



Excellence
IN FOSTER CARE AWARDS



March
2026



NGĀ MIHI (THANK YOU)
TO OUR SPONSORS:



The generosity of these organisations enables us to continue to host the Excellence in Foster Care Awards and recognise extraordinary caregivers all over the country.

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AWARDS PROGRAMME

1:45pm

Opening Speech from Caring Families Aotearoa
CEO, Linda Surtees

Karakia Timatanga | Opening Karakia
Waiata

2:00pm

Presentation of Awards begins by Hon Karen
Chhour, Minister for Children and Linda Surtees,
CEO of Caring Families Aotearoa

2:45pm

Closing remarks from Linda Surtees

Karakia Whakamutunga | Closing Karakia

2:55pm

Finish



KARAKIA TIMATANGA | OPENING KARAKIA

Ngā mihi o te rā
Ki te whānau e huihui nei
Kia tau te rangimārie
Kia whakatapua tātou me
ngā mea
E whakapono ana tātou
Haumi e, hui e, tāiki e

WAIATA: PUREA NEI

Purea nei e te hau
Horoia, e te ua
Whitiwhitia e te rā
Mahea ake ngā Pōraruraru
Mākere ana, ngā here

E Rere, wairua e rere
Ki ngā ao o te rangi
Whitiwhitia e te rā
Mahea ake ngā Pōraruraru
Mākere ana, ngā here

Scattered by the wind
washed by the rain
and transformed by the sun,
all doubts are swept away
and all restraints are cast down.

Fly o free spirit, fly
to the clouds in the heavens,
transformed by the sun,
with all doubts swept away
and all restraints cast down.



MICHELLE BEAVER

Caregiver with



Nominated by Kim Aperloo,
Open Home Foundation



Solo mum of seven, grandmother of 17, great grandmother of six – AND an extraordinary caregiver, Michelle Beaver is described as “an inspiration to us all”.

Michelle currently provides outstanding long term care for an intellectually disabled young man, whom she took under her wing three years ago. She has also informally cared for vulnerable children for over 40 years and continues to do so today.

It was during Michelle’s 25+ year career as a teacher aide for tamariki with high needs that she provided respite and emergency care for at least 50 children she met through the school. In one case, Michelle looked after a child for four months from a family that had recently immigrated to New Zealand, while their sibling was critically ill in Starship Hospital. She frequently stepped in to help parents who needed a break from caring for children with disabilities or behavioural issues.

Upon “retirement” from school life in 2022, Michelle chose to keep giving by becoming a foster parent with Open Home Foundation. Although she intended to stick to respite care, she made a special connection with Paul*, a very traumatised 10-year-old boy with an intellectual disability, who was living in a disability home.

“Michelle welcomed Paul as part of her family from the moment she met him,” says her nominator, Kim. “She provided her first respite weekend care for him in November and then asked if she could have him for his birthday in December because she didn’t want Paul to spend it at the disability home.” This pattern continued at Christmas and by the following February, Michelle had requested long-term care of Paul.

A strong advocate for Paul in the school environment, Michelle home-schooled him part-time to make up for a lack of teacher-aide hours. She succeeded in securing an early spot for Paul at the local secondary school's Special Needs Unit when he was 12, so he didn't need to transition in and out of Intermediate.

She works with Paul to regulate his emotions and is fostering his life skills by showing him how to make cups of tea for visitors and simple dinners. Together, they have travelled around the country and abroad – including a memorable trip to Christchurch where Paul participated in a swimming event for the Special Olympics. Michelle is very involved in the Marist Premier Rugby club, and despite Paul initially being wary of rugby, he is now the club mascot and enjoys getting lifted in the line up and running with the rugby boys.

Alongside her exceptional care of Paul, supported by her adult children, Michelle continues to help other tamariki in her community by transporting them to school if needed, attending paediatrician appointments and providing respite care.

“One child Michelle supports is actually a child that bullied Paul at school, but Michelle has such a big heart and is so understanding she was able to see behind the child's behaviour to recognise they were in need of love and care,” says Kim.

**Name changed for privacy.*

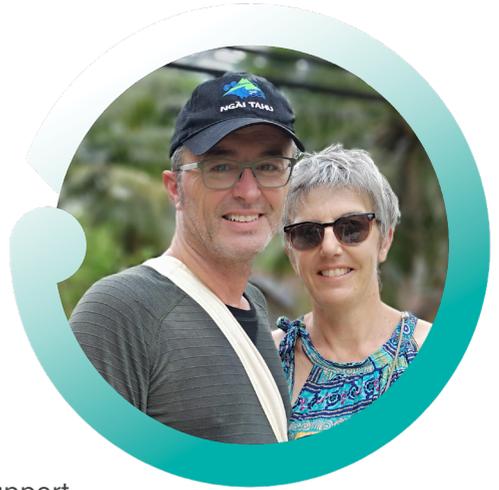
Below: Michelle and family, after receiving a Masterton civic award for services to families and to the Marist Rugby Club, 2019.



