail and we make them employable; getting them off benefits.'**

Mike Williams

the Westport District Court last week.

Mr Williams said young people were racking up thousands of dollars in fines due to driving offences and ending up in prison.

"They get in the slammer for driving offences, trapped into gangs while there, when they get out from their first short sentence they commit a crime to prove they're staunch and there the vicious circle starts."

Mr Williams said a meeting in Wellington in 2014 about increasing prisoner numbers prompted the league to trial driver training in the Hawke's Bay.

"Sixty-five percent of Māori offenders have a driving offence as part of their initial jail sentence and about 5 percent of jail sentences are just for driving without a licence."

Initially they thought literacy issues were behind people not getting licences but other barriers were evident, he said.

"No one had ever taken a personal interest in these people. The thing that's really making the difference is individual attention." He cited a young Hawke's Bay mother whom a judge had threatened with prison. She was put in the driving programme but did not turn up.

The instructor knocked on her door to see what was going on.

The woman said she could not go as if she was caught driving she would go to prison, Mr Williams said.

"What the instructor realised is that the woman did not realise there was a perfectly adequate bus service in Napier."

The woman ended up getting her full licence.

Mr Williams said money was another big barrier.

"Sitting your licence costs you 100

bucks and if you're on a benefit you don't have 100 bucks. Pass rates in Napier were about 42 percent meaning another \$100 for a resit."

The league also found driver training was largely online but the people it was dealing with were not online.

It put together a book to help learners and ended up with a 95 percent licence pass rate.

"The reason was we weren't letting them sit until we knew they were going to pass. Often they didn't have legal vehicles to sit the test in so we supplied them with a legal vehicle for the test."

After the Hawke's Bay trial the Corrections Department provided funding to assess whether it could succeed in West Auckland. It did.

Then the Lighthouse Trust gave \$100,000 so the programme could start in Whangarei.

The New Zealand Transport Agency also provided funding.

Now the league has driving pro-

grammes in Whangarei, Waitakere, Hamilton, Tauranga, Rotorua, Whakataane and Hawke's Bay along with the Coast.

Further expansion is planned into provincial centres.

Mr Williams said there were "no down-sides" to the programme. "We create safer, legal drivers, we help keep them out of jail and we make them employable; getting them off benefits."

Over 80 percent of all entry level jobs required a driver licence, he said.

Probation officers had told him that Greymouth had plenty of dairy farm jobs that paid \$45,000-50,000 if you could get them.

Mr Williams said a driver's licence was also an important form of identification.

ID was critical for getting a bank account, signing up for a rental property, and many other situations.

## Fostering: tough love and a tough job

## Our People

Becky Manawatu

Being a foster parent is not an easy job, but local man Linton Harmon has given it a good crack.

He and his wife Diane fostered 36 children over a period of several decades after their two children left home.

He shows me around his home - points out where he stacks his wood, his motorbike, where the dog and cat are sleeping, cosy by a fire.

There's his collection of the most "interesting" pieces of driftwood he's found, strung up in a row from the ceiling. He indicates a little dog, a little whale, an angry face.

In his lounge he has a happy birthday letter from his grandson pinned to the wall.

"Take a seat," he says. Linton lives with his son, Barry. "It's all right for a couple of bachelors," he says of the home that has been a short-term refuge for many children in need.

Diane died 11 years ago. Since then Linton has taken in the odd foster child, one as recently as a few months ago, but "only when called upon", he says.

Linton, 83, says foster parenting was often tough. It was also hard to see how poorly some children were treated by their parents and families.

Some were afraid, some never settled and ran away frequently. There were children who wet their beds every night. They could be stropky, rude and ungrateful.

But Linton and Diane were often reminded how important their care was.

He recalls one girl's father visiting. "She came up to me and she said: 'Please don't leave me with him on me

own'...It was sad, you know, really sad." They started foster parenting because of Diane.

"She was a great one with kids. I like kids too, you know. It was an interesting job."

Linton says he enjoyed giving the children stability. Often that included chores, such as stacking wood, which was a good way to spend time together. "I'd always try and take them with me, if I was out doing wood."

He took some fishing. Mostly, though, the job was about giving them a place where there was someone who was boss, and they were safe.

However, it took a toll on Diane and Linton because it was often stressful dealing with pubescent teenagers. Some of them liked to "take the law into their own hands".

One boy caused them a lot of heartache. "You'd blink, and he'd be gone."

He's kept in touch with several of the girls and boys he fostered, many of whom have now grown up and have families of their own.

One young man flew back to New Zealand from England especially for Diane's funeral, he says.

