

Helping hands of hope for



PHOTO: EDWARD GAY

PROVIDING SUPPORT: Michelle Dianne Kidd accompanies one of the many homeless people for whom she is the last hope.

Latest estimates reveal 400 homeless people are living on Auckland's streets. KIM REED went to talk to those who devote their time to helping them.

If I don't see someone for a few days, I know they're 'inside', passed out somewhere or dead," she says, deftly rolling a cigarette, then taking a sip of coffee – her third this morning and it's only 7.30am.

Welcome to Michelle Dianne Kidd's world.

Michelle's morning begins long before the city awakens to the drone of cars and buses that jam Auckland's motorways each day.

It doesn't matter that she clocked up an 18-hour day working on behalf of the homeless the day before – she is always at her office by 6.30am.

Men holding rucksacks, sleeping bags or nothing at all appear out of nowhere, gravitating to a mustard-coloured building with metal grates on its windows and doors, where Michelle works.

One of the men walks towards the door.

"It doesn't open until seven man," offers a neatly dressed, thin Maori man.

His beanie pulled tight over his black curly tresses, he leans against the alcove wall of the entrance, trying to keep warm.

A man with a white scruffy beard inside the building appears from behind a curtain, flashing five fingers to signal opening time.

At 7am sharp, the double glass doors are unbolted.

Down the corridor, Michelle can just be seen through her office window, her teal-coloured, oval glasses perched on the tip of her nose and light brown hair pulled tightly into a bun that reveals silver roots.

Michelle peers over her glasses to appraise today's visitors.

It's a regular morning at the

Airedale Community Centre for those with little routine – no work and no place to sleep.

But for those who arrive on its doorstep each morning, this is home.

A *Homelessness In Auckland* report, commissioned by Auckland City Council in March 2004, estimates Auckland City has 400 homeless people.

It says drugs, alcohol, mental health and poverty are the main reasons why people become "rough sleepers" or "street people".

Little is known about the history of homelessness and why it has become a social problem, according to the report.

But some of the key factors are the deinstitutionalisation of the mental health system, lack of accommodation and a background of abuse from a dysfunctional family.

One by one the homeless filter into Michelle's office. Some come to chat.

"I get a panic if I don't see them and worry. If they're not here I want to know why and what's happened to them."

Others simply want to grab one of the miniature bars of soap sitting in a large cane basket on her floor so they can have a shower and change into fresh, donated clothes.

Stuck on Michelle's office wall, is a piece of paper with a quote from Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire: "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the

powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."

Two framed certificates hang next to her bookcase – a diploma in Research Skills Maori from Te Wananga o Puukenga and a Masters degree in Education with first class honours from the University of Auckland.

Conversations deal largely with issues that are the daily reality of the homeless; finding out who got picked up by police the night before, parole dates, the name of legal aid workers and pre-sentence assessments.

As she listens, Michelle glances through the window at the main entrance to see who else is trailing into the centre. Instinctively, she knows who is missing.

"I get a panic if I don't see them and worry. If they're not here I want to know why and what's happened to them, because no one else does (worries) except us."

As Te Kaihono ki te Rangimarie (a street worker making connections to create peace on our streets) for the Methodist Mission, her aim is to challenge injustice, offer hope and work towards a socially just and inclusive society.

A pretty tall order for a 1.5m woman from Putaruru.

Those that go to the mission know they are alcohol or drug addicts.

"They don't come to see me because I have a vibrant personality."

"They come to see me because they know they are in such shit that if they don't put up a hand nobody is going to grasp it."

After a 60-hour working week, she spends her spare time

collecting bread donated by Bakers Delight, visiting the Mason clinic, taking clothes to inmates at the Auckland Remand Prison Centre and working with families through CYFS or delivering food parcels.

"I work with people that society doesn't want to deal with anymore."

"The ambulance is already over the cliff. Homelessness is the end of the track."

"They come to see me because they know they are in such shit that if they don't put up a hand nobody is going to grasp it."

JW comes into her office asking if he can store his sleeping bag there so it won't get pinched.

"You know I'm away at court all day, so you won't be able to get it until I'm back around 5.30pm."

"Hi bub," she says to a solidly built Maori girl who looks about 22.

"Have you been getting enough rest? I don't like those black circles under your eyes. Make sure you take care of yourself."

"She's a big girl. She's always getting targeted because she stands out above the crowd, but she's a good girl," says Michelle.

A Nigerian man, who has been selling his body for \$5 on the street, wanders in.

Later a white-haired 89-year-old woman with severe osteoporosis stops in to pick up her daily cigarette from Michelle.

The woman has the respect of the rest of the crew and a permanent place at the night shelter.

At 7.30am the kitchen opens and the group, which has swelled to 27, queues for bowls of porridge and two pieces of toast, along with tea brewing in billy pots.

Throwing her black hooded cape around her diminutive frame, Michelle makes a formidable figure as she pounds the pavement on her daily march to the Auckland District Court.

She cuts through Smith & Caughy's department store, stopping at the perfume counter. "Isn't this a different world?" she says, rubbing Dior Addict lotion onto her hands.

Outside she stops at a flower shop, closing her eyes, stealing a quick moment to smell the assorted bouquets, before quickening her pace.

The homeless who spent the night outside know her daily routine and wait for her in strategic spots to ask for help or get a message to a friend.

The "street" seems to have an intricate hidden network.

Taking the escalator to the second level of the court, she seizes the moment to check that two girls going down the opposite direction know what time they have to appear.

"It's going to be a busy day," she says, scanning the court list slipped under her office door.

"It comes down to respect. If someone has a list of 38 convictions, there's a problem. Locking them away doesn't solve the problem."

On any given day she will support up to 30 people.

Savouring a few spare minutes, she heads for the café across the road for another caffeine top-up.

The staff automatically reach for a tall glass to make a "Michelle Special".

Sitting next to some legal aid lawyers, she gets angry when one of them makes the comment: "I see our friendly sex offender is back again."