CHERIE DEAN & KIRINI

Caregivers with  **ORANGA
TAMARIKI**
Ministry for Children

Nominated by Hannah Keller,
Oranga Tamariki



Cherie and Kirini have something special in common: they both have a huge heart for caring for children and young people who need a little extra support.

Having raised their own children from previous relationships, the couple started providing respite care through the Ministry of Health for a young boy with autism. This young man is now in his late teens and has secured a building apprenticeship.

In August 2023 they began caregiving with Oranga Tamariki, taking a five-year-old boy, Jack* into their long-term care. Since then, they have made such a positive impression on the professionals working alongside him, that letters of support for this Award nomination have flown in.

Jack has an extensive history of trauma, with challenging behaviour, learning difficulties and attachment needs – requiring a high level of care, usually from more than one person at a time. He is now settled in a home built on safety, love and togetherness.

His transition into Cherie and Kirini's care happened more suddenly than planned. The couple organised a special day for Jack and his former caregivers so he could meet them, the family pets and see his new home. They took photos together and wrote a little story about themselves for Jack to take away, so he'd feel more familiar with them next time. However, his caregivers caught Covid that same week, causing Cherie and Kirini to hit the ground running with Jack in the space of just a few days. Nominator Hannah says the couple coped admirably, learning his needs, triggers, routines and responses – and understanding them – very quickly.

Cherie and Kirini both have a background in early childhood education and put their knowledge to good use. They provide an environment where Jack can explore and play safely, according to his interests. Due to his fascination with machinery, Kirini removed the blades from some old lawnmowers and a weed eater so Jack could push and carry them around the garden. For his 6th birthday, they purchased Jack a real leaf blower! These initiatives not only develop Jack's gross motor skills but also fulfil his sensory needs.

Hannah says Cherie and Kirini consistently put the child first, despite experiencing personal health issues and the passing of close whānau members over the past two years.

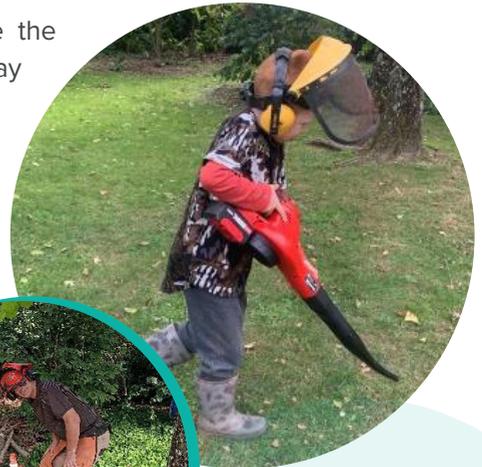
“Their commitment to [Jack] has not wavered,” she says. “They have been his biggest advocates across home, school and afterschool care settings to ensure he is safe and supported in all areas of life.”

Cherie and Kirini go the extra mile to maintain whānau contact for Jack. Even though he is often dysregulated afterwards, they take Jack to and from family visits regularly. The couple also encourage whānau to attend important events. Recently, their careful planning with school and social workers saw Jack successfully perform on stage in a school production, with his biological parents, stepparents and grandparents cheering him on.

Jack's life is full of experiences outside the home, such as swimming lessons, trips away in the campervan and rural games.

A former social worker for Jack says: “Cherie and Kirini have shown the highest level of commitment, resilience and care towards a young child that I have seen in my experience.”

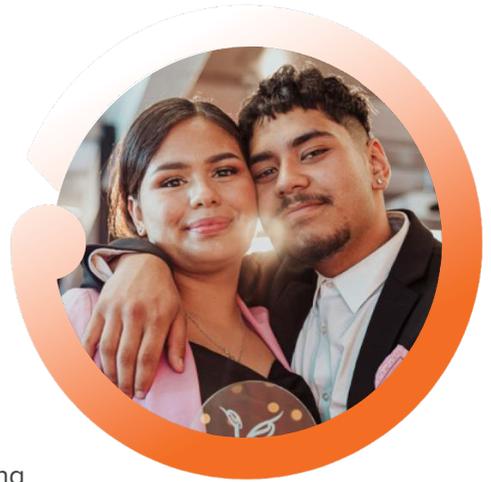
**Name changed for privacy.*



KAEA FLIGHT & JAMES NANSEN

Caregivers with  **ORANGA
TAMARIKI**
Ministry for Children

Nominated by Jane Freeman,
Oranga Tamariki



Kaea and James are described as the epitome of outstanding caregivers.

