

Hope for burns survivors

By
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The members of the Trust, burn survivors, and parents/peer support including Judy Hohaia, far left, attended Survivor Sunday at the Bucklands Beach Yacht Club. Photo Zoe Garden

Judy Hohaia was four years old when she was badly burned in an accidental fire.

Growing up in Hokianga, Hohaia's life was permanently changed when she suffered burns from petrol being put in the coal range fire.

"I was the burnt black girl," she says. "I had no friends. I thought it was normal but it wasn't normal, it wasn't normal what I went through."

The fire, she told the *Times*, left her with a lot of inner anger and ugliness.

"I would fight a lot at school," she says. "No matter what you tell a child – 'it'll be alright, it'll be okay – you can't say that because you don't know that, you've never been burnt yourself, never had to walk around with your face burnt.

"Back then in the 70s there was nothing for me."

Five years ago, Hohaia became involved in the Burn Support Charitable Trust (BSG) whose goal is to improve the lives of burn survivors and lower the incidents of burn injuries.

When she came to Auckland and met Michele Henry, BSG's events coordinator and office administrator, and fellow burns survivors, Hohaia met a "beautiful wāhine (woman) with burns on her face".

"I started crying because it was the first person I'd seen with burns on their face."

Through BSG, Hohaia says she's grown heaps.

"I've become what I've meant to be. (It's) brought out the best in me."

Hohaia was one of the attendees at the trust's Survivor Sunday event on Sunday June 26 at the Bucklands Beach Yacht Club.

Survivor Sunday, Henry says, is for the parents and peer support of those that live daily with those that have sustained burn injuries and for the burn survivors themselves.

At about 11.30am, the event's guest speaker, plastic surgeon Julian Lofts, presented on what he did 30 years ago to create a national skin bank, where skin was grown in a lab for use on burn cases. Out of the three cases he showed, two survived.

Trust board member Sam Barnes gave a short presentation on prevention and preparation of fires including highlighting the importance of fire extinguishers, fire blankets and up-to-date alarm systems.

The trust has more than 1500 supporters and survivors in its database, including Hohaia herself, who is now a full-time grandmother and involved in Women's Legacy.

"My life went to s**t when I got burnt," she says.

"But I've made it better and it is through the Burns Survivor Unit, through Michele and Delwyn [founder and board member] and knowing Delwyn's husband Alan also and others in the unit and the retreat [Women's Annual Burn Retreats] and sharing with each other and actually crying too and... not being judged."

For burn survivors, or any parents or friends or family of the survivors, Hohaia implores them to reach out.

"If your mum or dad isn't going to listen, reach out to someone who does...reach out to BSG."