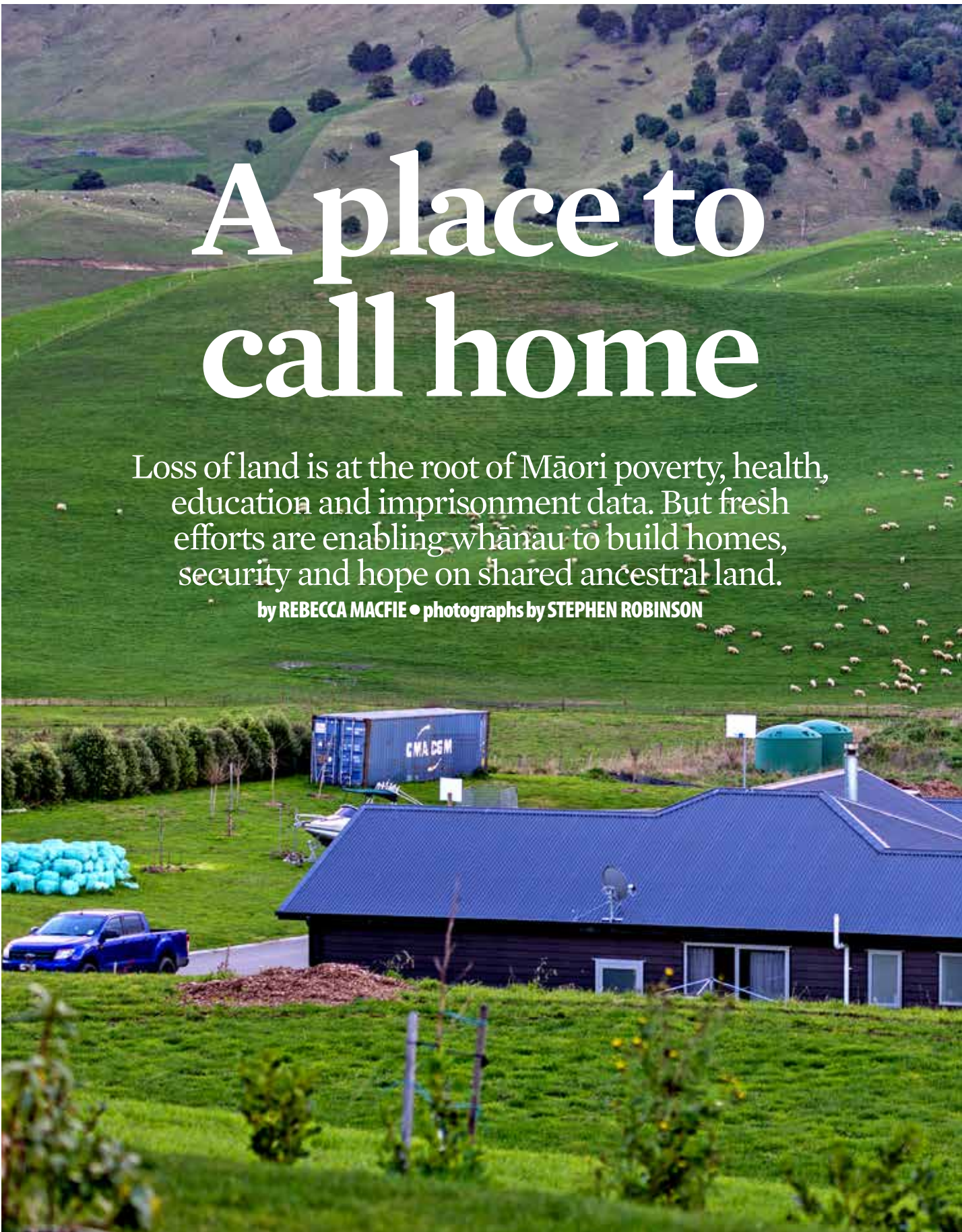


# A place to call home

Loss of land is at the root of Māori poverty, health, education and imprisonment data. But fresh efforts are enabling whānau to build homes, security and hope on shared ancestral land.

by REBECCA MACFIE • photographs by STEPHEN ROBINSON





**N**estled in the soft hills of inland Hawke's Bay, near the tiny settlement of Te Hauke, is a cluster of smart new houses. Nothing ostentatious: two-, three- and four-bedroom places, dark-grey Colorsteel roofs, nice kitchens and bathrooms, sunny decks, ample space for children to run and play.