At just 20 years old, the couple are young caregivers of five tamariki aged 4-14 years and their own baby daughter, aged one. Together, Kaea and James have overcome massive challenges, including a generational history of addiction and violence, showing a maturity well beyond their years. They are renowned for their aroha, resilience and strong advocacy in whānau care.

In 2022, an unstable home environment and ongoing care and protection concerns saw Kaea and several members of her whānau go into state care. Kaea had moved out a few months earlier as she could no longer cope with the situation at home.

Through a desire to build a better life for her whānau, Kaea stepped in without hesitation to support them with their care. Her sheer determination to look out for their best interests and advocate for a family member in the youth justice system, won the hearts of support workers, legal counsel and other professionals.

One year later, Kaea met James and together they cared for her whānau for 18 months, with oversight from Reconnect Family Services. They fought hard to keep everyone together, quashing advice that separation could make it easier to care for them. Kaea and James were adamant that the tamariki drew strength from each other and found their sense of belonging together.

In November 2024, Kaea and James were approved as Home for Life caregivers. Despite facing age discrimination, they secured their own rental property.

Home life is structured, stable and lots of fun. Birthdays are celebrated with enthusiasm, and the general busy-ness of family life is combined with sports and camping trips. Kaea and James adeptly navigate all the aspects of day-to-day care as well as the more challenging aspects of supporting tamariki who have experienced trauma. They engage in family functional therapy, parenting and budgeting programmes.

Kaea recently took the children to Taranaki, where they set foot on their maternal Marae for the first time, connecting with their maunga, their moana, their awa and their kaumatua.

Along this remarkable journey, Kaea has completed her NCEA and a Certificate in Social Work. With James' support, she plans to begin a Bachelor of Social Work next year and has further aspirations to be a nurse. In 2023, she received an Oranga Tamariki Prime Ministers Award. She is currently working closely with her Social Worker, Jane, and another young woman to establish a support group for other whānau caregivers.

“Kaea is an amazing parent to her [whānau],” says Jane. “She has been through so much trauma, but remains resilient, hopeful, and future focused. She has kept [them] together, advocated for their needs, her own needs, reached out to whānau, reconnected herself and her [whānau] to their cultural heritage and role-modelled what positive change looks like.”



DAPHNE & ROGER HAWKEN

Caregivers with



Nominated by Lizle van den Berg, Open Home Foundation



“For over a decade, Daphne and Roger have been more than foster parents; they have been a safe harbour for children who needed someone to believe in them”

– Lizle Van den Berg.

Daphne and Roger began their caregiving journey in 2012, when they welcomed six-year-old Eli* into their home with very few belongings, an intellectual disability and a history of early childhood trauma. Today, that small boy is transitioning into adulthood, bolstered by 13 years of unconditional love, birthday candles, unwavering support and daily affirmations that he matters.

The couple also care for two boys aged 8 and 9 – one of whom came to them as a baby and is in their permanent care, while the other boy arrived as a toddler in a shared-care arrangement. This incredible couple have also provided short-term care for five additional tamariki. They have three adult biological children.

For Daphne and Roger, caregiving is an extension of their faith. A way to stand in the gap for parents who needed time to get back on their feet and to offer children stability in uncertain times. They strive to provide the best opportunities for the children in their care – in education, within the community, and in their personal growth and development.

Daphne makes sure the boys are seen, heard and included in all aspects of life – fighting hard for them with social workers, paediatricians, schools, and by supporting their chosen sports and recreational activities. This advocacy also extends to life beyond school. When Eli finished school at the end of 2024, Daphne and Roger supported him in securing a stable full-time job,

guided him in managing his finances, and encouraged his independence. Since then, he's got his driver's licence and saved enough to proudly purchase his dream car.

Family friends speak highly of Roger too - taking the boys on adventures, tramping, motorbike riding, four-wheel driving and teaching them about money. He is described as having tremendous patience and naturally sees the funny side of things, instead of getting wound up and frustrated.

Both caregivers have actively participated in therapeutic parenting training and make sure the boys keep good contact with their biological families.

Jo, the SENCO from the boys' school sums up their mahi beautifully: "Their example has not only transformed the lives of the children they've fostered but has also inspired others within our school community, shifting perceptions of fostering and showing the profound difference it can make."

