

TRIBUTES TO NENA BENTON

[Extracted from “Requiem for Nena”, an account of her funeral for family and friends who were not able to be present personally at the ceremonies]

Before the final prayers, tributes were paid to Nena by six people who had a long or intense association with her and our family. Four of these were scheduled and two were not. Another person had prepared a tribute to read if the opportunity arose, and gave this to me after the mass. Because it deals with an important aspect of Nena’s life, I’ve included that here too.

[1. Poroporoaki / Farewell, from Hori Pirini]



Tena koutou katoa, ko taku mihi tuatahi ki te Atua, naana nei nga mea katoa, tuarua he mihi ki te whare hirahira e tu nei me Papatuanuku i waho ra. Ki te whakaminenga kua tae mai nei ki te mau mai te aroha mo to tatou whaea a Nena, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa.

Ki a koutou te whanau pani, Richard koutou ko Alan, ko James me nga tuahine a Nena tenei taku mihi aroha ki a koutou i runga i te tino pouritanga o te wa nei. Engari, ko te mea nui, kua mutu tana mamae, kua haere ke a Nena ki ona tupuna okioki ai, a, ma ratou ia e tiaki mo ake tonu atu.

It is a privilege and honour to address this hui today, and to share with you all some snippets of our adventures with Nena. As Office Administrator of the James Henare Maori Research Centre during Richard’s time as Director, I worked and lived side by side with Nena for some four years and in many ways life was an adventure for us all. Nena had a zest for life that made keeping up with her always a challenge.

To those of us who made up the James Henare whanau, Nena was mother, mentor, storyteller, ally, at times strict taskmaster, but always loving wife and partner to Richard. She was committed to helping Richard fulfil his many and varied responsibilities as Centre Director, and all the research work that he undertook. Nena worked tirelessly, and there were many times that we can recall where she and Richard worked long into the night and often some of us also, laboured on with them. Nena was a tireless taskmaster, seeking always to strive for thorough and robust academic research and urging us all to do likewise. We **all remember ‘coding’ and ‘coding’ and then there was ‘coding’!!**

We also remember Nena for her love of nature and the many horticultural activities she undertook. We especially remember the hectic build up to the ICEL conference in 2000, Nena’s work in co-ordinating that to its successful delivery, and especially the varied activities she included in the itinerary for conference participants. The permaculture exhibits, the worm farm, a visit to a Kohanga Reo,

and hands on raranga, to name but a few. Truly a memorable experience for our international visitors, made possible by Nena's commitment.

We remember that above all else Nena was a loving and caring wife to Richard and mother to her two sons Alan and James. We all got to know them quite well also.

We remember her begging or bullying her husband into eating, or taking a break when she thought he needed to.

We remember the care she took of them all.

We are grateful that we had the opportunity to spend time with Nena, to get to know her and that she shared of herself with us also.

We ask now that the Lord take her into his care and give her rest.

(Hori Pirini was Administrative Secretary of the James Henare Māori Research Centre at the University of Auckland when I was Director from late 1999 to the end of 2003. He is now the Boarding Facilitator at Hato Petera College, a Catholic Māori secondary school on Auckland's North Shore. He brought with him the six students who led the singing of the hymn which concluded this part of the proceedings.)

[2. Farewell to Nena, from Piripi Walker]



Farewell to Nena

Kua memenge ngā rau o ngā rākau, kua hangu ngā manu tangi ata o te mano whenua. Kua haea tenei te takere o te waka, ko te kuru tangiwai ia kua tākiritia i te taringa, ko tō tātou hoa tēnei a Nena kua moe ngā whatu, kua okioki i roto i ngā taimahatanga me ngā mamaetanga.

The leaves on the trees have shrivelled in grief, the birds of the deep forest of have fallen silent. The hull of the canoe is rent by the death of a mother, the greenstone pendant has been plucked from my ear. Our friend Nena has closed her eyes in the sleep of death, she is at rest from her labour and from her suffering.

Ecclesiasticus 4, 11-14 - WISDOM as an educator

Wisdom brings up her own sons
and cares for those who seek her.

Whoever loves her loves life.

Those who wait on her will be filled with happiness

Whoever holds her close will inherit honour

And wherever they walk the Lord will bless them

As a young and quite pestilential visitor to her family home, over a long period I owe a very large personal debt to the very hospitable and wonderful Nena.

