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The Single Object: The wood planks that hid Polynesian students from the police



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Guest writer

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Graffiti on the benches of an Auckland school where Polynesian students hid from the police (Image: Haru Sameshima).

Nina Tonga searches for the hidden history of the Dawn Raids at an Auckland high school.

I hold Tip Top bread close to my heart. Not because it's my preferred loaf (not by far) but because it reminds me of my Uncle Neini, one of the first from my family to move to New Zealand in the late 1960s. Uncle Neini worked at Baker Boy factory and later the Tip Top factory and for years he provided free bread to our large extended family, driving all the way to Mount Wellington on his days off with boot loads to distribute. He was a quiet man and his bread drop-offs were more than weekly provisions – they reminded us of the values of work and sacrifice that underscore our sense of belonging.

In the late 1970s, at the height of the dawn raids, Uncle Neini opened his home to my parents and my brother so they could hide from immigration officials looking for my overstaying father. For months, my father commuted by bus from Blockhouse Bay to his job at Mullers, a refrigeration factory in Penrose. When he worked the night shift he paid a casual worker, who was a university student at the time, a small petrol fee to drop him off home in the early hours of the morning. Even a promotion to the planning office was no security from the officials. One day he was called down from the office and asked to translate for another Tongan co-worker who was being grilled by immigration officers, who had no idea that at the time he was also an overstayer. Afterwards he raced through the factory-floor to find my grandfather, who sat him down in the locker room and reminded him that they should focus on being 'good workers' before he led them both in prayer.

These stories of hiding, being found, being deported or, for the lucky ones, receiving their papers are collective memories held within our tight-knit circles. A few have found their way into mainstream publications. For example, the now well-known story of the Polynesian Panthers, and the emergence of leaders such as Will 'Ilohia, Tigilau Ness and Lupematasila Misatauveve Dr Melani Anae. Some testimonies have been entrusted to my colleagues in museums, such as the [harrowing story of the late Veimau Lepa](#), who ran across the motorway to escape police dogs during a morning raid in Epsom. When stories like these surface, they stand in for the many others that have yet to find speech or words on a page, for the voices that remain in our enduring recollection.

What heightens these stories, for me, is that they represent what must have felt like a shocking reversal of an almost open-door policy. New Zealand once welcomed Pacific Island migrants in order to meet the labour demands of its expanding manufacturing sector. Up until the 1970s, there was no systemic effort to monitor those who had overstayed their permits – adding to the conditions that encouraged overstaying. While some migrants were able to make enough money to cover their return airfares within the timeframe of their temporary visa, most could not. Rising living costs made it difficult to build enough savings within the three or sixth month visa, so many simply stayed on and kept working. While some employers were unaware of the status of their workers, others encouraged their workers to overstay their permits, in fear of losing valuable staff during a labour shortage.

Public resentment over the overstayers grew once the economy went into recession. Housing shortages and a fear of unemployment placed further pressure on authorities to act. On 13 March 1974, the Auckland Office of the Immigration Division launched their first series of night raids, targeting houses of Tongans living in Onehunga. Over the years to come, Tongans were to bear the brunt of the Dawn

Raid campaign. Numerous houses were raided in the operations that would start at 11pm and run until 3am; in one incident immigration officers and police dogs interrupted a prayer meeting of the Free Church of Tonga. As the raids continued across Auckland, approximately 80 people were arrested, including the minister of the Free Church of Tonga. Random passport checks also hit a new intensity – although they had been happening intermittently, and unofficially, since 1972 – as documented by Melani Anae in [Tangata o le Moana: New Zealand and the People of the Pacific](#). After eight days, a reprieve: Fraser Coleman, the minister of immigration, bowed to the outcry from churches, unions, political parties and community organisations. He halted the raids on 21 March.



Screenshot from Polynesian Panthers documentary (Image: NZOnScreen).

But then came Muldoon. He was elected in 1975, and in February 1976 the new prime minister launched a renewed campaign against overstayers. Again, the move was met by protest and criticism, prompting a stay of proceedings: overstayers were given until April to register with the Department of Labour in return for immunity from prosecution. Disappointed by the low registration numbers, the government felt obliged to pursue those who had not registered. In October, the task of pursuing overstayers was handed to police. And on Thursday 20 October, Auckland police launched 'Operation Pot Black', an intensive campaign of raids and random street checks. By that Sunday, Auckland police had stopped and interrogated more than 800 Pacific Island people and raided 200 houses.