Named Puke Aute, it looks like any other modest residential subdivision. But it is not ordinary, nor is it a subdivision in any conventional sense. This is papakāinga housing – a rare modern expression of an ancient way of living, a village in which every resident is connected to the earth beneath their feet and where no one can make speculative gains. There are no fences – mokopuna can roam between the houses of grandparents, aunties and cousins.

On the Saturday I visit, there's a buzz of productivity. An area of ground is being tamed with loppers, garden forks and

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**“A lot of our people don't have time to love and nurture their kids on the couch, because they don't have a couch, they don't have a home.”**

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weed-eaters, and music is pumping from a portable speaker.

Everyone who lives in the houses is linked through whakapapa to this 2.8ha block, and they have proven their right to be here through their labour – attending working bees like this one, coming to hui, and splitting and distributing firewood to those who need it.

It's not everyone's cup of tea. But for Matariki Makoare and her husband, Phillip Wainohu, who were among the first to move in early last year, it offered profound relief from a housing system that had condemned them to severe overcrowding and stress.

Despite both working in good jobs – Makoare as a teacher and Wainohu as a meat worker – they fell into chronic housing stress when Covid hit in 2020. They lost the home they'd been renting because the owner needed to move in, and they couldn't

**Reclaimed: The Puke Aute development is on a site leased to Pākehā for generations that few whānau knew existed.**



**Whanaungatanga (family connection):** The papakāinga development allows whānau to live alongside one another and thrive, says Zack Makoare, left, with wife Georgina and their daughter Matariki.

get another place, despite looking at nearly 40 houses. “The viewings were packed,” says Makoare. “And we were young, we were Māori, we had two young children – I knew we had a slim chance of getting a rental. We were losing our home, I was hapū (pregnant), we had nowhere to go, and I had just started a new job. I had anxiety, depression.”

Nor could they buy their own place. Every time they had tried and got close, some years-old unpaid fine or other blemish on their credit record would disqualify them.

With no other choice, they moved in with Wainohu’s parents, whose old three-bedroom home was already crowded with 12 people, including other family members who couldn’t find anywhere of their own to live. Two more whānau joined the household after being evicted because their landlord wanted to sell, bringing the number to 18.

Despite the lack of space and privacy, Makoare says her in-laws’ home was full of love and generosity, and she was grateful her family of four had a cabin on the property to sleep in. She organised everyone into a roster for cooking and cleaning, but she couldn’t help but feel hopeless. “I got depressed because I felt I’d let my kids down. I was putting myself down, telling myself, ‘You’re useless.’”

### LAND COURT “FRAUD”

While she and her family struggled, a decades-long dream to build a modern-day pā on the land at Te Hauke was inching towards realisation.

Malcom Northover, his black singlet flecked with grass, puts down his weed-eater and settles on the slope to tell me

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**“We want to create a space where people feel safe, and where people have a vision for themselves.”**

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the long story of how this block and other ancestral land was brought back into the control of his whānau.

He was only 18 when his father, Joe Northover, a well-respected kaumātua, asked him in 1985 to look into what was happening with land to which their tīpuna, Pera Wheraro and Nikaore te Wharepouri, had been granted title in the 1860s from the then-new Native Land Court.

By the time the court began operating in

Hawke’s Bay in 1866, half the province had been acquired by the Crown from Māori on promises and a pittance, and from there into the possession of Pākehā farmers and speculators. The Native Land Court was the vehicle by which communal ownership of land would be extinguished and privatised into “native” freehold title. Initially, no more than 10 owners could be recorded by the court as owners of any one block of land, but this was later changed so that every individual with an interest was listed. As the Waitangi Tribunal has stated, the system “made it easier to sell land than to retain and use it”.

The purpose of the court, as stated by then-justice minister Henry Sewell, was “to bring the great bulk of lands ... within the reach of colonisation”. As was expected by the Crown, many Māori were forced to sell land to pay debts incurred in obtaining title, such as survey and court costs, writes University of Otago law professor Jacinta Ruru.

