



Taurus Taurima now employs 60 staff and his training academy teaches work and life skills.

From the ground up

An ex-Mongrel Mob member is teaching a new generation that a difficult past need not define their future.

BY REBECCA MACFIE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN ROBINSON

In Napier's industrial zone, a couple of young workers are paving a street corner on the banks of the Ahuriri Estuary. It's a small and unremarkable civil construction site. The workers are in high-vis gear, and there's a small digger bearing the name Topline Contracting. For the ordinary passer-by, there's nothing to see here. But this site is part of a much larger story of rehabilitation, healing and growth.

One of the crew in high-vis is Tumana Sullivan. He grew up in the impoverished suburb of Maraenui. When he was 13, his

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mother died suddenly of a heart attack, and he anaesthetised his pain with drugs and alcohol. He dropped out of school at 14, spent years drifting between the households of extended whānau, had time on the dole and bounced in and out of jobs. He had several brushes with the law, but managed to get himself clean of drugs a few years ago. He and his partner became parents when they were teenagers.

He wanted a better life for his children

Profile

and partner. But that's easier said than done: how to build a better future without access to the skills and jobs to earn a higher wage? The average employer can't be bothered taking on guys like him, except perhaps when they need some low-paid casual muscle.

But Sullivan has found himself with a boss who is not average; a boss who understands what it's like to struggle, because he has been there, too. Taurus Taurima is the employer who gave him a chance, hiring him three years ago to learn civil construction skills. For Sullivan and other workers, he's the bro who defied the odds and showed them that a difficult past need not define the future.

Taurima has built a business by hiring dozens of workers with little or no education, with criminal records, gang connections and drug and alcohol problems. He provides them with training and qualifications, pastoral care, financial and health literacy and support to kick their addictions.

A WARRIORS' WORLD

He is an unlikely entrepreneur, and a deeply determined one. Taurima grew up in Flaxmere, one of the most deprived communities in the country. He left school at 16, had his first child at 17, and did his first stint in jail at 19. "Once Were Warriors is a true story when you grow up in areas of poverty," he says of his upbringing. "Where we come from, many of us have seen that movie in real life."

His parents split when he was five. "We lived in state houses. My mum worked very hard to change that life for the better for me," he says.

"I wasn't stupid. I finished NCEA Level 2 a third of the way through sixth form. I didn't want to waste my time studying science if I didn't want to be a scientist, so I left school and did a pre-apprenticeship course for mechanics."

At 16, he headed to Australia, working 10- to 16-hour days in Sydney's fish markets. Hard work came easily to him – but so did decisions that "weren't quite the best".

His father was – and remains – a Mongrel Mob member, as are some of his uncles. "He came from a family of 12 brothers and one sister. Some of them were taken by the state when they were younger. Some went to boys' homes and grew up there."

When he returned home from Sydney, the slide towards gang membership was well-oiled for Taurima. He started prospecting at

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18, and earned his Mongrel Mob patch at 21. He did time in Christchurch Men's Prison, spending most of it in 23-hour-a-day lockdown, and was released back to Flaxmere with just the clothes on his back and his \$350 "Steps to Freedom" grant. By then, he and his partner, Tinaya Wirihana, were the parents of two children, one of whom didn't recognise him when he got out.

"After a little bit, I didn't think the things I was doing after I got out were the right things," he says. "I thought, 'Oh man, I have to find me a job.' That was quite hard. My third kid was on the way then."

That was 2010. If it's hard in good economic times for a patched gang member with a criminal record to get work, it was even harder in the shadow of the Global Financial Crisis.

For days, he walked the length of Hastings' Omaha Rd, a busy arterial flanked by industrial, logistics and construction businesses. "I asked everyone for a job and couldn't find one."

One day, he came upon a small concreting team and asked them for work. "They didn't give me a job. They just told me if I helped them for free they would give me their boss's number. So I worked a day for free and got the boss's number. That's when my career started."