I came to know Nena in my role as a member of the organisation Ngā Kaiwhakapumau i te Reo, the Wellington Maori Language Board. Like others, I and my wife Heather made immediate friends with her, swept up by vibrant personality; her hospitality and humour. She was a listener, a connector, a supporter, a quiet leader, who moved effortlessly across cultures and languages. Nena did not stint her time or interest, as a friend, as teacher, as an organiser, as a mentor to up and coming linguists.

Richard and Nena shared a visionary view of a just New Zealand society where Maori occupied the position of equals, where the language and culture regained strength to become a fully functioning modern language. Nena, alongside Richard in the old Mercedes, in the field, in the early bilingual schools, in kōhanga reo, was involved in every sector of the fight for the development of improved Māori education, of bilingual education, the provision of rights to use Maori as an official language, and progress for the language in the modern mass media. It is only right that Nena was farewelled on Wednesday on Te Upoko o Te Ika Radio in Wellington, a radio station she did much to bring into existence.

Nena's fight came directly from her deeply held Catholic faith. When she saw suffering, injustice and prejudice, her deep wells of her compassion demanded that action, real action, be taken.

It was not a politically popular programme, - it led eventually to direct action in the Courts against successive New Zealand Governments. The most difficult of all, the fight for Maori television, involved the taking of an injunction against the transfer of assets to a new corporatised broadcasting system which went in the end to the Privy Council. Direct involvement in these actions brought sacrifice and a high degree of professional risk, risk that Nena and Richard were prepared to take. For spearheading this long and tough fight your colleagues from Te Reo Maori Society and Ngā Kaiwhakapumau i Te Reo, salute you.

To the boys no doubt sometimes you felt you had to share your mother too much with the wider world. We are here to acknowledge that sharing, and say to you she was a great woman, who was very proud of you, and proud of you too Richard, her wonderful family. I wish to recognise and pay tribute to the marriage of Richard and Nena, a beacon of strength and hope, and the foundation of their loving family. Nena we wish to say we love you and we thank you, as we bid you farewell.

Nena demonstrated bravery and courage in her work in all spheres, not just te ao Maori, in her quest for social justice throughout her life, in the face of the tragic loss of Liam and Katrina, in her steadfastness in the face of her final illness. For Richard, James and Alan we feel deeply on this sad day. Kia kaha kia maia kia manawanui. Mā te Atua e kōkuhu mai he kaha, he māramatanga ki te ngakau.

During the hearings on the claim to the Waitangi Tribunal about the status and recognition of te reo Maori, Sir James Henare paused in his evidence and turned to the younger people who were working on the claim. He looked at us, ignoring

the Tribunal members briefly, with the look of a senior officer who needed to give some vital information to junior troops in the middle of a battle, and said:

“It’s not whether you win or lose that counts, but how you play the game.”

Nena played the game as it should be played.

(Piripi Walker is someone who has been involved in using our research from his student activist days—he and Andrew Robb both went on to have very successful careers in broadcasting and have remained friends of the family over the decades—they came up from Auckland together for the funeral and also came over to Waiheke for the burial)

[3. **Poroporoaki / Farewell**, from **Dr Ngapare Hopa**]



He Poroporoaki ki a Nena

Tenei, tenei manawa e hē nei (This, this heart misses a beat)

Kua tae nei ki te poututanga nui o Pipiri, ki te urunga tē taka (You have reached the zenith of Pipiri and the pillow of earth that never slips)

Ki te moenga tē whakarahia (And now lie in the resting place from which there is no rising)

Waiho ma te hunga i mahue i muri e whai atu i o tapuwae (Let those left behind follow in your footsteps).

I have been truly blessed in having Nena as an intellectual colleague, research fellow and friend, but more than this, to have been included and regarded as a member of her family has been high privilege indeed. My heart does miss a beat when I think of my loss – the loss of Nena’s friendship, collegiality and intellectual stimulus. I recall especially the Urban Disparities project which under her guidance a number of us worked on. Nena was an inspiration to all of us, but for myself she was the quintessential anthropologist. I’m reminded of an expression I once read that the voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes but in having new eyes. Nena gave me those.

But what I will remember most of all was her abiding belief in the ability to raise peoples’ aspirations for what they can become, and to release their energies so that they will try to get there. It remains ‘ma te hunga i mahue i muri e whai atu i o tapuwae’ (for those of us left behind to follow in her footsteps).

