

the homeless of Auckland

"Our people are sometimes laughed at and so often people don't care.

"If your son was standing in the dock would you want her representing him?"

"With a prejudice and attitude like that, she'd be the last person I'd be calling on.

"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."

"You have to cry because suddenly all the work you've done for 18 months is starting to come together."

Heading back to court — her full on day begins. She darts in and out of courtrooms, lending support to those appearing.

Often she will put her arm around them and whisper that they need to be strong.

She asks everyone she sees — security guards, lawyers and the homeless and even those she doesn't know — "you alright?" — just to be sure.

If they're not, she'll have a quick chat and hand over her business card with her cellphone number on it. It rings regularly at all hours of the day and night.

An anxious young woman awaits the verdict on her husband who has been on bail for nine months.

He packed his bags this morning and told his two sons, aged three and six, that daddy may be sent to prison for two years. Michelle holds one of the boys on her lap, keeping him calm.

After reading out the man's history — four different foster homes since the age of eight, physical and sexual abuse — the judge acknowledges the man's efforts to attend anger management and parenting programmes.

He's given another chance and Michelle sits there, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You have to cry because suddenly all the work you've done for 18 months is starting to come together. Both husband and wife are off the drugs, the children are back from CYFS and the father has self respect again.

"Sure he offended, but there were reasons behind it, and the judge took all of that into consideration.

"We have good judges in New Zealand and I keep praying we keep them. With the right mix of people we can move mountains."

Today is a good day, but others bring her down.

"I used to come home and throw cups at the wall until I got growled at. It's so unfair sometimes.

"People shouldn't be locked away because they're sick. Everyone is here for a purpose. I still have to figure out what mine is," she laughs.

Her grandmothers knew all along — they wanted her to be a nun.

Growing up in a family where alcoholism was a daily reality was a training ground that has served her well.



MICHELLE DIANNE KIDD: Working to create peace on the streets.

Michelle prefers not to talk much about her past — "with alcoholism, violence is always a handy partner".

She's always been a part of the social services.

"Because when you come from families that are forever in trouble, you learn from the other side. But you never know without experience how to articulate it or how it works."

She grew up in a large extended family under the protection of her mountain and marae.

Ko Hautere te Maunga. Ko Whakaaratamaiti te Marae. This, along with the strong love of her grandmothers, developed Michelle's sense of community at a young age.

Her grandmothers sent the nine-year-old to the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Auckland for an education and a safer environment. She stayed until she was 16.

"It was tough being away from home at such a young age. I learned to survive inside myself and how to be my own best friend.

"You also learn how to be selfless because you can't think of yourself all the time when you live in a community."

She never felt she was good enough to be a nun and went on to study at teacher's training college in Hamilton.

"I couldn't understand what everyone was talking about and thought, 'Jingos, this is why people don't want to learn,'" she laughs.

She later married and lived on a farm in Opotiki, raising five children on her own.

Finding the farm hard work, she moved to Auckland for office work and then studied for three years at Te Wananga o Puukenga.

While studying for her masters degree at the University of

Auckland, she began working for the Waitakere pilot of restorative justice, funded by the Northern Methodist Mission, which led to her current role.

Despite riding a roller coaster ride of emotions each week, she still manages to keep her sense of humour.

She won't disclose her age, other than to say: "On Mondays I feel 21 years old and by Friday I'm 104."

As she heads to her next case, a man with a tattooed forehead calls out and catches her attention.

"I've been sober for 100 days," he says beaming as she gives him a big hug.

Stopping to talk to a probation officer, she gets an update on yesterday's case where Amanda, a 21-year-old girl with mental health problems, was almost let back onto the streets for not "fitting the criteria".

"Where will you be when she's walking down Queen St and she's had every mental health pill available to her and she's mixed it with alcohol and then she's exploited?"

The judge, based on Michelle's and a probation officer's recommendations, asked that Amanda be kept in custody for her own protection.

Michelle finds the girl's parents, who, because of Amanda's violent episodes, are taking care of her six-year-old daughter.

After an assessment by a psychologist, Amanda is sent to the mental health unit at Auckland Hospital.

