

Veteran campaigner not holding her peace



PHOTOS: KATHRYN PHILPOTT

Support for extending the GE moratorium has flowed onto the streets and is the latest priority for veteran peace worker Laurie Ross. She talks to SARAH LANG about life as a peacemaker when the world is still far from peaceful.

A small, elfin figure sits on a stool, lambasting the United States: "You're either part of the gang or you're out. If you're in, you have to carry the gun." Suddenly, Laurie Ross throws her body back and her piercing blue eyes spark: "Hands up! You win!" A deep laugh wells up and overflows out of her body. For a moment, it transforms her face to a youthful prettiness. Ms Ross breathes again and squats serenely on her stool. It's a wintry afternoon in Huia, a west Auckland bay, and Ms Ross is clad in her "at home" clothes. Purple jersey, green slippers, green leggings tucked into brown legwarmers. Greying hair and faint lines are the signs of a woman turning the corner from middle age.

At the moment Ms Ross (54) is deeply involved in the debate at the forefront of the nation – genetic engineering. This is the latest in a string of issues for the veteran peace worker. She's one of the movers and shakers who got together at July's GE-free national hui to come up with a campaign strategy. Take 5 has one simple objective – to get the Government to extend the moratorium and keep GE in the lab for five years. October 29 was D-day. Petitions were out on the street and the e-mails flooded into inboxes. Last month, protestors took to the streets around the country.

Ms Ross' experience in publicity and event organisation is spurring on the campaign in Auckland. An Earth Pulse dance party in Birkenhead is one of her latest projects, with a mix of music and information on GE. She's also preparing to lobby West Auckland MPs on the GE-free cause. But what Ms Ross enjoys most is working at the grass roots. You can spot her at her stall on the streets of west Auckland talking about GE. Ms Ross is working alongside "hummus queen" Lisa Err, who helps coordinate Take 5. Acquaintances for many years, they've become friends more recently. Ms Err says Ms Ross has great integrity. "She's highly passionate about everything she does."

Ms Ross is adamant the GE-free movement is the voice of the public. "This is not just a fringe group or a few odd people. The New Zealand people must show the weight of their opinion." 69% of New Zealanders in a recent Herald poll wanted to keep GE in the lab for now. Ms Ross is quick to point out the Take 5 campaign is not anti-science. New Zealand, she

says, needs to stick to a "precautionary principle" until there's some proof GE won't be a disaster for the food chain. "What's the hurry? Once we let the genie out of the bottle, we won't be able to get it back in." Ms Ross is also worried about the effect on the economy. "New Zealand stands to lose a lot when we don't need to. Our major trading partners do not want to eat GE or import it. We can produce the GE-free products the world wants and still develop our bio-technology in the lab."

Words flow slowly from Ms Ross' mouth. It's a rare moment when a sentence finishes of its own accord. A myriad of ideas and passions bubble beneath the surface, vying for airtime. She speaks unhurriedly, deliberately, in a lyrical voice. Sometimes she says things over, as though trying to tweak them to the most perfect meaning. Waving arms and wide, expressive gestures accompany her ideas, cocooned in delicious turns of phrase. Some people find her a bit overwhelming.

Ms Ross' home and haven, Huia Bay, is a small community southwest of Titirangi in west Auckland. Ms Ross "semi-retired" here 10 years ago after her daughters left home. Upstairs is "the inner sanctum of Laurie Ross" – a welcoming space with a pervading sense of calm. Downstairs is a mishmash of treasures she's collected over the years. Little nooks and bookshelves galore. Peaceful music streams from the stereo and every so often Ms Ross jumps up to move her body in time. She is a self-confessed hoarder. Pullout drawers are piled with clippings on subjects that interest her "just in case". Her thirst for up-to-date information sees her pore over email subscriptions daily.

First and foremost, Ms Ross sees herself as a peacemaker who directs her vision to the practical. And prioritises. Earlier this year it was the Iraq war. Now it's GE. It's what's most important, she says, and who needs her the most. Ms Ross runs Free Spirit Peace Productions, and, as the name suggests, chooses who she wants to get involved with. Recently she's turned her hand to staging cultural and performing arts events, particularly musical concerts that draw refugee culture into the community. Last year Ms Ross raised \$33,000 to stage the North Shore World Peace Concert.

People have told Ms Ross she's not living in the real world. It annoys her. "The far-right tries to paint the picture that all people in movements for change are extremists, anti-establishment, left-wingers, extreme left-wingers. That's unfair and misleading. It paints us as very black-and-white, without looking for truer voices which aren't sensational at all." Ms Ross is not so much extreme as extremely visionary.