E kui, e Nena, haere ki te Putahi Nui a Rehua (Nena, go to the constellation of Stars)

Haere e kui ki tua o Paerau (Go to the land beyond)

Takoto i roto i te ringa kaha o Ihowa, nana i hunga i ngā mea katoa. Paimairire. (Rest in the hands of the Lord who made all things. Peace.)

(Professor Ngapare Hopa, who is an eminent Māori anthropologist, has been a friend of mine since my student days and a very close friend of Nena also since we met up with her again when we came to the Waikato in 1996. She was Professor of Māori Studies at the University of Auckland while I was Director of the James Henare research centre, and is now Director of the Tainui Endowed College in Hopuhopu, Waikato.)

(4. Farewell, from Alan Benton)



I am only going to say a few words today, but I do want to acknowledge in some small way that I can what Mum has meant to me. First, a verse or two from a song that I immediately reached for in order to dispel the urge to completely fall apart:

*And if the darkness is to keep us apart
And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off
And if your glass heart should crack
And for a second you turn back
Oh no, be strong*

*You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us has been
A place that has to be believed, to be seen
You could have flown away,
A singing bird in an open cage
Who will only fly, only fly, for freedom*

As the song says, Mum could have flown away many times before this. And when she did fly away, at 3:04am 11 seconds, a time indelibly etched in my mind, the first thing I did was reach for music. Music has the ability to do all sorts of things – to energises things and people around us, but also bringing much peace and happiness.

The abilities I gained over the years to be able to play several instruments is of course directly to do with the very encouraging way both my parents, but I think especially Mum, got me into music in the first place. Mum would be there at our music lessons, and for example she would even learn some of our violin pieces in order to help with the learning process. No better way at encouraging various activities I think than to become involved with what your children do I guess, and that's something Mum obviously took to heart. And she mentioned a mere one month back that she was particularly proud of the way I had stuck it out when it came to the musical side of my life. At times, I was a very stubborn person (still am really) when it comes to the role music plays in my life. It's something that has so far kept me from moving from Wellington for a start, and I'm sure even though Mum may have obviously appreciated me being nearer, she showed a definite respect for the path I had chosen to map out according to my entrenched desire

to stay where my music was. Through thick and thin, disastrous sounding practices I'm sure in the early days of learning the violin, through to attending a rock concert where the band I was in got the chance to support an international act, she was – and is – always going to figure large in my musical life somewhere along the line. So hence I am wearing my musical tie now.

I know that whenever I think of music, or play any of the instruments I can play thanks to your encouragement during those long years, that I will be eternally grateful for that immense gift of being able to not only take pleasure myself in the playing of music, but that this is something I can share with other people. And music is one of those things that crosses boundaries, you don't have language barriers, everyone can appreciate the gift of music. And Mum was definitely someone who was into sharing ideas and herself across all sorts of boundaries of culture.

I should like to end not with something I say, but perhaps more appropriately with some words from Mum, which I do take heart in, and must remember in order to be strong throughout this time. It's relevant for all I think. And I do sincerely hope I can do these words justice by living them from this point on:

The circumstances under which I discovered the resurgence of my cancer lead me to believe that I'm meant to be around a bit longer. Just think, if we hadn't made that trip to Hawaii (which Richard almost cancelled) and I hadn't broken a couple of ribs (I had a little accident in the garden before we left for Hawaii, and the pain I felt in Honolulu was partly traceable to that) I would be a goner now. I may not have lasted till Christmas! But here I am, looking so well that people who have not seen me walking with crutches would never suspect I have a little health issue to deal with...

Nevertheless I'm prepared for whatever happens. I believe that death is the gateway to a more living life where there are no tears. My bags are packed and I live each day fully. The power of now is wonderful. Life has indeed become a daily miracle for me.

I particularly like starting the day meditating on the natural beauty around us. In the garden, I can be oblivious of pain. In life, there are things we can change and things we can't. Joy comes from being able to tell the difference and learning to accept those that we cannot change and just celebrating life itself. Even serious illness can become a source of deep peace. I could imagine myself living to a ripe and venerable old age, but I know that it's not really the length of time we live that matters, it's how we live.

Thank you Mum for everything – I hope I have half the fortitude you have shown throughout your time with us for being able to put up with everything life could throw at you and so much more besides, my older brother Liam will be there I'm sure to greet you, as will my Uncle Henry, and Uncle Joe, your two brothers. And it was a privilege to have been the one to be holding your hand at your last moment on earth, and helped you on your way to a rest so badly overdue, and so richly deserved.