He quickly displayed a monumental capacity for hard physical work and stamina. It nearly came to a grinding halt when one of his workmates saw him in a video store wearing his gang patch. "The boss rang me and asked if I was in the Mob. I thought, 'Shit, if I want to change my life I can lie or I can be honest,' so I thought I'd be honest ... I pretty much begged him that if he keeps me, I will prove to him that I won't steal or do anything bad and that they could trust me."

He was allowed to stay, and over the next five years he rose to become operations manager. "I was employing heaps of people from Flaxmere and Maraenui. I was able to [hire] other people from a similar background who I guess were watching my progression and what I was doing. The



opportunity I was given by my employer was a blessing. It was life-changing."

He was careful where he wore his gang regalia because he didn't want to harm his employer's reputation. Then, when he was 26, he decided to hand in his patch. "I just went and said that I wanted to leave and do my own thing."

He did it for his kids, and in the hope that he could show his family and friends a different lifestyle, and that "no matter where we come from or our situation or upbringing, anything is possible."

"I didn't want to tell them to do something I wasn't living myself, and so I left. I still see



Taurima is the man who made a difference for Tumana Sullivan, right, and other workers at Topline Contracting.

them. My dad is in there, I still have family in there, and they aren't going anywhere. I still go to funerals, I still go to the marae. I haven't run from it. But I just hope I can inspire them or open a different avenue for them, and definitely to give the younger generation different options in life."

Even without his gang patch, and despite his evident work ethic and talents, Taurima realised that "as a Māori, it wouldn't be easy to get to the top and bring about change,

and achieve what I wanted for my people. I thought if I could build my own enterprise I could show everyone from Flaxmere that it's possible. I wanted to see my own people climb the food chain, so we weren't always on the shovel if we didn't want to be, and we didn't have to be stuck on the minimum wage."

START-UP BUSINESS

By 2016, he had six years of construction experience behind him, and he and Tinaya had saved enough for a house deposit. Instead of putting a down payment on a home, they poured it into a start-up business

specialising in small civil and residential construction jobs. By then he was 27, and the couple had four children. They moved into a one-room tin shed at Tinaya's mother's place, and bought a truck, some tools and some concreting product.

"I just worked hard. Extremely hard," Taurima says. "I took on what I was really good at and what nobody else wanted to do – all the labour-intensive jobs. We would just work a 12- to 20-hour day. I thought, 'Man, not only am I going to make it, I'm going to make it with everyone from Flaxmere, and I'll make sure we are all Māori or Pacific.'"

Tinaya was equally committed. "The main

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driver was getting people who don't have a vision to see that there is something more out there, and get them qualified to earn more money for their whānau, and not just being a labourer," she says.

Within a couple of years, Topline Contracting had grown to 20 workers and a fleet of 12 trucks, a concrete mixer and other machinery. Now, seven years on, there are more than 60 workers.

"I take people in and I sort of try to take them on a journey," Taurima says. "It's hard because I'm not corporate, and I don't say I offer the highest paying rates in town, but I do offer free education – I'm always trying to encourage them to buy a home, trying to teach them about wealth."

IT'S IN THE CULTURE

Tikanga is central to that journey. "I like to acknowledge my culture, and my ancestors. I value that very highly and I think everybody should. And not just because I'm Māori – we have Pākehā and Samoans as well. Our ancestors worked hard for us to get to the place we are today.

"I believe some of our people are losing their mana, because we are in a system we don't like but we stay in it. The thing I want the most is to make them proud of themselves and get out of that system."

Topline organises a three-day noho marae [marae stay] most years, to which workers' families are invited. "We learn about everybody's culture. We do a hāngī. We have our own karakia, we have waiata, we have a haka, we do fitness." He has even taken drug-using trainees out to the backblocks of Hawke's Bay and worked with them to get clean.

Taurima was getting flooded with job applications and requests from the Department of Corrections and Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to employ people. He hired many, but couldn't absorb everyone. So, last year, he set up a training academy in the hope that bigger construction companies would follow through on their social procurement promises and hire the graduates.

"It is really built primarily around life skills, teaching them to get up in the morning," he says of the academy. "The first interview we do is at Winz [Work and Income], and the second interview is inside their house with their support person. That just enables us to say to them that if they don't turn up, then we'll come in and get them out of bed.

