



Mind-shift essential in resetting New Zealand's housing system

For 38 years Monte Cecilia Housing Trust has been a voice for housing justice. Now, with the housing crisis worsening it's more important than ever that people and the government listen to what they're saying.

Bernie Smith finds it hard to believe how high the number of calls for help has jumped since the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in New Zealand.

"The need was always there, but it's now gotten out of hand," the Monte Cecilia Housing Trust CEO says.

Before the pandemic, the Auckland-based Trust would receive about 20-30 calls on a busy week but is now seeing that every day.

A recent count of the families going through the application process made for sobering reading, far exceeding Monte's 'normal' capacity. The Trust had 127 families allocated to a social worker and in the process of being assessed; another 196 families were waiting to be allocated to a social worker and a further 140 families were approved for housing but didn't have housing to go to.

"There are 463 families who have called us experiencing a housing crisis. They could be in a car park, an overcrowded house or they could be about to be evicted. And we're just one organisation of many across New Zealand. That blows me away."

It's grim, and the strain of that can tell on staff, Bernie says. They find it helps to dwell on the good stories, such as a daughter of one of the families they helped going to the University of Otago to study medicine. Another young woman successfully escaped an abusive relationship, and

another single mother with two children was helped through transitional housing and into a job, where she has been performing exceptionally well.

Although housing issues are nothing new for New Zealand, Bernie says the scale of today's problem certainly is.

Monte Cecilia's vision is simple: everyone should have access to adequate, affordable and secure housing. The Trust provides emergency supported housing for up to 12 weeks to families who are homeless or have a serious housing need. While they are housed, the families take part in residential programmes while Monte assists them into long-term social housing or an affordable rental.

The Trust's efforts began nearly 40 years ago when the Sisters of Mercy, the Marist Brothers, and St Vincent de Paul recognised there was a need for housing justice "long before any government did," Bernie says.

The Trust had managed and owned homes before, and in 2007 took the opportunity to purchase six affordable rentals (four in West Auckland and two in South Auckland). It was able to combine

government financial support (through the Housing Innovation Fund and the Social Housing Unit), with philanthropic donations and grants. More purchases followed including seven homes on land gifted by one of Monte's trustees. Monte wanted to be part of the long-term solution and became a "class 1 registered social landlord" as well as an accredited social services provider.

Many of the families were able to find a private rental that they could sustain, using the skills and resilience that they had gained whilst being supported by the Trust.

But those times are gone. Market rents have outstripped many people's ability to afford them.

"In 2016, market rent, policies and 30 years of inaction caught up with the country," Bernie says. "Now there's nowhere to go because there's no such thing as an affordable rental for low-income families in New Zealand."

Indeed, more and more people are increasingly forced into overcrowded situations, caravan parks, boarding houses and unsuitable structures such as garages.

Sister Mary Foy, one of the original founders of Monte Cecilia House, says while need has increased overwhelmingly in recent years, it has always been there.

She recalls that it was in the early 1970s when original founders, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, first experienced people coming to their office wanting somewhere to live. With no residential tenancy legislation Sister Mary says people living in terrible rundown accommodation in Grey Lynn and Ponsonby and surrounding areas were at the mercy

of landlords who had total freedom in how they treated them.

"They could just evict tenants without any legal reason. Sometimes families would come home at night and all their belongings- fridges and everything - would be on the street, locks would be changed, with no conversation about it at all".

Unable to find them accommodation St Vincent de Paul went to the Catholic Bishop of Auckland who gave them the use of Pah Homestead, a big old 1880s manor house. Eight homeless families with three Sisters of Mercy and two Marist Brothers were the first live-in community. That was 1982 and the Sisters of Mercy, including Sister Mary, and a Marist Brother John, were invited to do the day-to-day administration.



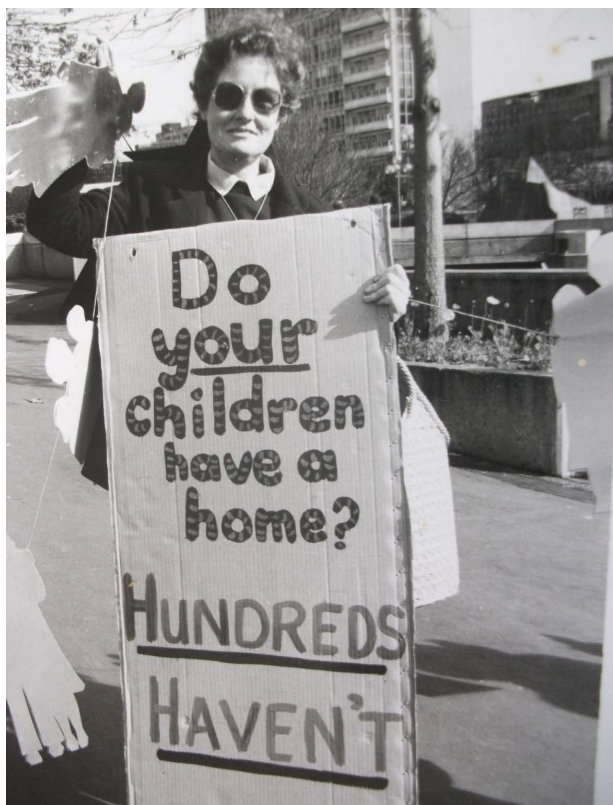
Moving in day 1982. The Sisters of Mercy and the Marist Brothers at the Pah Homestead

Sister Mary recalls the difficulties families faced: One mother with her daughter standing next to her as she made phone call after phone call seeking housing and the child saying "Mummy, don't they want us to have a house?"

