

The award-winning 3 News anchor and foreign correspondent looks back at life on the front lines here and abroad

Mike McRoberts

“I remember...

...being the only Maori kid in my class.

My father was Maori, my mother was Pakeha and my two brothers, sister and I lived in a Pakeha world in Christchurch. Once Mum dressed my brothers and me in matching outfits – shorts, shirts, bow ties – and marched us around the neighbourhood before we travelled up to Dad's hometown of Wairoa. There were my cousins in shorts and singlets; we were quite alien, and those bow ties were off pretty quick. My parents were 18 when they had me. They had difficulties; money

was tight and sometimes they'd both work two labouring jobs. Now, as a parent, I appreciate the great job they did.

...starting off as a general dogsbody at Radio New Zealand (RNZ). As a cadet, I delivered the mail and relabelled cassettes. Desperate to become a reporter, I tried out for a DJ slot on ZM radio station, but the programme director told me I didn't have the voice or the personality. It was shattering. I struggled with confidence early on in TV, too, feeling uncertain and inadequate. There was a hell of a lot of fake-it-'til-you-make-it, and perseverance.



Left: Mike McRoberts grew up in Christchurch; below: McRoberts and cameraman Cameron Williams in Niger last year

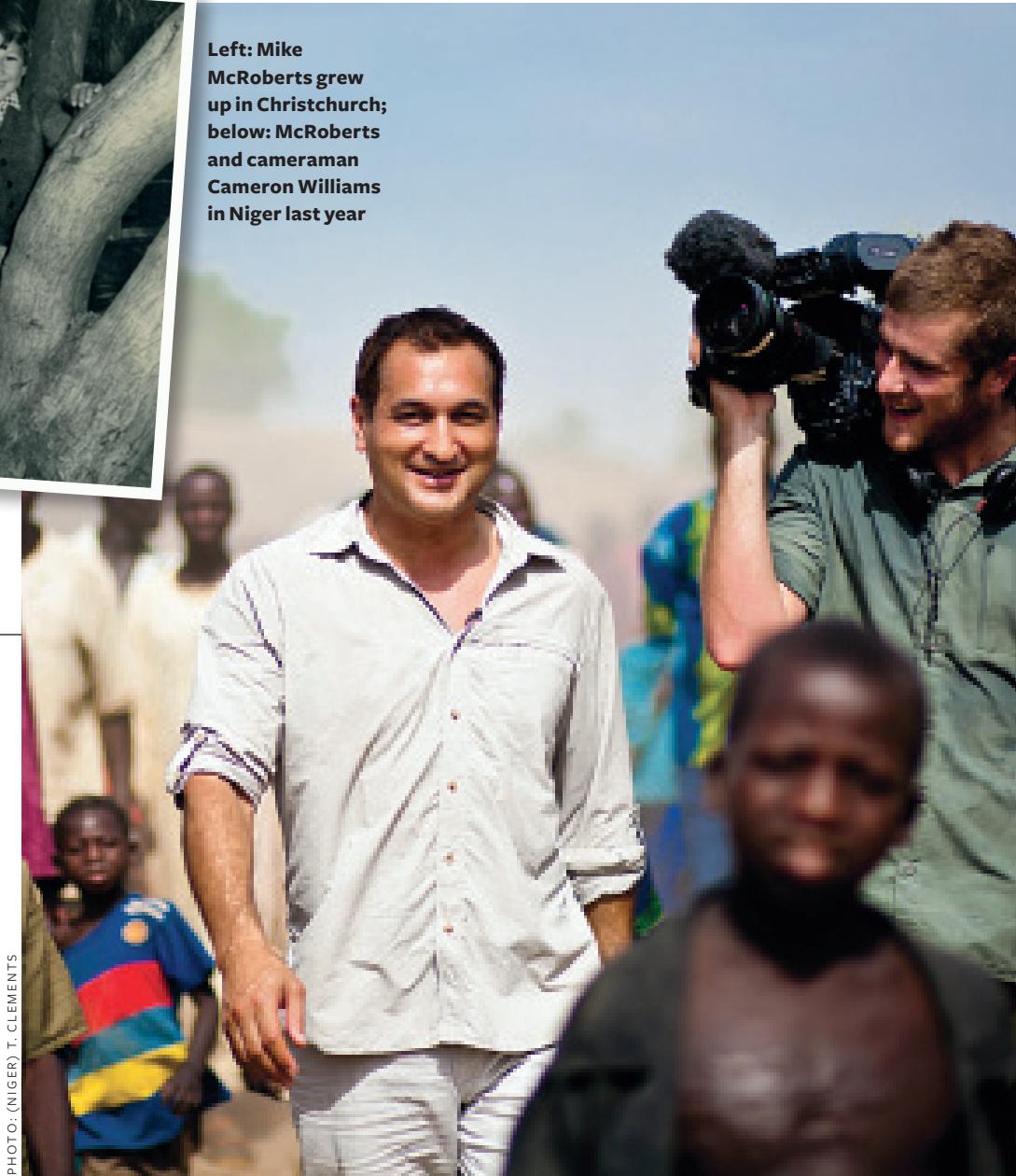


PHOTO: (NIGER) T. CLEMENTS

...meeting my wife Paula [Penfold] over the printer in RNZ's Christchurch newsroom. She was new; I walked with her down to the cop shop for a press conference that first morning. We were engaged within two months. I was running the sports department then, with a good profile, a company car, and the money wasn't bad. But I'd drifted away from why I'd got into journalism: to tell compelling stories, people's stories. Watching Paula work on big news stories renewed my interest in journalism.