In Hawke’s Bay, the court opened the door to what Victoria University of Wellington legal scholar Richard Boast has described as “obvious fraud and dubious dealings” and an “economy of speculation and graft”. Māori who sold land “seem seldom to have received actual cash”, with some getting



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1. The 10 letterboxes commemorate Zack and Georgina Makoare's son, Kelly, who loved daffodils. 2. Houses on the 2.8ha block are unfenced. 3. Zack with one of Puke Aute's five sheep. 4. Grandparents and aunty with mokopuna and niece Matariki.

only a reduction of debts that had been incurred with storekeepers, Boast writes of the evidence heard by an 1873 commission into land dealings in the province.

## RECLAIMING THE WHENUA

In untangling the history of his family's ancestral land, Malcom Northover spent months in what is now the Māori Land Court, working his way through hundreds of files and slowly building a detailed map of whenua that he had never known of.

"It was daunting at first," he says. "I would do a karakia before I went into the room, and look at all these files and just start from the front of the stack." The papers detailed the fragmentation of the original block and the succession of ownership into ever-more descendants of Pera and Nikaore. He learnt of land partitioned off for individual owners, the sale of blocks, and land taken by the local council and government for public works.

"It was inch by inch, acre by acre," Northover says of the erosion of the whenua.

In the end, he established there were 800 acres (323ha) scattered across 23 blocks, ranging from one acre to 90. All of it was being farmed by Pākehā under low-rent leases overseen by the Māori Trustee. "The leases were being rolled over without consultation."

The whānau still owned the land, but to

**“When you wake up in a warm, dry house, you want to get up, have breakfast and get to work or school.”**

all intents and purposes, they were alienated from it. In 1998, with the backing of his father and other kaumātua, Northover called the eight lines of the family together and told them what he had learnt. "Just about all my aunts and uncles were crying. They'd never had that information." He organised vans to take them to see the land and stand on it.

By then, Te Ture Whenua Māori Act 1993 (the Māori Land Act) was in force. For the

first time, the law recognised Māori land as taonga tuku iho (of special significance). The statutory purpose was to retain what was left in Māori ownership and facilitate its development and use.

Northover and other leaders set up ahu whenua trusts under the act to take over the management of their land. Leases were renegotiated; farmers who were previously paying a peppercorn now had to pay market rents.

The dream of building homes for whānau took root, "but the banks wouldn't touch us," he says, referring to the long-standing reluctance of the finance industry to accept multiply-owned Māori land as loan security because it can't easily be sold in the event of a default.

## FOUR WALLS

Around this time, Matariki Makoare's parents, Georgina and Zack (who is Northover's cousin), were facing loss and tragedy. Both were meat workers at the Takapau plant in central Hawke's Bay. Zack was a union delegate responsible for health and safety. He believes the employer had been looking to get rid of him for a while, and in 1998, he was sacked.

They couldn't meet their mortgage and lost their home. "It was a mortgagee sale

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even though we had very little money left to pay on it. I got into a depression," he says.

Then the worst happened. In 2000, their 15-year-old son, Kelly, committed suicide. There was anger, grief and self-blame. But over the years, they were able to turn that into a drive to support other rangatahi to build resilience and wellbeing by connecting them with customary practices (tikanga) and the therapeutic power of the natural environment.

They set up Te Taitimu Trust in 2007, and since then have worked with thousands of young people – many of them tagged "at risk" – on the beaches and in the sea, in the bush, on the rivers and lakes, at camps and on marae. They gather kaimoana, learn how to grow food and cook it, plant trees, learn marae kawa (protocol) and how to make beds, clean toilets and wash and dry dishes.

Their approach has been strongly influenced by the work of Māori psychiatrist and leader Sir Mason Durie, who developed the concept of te whare tapa whā, in which wellbeing is likened to the four walls of a meeting house – the whenua as the foundation, and the walls representing mental, physical, social and spiritual health.

"If we focus on the potential of someone, we get a better outcome," says Zack Makoare. "As opposed to looking at the criminal record or the mental health [problems] of a person, [we are] focusing the light on the good things of a person." Durie himself has described Te Taitimu Trust's work as "groundbreaking".

**BACK TO THE FUTURE**

It was a natural step from here to thinking about rebuilding the traditional way of living and working together: to using some of the ancestral whenua that had been shepherded back to the whānau to build a papakāinga where family members could live alongside one another and thrive.