**Name changed for privacy.*

Below: The Hawken family
Left: Eli with his new car.



RACHEL & JASON HOCKLY

Caregivers with



Nominated by Tanya Moleta,
Open Home Foundation



Jason and Rachel have been caregiving since 2019, representing seven years of dedication, unconditional aroha and whānau connection to meet the needs of tamariki. They have provided respite care for 15 children during this time and currently have two children in their long-term care.

The Hocklys are a busy couple who give much time and energy to their local church and Palmerston North community. They are also Mum and Dad to four biological daughters – and say their foster journey has taught their own children a huge amount of empathy, an understanding that every family is made up differently and a greater awareness of life in general.

The two siblings in their care (aged 11 and 12) have been an integral part of the Hockly family home for five years. Together they play games, go on outings and camping holidays and care for the family pets. Both children have mild cognitive impairments and trauma-based needs. In their desire to provide a foundation of love and stability for them, Rachel and Jason decided that only Jason would work in paid employment. Rachel is free to advocate for the best interests of the tamariki, attend meetings related to their care and keep up with their myriad of family commitments. She also studied Te Ao Māori for a year to make sure the tamariki gained knowledge of their cultural heritage.

Care sector professionals speak highly of Rachel's absolute commitment to supporting the tamariki to not only connect with their whānau and iwi but preserve their relationships.

“Every child needs to know they belong – and not just to a foster family, but to their roots,” says Rachel. “They must go back to their roots and carry that

with them. A child that belongs, thrives.”

With Rachel’s support, the children have set foot on their turangawaewae whenua (homeland), meeting members of their extended whānau, hapu and iwi at their Marae. Sadly, their birth mother passed away in 2024, and Rachel and Jason supported the tamariki through this very emotional time. Even though the whānau did not know Rachel, she showed immense courage to travel with both tamariki to the Marae so they could attend the tangi, spend time with whānau and grieve the loss of their mama.

The tamariki are also of Tongan descent and have recently connected with their Tongan father. Rachel travels with the tamariki twice a year to Auckland and communicates regularly with their father by phone.

Rachel has taken several therapeutic parenting courses and volunteered as a support group liaison for Caring Families Aotearoa.

When prompted to recall their rewarding moments as caregivers, the couple agreed it was seeing the tamariki settle, feel safe, calm and develop a sense of belonging. Jason adds “It’s seeing them un-learning some of the survival behaviours that were all they knew.”



PAULA & FRED HOHUA

Caregivers with  **NGĀPUHI**
Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services

 **ORANGA
TAMARIKI**
Ministry for Children

Nominated by **Tammy Nathan,**
Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services



Fred and Paula are described as exceptional caregivers whose aroha, leadership and commitment to holistic care is deeply grounded in kaupapa Māori values.

For the past three years, Fred and Paula have served as Mahuru Remand Mātua Atawhai caregivers with Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services, providing care to young people aged 12–17 in the youth justice system. The couple provide a safe, nurturing and culturally appropriate lifestyle on their rural Whirinaki property to support the wellbeing of rangatahi (young people) while maintaining connections to their whānau and whakapapa.

Twelve rangatahi have benefitted from Fred and Paula’s warm care, each encouraged to slow down, reflect, and rediscover the simple things in life such as feeding hens and pigs, walking the kuri (dogs), fishing, participating in karakia and sharing kai. These everyday experiences have become powerful tools for grounding, restoring and healing.

With Fred’s skills as a Master Builder, some rangatahi learned how to build a shade house, others laid irrigations or worked on gardening projects. Paula delivers Mahinga Kai workshops at the Mahuru Whare, teaching rangatahi valuable skills in growing vegetables, preserving and preparing food, and sustainability. She shows rangatahi the importance of sharing produce with kuia, kaumatua, and whānau in need. This practice of giving back nurtures empathy, generosity, and a sense of collective responsibility.

“Fred and Paula are dedicated to restoring mana, building trust, and nurturing aspirations,” says nominator Tammy. “They remain calm and composed in the face of challenging behaviours, always solution-focused and respectful of each young person’s dignity.”

The couple's support extends well beyond the home, as they encourage participation in sports, recreation, and community activities that build confidence and connection. They also work to strengthen whānau relationships, supporting rangatahi to reconnect with their families in meaningful and respectful ways.