...that urge to cover a story. There's a moment when I think, *Yep, I've got to go*. It can be hard, though. In 2001, Paula told me she was pregnant with our second child days before I left for Pakistan and Afghanistan. I was a wreck. Once, I went on foreign assignment three Christmas holidays in a row. That's tough for my family. I sit the kids down and explain why I need to be there.

...my first time reading the news. I felt sick to my stomach. Luckily, a friend had given me pop quizzes on world leaders' names – you can imagine his amusement when I had

Combine adrenalin, stress, uncertainty, travel, deadlines, lack of food or water, not sleeping properly

to pronounce Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's name in that first bulletin. Thankfully, I got it right.

...first seeing my face on the back of a bus. I'd just stepped out of a fish-and-chips shop in shorts and a singlet, with my then preschool children. This giant ad showed Hilary Barry and I in the studio looking very "Ken and Barbie". It was such a juxtaposition to normal life. For a few weeks my kids and I had a bit of fun driving around Auckland to see who could spot me on a bus first.

...worrying I'd get stuck reading an autocue. But TV3 honoured its commitment to get me out in the field. It's been tremendous. Sure, it's pressured: the trips are shorter, and you've got to get organisation and timing right, which is always a gamble. Like, I've been looking at going to Libya all year, knowing it'd take two to three days, then in August, wham, it's all over. But then there's the buzz of those times you get it right, like in Afghanistan in 2001, when we worked out when the Americans might attack and were in the thick of it as it unfolded.

PHOTOS: (FAMILY) BEN WATSON



Top: Mike's parents, of whom he says he's "a pretty good mix". Bottom: With wife Paula, son Ben, daughter Maia, and Manu the family dog

I'm doing it, so it'll be nice for them to read about all those times I was away. And I wanted to get these stories down before I forget them. It was hard deciding what to leave out, but I've written about my time covering local stories, as well as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, the Solomon Islands, East Timor, Pakistan, China, Haiti, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Japan, Zimbabwe, Burma, Bangkok, South Africa, Niger, Uganda, Tanzania. As I wrote, I felt all the emotions from back then welling up again.

...the physical toll trips take on me. Combine adrenalin, stress, uncertainty, travel, deadlines, lack of food or water, not sleeping properly... During Iraq's 2005 elections, when I couldn't sleep because of gunfire and mortar rounds, I started chain-smoking and got a bronchial infection.

...nearly missing deadlines from afar. There's the pressure of constant work, editing, then you have a technical problem and finally sort it ten seconds before you go on air; you're so stressed. Once a story went to air with my narration but no other sound – it was gutting. I've never had an FTD (failed to deliver), though I've come close often. While covering the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in March, we couldn't

find an internet connection – all the shops were closed. Finally we found somewhere and I didn't take much notice of our location until cameraman Billy looked up and said, “Are we where I think we are?” We were in a Japanese porn-video store, surrounded by images of scantily-dressed or naked women. We managed to get everything sent just in time for the news.

...sharing a room with my producer, Stephen Davis, in Iraq. Stephen liked to sleep naked. On the morning of the first US air strike against Iraq, he jumped out of bed, flicked on the TV and I woke to find him standing over me with the remote control, yelling something about the TV. Unavoidably, it wasn't the TV I was staring at. I said, “Jesus, war better have broken out.” It had.

...some close shaves. Like getting caught between an angry mob and riot police in Afghanistan. When a tear-gas canister was fired directly behind me, not seeing what it was, I flinched, ducked, and then rolled my body back through the riot police. My incredibly courageous cameraman Dutchie never flinched and got it all on tape.

Once I woke up in Iraq to find bullet holes beneath me; another time I went on night sniper patrol with US marines in Baghdad. Thankfully no-one fired at us. I pride myself on weighing up risk against danger, but that was a ridiculous risk to take. Since I've had kids, my risk assessment is the same, but how I relate to the story, especially when children are involved, is different.

Right: Reporting on the earthquake in Christchurch. Below right: McRoberts and Chedna in Haiti last year

...assisting Chedna. While covering the 2010 Haiti earthquake, we found an orphaned five-year-old girl at a relief camp with a badly broken arm and a gaping, infected leg wound the size of a cricket ball. She screamed when the medic, with no pain relief available, tried cleaning it with a scalpel. If she wasn't operated on that day, she may have lost her leg or even her life. But no-one had a vehicle to get her to hospital, and we did, so we stepped in. Throughout the consultation, Chedna wouldn't let go of my hand. Afterwards, she asked if I wanted to be her dad. I had to tell her I couldn't be, but she gave me a kiss anyway. I'm choking up just thinking about it. Surgery was successful and Chedna was later released to her aunt. I think about Chedna often. I've tried to track her down, to no avail. I would dearly love to see her again, if only to know she's OK.

