



Kaye Parker and Cure Kids ambassadors:
Isabella Davies, Sophie Newbold and Dan McKay.

O Kaye

“You can’t sell research,” Kaye Parker was told in 2000. Now her charity Cure Kids raises \$4 million a year for research into illnesses killing Kiwi kids. SARAH LANG spends a weekend with the Queenstown dynamo.

PICTURES: GILBERT VAN REENEN



It's a fine Friday evening in Queenstown and Cure Kids CEO Kaye Parker is pacing around the ladies loos atop the Skyline gondola complex. She pauses beside the mirror to address her reflection, trying out different sentences for effect. After a few minutes she breathes in deeply, reapplies a trademark slash of blood-red lipstick and darts out the door.

Despite being a seasoned public speaker at events for Cure Kids — her charity raising money for research into life-threatening childhood illnesses — Parker still gets pre-speech nerves. You'd never guess. The 50-year-old is short in stature but big on buoyancy, with sparkly blue eyes that dance with excitement.

Parker's MC-ing the launch of a Cure Kids fundraiser, the inaugural South Island Great Adventure Race. Thirteen corporate teams from Christchurch, Dunedin and Queenstown who've fund-raised and trained for months will run, trek, bike and swim through 45kms of spectacular local scenery (the larger North Island Great Adventure Race has been running four years already).

Out in the function room Parker approaches the lectern for one last run-through, but she knows most of the points by heart. Twenty thousand New Zealand children have a life-threatening illness; Cure Kids currently funds 21 research projects — and that figure's rising each year — to combat these diseases, and taking part in events such as this helps to raise the millions needed.

As the room fills with competitors, gazing through the giant window at the mountain ranges they'll be scaling on the morrow, Parker looks around for "my darlings". She's expecting three local Cure Kids ambassadors. There are 100 child ambassadors nationwide who attend events, make speeches, appear in video presentations and mentor other kids. They're the Cure Kids pulling power.

A little girl tossing thin blonde plaits bounds in ahead of her mum. Sophie Newbold is 11 but looks much younger. She suffers from cardio-facio-cutaneous (CFC) Syndrome, which stunts growth, weakens bones and causes heart problems. One of only 20 known sufferers worldwide, she has a hole in the heart, faulty heart valves, a large head, a spunky personality and a giant grin.

Ten-year-old Isabella Davies has a sweet smile and leukaemia diagnosed 18 months ago. She's one of the first New Zealand children to benefit from Cure Kids-funded technology that quickly pinpoints the type of leukaemia and the extent of genetic changes. Isabella immediately started on a personalised chemotherapy programme and is holding up well to the treatment.

A lanky lad in trademark teen super-baggy jeans and cap saunters in and hugs Parker. Fourteen-year-old Dan McKay suffers from Long QT Syndrome. Often a sufferer's first symptom is the last — their heart stops. But luckily, after Dan suffered a life-threatening blackout aged just 18 months, his heart condition was diagnosed.

Speech time. In a strong, warm voice, Parker introduces the three ambassadors, concentrating as much on their personalities and interests as their conditions.

Dan makes his seventh ambassadorial speech like a pro. "My

Home in Kelvin Heights offers a deck with astounding views of Lake Wakatipu.



pacemaker helps my heart maintain a normal rhythm and the medication I take prevents it from racing too fast. But in February this year I blacked out and gave everyone a real fright."

Because he'd grown very quickly, his pacemaker cord had shattered. "I waited in hospital for an operation to replace it. It was a pretty anxious time as I also had to stop my medication so I was at risk of my heart failing."

Dan continues: 50 per cent of his family, including his mother Trudi and her sister Sue, have the Long QT gene. His older brother Paul, a carrier, has passed it on to his baby son, cousin Lani has a defibrillator to zap her back to life, and two cousins died before the disease was diagnosed.

"It's such a waste because it's so easy to save lives just by identifying who has the gene and giving them life-saving medication," Dan says.

"It's cool Cure Kids has picked up the ball by funding a national screening programme. Thank you for giving your support to save the lives of kids like Isabella, Sophie and me. I'll see you at the finish line tomorrow!"

