

★ Francis Toko: A Day in the Life

Francis Toko has a career conversation with colleague Jean Ottley about his worldview, his work with young people and what he would say to non-Māori about working with Māori.

*Ko Tutamoe rāua ko Hikurangi ngā maunga
Ko Opanake rāua ko Waiapu ngā awa
Ko Mahuhu-Ki-Te-Rangi rāua ko Horouta ngā waka
Ko Ngāti Kaha rāua ko Ruataupare ki Tuparoa ngā hapū
Ko Ngāti Whātua rāua ko Ngāti Porou nga iwi
Ko Francis Toko rāua ko Heneriatta Toko (nee Terewi) oku matua
Ko Francis Toko ahau, nō reira tēnā koutou katoa.*



Kia ora Francis. Please describe your career path up to the present.

I have been working since I was 14. My first job when I wasn't working for my grandmother or my parents was paid work as a cleaner.

Tikanga runs in my veins, expressed through kapa haka. At a young age I auditioned for a theatre company and found myself touring overseas, performing in Europe and French Polynesia.

The overseas experience changed my perspective, it humbled me. I saw real poverty overseas and I appreciated then what my whānau had taught me. When I came back, I started a job as a youth worker, to help enforce change. I was an example of what a South Auckland kid looks like, at 16 years of age, travelling around the world.

I had been given an opportunity to be paid to do theatre and I took it. I wanted to show young people that if you're passionate about something, do it.

What was it like being a youth worker?

I worked for seven years with students in schools and community organisations in South Auckland and experienced the mindsets of our people in their raw form. I used to tell the trainee social workers there is no text book written about life, it's common sense that keeps you alive out there.

You're known as 'Koro'. How did you get that name?

I was first called Koro in high school as a third former at Penrose. I was one of a few in my kapa haka group at school who spoke Māori. So when we welcomed visitors to the school I used to sit with the head boy, who also spoke Māori, and a Māori dean. I became the leader of our kapa haka group by the time I reached the end of the fourth form.

I've always been seen as the old man.

How does careers work compare with youth work?

I started at Careers New Zealand in 2011. I still think of myself as a youth worker and through my youth worker eyes careers work is imperative. It is what informs young people in the life journey. Life has ups and downs and being a career worker I see myself at the hopeful end of

their journey. It's important not just to talk to the students and their influencers like teachers and community leaders – you have to talk to families too. Education starts at home.

What do you love about your careers work?

It's enjoyable and it's the longest job I've had in my life. My colleagues keep me here. As a youth worker you don't get emotionally involved. But at Careers New Zealand I've really fallen for my colleagues.

I also like the variety and that you can make a difference. It's about normalising career education in the home.

In our workshops with whānau we ask 'what is a career conversation?' People think it's complicated and then they find out they're already having career conversations – like asking your son or daughter 'what did you do at school?' It's giving that talk some structure; someone who cares is asking 'what do you want to do' and 'what are you doing now to get you there?'

What would you say to someone who is not Māori about working with Māori?

I would say to them find someone who is Māori to help guide them through the engagement process – making sure young people and their families are well equipped with the right information to make decisions for themselves. Culturally, there are huge differences but with support, guidance and understanding about the culture one should feel more comfortable when working alongside Māori. I don't believe in the idea of 'fake it till you make it'. Be sincere. It's about being honest. If you don't know, then ask.

When I kōrero Māori I tell people if you don't understand what I'm saying, listen to how I'm saying it. Tikanga is a process and it's important to ensure it's fulfilled. We welcome, and the other side responds. It takes two to tango.

So within the careers process allow for fluidity. It's like Te Reo Māori that is spoken differently depending on where you are.

What about your approach to careers work is a particularly Māori strength?

This proverb quoted by Sir Apirana Ngata changed my life when I was overseas:

*E tipu, e rea,
Mo ngā ra o tau ao;
Ko to ringa ki ngā rakau a te Pāhekeā
Hei ara mo to tinana,
Ko to ngākau ki ngā taonga a o tipuna Māori
Hei tikitiki mo to mähuna,
A, ko to wairua ki to Atua,
Nāna nei ngā mea katoa.*

*Grow up and thrive for the days destined to you
Your hands to the tools of the Pakeha to provide physical sustenance
Your heart to the treasures of your ancestors as a diadem for your brow
Your soul to God to whom all things belong*

To me this is about being resilient. It is saying 'above all, believe in yourself, because God believes in you.'

★ Francis Toko. Ngāti Whātua, Ngāti Porou. Kaitohutohu Whanaketanga Umanga -- Mana Rapuara Aotearoa - Career Development Consultant - Careers New Zealand.