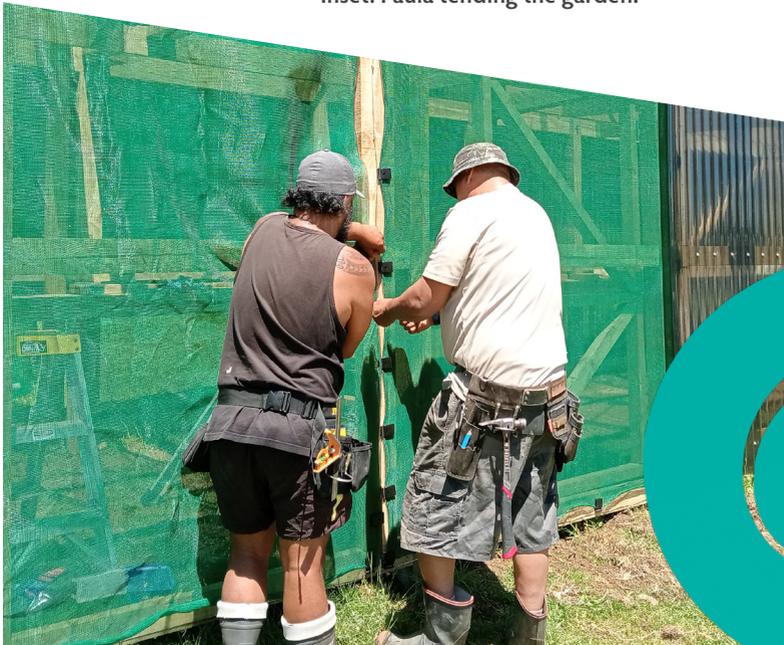
As Mahuru Remand Mātua Atawhai Caregivers, they participated in an intensive 6-week cultural mentoring programme but have also extended their knowledge with training in child protection, parenting in a healing way, mental health and addictions.

Fred and Paula have a beloved daughter who is now 20 years old and a cherished mokopuna, both of whom often visit and contribute to the warm, inclusive, and supportive whānau atmosphere. Their whānau is a living example of aroha, resilience, and commitment to uplifting the next generation.

Paula says she has seen rangatahi overcome their shyness, anxiety, shame and emotional trauma because they were cared for in their loving home, filled with positive engagements.

“All our prayers and good thoughts are to these beautiful souls that left imprints of reciprocal respect and aroha to us as caregivers,” she says.

**Below: Fred mentoring a young person
Inset: Paula tending the garden.**

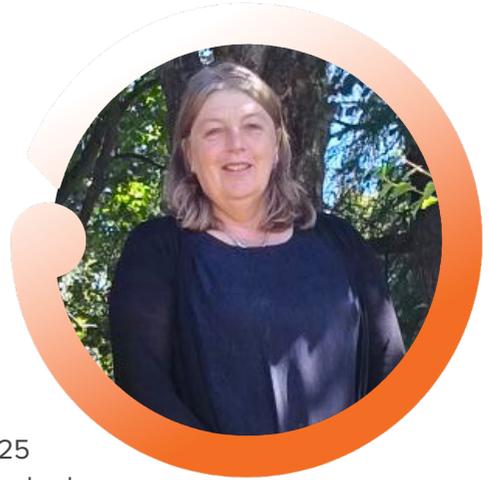


DONNA ILLINGWORTH

Caregiver with



Nominated by Katarina Siebers,
Oranga Tamariki



Donna has a strong commitment to love, support and care for children, and this is intrinsic in her nature.

She began her caregiving journey 25 years ago, alongside her parents who had already become caregivers for Oranga Tamariki once Donna and her siblings had left home. Together, they purchased a farm and lived communally so the children could have space to play, animals to love and care for – and the adults could offer each other support when needed.

Over 40 tamariki and rangatahi have been welcomed into the rural Otago home, which is also home to chickens, ducks, sheep and goats. Many of these children have returned several times. Currently, Donna has six tamariki in her care, all under the age of 10, including two tamariki she cares for permanently. Whether it's emergency, transitional, short-term or long-term arrangements, Donna is always willing to help. "The only limit is how many my car can carry!" she says.

Due to her reputation as an extraordinary caregiver and her dependability, Donna is frequently asked by Oranga Tamariki to care for children with high needs, or challenging behaviour. She has managed damage to her property, threats and physical abuse. Despite these incidents, Donna remains committed to caring for each child and her resilience and ability to stay calm in the most disruptive situations has worked wonders.

As a single caregiver and registered nurse working part-time at Dunedin Hospital, Donna is incredibly organised. She fits her shifts around her caregiving commitments and runs an orderly home, where tamariki also have responsibility for household tasks. Social workers marvel at the way she still finds time to support the tamariki in any activities they wish – she will simply

adjust her schedule to make it happen.

Nominator Katarina says: “What really stands out to me is her incredible ability for organising multiple children, her work and her home all on her own, while maintaining a very calm, patient and loving presence towards children and others.”

