

Stories from our rangatahi

Sharonika's Story

Teen Sharonika Prasad used to be scared, of life, of opportunity. She lacked self-confidence. "I had a negative mind set in which I had beliefs that I would never be successful at anything, with a very low self-esteem. "I made excuses because I had no motivation and little confidence and I let life pass me by even if it was a wonderful opportunity because I was so afraid of the unknown."

Not anymore. Prasad, 18, and the youngest in a family of five, is now working as a caregiver while studying a foundation course at NZMA for occupational therapy and has realised she "could do anything". She is the first in her family to go to university. The South Auckland teen has found her potential with the help of a charity that aims to transform young Kiwi lives – the Graeme Dingle Foundation.

Started by former mountaineer and adventurer Sir Graeme Dingle and his wife Lady Jo-Anne Wilkinson, the foundation has a core belief that young Kiwis can be taught resilience to overcome any of life's challenges and go on to succeed. The foundation motto is: we want every child to know what they have inside is greater than any obstacle.

Prasad took part in the 14-month Project K programme when she was 14, in year 10. It's a three-stage programme involving a wilderness adventure, a community challenge and a mentoring partnership. "During the camp I realised my potential – we stayed in tents, made our own food and were without our phones the whole time. I did things I never thought I would be able to and it taught me to be strong and independent." She learnt how to set goals and achieve them and be persistent. "It was the start to a better me." The project also gave the former James Cook High School student, who went



onto be a prefect, the chance to give back to the community where she had lived her whole life, Manurewa, by picking up rubbish at local beaches and painting a hopscotch for children to play on. "The community challenge showed me that making a change in my community can be as simple as making a plan and just doing it."

Then came the mentoring. "She helped with making sure I kept a positive mind set and was always there for me which made me feel like I had someone else other than my family members to talk to. "My mentor also helped me to get my [driver's] learners licence and we still keep in touch now, about two weeks ago I got my full licence and drove her around, which was a cool way to show her how far I've come."

Project K has ignited a passion to help others. She has applied to volunteer at Middlemore Hospital. "This opportunity has really opened my eyes to what I've never seen before in myself, others and my community. I feel as if I came out as a whole new person and have discovered my inner self. I love being a caregiver because I get to contribute to the lives of these people and take them out and I can see they really enjoy it. When it is hard I just remember the good I'm doing."

We want every child to know: What they have inside is greater than any obstacle.