

Spanz

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Presbyterian making a difference for south Auckland kids

It's not easy finding a slot in Steve Farrelly's diary.

The genial 61-year-old, who received an Auckland Local Heroes Medal in 2014, is one of the busiest men you'll ever meet.

Take for example a recent Wednesday at 1pm: Steve has already criss-crossed Auckland delivering a tonne of rice to food banks, worked the phones to help raise the \$24,000 needed to host 600 people for Christmas lunch and manned the toaster at the Breakfast Club, a social enterprise he set up in 2010 which now feeds around 40 hungry three to 14-year-olds every week day at Randwick Park, Glen Innes Primary, St Pious X and Glen Taylor Schools.

St Columba Presbyterian Church at Botany, where Steve is a long-time member, is one of the key supporters of the Breakfast Club which has since morphed into a network offering everything from parenting skills to sports coaching.

"I saw a need and decided to do something about it," says the gentle giant, in what you quickly realise is his customary unassuming manner.

To find out how the former policeman became one of Auckland's Local Heroes, you need look no further than the Bible.

"My wife was at a conference in Denton, Texas when the speaker, Dutch Sheets, quoted the Passage of Jesus: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach to the poor'. It started me thinking about what could really be done and I knew that eventually I would get involved."

Ironically, a week later back at St Columba, Steve heard the same words in his own church.

"It was my 'A-ha' moment. I thought, I've now heard this same message twice in a week, it must be a sign. I knew I needed to do something to help, but I just needed to find the right people."

It didn't take long for those people to present themselves: Steve was helping a friend redistribute books when he realised that the students at Randwick Park School, a decile-one school in Manurewa, were grappling with a major problem.



Milo Kids Hamiora Samuels [9], Sonny Pawa [11] and Heperone Kiao [11] enjoy a break with Steve Farrelly before starting the morning at Randwick Park School in Manurewa. Photo: www.newspix.co.nz

"Many of the kids were coming to school hungry and others were being kept at home because their parents couldn't afford to send them to school with lunch. The school had been thinking about a breakfast club for a while so I put my hand up."

Sanitarium and Fonterra had previously sponsored supplies two days a week through the Kickstart Breakfasts programme, but Steve and his wife Brenda soon realised five days' worth of food was needed and so funded the other three days out of their own pockets.

Eventually they knocked on enough doors that other organisations stepped into the breach.

"Steve is a very persuasive person and is hard to say no to," laughs the Moderator, the Right Rev Andrew Norton.

A strong motivator was research showing that kids who have breakfast learn better, says Andrew.

"Steve also understood that kids who come to school for breakfast are less likely to be truant."

But his crusade wasn't just about filling empty bellies. Steve also worked alongside the schools' social workers to address issues students were facing at home.

Steve's work now also encompasses the provision of school items such as uniforms and stationery, community support for families including appliances

and furniture, clothing op-shop, food bank and a sports academy, which focuses on the natural strengths of children in the sporting arena.

Steve is rightly proud of the success of all these initiatives but is particularly pleased at how quickly the sport academy fired the imaginations of the participants – in 2013, for example, 40 kids applied for 30 positions and a year later, that number had leaped to 87 applications for the same 30 slots. Steve is also pleased at the support they've received from everyone from the Auckland Blues and Vodafone Warriors to the Breakers, Silver Ferns and Les Mill gyms, as well as neighbouring Saint Kentigern College that offered coaching support from their rugby and netball teams.

"Saint Kent's have offered so much to our kids who might not otherwise have access to facilities and equipment and mentoring services."

It's a partnership that's obviously working: one of Steve's charges has recently been granted a Saint Kentigern College scholarship.

"We've only been going two years and already the sports academy has opened up such a great opportunity for this 16-year-old. He's an extraordinary rugby player. He's a credit to his Samoan heritage and to his parents in the way they've raised him."

Sharon Stephenson [Spanz](#)