Donna’s nursing career has provided her with a thorough understanding of trauma-informed care, child development and the health system, so her advocacy skills in this department are second to none. One of the young boys in her care has high health needs, requiring multiple trips to hospital for interventions and appointments, always with Donna by his side.

Over the years, Donna has supported many tamariki to transition back to their whānau. She has worked alongside birth parents and grandparents in shared-care arrangements to ensure the child’s best interests are considered. This amazing caregiver often maintains a connection with the child once he or she has returned home, keeping the lines of communication open with the whānau and offering to babysit. She remains in contact with several young adults from her early caregiving days.

Donna has completed a range of Caring Families Aotearoa training over the years, demonstrating her commitment to making a long-lasting and life-changing contribution to the futures of many tamariki and rangatahi.



NATASHA & PIRIPI PHILLIPS

Caregivers with

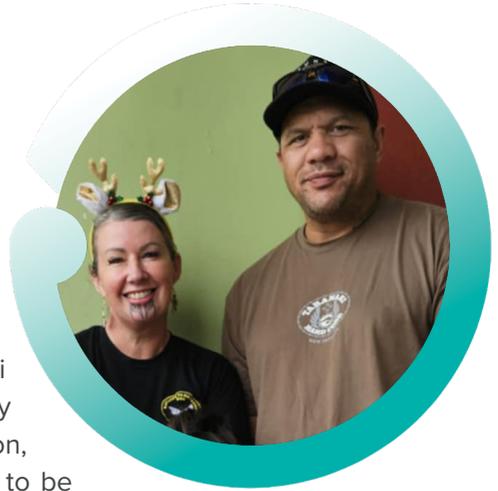


**ORANGA
TAMARIKI**
Ministry for Children



Ngāti Ruanui

Nominated by Georgia Lynn,
Oranga Tamariki



As a caregiving couple, Tash and Piripi are described as a powerhouse! They model acceptance, patience, compassion, respect, love, generosity, and what it is to be humble.

The couple are kaimārire (caregivers) for Te Atākura o Ngāti Ruanui in South Taranaki. They also work closely with social workers from Oranga Tamariki, who say they have changed the trajectory of the lives of many and are actively breaking intergenerational cycles through their love and care.

Tash and Piripi welcome tamariki into their home for as long as they need. If, or when a tamaiti no longer needs to be in their home, they remain a part of their whānau. Their daughter, Kasilk, also plays a key role in helping tamariki settle in, feel included and safe and secure in the whānau.

Natasha and Piripi began as kaimārire not only because they have love to give, but also because they are guided by strong morals and tikanga. As a couple and as individuals they have spent years providing a steady, quiet harbour for tamariki in need of a safe place, long before they began formal arrangements with children in state care. Deeply committed to the principle of whanaungatanga, Natasha and Piripi view their role as part of a much larger village.

They are known for their humble, collaborative approach, working closely with whānau to ensure that every child stays connected while growing toward their future. If you ask either of them about their foster care journey, they will likely turn the conversation to the resilience of the tamariki who have walked beside them.

Natasha's skills as a bilingual early childhood teacher means that all tamariki

in her care benefit from her professional expertise and natural ability to nurture and teach. Alongside Natasha, Piripi's gentle and approachable nature is a source of comfort and strength for tamariki and whānau.

They have created a safe, loving home full of resources and opportunities for tamariki to thrive. Their caregiving is not limited to the home; they maintain tamariki connections to hapu and iwi, and act as a vital link to their biological whānau – ensuring they can attend important whānau events such as tangi. They welcome whānau into milestones and celebrations, honouring whakapapa and strengthening identity.

“Nothing has ever been too challenging or too much for Natasha and Piripi,” says nominator Georgia. “They meet each tamaiti where they are at, advocating constantly for their wellbeing and ensuring they can access sports, cultural activities, appointments and every opportunity to grow. Their home is often filled with friends’ children and children’s friends, reflecting how naturally tamariki gravitate to their warmth and aroha.”