Reaction to Operation Pot Black was swift and focused on the unfair targeting of Polynesians. At the time some likened it to the Gestapo tactics of Nazi Germany, according to Anae. Accounts of the police blitzes describe a climate of fear and uncertainty that affected whole communities and permeated all aspects of life. The checks could take place at any public or private space, and at any time of the day, without warning. Pacific people were accosted in pubs, at the bus stop, at work and even on the street. And checks also took place at school.

At Seddon High School (now Western Springs College Ngā Puna O Waiōrea) random immigration checks were a common occurrence even up until the early 1980s. During the Dawn Raid era, Seddon High School's student body was predominantly made up of Māori and Pacific students. It was one of the first schools to participate in the secondary schools' Polynesian Festival (now Polyfest) which began in 1976. The school embraced its Pacific identity through the ngatu (Tongan tapa) designs that adorned the school sign, and the front cover and pages of its school magazines in the late 1980s. This was a school that asserted pride in its Pacific communities at a time when fear and shame prevailed. Further, through quiet acts of activism, the school provided a haven for its students in the classroom.

Professor Welby Ings of the School and Art of Design at AUT was the technology teacher at Seddon High School at the time. In [his book](#) *Disobedient Teaching: Surviving and creating change in education* he recalls the checks that took place in his woodwork room.

Located across the road from Auckland Zoo, Seddon High School was built on an old quarry and landfill which made the land quite unstable. Most classrooms, including the woodwork room, were braced by poles that ran into the rock substrate. The woodwork room was not like a standard secondary school workshop: it had three large industrial tanner wood lathes, inherited from the school's relationship with Seddon Memorial Technical College (now AUT University). Underneath the first lathe was a trapdoor. It opened to a deep trough that had formed underneath the classroom as the land subsided and the old dump began to settle. While mostly used as a repository for sawdust that never quite made it to the bins, the deepening hole also served as a hiding place for Tongan students during random immigration checks.



Professor Welby Ings, of the School and Art of Design at AUT, was the technology teacher at Seddon High School during the 1980s (Image: supplied)

When immigration officers arrived at the school, often without notice, the receptionist would place a three-ring call to the classroom to let them know that the officials were on their way. The phone call would activate a system in the woodwork room where the students of concern would descend into the hole beneath the classroom through the trapdoor. True to *anga fakatonga* (the Tonga way), the girls went first, followed by the boys. As Ings told me, “if a sister was in the class, of course you got the sister hidden first”. To conceal the trapdoor, Ings instructed one of his female students to work on the wood lathe on ready-made pieces, kept on hand for this very purpose. Ings, a passionate teacher, strove for gender balance in his classroom – which came in handy when students were hiding. Officials, he wrote, “were never going to question a girl working on the wood lathe”. Typically, immigration officials would request the class roll, which would be deliberately left empty by teachers throughout the lesson, and marked only as students left class. About 10 minutes after the officers left, the office would ring again to signal the all-clear.

There was only a short distance between the office and the woodwork room – sometimes students didn’t have time to get through the trapdoor. In these instances, they would hide under one part of the large wood benches, a practice Ings believes was in existence before he arrived at the school. It’s likely that the knowledge of these practices, including the warning phone calls from the office reception, went largely unspoken. As Ings notes in his book, “nobody talked openly about what certain teachers were doing at this time”.

Unbeknownst to Ings, students who hid under those benches would often graffiti their names and the date they were hiding. These scrawled histories were brought to

his attention years later by a former student, who told him that students recorded their names and dates in case they happened to be taken away. Like many of their parents, these students would leave home for the day before dawn to secure a degree of safety, never knowing for sure that they would be able to return.

The old woodwork room was in use well into the 1990s, surviving a fire that damaged the trapdoor and led to a new floor being installed. The workshop was eventually demolished last year to make way for a new technology block, part of a major rebuild that replaced 80% of the classrooms. A grassy verge now marks the site of the original workshop, and the only remnants are three rimu planks of a workbench salvaged during the demolition by one of the art teachers. They're now kept in the principal's office. On the underside of the benches is an array of graffiti. It includes school pride ("Ponsonby Rugby League team 1980") and a cluster of names: Sam Afitu, Joseph Iuli, Oti Achong, Perry Mitchell. Some are in pairs: couples? "Joe + Helen" and "Oti + Tony". I'm told that there was also skinhead graffiti but it had recently been buffed off by a teacher.

