



SOCIETY HERO

KEN DOWNE

Cherie Kurarangi Sweeney: Ngaruawahia

Breaking a conspiracy of silence to champion the rights of vulnerable children.

Branded a “nark” for speaking to police about the death in April of her six-month-old next-door neighbour, Serenity Scott-Dinnington, Cherie Kurarangi Sweeney didn’t sit down and shut up, despite her home being tagged, her car scratched and her fence cut with a knife. “My husband chased some young guys away, yelling, ‘Leave us alone,’ ” she tells me over the phone from Ngaruawahia. “I felt very vulnerable. But I refused to feel victimised.”

Come May, she turned a derogatory label into a call for change by setting up N.A.R.K. (Nation of Advocates for the Rights of Kids) and organising two community hui to discuss child abuse. At one hui, she distributed

an anonymous questionnaire that suggested Ngaruawahia had a serious child-abuse problem – and that many felt too afraid or unsure to “nark”.

She didn’t stop there. Sitting in the local library – she didn’t have a computer or internet connection at home – she created Facebook page STOP Death by Abuse of Our Children, which racked up thousands of members within days.

N.A.R.K. has grown into a grassroots national movement and its website (www.nark.org.nz) provides tools for how to spot and respond to child abuse.

Its founder, who wants everyone who works with children to be trained to identify abuse, wants this same information made easily accessible to all, including those with no internet access. Her idea of slipping an information

sheet in with electoral enrolment forms was spurned. “I know these things cost money, but just as the environment is a concern for many voters, our children who aren’t old enough to vote should be a concern too.” (New Zealand’s child-abuse death rate is the fourth highest in the developed world.)

It’s been a busy year for her. In July, she was a VIP guest at the Auckland launch of the government’s green (discussion) paper on vulnerable children, standing next to Social Development Minister Paula Bennett. In September, through N.A.R.K., she organised an awareness-raising event that saw hundreds of soft toys (later donated to needy children) adorn war memorials countrywide. “Those soldiers fought so hard for our freedom, and these children are fighting a war in their homes every day.”

Next up? She’s excited but tight-lipped about a “life-changing” new N.A.R.K. project, and also wants to examine coroners’ reports of 120 young victims. “But I haven’t got a spare \$7500 to pay the Ministry of Justice.”

She’s been accused of trying to make money from babies’ deaths but not only is she funding N.A.R.K. herself, it’s got her into debt. After a diagnosis of epilepsy, which left her unable to drive, she was made redundant from her traffic-controller’s job in 2011; her husband’s lost his job too (and is helping N.A.R.K.). “We don’t know how we’ll pay the bills or the mortgage,” she says, crying quietly. “It takes a lot of energy, time and effort to keep this [N.A.R.K.] together, to keep me together, to keep going.” But whenever she considers stopping, she reminds herself why she’s doing this.

As a mother of two school-age daughters, and a son who died at age five in a freak drowning accident in 2008, she’s determined to speak for children who can’t speak for themselves. “I had no choice in my son’s death, but other parents do.”

The tremor in her voice disappears when I ask if we can prevent more needless deaths. “Absolutely. Awareness-raising, encouraging people to speak out, being nosy with your neighbours, caring, helping each other. We can do it, and that’s why I’m still here, fighting, today.”

SARAH LANG

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