By 1987 the Residential Tenancies Act had been passed but housing need continued to grow. Housing and community agencies, churches, St Vincent de Paul Society members all over the city had families approaching them for housing assistance.

“It’s much more complex now but the reality is still the same: there wasn’t enough affordable housing in the whole country,” she says. “The issue always was that everyone has a right to a home, a safe, secure, healthy home to live in and that philosophy has driven Monte all those years.”

Sister Mary soon became an advocate for housing, getting more involved in the justice issues as well as managing the service.



*Sister Mary Foy in Aotearoa Square, Auckland.
Late 1980s*

“We began educating people. In fact, we used to have seminars where we told local residents about the right of every person to have adequate housing. We had good MPs around us: Phil Goff our local MP, Helen Clark in the neighbouring electorate of Mt Albert and Richard Northey in Onehunga.

They were all committed around the issue of homelessness - or serious housing need - as it was called. Both Phil and Helen became Ministers of Housing and they introduced useful policies.”

“I was with a group of courageous housing workers and together we were very active and creative. We organised protests and demonstrations leading to face to face meetings with Ministers to get our message out there at all levels of society” she says. “There weren’t a lot of organisations doing social services in those early days and they were mainly church-based. We had to stick our necks out to get our message heard”.

“We really are all about justice - that’s just inbuilt in me.”

Sister Mary says treating each person with respect and compassion was built into the organisation so housing justice was a natural fit. In fact, whakawhanaungatanga - right relationship – incorporating “courageous justice” is one of the central tenets – a founding value of the Trust.

A significant action taken by housing workers nationally at that time was initiating a movement to put the right to housing into legislation. Shelter For All was formed and members worked together for a statutory obligation to the homeless.

“I just utterly believe that for every person a basic human right is to have a safe, secure, affordable house to live in. That is the fundamental aim of the Trust.”

“That courageous justice element is the part of Monte Cecilia’s DNA that drives it as an organisation to speak out and have a view on things, and to act,” Community Housing Aotearoa manager of engagement and support David Zussman says. “I think the organisation has had that right from the beginning.”

In 2019 Monte Cecilia Housing Trust was finally able to deliver on its goal to replace the shared facility model of emergency housing with self-contained accommodation. The Windrush Close site was completely redeveloped with 30 new two-bedroom apartments alongside an office and a flexible space for meetings, education and training. Once again this was achieved with a unique partnership between the Trust, government and philanthropists all coming together with a shared goal.

Monte Cecilia is currently leasing homes through Kāinga Ora and from private landlords, but there is now planning to start building again. In total the Trust is responsible for providing homes for 2200 whanau / individuals across 470 properties. It takes its responsibility as a community housing landlord seriously.

“We have a good relationship with our tenants, they know who we are, we’re not only having contact with them when something goes wrong,” Bernie Smith says.

As for the reasons for the housing crisis, Bernie says there is no single thing to blame.

“This is an accumulation of 30 years of inaction by whichever party – I don’t think anyone can claim innocence,” he says. “I don’t think we can keep throwing money at one end and hope the other end sorts itself out; I don’t think this government can build us out of this crisis. We are tens of thousands of houses short across the nation.

“We should all be building homes, but the levers aren’t there for us to be able to do it.”

He supports a strategy that looks at the whole housing continuum, from chronic homelessness to home ownership, including a cross-party 15-25 year housing strategy, something that will persist beyond a three, six, or even nine-year political term.



The Prime Minister alongside Sister Mary Foy and CEO Bernie Smith open the redeveloped Windrush Close site with 30 new apartments and office and training facilities. 2019.

“That’s the biggie. If we can nail that to the flagpole then everyone has got something to work towards and there’s a commitment,” he says. “It gives industry and trade certainty in the sense of how many apprentices to take on, how big to become and what sort of infrastructure needs to occur to fit in with the strategic plan’.

“The biggest gap at the moment is affordability in the middle,” he says. “There’s a hell of a lot of focus on crisis intervention and believing that every New Zealander should own their own home, but some people are more than happy to rent as long as they can get some security of tenure.”

That’s often one of the core issues when it comes to housing, he says. “If you’re a good tenant you clean up the gardens and house a bit and the landlord thinks ‘This is nice, I’ll put it on the market’.”

“I think we as a country fail to think about the fact that the government can’t resolve this issue,” he says. “It’s easy to blame them and have an expectation they’ll fix it, but it’s something we all need to solve together to have a social conscience and be a part of making generational change for every tenant. New Zealand is the solution.”