"The No 1 denominator is to get them drug free, and teach them to have respect and teach them to look after themselves. I

cut their hair off, clean them up. Then we evaluate their house and figure out if we need to do a makeover in the back yard. We do yard clean-ups. We've filled up people's cupboards. You have to feel good, you have to have a clean home to have a clean mind to be able to go to work every day. One house we did, the kids hadn't played outside for three years."

Training academy days start and finish with karakia, there are 5am swims in the sea, and compulsory public speaking. "It's just a major detox. By the end of it, everybody has at least cried once and everyone has had times they didn't want to be there. But they graduate."

Many trainees arrive with only a learner driver licence: through the academy they get their full licences and can also gain a raft of civil construction licences and certificates such as for forklift driving, first aid and traffic management.

Everyone who graduates is guaranteed a job – either with another construction company or with Topline. Of 41 cadets who graduated in April and June this year, 30 are still in employment. Inevitably, some will stumble but Taurima operates on a philosophy of second and third chances.

"If they get fired without an opportunity to get back on track and learn from their



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Hands on learning: 1. Cadets at work pouring concrete. 2. Intake 5 at the completion of their course in August. 3. Installing footpaths and bollards at Riverside Park carpark in Napier. 4. Bookwork is part of the training.

mistakes they can fall off the track completely,” he says. The door is kept open to reapply “after they’ve had time to think about why they lost their job and the consequences for their families”.

Initially, Taurima financed most of the cost of running the academy, but last November it was awarded 24 months’ funding from MSD’s Māori trades and training fund, which was established in the early days of Covid to provide training and wraparound pastoral care. The fund was set up to buffer the expected impact of the pandemic on Māori employment, which historically has taken a disproportionate hit from economic shocks – after the GFC, Pākehā unemployment reached 5%, but for Māori the figure soared to 13.9%.

“CLEANER THAN CLEAN”

Hastings accountant Anna Wellwood says Taurima’s background gives him permission to lay down rules and expectations that others wouldn’t get away with. Cadets enrolled in the academy are banned from consuming energy drinks and fast food, and Taurima makes them put money aside for saving.

“Because he’s been there and speaks their language, he can be harder on them than anyone else can,” says Wellwood, who has

been an adviser to Taurima since Topline’s early days. “He can tell them off and they’ll listen to him.”

Because of his background, he has always known that he has to be “cleaner than clean” in the way he runs the business, says Wellwood.

“He can’t put a foot wrong, because too many people are aware of his background and are ready to chop him down. But that background is what’s made him who he is. He genuinely wants to help people. He doesn’t want to see kids in poverty, and the way out of that is to give the parents the mana of a good job.”

Henare O’Keefe, Flaxmere community leader and one of Taurima’s staunchest supporters, agrees that he “pushes the boundaries”. “He goes beyond KPIs [key performance indicators] and

“**Here’s a solution right here. They’re talking about boot camps, etcetera, but they need to sit down with the Tauruses of this world.**”

outputs. He’s led by his heart.”

O’Keefe has been involved for years with the volunteer Kaiwhakamana prisoner support and rehabilitation scheme at Hawke’s Bay Regional Prison and says Taurima has become an unofficial partner in that effort.

“There are three things needed to prevent inmates from reoffending: a place to stay, a job, and follow-up, including with the family. Taurus does all of that,” he says.

“Mana, love and integrity” are the core of Taurima’s approach, says O’Keefe. “He hasn’t broken the cycle [of deprivation], he’s smashed it to smithereens. There should be a Taurus-type template right throughout the country.

“Here’s a solution right here. They’re [the National Party] talking about boot camps, etcetera, but they need to sit down with the Tauruses of this world. It’s not all of the solution but it’s certainly a significant part of it. We can’t keep doing the same old, same old. We’ve got to change the way we do things.”

For Taurima, it’s all about unlocking and nurturing the untapped talent in deprived communities like the one he grew up in. “There are people in there who have the ability to do amazing things,” he says. “The life they live might be all they know from when they were a child. They’re just born into it. They haven’t seen another option.” ■