Throughout his speech, no-one moves a muscle and a burly bloke surreptitiously wipes his eyes.

Parker's back at the podium. "All of you here tonight have given our kids and families a message that they're not alone and you're prepared to get out there and help them. When it's tough tomorrow, when you're at the end of your physical endurance, remember what these kids go through and that you're champions for them."

Hauling out a giant green cheque, she announces the 13 teams have raised \$191,303.65, far exceeding the \$10,000-a-team expectation. With everyone revved up, it's time to head home for carbo loading and a decent kip.

Two men give up trying to squeeze the huge cheque into the gondola and pass it to Parker. Not going to take no for an answer, she shunts it in and sits down, bending it around her.

Spend a few hours with Parker and, as well as hearing "darling" a lot, you'll observe an iron will and wicked sense of humour. And that rare ability to make people want to help her charity.

Cure Kids is the face of the Child Health Research Foundation, established in 1971 to fund a child health chair at the University of Auckland. In 1990 it expanded to fund research into childhood illnesses via a biennial grants round, bringing in money via donations and a share of third-party fundraisers such as Telethons

"Kaye's the only person I know who can just about take a vital organ out of your body without you knowing it. Imagine what she can do with a chequebook." — Aim Proximity chairman Bill Gianotti

and Red Nose Day. By the late 1990s it was raising a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year. Not a bad effort, but not all that much money to dole out either.

Enter Kaye Parker, former advertising strategy director. Joining the foundation as marketing manager in June 2000, her first move was rebranding it as the snappier Cure Kids. She took the CEO mantle in 2002 and has driven dramatic growth ever since, in 2006 raising \$4 million and funding 21 research initiatives. In 2007 it's projected Cure Kids will raise \$4.5 million to fund 25 research projects.

Early on, someone who struggled to raise money for the charity — Parker prefers not to say who — told her research couldn't be sold. She disagreed, "because I really got what Cure Kids was and had a vision of what it could be. But it needed a different strategy".

"With Daffodil Day, people know immediately what they're giving to but you can't go out on the street and say, 'Please give money to research'. Cure Kids takes more than 30 seconds to explain. That's when I first thought, how do we do this? We needed to partner companies — well-run, organised companies with a lot of staff — and we needed events for them to get involved in that would make them passionate about the cause."

Parker won't divulge her salary but says it is "a substantial drop" from previous jobs. So why take this on?

"People always ask if I had a sick child or knew one, but I didn't. My three kids are all healthy blighters. My mum died of cancer at 50 but that didn't come into it. I just realised I had a chance to do something much bigger than myself."

First step was cold-calling company directors asking for an appointment. The first was to BMW's managing director. "I told him I needed to see him, turned up and said, 'I can't go out of here without

a commitment for \$50,000. Now I'm going to give you a really good reason why you want to do it'." She got the cheque.

From then she always called first and turned up in person, tailoring her presentation and usually including a child's story on video. "The secret is to tell a compelling story about research we've already funded. Show how it's changed children's lives, then say, 'Look, we've got all these events your company can get something out of too'."

Hundreds of thousands of dollars now flood in via a corporate sponsorship programme. As well as buttressing Cure Kids financially, 10 "Key Partner" companies provide products, service, staff and business advice. And it's no coincidence who's on board — with Qantas providing flights, Accor Hotels accommodation and BMW vehicles, Parker covers many incidental costs. Eighteen "associate" companies supply goods, services and some funding and often participate in events. Quarterly newsletters, a comprehensive website, regular calls, emails and get-togethers keep them all in the loop.

Parker also invited celebrities to be ambassadors: Anton Oliver was first, joined by others including Jonah Lomu, Graham Henry and Philip Taturangi. Attending events, MC-ing, appearing on posters and spreading the Cure Kids word, they've been a vast profile boost.

Such is the Parker power that in the past two years Cure Kids' profile has ballooned to the point where companies now approach the charity to be involved. Corporates stage their own fundraising events such as boat regattas or golf tournaments and people pay thousands to attend.

Pre-Parker, the charity relied on being picked as the beneficiary of other organisations' events. Now not only is it picked more often, but

more importantly for the coffers Cure Kids stages eight event earners of its own.