However, she chuckles about her most "serious problem". "As soon as I say something, I immediately think of the opposite view. You know, I don't fit into categories." A pause, and the eyes spark. "Well maybe I do. First, a human being on earth. Second, a New Zealander. Third, a woman. And fourth, an aged person," she smiles wryly.

The eldest of six, Ms Ross was 13 when her family immigrated from Canada in 1962. She left Christchurch for Auckland at 17 to study arts at the University of Auckland, but dropped out before finishing her degree. "The pressure didn't suit me," she laughs. At 19 she met her husband, David Theobald, a social worker and teacher. As the 1970s began, the couple immersed themselves in a world of study in the Coromandel. Ms Ross says this time spent "searching around in my head" was one foundation of her peace work. Another was her father. Larry Ross was the driving force behind the nuclear-free movement that achieved what few thought possible 20 years ago. Today his daughter is adamant New Zealand must stay strong on its nuclear-free position.

GE, war, refugees, nuclear testing – the list goes on. How did this free spirit get so involved in these causes? Ms Ross says working in sales and promotion in Auckland in the '70s gave her life experience to mix with her idealism. "For me that was wonderful. To learn how the world worked and what people do." By the '80s Ms Ross was financially secure and mixing with Aucklanders who "always needed people". Her list of involvements since then is extensive – the Friends of Refugees Trust, UN Earth Summit Committee, Auckland Tree Council, to name just a few. Environmental and social issues are inextricably linked, says Ms Ross.

Politics called too. It doesn't come as a surprise that Ms Ross was a founding member of the Greens. "After ten years as an environmental activist, I realised how important it was the Green position be taken more seriously as a political force and how that can influence the world." With just a tinge of regret, Ms Ross talks of her bid for the Onehunga seat in 1990. She came third in an area where the major parties had fortresses of track record and support. She decided to return to her peace work.

"If I'd enjoyed politics more I might have kept on going. But I wouldn't really enjoy endless council meetings or being in Parliament every day. And you have to compromise your own values."

New Zealand, Ms Ross says, is in a prime position to be a peacemaker nation. It's a great vantage point, she says.

"If you have a friend who is prone to having psychotic episodes and shooting people, you wouldn't pick up a gun. You'd refer them to a counsellor or try to talk them out of it!"

"Full of brave and free minds. Not naive, but candid. We call a spade a spade." Ms Ross urges the Government and Helen Clark, who she greatly admires, not to bend New Zealand's voice to US pressure, particularly to get involved in war. "If you have a friend who is prone to having psychotic episodes and shooting people, you wouldn't pick up a gun. You'd refer them to a counsellor or try to talk them out of it!" Ms Ross declares.

The passion in her voice is clear. So how does this woman keep up her energy and vision? Ms Ross says the cynical stage did come, but passed. "You think, 'Oh, I'm going to ignore all this' and all you feel is a nagging... In the end cynics can only survive so long." But Ms Ross' commitments have taken their toll on her energy levels and health. The light in her eyes dims for a moment when she speaks of her down times. Husband David died a few years ago. Daughters Natarani and Blessing are a great joy to her.

Time-out for Ms Ross is walking in the bush, reading, singing and playing the drums and guitar. A trained dancer and choreographer, Ms Ross teaches the "Dances of Universal Peace" – meditative movements performed in a group circle to spiritual songs. She describes them with something close to reverence. Music and dance, she says ardently, are a universal language. "It's asking how can we express it together? Actually listening out rather than listening in."

And listening out is what the peace movement, Ms Ross declares, is about.

"Throwing light, exposing the sham – what is being hidden from the general public. Peace is not about just protest. A lot of people think it's about marching up Queen St a couple of times a year on an issue that's obviously violating peace and justice. But what it's actually about is developing a culture of consciousness – on what it is in our society that perpetuates violence, militarism and war as an inevitable way of life."

Ms Ross takes pains to point out being a peace worker is not the same as being a pacifist. Sometimes force is required, she says.

But what most disturbs her is super-power nations not just relying on military power, but wanting it to be the status quo. "We need to work out how to respond to violence and terror in intellectual ways. Rather than saying, 'Look, there's someone doing something bad over there – let's bomb them!'" she laughs.

"Our potential as humans is to evolve and change our behaviour. As a culture, a nation, as humans, we need to continue conversation.

"Even if it seems impossible – a dream – it could happen. If we set our minds to it."



TAKE FIVE: The GE debate has Laurie Ross back on the streets and raising her voice.

PHOTO: SARAH LANG