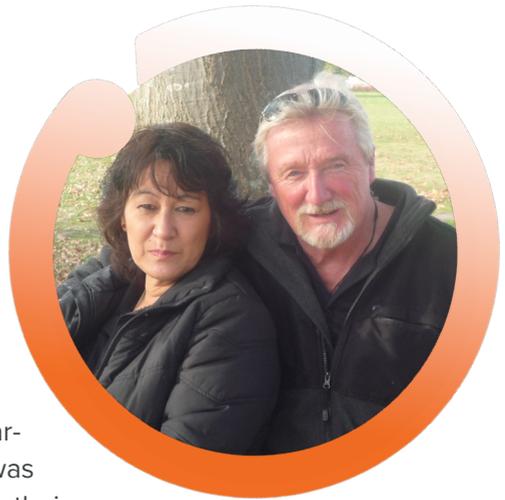
For Natasha and Piripi, excellence isn't found in accolades. It is in the small, everyday victories: a child's first peaceful night sleep, a newfound confidence at kura (school), or the slow rebuilding of trust. They approach each placement with the utmost compassion and understanding of the trauma within each tamariki.



LENA & PHIL STIRRUP

Home for Life/Guardianship
Caregivers

Nominated by Christine Frost



Lena and Phil have raised their 13-year-old moko (grandchild) since she was just 12 months old. They took her into their loving care without hesitation as it was clear to them both from the outset that they would do whatever it takes to ensure the best possible outcome for their granddaughter.

Daily life changed radically for Lena and Phil at the ages of 52 and 59 respectively with a baby in the house full-time. Little Sarah* arrived with a condition called vacant stares, where she would withdraw for short periods due to the trauma and neglect she had suffered. With perseverance, love, patience and empathy, Sarah adjusted well to her new environment and the couple set out to learn as much as they possibly could about raising a child impacted by trauma.

They both upskilled by enrolling in parenting courses such as the Incredible Years and Caring Families Aotearoa training, while actively seeking out other avenues of support. Lena joined Grandparents Raising Grandchildren and went on to become a Committee Member, before becoming involved with Caring Families Aotearoa in 2019.

Sarah is neurodivergent and medicated for attention deficit disorder. She has other complexities including learning difficulties, borderline Autism and Irlen Syndrome. Lena and Phil have been her strongest advocates at school and at medical appointments to ensure the right supports are put in place for her to thrive. Paying for things like extra tuition hasn't always been easy for the pensioners, but they see it as a priority, and make it work by securing funding.

“Knowing that we can change a child’s pathway to a better life is priceless and we would do it again in a heartbeat,” says Lena.

Local schoolteacher Wendy says Lena and Phil are “the silent heroes, like many grandparents, who are filling in the gap for a generation that struggles. [Sarah] is thriving and loved and quirky and happy and allowed to be truly who she is.”

The couple are very whānau oriented, with four grown children, 16 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Home is a lively, fun place where extended family life is embraced. They are active within their Marae and regularly take Sarah out to community events, swimming lessons, gymnastics and girl guides.

Lena and Phil foster a healthy connection with Sarah’s biological parents and facilitate contact visits. She has siblings she sees frequently, and the couple supports this contact, knowing the importance of identity and belonging and the impact this has on their granddaughter.

Care sector professionals say Lena and Phil are steered by their aroha, determination, empathy and manaakitanga (generosity and care for others). For five years, they have both volunteered as regional committee members for Caring Families Aotearoa, helping to organise caregiver connection events in their area. They run a support group for caregivers in Rotorua and plan to set up a reference group of experienced caregivers who have knowledge they can share with others.

“They are exemplars of positive behaviour and an inspiration to all who know them,” – Sarah’s biological father.

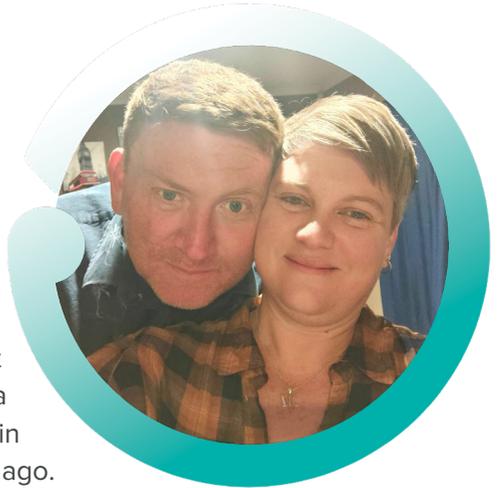
**Name changed for privacy.*



MELISSA & DEAN SUMNER

Caregivers with  Barnardos

Nominated by Maxine Routh,
Barnardos



Melissa and Dean's shared belief that every child has the right to live in a safe and loving home led them to begin their caregiving journey 12 years ago. They have devoted their lives to raising children in a home filled with joy, fun and laughter.

Melissa works as a teacher aide and is studying towards her teaching degree. Dean worked for a time in a specialised residential home for young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties before joining the construction industry. Together, they draw from a wonderful mix of knowledge and experience on their quest to make a positive difference to young lives.

