

## Diversability Award Entrant:

### Tiaho Trust

**Diversity an asset, not a problem.** Tiaho Trust is a Northland based disability-led organisation that aims to promote the disabled community as valued citizens who contribute, participate and add to the diversity of New Zealand society. They provide advice, training and support to nurture the inclusivity of people with disabilities in the Northland community.

Tiaho Trust is unlike other disability providers in New Zealand in that the leadership of the Trust, both within governance and day to day management, is made up solely of individuals with some form of disability. The majority of its workforce also have a disability or impairment.

The organisation was founded 12 years ago by CEO Jonny Wilkinson, who has previously held several management positions in the disability sector and has also served on the National Executive Committee of the Disabled Persons Assembly. Jonny has Cerebral Palsy and understands the value in employing people who have disabilities, something other employers often shy away from.

The organisation has a strong sense of disability culture, as well as a practical understanding of some of the perceived barriers to employing those with unique needs. This level of insight and appreciation is particularly useful when providing support and training to their clients.

Organisations who seek the support of the Tiaho Trust are often driven more from a business-need than from a social conscience. The Trust have recently provided training for Trident Engineering Services, an organisation that installs and maintains disability equipment throughout Northland. Trident recognised the need to improve their service for their main customer base, older people and those with a disability.

In order to provide an insight into disability culture, Tiaho Trust put together 'Understanding Customer Needs' workshops for Trident staff. The workshops included the concept of creating a non-disabling environment for their clients, not just from a built environment perspective, but also in the way staff interacted with customers.

Tiaho employee, Elinor Niha, was pivotal in the delivery of this training. Elinor was able to use her own experience as a previous customer of Trident to suggest practical ways in which their customer service could be improved. Elinor facilitated role play exercises to develop their understanding of a disabled customer's needs.

"This training was a revelation to our staff," says Trident Engineering Services CEO, Ian Hendriks. "It was professionally presented with good use of staff experience and thoughts, which were able to be shared in a safe and supportive environment".

Elinor's journey to becoming such an insightful trainer was due to the support Tiaho Trust gave her as an employee. Elinor, who has Cerebral Palsy, held several voluntary positions before she came to Tiaho. As is often the case with people with a disability, she struggled to find an employer who would support her into paid employment. Recognising her potential, Tiaho Trust developed a position for Elinor as a Database Operator, but it soon became apparent that her enthusiasm and interpersonal skills could be utilised in other areas of the Trust's work, namely the disability training model for external organisations.

"Being given the opportunity to become a paid employee gave me a sense of importance and increased my mana as a Maori disabled Individual," says Elinor.

Tiaho Trust was determined to set Elinor up for success in her transition into the paid workforce. Elinor's work hours were gradually incremented and her work space was adapted to ensure it met her needs. Elinor's professional development has also been supported so that she feels confident in facilitating training workshops with organisations such as Trident.

"By expanding Elinor's role in accordance with her growing abilities, we have been able to provide a successful model for how success and personal growth will be supported by the organisation," says Jonny Wilkinson. "In this respect we have furthered a culture of positive achievement associated with the benefits of disability rather than in spite of disability".

Former employee Gail Stacey, who has a vision impairment, was with Tiaho Trust for nine years and says that the experiences and professional development opportunities given to her by the Tiaho Trust helped her to grow both personally and professionally. "It gave me the confidence and skills to apply for, and successfully gain, employment in Australia," says Gail.

The Tiaho Trust is an organisation that from its inception has embraced diversity and consistently seeks innovative ways to support staff to achieve and be successful. Facilitating each staff member to function at their full potential has enabled the Trust to develop its offerings as a service provider.

"The more we are able to draw out the abilities of the staff, the more flexibility we have as an organisation aiming to win and implement contracts to ensure the ongoing expansion of the Tiaho Trust," says CEO Jonny. "Multi-skilled workers who can and will share the expertise and life perspective they have gained through their disability journey can only be assets to the growth of our organisational capacity".

So what of the future for the Tiaho Trust, what's next? The Trust plans to expand its customer service training not only to health providers, but also to industries such as tourism and retail who provide services to older people and those with a disability.