

Wark, Elizabeth Cecilia (Betty)

by Helene Connor

Biography

Whāea (mother) Betty Wark worked with ‘at risk’ Māori youth in Auckland for more than 30 years. The product of a difficult childhood, she struggled to provide a family environment to many young people whose lives had been destabilised by mid-twentieth century Māori urbanisation. At Arohanui, the hostel she co-founded and operated, young Māori found a bed, a hot meal, help with addiction, and the prospect of education and reconnection with a resurgent Māori culture.

Whakapapa and early life

Elizabeth Te Wheao was born at Omanaia, a small settlement in southern Hokianga, on 6 June 1924. Her parents were unmarried. Her biological father was Cyril Chapman, and her mother, Nau (Mabel) Rini Te Wheao (also known as Nau Barbara Mutu Riwi) was of Ngāpuhi descent. As a child Betty had little knowledge of her biological parents. She met her mother when she was 21 and her father when she was 27. Betty was raised as a tamaiti whāngai (foster child) and was given the surname of one of her initial foster families, Te Wake.

At the age of eight Betty moved with a foster family to Motuti, a remote settlement in northern Hokianga. There she was raised Catholic, attended the Motuti Native School, and undertook farm chores before and after school. She never felt wanted or part of the family, and was forced to sleep in a storage shed. Her Pakeha foster father abused her psychologically, physically and sexually, and her childhood was virtually devoid of stability or love.

In 1938, aged 14, Betty received a government scholarship to attend St Joseph’s Māori Girls’ College at Greenmeadows, near Napier. St Joseph’s stressed service to humanity as a spiritual path, and the nuns provided Betty with strong female role models and a period of relative stability. She credited them with giving her a strong moral base and pride in herself as a Māori Catholic woman with a social conscience, integrity and an ethical framework. Betty was confirmed whilst a pupil at St Joseph’s and given the name of Cecilia. Thereafter, she called herself Elizabeth Cecilia.

Motherhood and marriage

Betty left school at the end of 1941. She worked as a trainee nurse at Wairoa for six months before becoming a housekeeper. Settling in Napier, she met American

marine Charles Turner at a dance. He was her first love, and Betty relished every moment with him and the escape he represented from the daily drudgery of her work. She shifted first to Waipukurau and then to Wellington to be near him. They got engaged, and Betty was soon pregnant. Sadly, Charles was killed in action in the Pacific at the age of 22. Betty, who had been looking forward to a future with him in the United States, was devastated.

Betty and Charles' son, Brian Turner (Te Wake) was born in St Helen's Hospital in Wellington in 1944. There were then few social welfare provisions or employment and childcare opportunities for unmarried mothers. Betty's first-born thus became a tamaiti whāngai like his mother. Placing him in the care of the Te Wake [whānau](#), Betty moved to Auckland to find employment. Her early jobs included ward's maid at Auckland Hospital and waitress.

Betty's next significant relationship was with Englishman Henry Smith. Betty described Henry as a kind and gentle man, though she did not want to marry him and he eventually returned to England. Henry fathered Betty's second son, Danny, who was born in 1948. Betty moved to Waihi, where Danny was raised by a family while Betty continued to work. She returned to Auckland in 1950 and found lodgings and a clerical position.

Betty met her first husband, Canadian merchant mariner Conrad Kenneth Powell, at a dance. Betty and Conrad married on 28 May 1951 in Auckland, and their son, Conrad, was born in 1952. When her husband decided to return to Canada, Betty chose to remain behind. She was entitled to a deserted wife's benefit, so was able to keep baby Conrad.

Betty met her second husband, a young Englishman, James Gordon (Jim) Wark, in the mid-1950s. Jim wanted to get married but Betty was wary. Their first son Robert was born in 1959, and their second, Gary, in 1961. Eventually Betty divorced Conrad and married Jim in Auckland on 21 November 1966. Jim provided the security Betty had craved, and together they created the home for which Betty had yearned all her life.

[Māoritanga](#) and heart politics

By 1960 Betty and Jim had settled in the inner Auckland suburb of Freemans Bay. It was here that she began, as she later recalled, to evolve into her 'own person' and found her 'Māoriness'.⁴ Her childhood experiences had left her disconnected from her Māori roots, and she was unaware of her [whakapapa](#) until her mid-life. Her identity evolved during the Māori renaissance of the late 1960s and 1970s as she became involved in the urban Māori movement. She got actively involved with the Ponsonby branch of the Māori Women's Welfare League and the Ponsonby Māori Community Centre. She also attended Te Unga Waka, the Māori Catholic church and [marae](#) in

Epsom. Betty developed deep friendships with many kuia (older women) and these connections augmented her identity as Māori.