"I'm not the most likeable person because I try to make people

accountable. I dare to ask the questions no one will ask.

"I ask the lawyers: 'Will you be there when it's 2am and she needs help and has nowhere to go because the shelter is full?'"

"Where will you be when she's walking down Queen St and she's had every mental health pill available to her and she's mixed it with alcohol and then she's exploited?"

One of the biggest issues facing the homeless is lack of affordable accommodation.

Many are on the unemployment or sickness benefit, which is \$164.16 a week for a single person aged 25-plus years.

The Airedale Night Shelter with 30 beds is the cheapest option in the city at \$10 per night.

It is on a first-come, first-serve basis. It's in demand, not surprisingly, given that if a street person is able to get into the shelter every night, which isn't the case considering the numbers game, it leaves them with just \$13.45 a day to live on.

They will find their own shelter in Albert Park, the Auckland Domain, railway tunnels, under bridges, and graveyards. Other places like the library and the casino provide warmth and shelter in bad weather.

"We need places for people to go where they are protected. Too often they're sick. They're not criminals by nature. They've become criminals as a result of their sickness and poverty."

Alcohol, predominantly "the blue lady", the nickname on the streets for methylated spirits and glue, is the biggest problem for the homeless, she says.

"When they've drunk too much, they can hardly stand up. They urinate on themselves and fill their pants full of faeces, which alienates them even more from everyone."

Taking them into the mission after hours, Michelle peels off the layers of clothing they've worn for many weeks. She showers them, provides clean clothes and feeds them.

"Their skin peels off like another layer after a shower because the methylated spirits dries out the skin. A bit of sorbeline cream helps protect their skin, but the alcohol will dry it all out again."

While some might see her efforts as futile, she believes "dignity" is imperative.

"It's a long process but I think it's worthwhile."

Among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, New Zealand has the second highest rate of imprisonment next to the US, with 157 people per 100,000 of the population in prison, according to John Pratt, a criminology professor at Victoria University.

Michelle says we need to tidy up our own backyard. "That's where the restorative justice bit of my life comes in."

"Because without talking to one another, we are never ever going to know what another one's situation is."

And most situations, she says, have started long before someone appears in court.

"A lot of our people going through the court are discon-

nected from their family, often at birth.

"Once something goes wrong in the family and social services take over — you're lost. People have changes in name, changes of identity, changes in parents and on and on it goes.

"You can't actually break free until you're over the age of 17 and by that time you've lost a major part of your life."

Michelle pushes offenders to take part in restorative justice programmes whenever possible.

"It's very important for them to face their victims and for the victims to face you — especially in a loving and caring manner."

"Connection back to family. Whether you're Nigerian or South African, we all have to have a place to stand."

"I think all offenders should have that right to apologise for their behaviour."

She talks about Michael, a homeless person who beat up a man and went through restorative justice.

"It changed his life," she says.

He paid for the man's teeth to be fixed and attended drug, alcohol and anger management courses at the victim's request.

The two of them left in the same taxi when the day was over.

"That's what will bring peace," says Michelle, "not locking people up. If you lock people up, all they're going to do is sit in a cell and say the victim deserved it."

"They'll leave in denial and come out angrier than they were when they went in. That's not going to help our community."

There is no quick fix to homelessness but Michelle says that it's more than having accommodation.

"Connection back to family. Whether you're Nigerian or South African, we all have to have a place to stand — it doesn't matter where you come from."

"But at the end of the day if you have nowhere to go to apart from the park, or a building that is ready for demolition, it's not healthy."

"It's not normal not to have connections back to your family. It breaks our spirit and that's the thing you've got to a fix."

"It's all of you, not just your physical or your intellectual wellbeing but also your wairua (spirit)."

Michelle has even been known to open her home when there were no other options. Daniel has been living with Michelle and her family for seven months. He weighed 70kg at his worst and was "drinking meths 24/7". "This woman saved my life," says Daniel. He now weighs 100kg and finds solace and purpose working in her garden.

"People are like gardens. If you don't water them and don't feed them and don't give them a little bit of love by taking the weeds away, then they will not grow," says Michelle.