(5. **Some tributes from people unable to be with us**, introduced and read by **Tim Campbell.**)



When Richard asked me to do this task today, which is to read some of the tributes that have come in to him, James and Alan, in the past week or so, I thought back to the time I first met Nena. I think the first feeling I had on meeting Nena was fear (I was a gangly 15 year old at the time...now, as a gangly 37 year old, I feel somewhat differently). I was afraid of her intellect...but soon that fear gave way to a deep admiration of her intellect and her mind that was constantly working on different ideas. The one thing, however, that I will truly remember is Nena's laugh.

There is one particular image I have of her at the farm. I can't remember the exact moment, but I had told her something and her eyes lit up, the smile spread across her face. She laughed her laugh, and clapping her hands together said, "That's wonderful!" I can't describe it, such was her joy. That is what I will remember most.

Anyway, I am here to read to you a selection of the emails and letters sent to Richard, James and Alan. Bearing in mind that these messages are only a small selection of the tributes that have flowed in, I think it serves as a nice reflection of the esteem and love that was held for Nena by all who knew her.

[From Dr Geraldine McDonald – Wellington:]

When [a friend] telephoned me to say that Nena had died I felt greatly saddened, but [we] remembered Nena as we had known her. She was a lovely person ... Nena became very involved in the Suzuki method and was able to see its application to other settings. I think that was characteristic of her thought – to see connections.

I remember the house in Seatoun where Nena, with green fingers, had managed to persuade plants to grow all over the house. She was also a great hostess with a welcome for everyone.

She will also be remembered for her care and devotion to her family. Always putting them first. Of course she suffered some great sadnesses but handled them with fortitude and grace.

[From Dr Santiago Obien, Manila:] ...

Nena lived a happy life -- she played her role as wife, mother, and as a professional. As you grieve, remember, there are hundreds of us who feel the same grief.

...

How we wish we could be with you in person to accompany Nena in her last journey here on earth. But we are with you in thoughts and in our hearts ...

[From Professor Camille Roman, Washington State University:]

... I have always resisted and feared death, but Nena has shown me another way of thinking about this complex intertwining we call life and death. ...

[From Professor Nena Mijoč, Slovenia:]

... We will all keep Nena Benton in our memories as a warm person with excellent intellectual and organising potentials. She proved to be a very empathic and caring person. I was privileged to have been able to meet her!

[From Bishop Denis Brown, Hamilton:]

Nena had that strong simple faith that carried her through many difficult times. You will have caught it from her and will feel her presence and encouragement during the difficult times of loneliness and mourning that are ahead of you. Her strong sense of justice was always an inspiration to me and to all who knew her. She will now be looking over us and making sure that we try to imitate her faith and joy even in suffering.

[From Professor Anne Griffiths, Edinburgh:]

I am very sad to think of how we have all been deprived of the company of such a lively, interesting and loving person. I shall never forget my time in New Zealand which was made special by your and Nena's wonderfully warm hospitality. My memories of Nena are of a very vivacious person with a very warm heart who made the most out of life.

[From Professor Ricardo Trimillos, University of Hawaii:]

Nena brought much joy and gentleness to those around her.

[From Dr Dan Landis, Hawaii:]

She was a brave and wonderful lady and all of us will miss her.

[From Yolanda Bacani, Manila:]

She has always been someone I admired for her brilliant mind and strength of character.

[From Priscilla Cayford, Toronto:]

I consider myself blest for having been inspired by Nena even as she grappled with what the Lord has challenged her with.

[From Dr Ka-Wai Tam, California:]

... I did learn from her experience, and have been inspired for the past years by how she has seen the good side of God's hand in your life where others would have simply smoldered in resentment about how life had let them down.

[From Gregory Trifonovitch, Hilo, Hawaii:]

Nena always wrote so positively about her treatments and general well-being. That's only by the grace of our loving God, and we rejoice that she had that solace and comfort from Him, apparently right up to the end.

We remember so well our conversation on the lanai in Kaneohe when you had just received the news of her recurring cancer. It was disappointing, yet Nena

was very positive about being in the will of God through it all. Her testimony was such a blessing.

[From Professor Bernard Spolsky, Jerusalem:]

It is hard to realize that on future trips I won't have the chance to try out some new vegetarian restaurants with her, and to enjoy her company if only briefly. I do have warm memories, and I am sure you must have many that will slowly replace the difficult last days.