Along with some of the names are notes. "Sam Afitu was hiding in here on the 11.08.80", reads one. Another reads: "Joseph Iuli was here too."

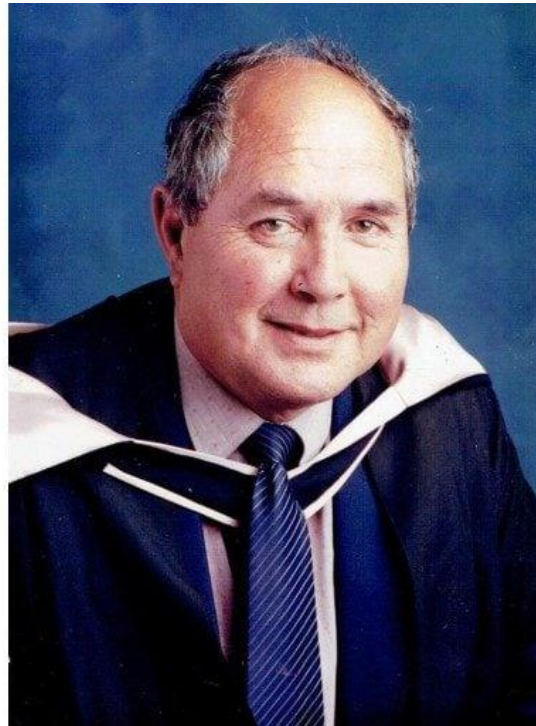


Graffiti on the benches of Seddon High School (now Western Springs College Ngā Puna O Waiōrea) from the 1980s (Image: Haru Sameshima).

The names aren't familiar to Ings, and he suggested that perhaps they were students from another class. Naturally, I took to the coconut wireless (the word-of-mouth network of Pacific Island communities in New Zealand and back home) and Facebook to try to track down Sam, Joseph, Oti and the rest. But to no avail. While I can't be sure if these students were hiding under the same circumstances as the Tongan students in Ings' class, or if they were just wagging class, their names confirm that this classroom was a refuge of sorts for Pacific students.

Beyond the woodwork room, the school in general was a sanctuary. Ings' effort in the workshop was echoed by the activism of several teachers at Seddon High School who knowingly broke the law to protect their students. In reflecting on this history, many of the staff, both past and present, mentioned a Tongan teacher, Karl Tui.

Initially the name didn't ring any bells with me – until someone mentioned his surname had been shortened. Karl Tu'inukuafe was a well-known educator and Tongan community leader who taught at Seddon High School for more than 20 years. Now in his eighties, Tu'inukuafe has rarely spoken about this period of his teaching career. For some time he was the only Pacific teacher at Seddon High School, and his colleagues in the Māori department assisted his efforts to protect students. One night, Tu'inukuafe hid 20 Tongan students in the sleepout at the back of his Devonport home. The sleepout was guarded by his "savage dog" that successfully deterred the police from looking further, he told me. He then was faced with the problem of getting the students to school the next morning. Luckily, he often used his trusty Holden to transport the school's sports teams, which helped this particular ride go unnoticed.



Karl Tu'inukuafe taught at Seddon High School for more than 20 years (Image: supplied).

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When I asked what compelled him to take such risks, he replied simply "my faith". In total, Tu'inukuafe and his family had their home raided nine times.

In speaking with Ings and Tu'inukuafe, I am reminded of the lasting impact teachers still make in the lives of their students. Their impulse to act and to protect comes from their shared sense of responsibility, and from a place of love. I would describe their actions as heroic, although that is not a word that Ings or Tu'inukuafe would readily use about themselves. As Ings writes in his book, "it was the nature of love. It is what happens when people trust other people, when they work together in worlds without maps and where humanity and passion are a normal and committed part of learning together. Such things are transformative."

These teachers were transformative. They taught beyond their own curriculum and instilled in their students the understanding that humanity and love could persist even in the darkest of times. These rimu planks are a taonga, those few tagged names standing in for many that are not written or recorded. They symbolise the selfless acts of teachers and staff who acted out of love and hope for a future transformed by those they sought to protect.