Through her work with urban Māori groups, Betty developed a strong sense of community responsibility, social justice and 'heart politics' (grassroots community work). Freemans Bay was going through a period of urban renewal, with older homes being demolished to make way for new housing developments. This process saw many low-income Māori forced out of their rented homes, and Betty grew concerned about the welfare of displaced and disenfranchised young people who reminded her of her younger self. She joined the Freemans Bay Advisory Committee, which represented the interests of Auckland City Council tenants in negotiations and in the setting of rental and housing policies. Her work with this committee was the catalyst for her future life as a community worker and advocate.

In the late 1960s Betty helped establish a hostel for young Māori displaced by urban renewal, with support from the Māori Women's Welfare League and the Catholic church. She ran the hostel during the day and returned to her family in the afternoon. In 1974 Betty helped set up Arohanui Incorporated, a community-based organisation that provided housing and assistance to young people referred from the courts, prisons, Social Welfare and other sources.

Jim Wark was supportive of Betty's work but became uneasy about the time she was spending out of the home. He viewed her work as detrimental to her relationship with him and their sons as it began to encroach on family commitments. Homeless people regularly stayed at the Wark home, causing tension and disruption to family life. When she opened Arohanui hostel in Ponsonby in May 1976, Betty left Jim and her sons and moved into the hostel as housemother. She maintained an enduring friendship with Jim Wark for the remainder of her life and stayed in close contact with her sons; the youngest, Gary, eventually joined his mother in her work at Arohanui.

Arohanui

Arohanui, Betty's home for 'at risk' youth, was the main focus of the rest of her life. Betty and her colleague Fred Ellis patrolled the streets on winter nights, taking creamed mussel soup and scones to 'street kids' and urging them to make contact with Arohanui. Many did, and were either reunited with whānau (family) or alternative accommodation was found for them. Many young people received a meal, a place to sleep and 'a lot of loving care' at Arohanui, and Betty and the other trustees and workers strove to maintain a positive, family-like environment for the residents.

As Arohanui grew and began applying for government funding, the trust also began offering literacy and numeracy programmes. Arohanui strengthened its Māori culture and language programmes and introduced several innovative health and

exercise programmes which used martial arts and Māori weaponry drills. Many residents were addicted to solvents, drugs or alcohol, and Betty investigated various programmes to help them overcome these afflictions.

From the late 1960s Betty's work was periodically profiled in the news media, where she was portrayed as a 'mother to lost boys' and Auckland's 'Mother Teresa'.² In 1986 she was the subject of a television documentary, *Give me a love*. Directed by Bill Saunders, the programme recorded one month in the life of Arohanui. It showed Betty as a person of immense dedication and aroha who was also realistic, demanded respect, and administered a good deal of old-fashioned discipline.

Term on Auckland City Council and public recognition

Betty was 62 when she was elected to represent Ponsonby ward on the Auckland City Council (1986–9). She was never completely comfortable working within the constraints of being a councillor, and often felt isolated as the only Māori woman. Her main areas of strength were working with people and housing issues.

Betty's community work with young people was recognised with a number of awards, including the Queen's Service Medal, which was bestowed by the Queen herself in 1986. In 1996 Betty won top honours in the Trustees Executors Senior Achiever's Award, which recognised her 50 years of voluntary service to the community. Betty joked that she did not qualify for membership of the organisation behind the award, the Retired Persons' Association: 'Retirement, what's that?', she asked.³

Final illness and death

Betty was diagnosed with lung cancer shortly after her 76th birthday in June 2000. She continued to carry out her life's 'soul work' until she was too frail to do so. Betty Wark died peacefully on 16 May 2001, aged 76, surrounded by her whānau. After her death, she lay in state at Ngā Whare Waatea Marae at Mangere, where a Requiem Mass was conducted. Her body was then taken back to Motuti Marae to await burial in her papakainga (home base). She wanted to return to the Hokianga, with which her whakapapa (genealogy) connected her. She wanted to make the journey home.

Kua hinga atu te Totara

Ki te waanui a Tane

e te Mama Betty,

haere, haere, ngaro atu

The mighty Totara has fallen.

She stood proud and tall in Tane's forest.

She provided shelter for
the homeless and food for the needy.
Her heart was filled with love
and tenderness as she
showered affection on those around her.
Ma Betty's gifts are endless
to those whose needs are many,
so rejoice that we were blessed
by this beautiful Angel of Mercy.⁴

Footnotes

1. Quoted in D.H. Connor, 'Writing ourselves "home": biographical texts: a method for contextualizing the lives of wahine Māori: locating the story of Betty Wark.' PhD thesis, Auckland, 2006, p.198. [Back](#)
2. Ibid., p.260. [Back](#)
3. Ibid., p.276. [Back](#)
4. Extract from Betty Wark's Death Notice, New Zealand Herald, May 17, 2001. [Back](#)

External links and sources

More suggestions and sources

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