"Can we go back to some of that living that we used to do, and through that philosophy can we bring down the rate of imprisonment, can we change the statistics for health and for education?" says Makoare. "Of course we can do that ...

"[Māori] have lost a lot, but we can't keep going on about how much we've lost. I think



**Cutting a path: Malcom Northover pored over hundreds of documents to untangle the history of his whānau's ancestral land.**

we have got to really figure out and design the next level of housing, education, health, culture and, more importantly, an economic base so that we can become and stay proud."

But even with the land, the vision and the respect the Makoares had built up through their work with rangatahi, there were years of complexity and frustration before homes could be built.

There were 96 owners of the 2.8ha block, governed by the Mahue Pera Ahu Whenua Trust, set up in the late 1990s. Makoare was unhappy with the oversight of the trust and went to the Māori Land Court, which named him and another whānau member as trustees.

In 2010, the Kāinga Whenua loan scheme was set up. Kiwibank provided mortgage finance – the first time a commercial bank had shown willingness to lend for housing on Māori land – for borrowers who met tight criteria, with loans underwritten by the then-Housing New Zealand Corporation (now Kāinga Ora). It was a decades-overdue attempt to unlock the potential of Māori land for housing.

In 2013, the Kāinga Whenua Infrastructure Grant scheme was set up to fund infrastructure for housing developments

on rural Māori land, where the cost of putting in roads and connecting to wastewater systems can be prohibitive. The fund was hopelessly oversubscribed, and Mahue Pera was rejected three times before finally getting over the line in 2019. In the end, nearly \$5 million was granted for infrastructure and two-thirds of the cost of nine houses, with a further \$445,000 from Ngāti Kahungunu for a 10th home. Kāinga Whenua mortgages have funded the remainder of the construction costs.

"Build starts for papakāinga on 17th March. 7am karakia," Makoare posted on Facebook in early 2020. Eight days later, the country went into lockdown and the development schedule was knocked sideways. But three years on, the Puke Aute papakāinga is rising. Nine houses have been built and are rented at affordable rates

to whānau, with construction on another due to start. Makoare and his wife lived in a caravan on the site until just a few months ago, when their own place – which they funded themselves – was built.

**NO METH, NO PATCHES**

Those who wished to live at Puke Aute – including daughter Matariki and her family – put their case forward and the final decision on who qualified lay with Malcom Northover. Among the rules that govern life there are no methamphetamine and no gang patches.

It's hoped that whānau will be able to buy their homes, which can be sold only to other members of the trust. The land can never be sold.

Next on the list are a wellbeing centre – Te Pā Oranga – with space for wānanga (educational meetings), vegetable beds, an amphitheatre for kapa haka, communal showers and toilets. There is no money for this part of the dream yet, but Makoare hopes to win the interest of philanthropists who support the te whare tapa whā holistic framework.

"We want to create a space where people feel safe, and where people have a vision for themselves," he says.

Life at Puke Aute sounds idyllic, but there are challenges to living alongside whānau – it has been generations since families have

REBECCA MACFIE

lived together like this. Relationships can come under strain, tensions and old wounds can become inflamed. But the chances of recovery and healing are infinitely greater from a foundation of secure housing, and a sense of belonging and whanaungatanga (family connection).

## COMPLEX OBSTACLES

Are developments like Puke Aute part of the answer to a housing system that is disproportionately harming Māori families? Can they provide a pathway to safe and secure homes for the 43% of Māori children whose families don't own their own homes?

"Papakāinga is a huge part of the solution to the housing crisis, not just for Māori but for all of New Zealand," says Paora Sheeran, of Sheeran Associates, who has been working with whānau for the past decade to develop feasibility plans, get resource and building consents, and obtain funding for papakāinga developments.

"The land is there. Papakāinga is the most affordable way to get into home ownership because you don't have to buy the land. What you get is healthy, affordable housing, and that flows on to social outcomes, economic outcomes, cultural outcomes. When you wake up in a warm, dry house, you want to get up, have breakfast and get to school or work."

While Māori were stripped of the majority of their lands through dodgy dealings, confiscations and the individualisation of title through the Native Land Court, 1.4 million hectares – about 5.3% of the country – remains in whānau and hapū ownership.