The Cure Kids Great Adventure Race (CKGAR) is one of many Parker brainwaves. Says friend and former National Radio journalist Jenny McLeod: "We were sitting in a cafe and Kaye started doodling on the back of an envelope. It turned out to be a gem."

It's 5.30am, Saturday, race morning and still pitch-black up at start-point on the Remarkables skifield, a sheltered basin framed by lofty peaks.

Parker's cleaning the complex's loos. She's been up since 4.15, hitching a ride up as she's loaned her car to a couple who've won a weekend in Queenstown through a Cure Kids auction.

At 6.15 nervous-looking competitors start arriving for the gear check. Most have never done anything like this before. Just after seven the sun peeks above the horizon and at 7.30 the exact course is announced, allowing teams an hour to huddle hunched over maps.

Just before race kickoff, Sophie arrives and she and Parker shout "Ready, Get set, Go!" over a loudspeaker system and 42 figures hare off up the hill.

By 12.30 Parker and staff have relocated to race HQ and finish-point, the Lakeland Park Christian Camp, and she's "running around like a flea in a fit" organising food for the troops in the bunkroom-turned-office-for-the-day, then dashing off to the finish line to deal with last-minute signage problems. Team KPMG supporters are helping to assemble shelters. "Could you do our end-of-year financials while you're there?" she quips.

At 1.30 Parker asks Dan, Isabella and Sophie if they want to come to the "two-thirds" stage, Jacks Point Track, to cheer on the teams

near the middle of the pack. They do. It's a 4WD drive then a short walk alongside a panorama of mountain ranges and Lake Wakatipu. The kids say they're not tired, but to keep spirits up she makes up a chant and gets them singing along. A steep dip materialises down a tussocky hill and Parker decides to go tumbling down. "Whee! Come on guys!" They shriek with laughter. "Kaye, you're mad," observes Sophie.

Shortly a lean, grinning figure materialises in the distance: it's Parker's lawyer husband Michael competing in The Not So Young and Not So Restless. Parker thought the team was further back. "Hello darling, I love you!" she calls, planting a big smacker on his lips. Michael's limping a little — after slipping on rocks he's got a nasty graze on his left thigh — but isn't fazed.

As the kids walk back, Isabella asks Sophie if she still likes her new "cool" hair. Sophie's hair was sparse and refused to grow long. She'd always dreamed of having long hair, so Cure Kids organised hair extensions.

Back at race HQ, Sophie's mother Bridget, Isabella's mother Janice and Dan's parents Trudi and Bruce sit chatting in the shade of a tree. Through events and regular get-togethers they've got to know one

Another bright bank bolsterer is the Add A Dollar campaign. Each October, when people make a purchase at five participating outlets (Briscoes, Life Pharmacy, Accor Hotels, Harvey Norman, Rebel Sport) they can add on a dollar. Last October 269,451 shoppers decided they wouldn't miss a dollar.

Parker has also adapted established or lapsed events for a "perfect fit" with the charity. "I'm a great pincher of ideas!" One she "nicked" is the Accor \$10 Race, originally a five-day race from Queenstown to Auckland and back raising money for a local trust. In 2003, noticing the race had lapsed, Parker asked to buy the rights for \$1 and handed over the requisite gold coin. Now every October, around 25 teams of two (with just \$10 to spend) race by any means possible from Auckland to Queenstown over three days. Competing for the champion fundraiser trophy, last year they raised \$260,000.

Before getting the go-ahead, all event proposals undergo thorough business appraisals. "Art in the Mountains" is another recently approved Parker brainwave. In September, 12 well-known artists including Grahame Sydney and Nicky Foreman will spend a weekend in Queenstown with 12 artlovers, who each pay \$6000 for the privilege



another well. Bridget tells the others how after Isabella started losing her hair, Sophie asked if she could give Isabella some of hers.

Just after 3pm the winning team bursts out of the bush. It's local adventure-sports retailer Outside Sports' entry, home in a time of six hours 38 minutes. Soon after, AJ Hackett Bungy Nevis pounds in to win the corporate division. The Not So Young and Not So Restless — by far the oldest team — finishes sixth of 13.