...being criticised by a gossip columnist for putting myself helping Chedna into a TV3 story. I found being called “the Brown Jesus” incredibly offensive. When I got home, my then seven-year-old, Maia, gave me a big hug and thanked me for “helping that little girl”. That put everything into perspective. I have absolutely no regrets about that. Haiti wasn't the first time I intervened in a crisis, and it won't be the last. I'm a human being first and a journalist second.



PHOTOS: (HAITI) M. LACOSTE;
(CHRISTCHURCH) GEORGE KUEK

...freaking out after covering that first September earthquake. It was more than an assignment to me: it's Christchurch, my hometown, and I didn't really deal with my feelings about it. Usually I can keep my two worlds of home and work quite separate, but here they collided. I didn't feel as though I'd covered the earthquake well enough, and looked at possibly changing careers.

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Then the February earthquake came. I knew straight away that, given the time of day, it'd be bad. I felt utterly nauseous, trying to get hold of friends and family while packing my bags. To me, Christchurch is the most important story I've covered: it's so personal and so New Zealand. I'll always remember the moment 200 rescue workers arrived for the memorial service, their uniforms still dusty, and 100,000 people gave a standing ovation. It's emotional just thinking about it. I've never been more proud to be a New Zealander.

...thinking the NZ passport is the best passport in the world. Because New Zealanders have such a great reputation abroad. Once, we were filming in Lebanon when men from the militant group Hezbollah jumped out of a Range Rover and bundled us in the back. At first, I wasn't keen on handing over all our money, and had a brief scuffle with one man before I came to my senses. The tension eased when they realised



A reflective moment at the Pike River memorial service in Greymouth for the 29 dead miners

we were New Zealanders. They returned our money, told us the safest route back to Beirut, kissed us all on the cheeks and we were gone.

...wondering, *Why do I do this again?*

I thought that during a 12-hour drive to Northern Uganda. The frustrations of travelling are hard enough as a tourist, let alone when you've got TV gear and deadlines. But I consider it a real privilege to do what I do, to meet people with tough lives and tell their stories.

...breaking down. Usually I'm pretty calm, but once in Baghdad, when two soldiers stopped a man from taking his daughter to a doctor, I started screaming obscenities at the soldiers. Eventually they let them through and I sat down and wept. Sometimes I do feel despondent about the world: not so much with natural disasters but with

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man-made wars and conflicts. You wonder, *How does it keep happening, what lessons do we learn?* I've never been that disturbed by bodies; I'm more disturbed by the welfare of the survivors, whether they're living in appalling conditions or are injured and can't get help. It helps that I'm naturally an optimistic person. I remind myself I'm part of an international body of work putting pressure on warring parties or regimes to change.

...being constantly amazed by the kindness of strangers. I can't count the number of times people have put themselves out for me, helped me, opened their homes to me. Like in that Iraq riot: I was separated from my crew, coughing, my eyes streaming from tear-gas, when a man led me away, poured water on my face and offered me some salt crystals to suck. Or in Christchurch, when someone who didn't have power somehow made me a cup of tea. Little things that make a big difference. ■

As told to Sarah Lang

PHOTO: G. FINDLAY

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AN EXTRACT FROM:

BEYOND THE FRONT LINE

by Mike McRoberts (HarperCollins, \$39.99)

The relationship between the public and the media can often be very strained in times of crisis, particularly when the crisis is in our own backyard.

Journalists are not held in especially high regard at the best of times, but in situations where there has been loss of life and devastation on such a large scale it is easy for the media to be seen as intrusive or insensitive. By and large that did not happen with the Christchurch earthquake; if anything, it was quite the reverse. I believe that TV3's coverage of the earthquake and its aftermath was done with considerable compassion and sensitivity. I think many of our viewers also understood that our Christchurch team was not only covering the event, they were very much living it as well.

Personally, I don't think I have ever received so much positive feedback about our work, and at the end of some long weeks that made all the difference. I remember one night finishing late – too late to get anything to eat – and stopping off at a dairy down Riccarton Road. I grabbed a couple of things, which probably came to around \$10 in total, and the Indian owner of the dairy point-blank refused to take my money.

Time and again I came across amazing stories of generosity and selflessness. Like Steve Hira, a man with two young children and a third on the way, who lived in one of the worst-affected areas: Aranui. When he realised after the earthquake that many in his community were struggling with no food, water or power, he went to his employer and asked to take some time off so he could help out. When his employer refused, he simply quit his job, gave back his firm's car, laptop and cellphone, and set to work. When I caught up with him, he was running a full-on food and household goods distribution centre out of Aranui Primary School, feeding thousands a day. Most of the food he was distributing had come from church groups and other communities in the North Island, arriving daily by the truckload.

When I asked him what he would do for a job when all this was over, the devout Christian said, "Something will turn up."