Historically, building homes on this land has been extraordinarily difficult. The bulk of it is rural, although about 30% is close to towns and cities. Some of it is very isolated, and in many cases lacks water, power and roading services.

Banks have no interest in financing it (Kiwibank being the recent exception), and council zoning restrictions have generally dictated against development. Under the old Hastings district plan, for instance, owners needed a minimum of 4ha to be permitted to build homes, but many ancestral blocks were smaller than that, says Sheeran.

Fragmented ownership has been another major barrier. According to a recent Reserve Bank report, the average Māori land block has 111 owners, and many are not governed by trusts.

And, just as wealth begets wealth, so too does the destruction of wealth beget further loss. Having been alienated from almost all their land, Māori have been deprived of

the opportunity to build intergenerational equity. According to data cited by researcher Charles Waldegrave for the Waitangi Tribunal's ongoing inquiry into housing, median individual Māori net worth is \$42,000, compared with \$151,000 for Pākehā.

While all these factors conspired against building houses on ancestral whenua, the housing crisis for Māori has spiralled. The withdrawal of the state from low-cost mortgage lending in the 1990s led to a collapse in the proportion of Māori living in their own homes from 57.4% in 1991 to a low of 43.1% in 2013 – twice the rate of decline experienced by Pākehā, writes Waldegrave.

Ownership rates across the population improved by 2018, but a huge disparity between Māori and Pākehā rates remained, at 47.2% versus 70.6%, writes Waldegrave. Deep cuts to the state-housing portfolio in the 1990s – which created a severe deficit that continues today – also caused huge and ongoing harm to Māori families, who

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**“What you get is healthy, affordable housing, and that flows on to social, economic and cultural outcomes.”**

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make up half of the 24,000 households in the queue for social housing. And it is disproportionately Māori families who are jammed into “emergency” motel accommodation – a stop-gap measure started by the Key government in 2016, which has turned into an entrenched crisis with the average stay now six months, and which has burnt through \$1.3 billion in the past five and a half years.

## TURNING THE TITANIC

But there are signs that – belatedly, slowly – developments like Puke Aute are becoming more viable, providing a beacon of hope amid the housing catastrophe.

Paora Sheeran says the pace of papakāinga development is picking up. He started his company in 2013 after several years working in the Māori Land Court, and completed his first project two years later; now, he has 25 papakāinga on the go across the North Island.

He says expertise is growing within firms like his, as well as among local and central government agencies, building contractors and Kiwibank.

After a pitifully slow start that drew the criticism of the auditor-general in 2011, the Kāinga Whenua mortgage scheme finally appears to be making some headway (although at just 78 loans over 13 years, still far too little). And district plans that once blocked development have, in many areas, been amended to make papakāinga permitted activities.

Success breeds success, says Sheeran, and as whānau see others building homes on the whenua, their own aspirations and confidence grow.

Most importantly, there is a bigger pot of money available to support Māori housing. In 2021, the government tagged \$730 million over four years for infrastructure, repairs and new homes under the Whai Kāinga Whai Oranga programme. Waldegrave describes this as “historic”, and says it reflects a level of “urgency and realism” that has been absent from housing policy since the 1980s. But he warns investment on this scale “will need to continue for more than a decade if the goal is to reduce the inequities and housing stress” being suffered. A further \$200m was added to the programme in this year's Budget.

## “A GOOD FOUNDATION”

The need is immense, and papakāinga are just part of the answer. But the security of living on home ground generates benefits that reach far beyond the village.

For Matariki Makoare, a home at Puke Aute has meant stability not just for her immediate family, but also a solid platform from which to support other whānau. Last year, she and Wainohu brought three whāngai children, whose parents were struggling with meth and mental health, into their household. “We knew we needed to do this and we could do this, for their sake ... and for their mum and dad to become well again,” she says. “That's what whānau does. Ko te mea nui, ko te aroha [The most important thing is love] ...

“We know learning comes from home first and foremost. When you've got a good home, a good foundation and a good work ethic, you've got a positive lifestyle. But a lot of our people are on struggle street and they don't have time to love and nurture their kids on the couch, because they don't have a couch, they don't have a home.” ■

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For more on this story, visit [listener.co.nz](http://listener.co.nz).

“Hardship & Hope” concludes next week. Rebecca Macfie received research funding for the series from philanthropists Scott and Mary Gilmour.