[From Justice David Baragwanath, Auckland:]

She is deeply precious; I have an abiding sense of her warmth and vitality.

[From Anthony Clarke, Wellington:]

She was always such a kind, thoughtful person and used to make me feel welcome in her home. I particularly remember the times in Townsend Rd where there always seemed to be an easy, caring atmosphere.

[From Professor Harry Nimmo, San Fransisco:]

Although she is physically gone, she shall live with me the rest of my life. Loved ones make us who we are, and Nena certainly helped shape me.

[From Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, Samoa:]

May Nena's spirit be a source of love and encouragement to us all.

[From Someone she had helped in Auckland:]

Nena, you gave me confidence and pride in myself because you believed in me and insisted that I had something valuable to contribute to the projects we worked on, and to any future mahi that I would be involved in. Thank you.

(Tim Campbell, who was Liam's best friend at school and best man at his wedding, acted as one of our family spokespeople after the plane crash, and has been a very good friend to all of us, and especially to James and Alan, since then. He is now a lecturer at the Manukau Institute of Technology in South Auckland. Many more messages have come in since then, but only those read out by Tim are recorded here.)

(6. Poroporoaki / Farewell from Selwyn Muru)



The last to address the congregation was the artist Selwyn Muru, striding with his tokotoko down the centre aisle.

He said that he was here on behalf of the freaks and misfits, “Ngāti Whiriki”, the poets, painters and sculptors for whom he was spokesman and who would not allow Nena to go before they also had paid their tributes.

He spoke warmly of Nena and of his association

with her and her family, and ended his oration with a moving recital of Hone Tuwhare's poem "Tangi".

*I did not meet her
on the bordered path
nor detect her fragrance
in the frolic of violets
and carnations.*

*She did not stroll riverward
to sun-splash and shadows
to willows trailing garlands
of green pathos.*

*Death was not hiding in the cold rags
of a broken dirge:
nor could I find her
in the cruel laughter of children,
the curdled whimper of a dog.*

*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.*

(Selwyn Muru is an eminent Māori artist and orator. We have known each other for a long time, and were fortunate to have him and his family as our neighbours during the four years when we lived in Devonport.)

The unspoken tribute was from Alfred Harris, a scientist with a particular interest in the sustainable production of healthy foods. Alf has become a very good friend of all the family since we first met him not long after we acquired our farm in Ngaruawahia. He is currently involved in highly innovative work on the role of charcoal in enhancing the fertility and health of soils. We do not have any photographs of him taken during the funeral, but there is one of Nena (included in the "book of remembrance" which people at the church who wished to could sign) that is a good companion to some of his observations.

(7. Honouring a fallen warrior, written by Alfred Harris.)

Where is the justice in the death of someone too young to die?

Nena didn't think there was any, and fought against death with courage and dignity.

I come today to honour a fallen warrior, a woman of many talents and enormous strength.

I suspect that Nena's first love in life was gardening. I have wonderful memories of Nena, a vision bigger than her smile if that is possible, constantly chipping away in the garden at Ngaruawahia. Like me, many of you will have benefitted from the bounty of vegetables, figs, apples and oranges. We are all still waiting for the olives!

However, Nena's greatest gift was the cultivation of people. This gift was combined with a huge passion for life. It was a passion with a huge smile, and many, many arms and legs. I remember Nena reminding me on more than one occasion that the only way to eat an elephant was in small bites. The bit that I have just realised today is that it is even quicker if you invite the whanau to help!



Last year, Nena and James visited Annette and me, shared some lunch, and talked about their wonderful vision for their Ngaruawahia property. Nena reminded me, as only she could, that love and big dreams are much, much more powerful than death.

All of us are aware of the misfortunes of almost Jobian proportions that rained down upon the Benton whanau. I never once heard Nena complain. Painful anniversaries were yet another opportunity to celebrate with whanau the wonders of life and the joy of friends.

Finally, I wish to honour Nena as a scholar. Nena's life was a constant reminder to those of us in the academic community that scholarship

without passion or purpose is an empty vessel. The ICEL conference in Auckland in 2000, substantially organised by the Benton whanau, is still the best international conference that I have ever been involved with.

My dear friend with the big smile. That was the secret wasn't it, you loved all of us and involved us all in your fantastic life.

Thankyou, and rest in peace.