When the last groups jog in after 10 hours' racing, the cheers are just as loud. The kids hang medals around every neck.

Grace David, a member of AJ Hackett Bungy Kawarau which finishes 11th, bursts into tears after crossing the line. But it's not the shin splints or the tiredness — it's the emotion of finishing. "It was Sophie telling her story on a video that made me sign up. I couldn't begin to grasp what she'd been through and thought if she can deal with that, I can do this." Previously not particularly fit, David trained for five and a half months for this moment.

While the Great Adventure Race is Cure Kids' chief event earner — last year the North Island GAR raised \$630,000 — it's just one of many clever events Parker's dreamed up and brought to fruition.

and get to take home a piece of art produced over the weekend. That's another \$72,000.

Parker's also quick to snap up chance money-raising opportunities. Such as when she heard about woolly wonder Shrek and begged farmer John Perriam to let her auction off his wool. She was stunned when it brought in \$55,000. Since then Shrek-starring events have topped that up to \$100,000.

And all that money goes where?

Cure Kids' current 21 research projects investigate everything from cot death, cancer and cystic fibrosis to more unconventional studies such as diagnosing common childhood infections via breath tests (thus avoiding further invasive and painful procedures on already-suffering children).

Gaining funding is a rigorous exercise. Meticulous applications are due by June, when Cure Kids' medical-scientific committee — eight top paediatric professors — choose 10 finalist proposals. Each professor researches one or two projects, seeks international referees' opinions and reports back to the committee, where after fierce debate they confidentially rate and rank each proposal on scientific merit and relevance to children's health.

Parker, who's there throughout to monitor the process, is the only one in the room without a science degree or two. "I'm not afraid to

ask the tough, dumb-blond questions when I'm not absolutely clear on something!" But as she elucidates key research initiatives, translating medical jargon into layman's terms, it's clear she's no science ditz.

One initiative Parker is particularly proud of supporting (since 2005) is a world-first screening programme for inherited cardiac disease. Study chief Dr Jon Skinner, a paediatric cardiologist at the Starship children's hospital in Auckland, says he "hadn't a hope in hell" of getting funding until Parker approached him, intrigued about his work, and asked what in an ideal world he'd like to do.

While screening for various inherited heart diseases, the programme most commonly detects Long QT Syndrome (which Dan's family suffers). Pathologists test the bodies of young sudden-death victims — of the genes showing up, roughly 50 per cent of family members will have the same condition. Most sufferers wouldn't find out otherwise, but once the condition is detected they can get medical treatment and have a relatively normal life.

Parker: "Research can be a lottery. Not everything will work. But sometimes it has a rip-roaring effect. And while it can take seven years for a study to bear fruit, that time span's lowering. We're

identify the gene FLNB, which impacts on skeleton development.

Last July Cure Kids announced it would invest \$1.25 million in the chair, matched by the government under the Partnerships for Excellence Programme. With the total sum invested, interest pays for the chair "in perpetuity".

Robertson, who's spoken at numerous Cure Kids events and competed in 2005's Great Adventure Race, is delighted someone will eventually step into his shoes. "Kaye's understanding of people makes it all happen. She gets how academics tick on one hand, corporates on the other, and she's a midwife to that relationship. I for one don't see corporates as huge, faceless monoliths now. I see human faces, caring faces."

Parker shares Cure Kids' Queenstown office, a modest room of six metres-by-three-metres, with South Island funding manager Josie Fitzgerald. Every three weeks she heads north to spend a few days with her seven staff at Cure Kids' HQ in Auckland's Eden Terrace.

They're expecting Parker up shortly and business development manager Mandy Mee is delighted: "When she's here everything we



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Lending support and raising spirits: (from left) the cheerleaders on Jacks Point Track, happy medal girl Sophie Newbold and the charity champ with running lawyer husband Michael.

picking top researchers working collaboratively internationally, who've already proven themselves and who'll take risks."

And by funding university chairs in child health research, Cure Kids also helps to keep key researchers in New Zealand. The University of Auckland's chair is held by cot-death expert Professor Ed Mitchell, Christchurch School of Medicine paediatrics head Professor Brian Darlow is the new Canterbury incumbent, and gifted paediatric geneticist Stephen Robertson has held Otago's chair since 2002.

