

Super Human Award Nomination – Cr Neville Phillips

Council employee, community board member, councillor, volunteer fireman and sports administrator – Neville Phillips has spent half a lifetime serving the Mataura community and wider Gore District in one way or another.

He may have been Gore born and bred, but Mataura is where his heart lies - literally. He moved 12km south 43 years ago for love - Mataura is his wife Jillian's hometown - and he's stayed there ever since.

Community service was ingrained into Neville from a young age with his parents, siblings and wider family involved in their local volunteer fire brigade or St John. When Neville received his Gold Star for 50 years of service to the Mataura Volunteer Fire Brigade, he revealed that his immediate and wider family have collectively given 600 years service to the fire service or St John.

Neville's contribution to Mataura started in 1987 in a most practical way – he was a supervisor on the old government PEP employment scheme. At only 24 years old, he oversaw 14 trainees whose job was to look after the town.

These were men aged from 16 years to 60 years – proud people who had lost their jobs. As their supervisor, Neville was committed to restoring a sense of worth and well-being in his trainees, ensuring they left him with the skills to gain employment and contribute to their community.

In the 80s, Mataura was a booming town and the industrial hub of Eastern Southland. Neville took immense pride in ensuring the town's footpaths were maintained, its gardens weed-free, and parks mowed. He led a beautification programme that was a forerunner for many of the reserves and parks in the town today.

His work in the 80s was something that gave him great satisfaction and confidence as a young man. In many ways, it provided the grounding for the leadership skills he would need later in life as an elected member serving a town hit by economic decline and a lack of community cohesion.

Local government amalgamation in 1989 enabled Neville to step into a paid role with the new Gore District Council. Never did he think that in 2013, he would be elected as the Mataura ward representative and his community's voice on the Council.

His first position was overseeing the Gore and Mataura transfer stations. He launched himself into the role in true Neville fashion, transforming the muddy, dismal tip face into a place residents could go in their slippers!

From there he moved to the 3 Waters team, working on the District's water and wastewater networks. It was challenging, and saw Neville having to go back to school to get his water and wastewater operations certificates.

Neville relished his time with the 3 Waters team, and just before leaving, he gained national recognition for a paper he wrote on the operation of Gore's actiflow plant.

Determination and diplomacy

Neville's political career was launched in 2003 when he was elected to the newly created Mataura Community Board.

His motivation was to ensure the town had a voice. There was also a degree of nostalgia – he could see some of his work in the 80s, the cobblestones and footpaths, were showing their age and needed repaired.

However, it was a project that would give the town a focal point and place to meet that earned Neville the respect and gratitude of his community.

The development of the Mataura Community Centre took 12 years from when it was first mooted to when it opened on 30 January 2009.

Neville had this project firmly in his sights when he was elected, but first, he had to unite a fractured community. It seemed everyone had an opinion on where the community centre should go and what it should look like.

The local RSA and Mataura Rugby Club were the two main contenders vying for the community centre on their turf. Many had tried to help these two find common ground but failed.

Never one to be put off by how long something might take, Neville quietly worked away negotiating, persuading, and sharing his big-picture vision of how to make Mataura a vibrant, safe community.

Always one to keep an open mind, it was a chance conversation that led him to come up with the idea of building the community centre so it linked the existing library and senior citizens centre – creating a hub for the town.

Initially, he was a lone voice, but with determination and intestinal fortitude Neville got the project across the line. AND at no cost to Mataura ratepayers – the \$1.3million building was fully funded by grants and donations.

At the community centre's opening, Neville's contribution was acknowledged by many speakers. Community Trust of Southland board member Wayne Harpur, who was born in Mataura and retains close family ties with the town, noted that every project needed a person with a strong character and steely resolved - "Neville, thank you for being that person".

Another controversial project Neville took under his wing was the new Welcome To signs at Mataura. After 19 years of being a political football, the first sign was finally erected last December. However, the signs remain a focal point for discussion and, at times, criticism.

Neville is always the first to put his hand up if things aren't quite right and doesn't shy away from admitting he's made a mistake. But he also almost always ensures he has a solution and can show others there's a way forward.

The Future

Mataura has fallen on hard times lately, not immune to the pressures hitting many small rural communities throughout Aotearoa.

Where some may get despondent, Neville is quick to dismiss any thoughts of 'last man can turn out the lights'. He is on a mission to show that Mataura is a great place to live with affordable housing and some of the best facilities in the south.

And that's where the reimagining of Tulloch Park comes in. It's a project started in 2017 with the controversial closure of the local pool due to falling patronage and increased running and maintenance costs.

Since then, Neville has quietly worked away to help deliver a multi-purpose recreation hub for Mataura and the entire Gore District.

Tulloch Park is another example of Neville's ability to look long-term and put the interests of his community above all else.

He has had to deal with petitions and rhetoric from fellow elected members over the closure of the Mataura pool. Thankfully, since the ageing structure was demolished, people are starting to see what Neville saw years before.

A pump cycle track and modern playground, finished in 2019, will be joined by a splash pad (the only one south of Christchurch), basketball court and, new toilets and a changing room.

Mataura is certainly punching above its weight, as does the Gore District, with the facilities it offers. There's no doubt in Neville's mind the town is throwing off the shackles of its past. It's not the town made famous by Jon Gadsby over 40 years ago – although Neville is most definitely 'proud to be a scourer from Mataura'.

He has lived by the philosophy that whatever he's involved in – whether it's the fire brigade or ice sports (his other love) – he's not there for himself. Here's there for the community. In his opinion, anyone who serves the community for their benefit shouldn't be there.

Neville is acutely aware of the need to listen to residents and ratepayers, whether it's a public meeting or manning the BBQ at a Council event. He sees local government as the vehicle to deliver the best for communities.

That said, he is not afraid to question whether he is doing the right thing or if there's a better way.

Now semi-retired, Neville is revelling in spending more time immersed in all things local government and has no intentions of slowing down.

He still has a strong connection to ice sports, which is not surprising given he met his wife and was married on ice, and they competed together for many years. When the pair hung up their skates, Neville moved into the administrative side, holding leadership roles locally, provincially and nationally.

It was during his term as New Zealand Ice Skating Association president that he convinced the International Skating Union to hold its annual conference in Christchurch – the first and only time this has happened.

At a local level he has been involved in the development of three ice skating rinks in Gore. Add these to Neville's portfolio of achievements, and it's easy to see why he's renowned for taking projects he sees merit in and making them happen.

In closing, Neville has shown an unselfishness and willingness to affect change at all levels. He is as much at home talking footpaths and multi-million dollar infrastructure projects as he is operating at the highest level of diplomacy.

Every town needs a Neville.