The couple have cared for eight-year-old Adam* since he was just seven months old. They also have 15-year-old Tane* and his 12-year-old brother, Kit* who came to live with them in 2014. Their four biological children range in age from 12-20 and all live in the family home.

Adam lives with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder but is thriving in the care of Melissa and Dean and has a strong sense of belonging. As there was no possibility of Adam returning to whānau, his caregivers felt passionately that he should not be exposed to further instability, so successfully applied for permanency care.

Melissa and Dean support Tane and Kit with a high level of guidance as exposure to trauma has meant both boys struggle to regulate their emotions. While Kit has remained in their care for the past 11 years, their journey with Tane was disrupted back in 2014 when his behaviour led authorities to believe he would be better placed in a family with less children. Ten years later, when Melissa and Dean learned that placement had broken down, they didn't

hesitate to take him back into their care. To demonstrate their commitment to both boys – and to increase their sense of safety and belonging – the couple have begun the process of offering them a forever home.

Events over the past year have really shown Melissa and Dean’s energy, strength and flexibility in caring for tamariki with complex needs. Tane began to self-harm and experience hallucinations (hearing voices telling him to hurt himself and others). Melissa has comforted him when he wakes screaming at night and juggled work, study and home life to be available for appointments and care for Tane when he was unable to attend school. Although the couple have endured extensive damage to their house and physical abuse, they have fought hard to keep Tane with them, knowing too well his fear of abandonment.

These wonderful caregivers understand the importance of cultural and whānau connections, and make every effort to ensure Adam, Tane and Kit have regular contact with their whānau. They have proactively supported the brothers to see their father more frequently, to the point that they now enjoy a close bond with him. Melissa and Dean also invite the boys’ siblings over in the school holidays for play dates.

“Melissa and Dean embody the true spirit of foster parenting by embracing each child as their own,” says Lindee, SENCO at the local secondary school. “They possess a remarkable ability to love these children unconditionally, accepting them for who they are and providing a nurturing environment where they can thrive.”

**Names changed for privacy.*



KARAKIA WHAKAMUTUNGA | CLOSING KARAKIA

Kia hū	Pause
Kia marino	Be calm
Kia whakamoemiti	Be thankful
Kia manatu	Be mindful
Kia tuku	Be released
Kia rite	Be ready
Kia tina, tina	Keep at it
Haumi e, hui e, tāiki e	Continue on

ABOUT THE AWARDS

Now in its 19th year, the Excellence in Foster Care Awards evolved from a desire to recognise the incredible mahi (work) of countless caregivers all over Aotearoa New Zealand.

Every year we put the call out for nominations, which are reviewed by a panel of representatives from Caring Families Aotearoa and our sponsors. Having to choose just ten successful solo caregivers, or caregiving couples is always extremely hard.

We continue to be humbled by the incredible stories we hear, year after year, of caregivers' sacrifice, dedication, and boundless love for the children they care for.

The Excellence in Foster Care Awards is a way for us to give back, say thank you, and recognise some truly remarkable people within our communities. Caring Families Aotearoa holds the Awards in collaboration with our generous sponsors - Barnardos, Kia Puāwai and Open Home Foundation.

We are grateful to the Minister for Children, The Honourable Karen Chhour, for hosting the awards this year.

HISTORY OF THE AWARDS

This year's Awards fall at an extra special time for Caring Families Aotearoa - the 50th anniversary of our organisation. In recognition of this milestone, here's a brief history of the Excellence in Foster Care Awards.

Since the Awards' origins in 2007, caregivers right across the motu have been nominated by their social workers or members of the community. Each nomination provides a glimpse into the lives and selfless mahi of some incredible individuals - just a small sample of thousands, who are not only caring for - but also healing - some of Aotearoa's most vulnerable children.

Among the first caregivers to be honoured in 2007 were Linda and Rob Surtees, both of whom have continued to contribute to foster care by dedicating their careers to supporting caregivers at Caring Families Aotearoa.

To begin with, just five caregivers or caregiving couples received an award at the ceremony. Since 2013, ten awards have been allocated each year.

From 2013 to 2021, Oranga Tamariki partnered with Caring Families Aotearoa to host the Awards. In 2022, new partnerships were made with key organisations in the care sector, including Barnardos, Open Home Foundation and Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. In 2024 Kia Puāwai also lent their support.

The Awards are traditionally held in March to align with Foster Care Awareness Week, which is the first week of March. They provide a wonderful platform for us to sing from the rooftops about caregiving and to acknowledge, on a national stage, the absolute importance of this role.





Excellence

IN FOSTER CARE AWARDS

March
2026



Caring Families
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CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

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