

Te Waha Nui talks to young New Zealand activists on why they fight for their beliefs



Becky Low

Having a vivid dream of helping the poor in Africa inspired a six-year-old girl to focus her life on changing the world.

In her sixth-form year, instead of enjoying her summer holidays at the beach, she went to work in an orphanage in Thailand. The orphanage was for children who had HIV and Aids. "After that I was hooked and over the next two years I brought three groups of people back to have the same experience. My eyes were fully opened to a world outside of our comforts in New Zealand."

She continued to look for more training in the area and found a course in Calcutta, India. She worked and studied there for three months while helping out street children and then did practical work for two months.

She has now developed a strong desire to work with children trapped in the sex trade. So in January she went to Thailand to research the issue, stayed in the red light districts and visited different shelters.

"I have seen some crazy stuff in my travels. It's hit me just how blessed we are to live in New Zealand."

This realisation also highlighted the selfishness and apathy of New Zealand society.

"Why do we have one of the highest percentages of teen suicide, domestic violence and everything else and why does no one have knowledge of it. We are a nation that only looks to our own needs and when you are chasing that you will never be fulfilled but only find yourself wanting more."

This prompted her to start a website called There's More To Life (www.theresmoretolife.co.nz) to open people's eyes to the "real problems in this world".

"Looking beyond ourselves to make a difference is something that can give you fulfilment and change the life of another. It doesn't take much but if we all chipped in we could change the nation."

However, despite her passion for changing society she doesn't believe in protest.

"I can't say I believe in protest – it's better to listen to the quiet voice of a wise person, than to the shouts of a ruler."

— Justin Latif



Harmeet Sooden

One day before his 33rd birthday, Harmeet Sooden was released from a 117-day hostage ordeal in Iraq. He had been working there as part of a Christian aid team.

He sees his motivation for such work as being universal.

"We as human beings all generally have a concern for other people. Some, like me, are in a unique position of privilege, and that privilege confers a greater degree of responsibility," he says.

Having family and friends being victims of Middle East conflicts over the last 100 years has been a significant influence on Sooden.

In 2003, a Canadian friend of his, Maher Arar, was deported on the basis of faulty "intelligence" to Syria where he was imprisoned for one year and tortured. One of his close friends survived the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

He has family who have been living in Kashmir refugee camps since 1947.

His great-grandfather was a soldier in the British Indian army. He was killed in Basra in 1916.

The New Zealand Government's support of companies like NZ-based Osmar (an American company that had a contract to supply equipment for the Israeli army) and compliance with the United States' occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan also motivates Sooden.

"Surely, we should be doing our best to influence our Government to make choices that represent our values. We should now be asking: why is NZ participating in crimes in Afghanistan?" he says.

He volunteered for the Christian Peacemaker Teams, which are a small but important part of a mass non-violent movement made mostly of people in Iraq. This movement forced the foreign occupiers to allow elections in 2005, allowing the people of Iraq more of a say in the running of their country.

He said his position was clear before he went into Iraq:

"I did not want force or public funds (that could be better used elsewhere) to be used for my sake. My wishes were overruled – in the end I had no choice in the matter. I knew that being kidnapped could possibly lead to deaths, to military involvement or ransoms. There were precedents. After all it's currently a war zone," he said in an interview with Sahar Ghumkhor for *Craccum* magazine.

— Justin Latif



Simon Oosterman

Simon Oosterman has always been one to stand up for the little guy. At primary school, he and his twin brother would look after kids who were being picked on. "We were brought up so that we saw everyone as family," he says.

Born in 1980, Oosterman spent his formative years in Ramarama before receiving a private school education at Kings College.

However, it was not until university that Oosterman made a conscious political decision to become an activist.

Since then he has been arrested five times and pepper sprayed once. Oosterman will soon be up in court on charges relating to a protest over the Israel-Lebanon conflict in September. Police claim Oosterman resisted arrest after scaling a wall outside the US consulate.

"When I see injustice I make a stand," he says. "I don't budge when the police say budge if I don't think it's lawful."

Oosterman's enthusiasm for fighting the good fight is beyond doubt yet he cannot blame individuals who do not get involved.

"A lot of people who are trodden on feel they can't do anything about it," he says.

He believes in empowering such people by helping them to realise their power if they work together.

Recently he has been spokesperson for a number of campaigns including Supersizemypay and Stophetaser. Currently working for the National Distribution Union (NDU), which locked horns with supermarket giant Progressive Enterprises for most of September, Oosterman has decided to pull back from the media spotlight.

"I didn't want people to think, 'Oh, there's Simon Oosterman again,' rather than be talking about the issues."

He says he still helps with the campaigns, especially on the media side but prefers to work behind the scenes.

The day he spoke to *TWN*, Oosterman was in Riccarton visiting Feltex workers when they decided to engage in stop-work action.

Last Friday the 170 workers at the plant were told it would be closed.

"Today shock turned to anger," said an excited Oosterman.

He said their strike was "just, but illegal". It's a term that applies to much of Oosterman's own picket-line action.

— Mathew Grocott



Omar Hamed

Omar Hamed, 18, was introduced to politics at a young age. While at Devonport Primary, his mother worked at the Human Rights Commission trying to stop National and NZ First attacks on social welfare.

He says he gained inspiration "from seeing my mum involved in those struggles to keep part of the welfare state."

Later he gained a better understanding of issues and got involved in writing and educating others.

A half-Palestinian born in Greece but raised in New Zealand, Hamed is reluctant to become an object of attention, which he sees as a distraction from the fundamental issues.

"It shouldn't be about me. I'm just doing what anybody could do."

A first year history student at the University of Auckland, he is disappointed with the blasé attitude of some of his fellow students.

"I totally don't buy that students are apathetic. The majority are rich, white and privileged – the sons and daughters of the guards of the system. They have a lot to lose from social activism. They're very under-politicised."

He says because they are the mainstream, not the fringes of society, they are less interested. If there were more working class families or people outside mainstream society: "You'd have more interest in people changing the system – how to and why."

He wrote for youth media such as *Just Focus*, *Provoke* and the *College Herald* while a pupil at Takapuna Grammar School.

He now writes for outlets like Aotearoa Indymedia Centre, Scoop, *Craccum*, *Green-Left Weekly* and the American left-wing website Znet.

He was instrumental in setting up Radical Youth, an anti-capitalist organisation for young people, as well as the youth wage rates campaigns, but is now chiefly involved in Students Justice for Palestine.

Hamed is also passionate about globalisation, the Israel-Palestine conflict and other issues of social justice.

Hamed would like to work on many other issues but "I don't have a million hours a week".

He thinks activism needs to be "communicating to people the basic human desires for justice, freedom and solidarity – it's about tapping into the desire to fight for those ideals that is in people to some extent."

— Cameron Broadhurst

GET UP, STAND UP

