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‘We have to live a little apart’

On Great Barrier Island, the nurses are the “keepers of secrets”, the witnesses to life, love and death in a small community. **photograph by STEPHEN ROBINSON**

On Great Barrier Island, there is no getting away from the Howies. Leonie is a nurse and Ivan a GP and marriage and funeral celebrant. They, along with nurse and midwife Adele Robertson, are the longest-serving members of the medical practice that provides cradle-to-grave care for the island’s 900 residents.

Leonie Howie and Adele Robertson have both lived and worked overseas and neither imagined they would end up on the Barrier, 100km north-east of Auckland, in the outer Hauraki Gulf. Now the women can’t imagine living anywhere else.

Robertson and her husband, Shannon, live at Port Fitzroy, an hour’s drive north of the Howies at Claris. Both women have seen their highs and lows: Robertson has delivered dozens of babies but didn’t have children of her own, and she has twice been diagnosed with cancer. Howie had two children but, from the day they were born, dreaded the time they would have to leave the island to further their education. Howie’s also nursed, buried and

mourned one of her closest friends.

The women collaborated on a memoir, *Island Nurses*, which opens with Hone Tuwhare’s 1963 poem *Tangi* – chosen by Howie, which ends: “But I heard her with the wind/crooning in the hung wires/and caught her beauty by the coffin/muted to a softer pain –/in the calm vigil of hands/in the green-leaved anguish/of the bowed heads/of old women.”

Why did you choose *Tangi*?

It’s from my favourite book of poems, *No Ordinary Sun*. I used that poem when I was working through the death of my friend, Jill. That was a watershed – that fusion of my professional and personal lives.

And tough times, too, when Adele got cancer?

Yes, she’s my partner in crime. But I got a lot of strength, because I realised that Adele needed to put all her energy into healing and I needed to put energy into keeping problems away from her so she could heal. That is what friends do for one another.

Is it good luck that you and Adele became friends or have you had to work on it?

We are very different people. We have different social circles, but this central knot of our friendship is based on our love of nursing and of community. Those are our passions; we share the same goal of the best service possible for the islanders.

On a small island, you must learn a lot of sensitive things about your neighbours, so what sort of a social life can you have?

It’s tricky. Our social life is our patients’, too. We are inclined to have a smaller social circle because we are the keepers of secrets, and we also want to be available to all of the islanders. What that means is not being part of any faction, living a little apart. A lot of my friendships have been based on my children and the parents of their friends. I was lucky in the early days to have this really tight-knit bunch of like-minded women who made me feel strong.

What brought you to Great Barrier?

I fell in love. If I wanted to be with Ivan, I had to be on the island. I was a rural girl so it was going back to my roots in a lot of respects. I would never have dreamt that I would live on Great Barrier Island once I hit the big lights of Auckland, but after I had a head injury, it helped me look at life and what’s important. It also helped me slow down and think, “This

Leonie Howie, left, with Adele Robertson: “The central knot of our friendship is our love of nursing and of community.”

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is going to be an amazing relationship.” Ivan had a great vision for the island’s healthcare. I wanted to be part of that. (By the time of Ivan Howie’s recent retirement, there were two GPs, and three more nurses, to work alongside Leonie and Adele.)

What is the hardest part of raising children on an island?

Raising them on the island is a dream come true, because the community looks after the children; we all look after each other. My children have someone we call their “other mother” – Cherie. Because I was working full-time, the children went to her after school and during the holidays. Cherie is this Amazon of a Barrier woman: she built her own house, she surfs and swims, her kids ride motorbikes and horses. My kids are really good at all these things I am lousy at. The only problem is this haunting thing looming of secondary school. Jordan was only 12 when he went to boarding school. I knew from when he was born that is the lot of Barrier children. In Form 2, you have to make a decision about where the kids will go. Ivan had been to Auckland Grammar, so Jordan went there. Amiria had left the year before. The separation was really difficult for all of us.

What about your own background and aspirations?

My waka is Tainui but I grew up near Dargaville. When Dad (Eddie Taylor) came back from the war, he bought a farm at Te Kopuru, near Dargaville. He married another local farmer’s daughter, my mother, Isabel. I’m from a family of four and I am the youngest. Every female relative was a nurse: Mum was a nurse, my grandmother, two of my cousins, and my dad wanted me to be a nurse.

Does being Maori help you in your nursing, or life generally on the island?



Howie: “Raising children on an island is a dream come true, because the community looks after the children.”

from the Howies. Ivan and I were at births with Adele, then at weddings and the funerals. When our daughter was at uni, she worked on the front desk. So no matter what you did, there was a Howie; people got all Howied out.

And what do you do when you’re all peopled out?

I put my hands in the soil. I love gardening. I love nature around the island, and I think that you need a break from giving out: you need to be able to retreat. We have a 10-acre block and I find that re-energises me. And I read.

What are some of your favourite reads?

Jenni Ogden is a neuropsychologist, a Kiwi, who happens to live on the island. She wrote two

“We are the keepers of secrets and we want to be available to all of the islanders.”

The tangata whenua on the island are Ngati Wai. I come from Tainui and historically, on the island, there have been differences. But I have found being Maori has been very helpful – the way that I understand the realms of birth and death and the privileges of life. For example, I understand the traditions of the tangi and on the island that is transferred to how funerals are run – understanding the importance of surrounding a grieving family with the love a community can offer.

Is it fair to say you’re never far from a Howie on Great Barrier?

Ivan’s taken a lot of the weddings and funerals on the island so there’s that whole thing of not being able to get away

books before her first novel, *A Drop in the Ocean*, which has won prizes in the US. It talks about mid-life transformations, and although it is a novel, it delves into deeper issues: connections with other humans, the natural world and the fragility of life. I love Patricia Grace’s book *Ned & Katina*. It is important to me because they were friends of my parents. The book is about Ned being in the Maori Battalion in Crete and being left behind on the island. He was unwell, and Katina rescued him. Her uncle was a doctor and her father was a priest, and it speaks of their whole life story. It just envelops me in the whole Maoriness of my roots up north. My father was on Crete, too. He was one of those who escaped, although he wasn’t in the Maori Battalion. I also love *A Fortunate Man* by John Berger – it looks at the roles of health professionals in a small community and what motivates us. And Monty Don’s *Around the World in 80 Gardens* is a favourite. The librarian on the island and I are both in love with Monty Don. Don’t tell Ivan! ■