In 2001 the straight-up researcher was finishing his PhD at Oxford in England and considering overseas positions when he answered a phone call from Parker. "I'd been having discussions with university bigwigs and found Kaye's style so refreshingly different: such a can-do style. If a barrier's there for no good reason, she'll get around or over it."

With the charity splitting costs 50/50 with the university, Robertson was offered not just a decent salary and office, but also lab facilities, staff and research funds. In 2003 he made landmark findings into congenital birth abnormalities and in 2004 collaborated with US researchers to

do becomes fun, even a run-of-the-mill meeting. Her enthusiasm's infectious."

As are other things. Around the office, "doing a Kaye" is doing something "a bit ditzzy" like trying to unlock the wrong car, or losing sunglasses. (Sure enough, over race weekend Parker loses another pair, exclaiming, as she often does, "Detail overwhelms me!")

With staff numbers rising, Parker can delegate much minutiae, leaving more time for strategic planning, and recently that's involved initiatives outside our islands.

In 2006, Cure Kids partnered Accor Hotels to supply resource-poor Fiji hospitals with basic medical equipment, lifesaving drugs, vaccinations and medical training from New Zealand paediatricians. Currently an Accor-raised \$275,000 is sitting in the bank in Fiji and Parker's working on a plan to maximise this money.

Back in October 2005, Parker secured Cure Kids' charity registration in the US. The vision for Cure Kids USA is an arm accessing US funding for top New Zealand researchers who partner their US colleagues in international research projects. In early May she flew to the US to meet both local researchers and US-based New Zealand scientists — intent on inviting some to join the Cure Kids USA board — and to begin applying to the US government for collaborative research funds.

Ask about her childhood and it's no surprise Parker's an entrepreneurial dynamo. After all, her father morphed himself from Depression-era baby into a successful businessman. In 1951 Hugh Morris co-founded the North Island grocery-store chain Shoprite and ran it for two decades.

Kaye was born in Tauranga in 1956, the second of three children, and when she was six the family moved to Auckland's North Shore. She remembers a happy, middle-class childhood. The Morris kids worked in the shop after school, stacking butter and fruit for a Crunchie a week.

"Dad taught us right from the beginning you must always work hard, and give back. For him there was no such word as 'can't' in the dictionary, and he instilled that in me." Mum Lyn was "the greatest mum and homemaker out" who did a lot of volunteer work.

Both Salvation Army Christians, they sent their offspring collecting for the cause and singing in children's choirs at local hospitals. After Lyn died of cancer in 1983, Morris donated the proceeds of his house to start a Salvation Army Fiji branch. Now 76 and happily remarried, Morris says his middle child was "a delight — full of joy right from the word go".

Though she was only average academically and at sports, Morris says he knew his daughter would achieve anything she set her mind to. "Kaye would always have a thought about how to do things better. And she could always get out of a situation with a glib tongue."

Her dad confirms that yes, one of her dreams was rolling ice creams in a milk bar, but on achieving it she quit after two weeks "rolling" in the heat.

At 19, the OE beckoned and from 1975 Parker spent two years intermittently travelling around Europe and working in London as PA, typist and chambermaid. One day, through a friend's parents, she met a woman who mentioned her student-lawyer son was a terrible typist and was thus struggling to turn in his papers. Parker, who had time to kill at her PA job, typed up some papers, and in 1977 returned home without meeting the beneficiary. A year later she opened a London-postmarked letter. "It said he'd become a barrister, thanked me for the typing, hoped the mail would get through to the Antipodean outpost and inquired after my grass hut."

Laughing, she dashed off a reply, then promptly forgot all about it. But the lawyer didn't and has her letter to this day. When she visited England in 1981 for a few months en route to the US, Michael waylaid her for a game of squash. She never made it to America — they were married within a year.

In London Parker's career took off — no degrees necessary — when she talked her way into a job as account director at marketing firm Rapp & Collins BBDO. After working in London for two years, the couple moved to Auckland in 1983.