Linton recently visited another lad, whose four-year-old daughter opened the door and yelled out: "Hey! Old man Harmon's here."

The first girl they ever fostered is a mother now.

"She come to me a couple of years ago. She said: 'Linton, I've got my own kids now, it made me realise what a b... of a kid I was when I was with you,'" he laughs.

It's great to see some are doing well, and many look like they've broken out of the cycle of poverty, neglect and abuse they were born into, he says.

He loved "the satisfaction of getting them on the right track. We had the



Linton Harmon at his home in Westport. Photo: Becky Manawatu

odd disappointment, but not many".

They had a lot of children who'd arrive at their place just because they were "cobbers" of their foster children.

"We'd get a few wagging school here, I'd have them stack wood."

Did he not feel obliged to send them

back to school?

"If you said that, they'd just wander the streets."

Linton has a card from Oranga Tamariki staff. One woman writes that she has worked in the foster care service for 15 years. "And in that time

you have helped many, many children and youth."

She writes that it was lucky one boy was placed with Linton and Diane.

"I don't think he would be the fine young man he is today."

Another woman writes that she

hopes he never retires.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am for all the great work you have done as a carer."

Linton looks at the card, smiles and says they enjoyed fostering children.

## Clean sweep for country musician

Becky Manawatu

Westport country music talent Jaydin Shingleton has hit another high in his entertaining career.

He was judged overall winner at the recent New Zealand Country Music (NZCM) Star Awards in Tauranga.

Shingleton, 19, won every section he entered.

These were the senior open, senior gospel, senior country rock, New Zealand open, and open western sections.

He said he was thrilled. "I was very shocked to have won every section for a start."

His win in Tauranga has earned him a place in next year's Norfolk Island trans-Tasman competition.

Shingleton said the place in the Norfolk competition was a huge bonus. The trip was to be in May.

It was Shingleton's first time competing in the NZCM Star Awards.

He sang 10 different songs at the competition, with his favourite being a song he penned himself, 'So Hard to Lose'.

"It's about losing someone who is a

father figure, to me it's about my granddad."

His late granddad, also a musician, was a big inspiration to Shingleton. "And my mum, can't forget my mum," he laughed. He inherited his grandfather's guitar and regularly uses it for competitions.

The latest wins top up his myriad music prizes.

Shingleton took out top place at this year's Buller Country Music Club's 30th annual Best of the West awards.

Last year he took out the Best of the West's annual camerata scholarship in Tamworth, Australia, which he had previously won in 2015.

This earned him a week of country music tuition with peers from Australia and New Zealand.

He won Intermediate New Zealand Entertainer of the Year at Rotorua in 2017 which led to an invitation to perform on Norfolk Island in a trans-Tasman showcase in May this year.

Shingleton began entering country music competitions when he was four years old.

One of his earliest performances was playing The Last Post on a recorder.

He has applied to take part in next year's Tamworth's senior country music tuition programme and says he would also love to perform in the Tamworth Country Music Festival.

## Westport rental home surplus gone

Lee Scanlon

A Buller real estate consultant says his company has gone from having dozens of empty rental homes on its books to a waiting list of hopeful tenants.

Charlie Elley confirmed that local woman Jewel Lemon, 83, isn't alone in her search for a flat to rent.

Mrs Lemon told The News yesterday that her flat had been sold and she had to vacate by November 12 but couldn't find anywhere to go.

Mr Elley said Buller had been over-run with vacant rentals before Stockton mine sold to BT Mining.

"At the worst of the worst there were between 40 and 50 properties that we managed that were vacant. That was a couple of years ago.

"Now we have a waiting list for properties... It's not as easy as walking in and asking for a property."

Once the fear of mine job losses disappeared, vacant properties sold or filled



Charlie Elley

up, he said.

Buyers from outside Westport were now looking for rental properties.

Rents were going up. "The days of a modern home for around \$250 [a week] are gone."

Tenants could expect to pay \$200 a week for one bedroom and about \$250 for two bedrooms. Previously, a two-bedroom rental was about \$180 a week, Mr Elley said.

Despite the increase, local rentals were still considerably cheaper than elsewhere.

New warrant of fitness and insulation rules might further narrow the housing supply, as landlords sold off their rentals rather than upgrade them.

When properties were upgraded, rents would go up. "It's not going to get any cheaper for tenants."

Mr Elley said Mrs Lemon would struggle to find the one-bedroom flat she was after.



Local music talent Jaydin Shingleton cleaned up at the New Zealand Country Music Star Awards in Tauranga. Photo: supplied