Bill Gianotti, founder/executive chairman of marketing heavyweight Aim Proximity, met Parker while she was working for another firm and was so impressed he offered her a job working on new-business pitches (at what was then Aim Direct). She was soon strategy director.

Gianotti: "Kaye's the only person I know who can just about take a vital organ out of your body without you knowing it. Imagine what she can do with a chequebook."

Their working partnership spanned 12 years. "Kaye looks at things in a different way and says, 'Hey, we haven't thought about this'. And she doesn't just take — she knows how to give value to people, whether that's financial value or simply making people feel good about what they're doing."

In 1998 the Parkers were stressed. Juggling high-pressure Auckland jobs with parenting three kids approaching teenagerhood, they took a sabbatical in Queenstown and decided on a whim to move there. Kaye celebrated by throwing her cellphone into Lake Wakatipu. "We loved it, the kids loved it and we stayed."

Now most Queenstownians know both Parker and the charity. Toots and waves waylay her as she dashes around town. But knowing local movers and shakers isn't about being popular — Parker's perpetually asking for favours, whether it's borrowing their land, their premises or even getting the local bar to stump up for a post-race round of drinks.

Since shifting town the Parkers have lived in Kelvin Heights, a peninsula frilled by houses before trailing off into bush. Down a long, curving driveway, their two-level roomy, open-plan home looks over Lake Wakatipu to Queenstown central. The morning after race day, Parker's enjoying the view from the deck.

A good-looking lad with rumpled mop of dark hair comes lurching out of "the den", where five friends lay prostrate on bunks. Son James, 21, a classics and commerce student at Otago University, is home for the weekend's Shapeshifter concert.

All three children live away from home but return in the holidays. Katie, 19, has just begun at Massey University's School of Fine Arts in Wellington. Sixteen-year old Henry, who's just returned to boarding digs at Otago Boys High School, texts to tell Mum the hostel food's inedible and can she stump up for pizza. "He's the mischievous one — always trying it on," laughs Parker, who admits that of the three he's the most like her. She texts advising him to work on his pitch: "Think about what's going to make me say yes."

"He knows not to ask for a goodie box! I hate cooking — we live on takeaways. When I'm focused on something, keeping the house going falls by the wayside."

In early 2003, "consumed with guilt about going away again", Parker asked the family over dinner whether she should quit.

Says Michael, wandering on to the deck nursing a sore leg: "We all said, 'Absolutely not'. We're too proud of her."

Work's never nine-to-five. When events or deadlines loom Parker works 70- to 80-hour weeks. To bolster energy levels she exercises five days out of seven, mountainbiking with friends and taking early-morning mountain walks.

She's seldom sick, but occasionally does get exhausted. As she did in December, when after a hectic 2006 she desperately needed three-weeks' holiday so completely switched off from work, relaxed and recharged.

She emerged raring to go for this year, particularly looking forward to Cure Kids' regular Ticket To Hope getaways. Fifteen children, and one parent each, come to Queenstown for a "treat weekend". The kids — most have never flown or stayed in a hotel before — go jetboating, sailing, lugeing and more. (Sponsors cover all weekend costs.) Meanwhile the parents get pampered. "Some of them keep in touch. And it helps. How cool is that."

Parker has to regularly remind herself and the staff not to get too emotionally involved. "It's hard not to," she admits. "When I started I met some seriously sick kids, came home and balled my eyes out. I thought, 'I'm too soft!' then I said, 'Pull yourself together, Kaye, this isn't about you'."

When the worst happens and children die she takes her own advice to the staff. "I say, 'We can all cry but we're peripheral — imagine how the families feel. So, girls, we get out there tomorrow and we work harder and faster and smarter for those kids.'"

"Lives can be ticking along and in a second it's all changed. And not just for the sick child. Brothers and sisters have to put up with mum and dad being so focused on this child. Parents feel guilty, feel selfish, feel fed up at times and worry the child isn't going to make it. Add the financial hardship — often one parent has to give up a job, or they lose houses or businesses, marriages break up.

"My role is to make 20,000 New Zealand families feel they're not struggling by themselves. To let them know complete strangers are willing to pitch in to help get these kids better." ■