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Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau
NEW ZEALAND

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GENE GENIES AND GOATS

The widening scientific endeavours of geneticists Klaus Lehnert and Russell Snell

Page 6



FOCUS ON FILM

Filmmaker Jake Mahaffy on how students can make their mark in the burgeoning Kiwi screen industry

Page 11



COOKING UP A BUSINESS

By day, Perzen Patel works in communications; by night she's recreating the tastes of her homeland, India

Page 3



SHARPEN YOUR STYLE

Writing expert Helen Sword has devised a handy app to identify where a writer's prose needs tightening

Page 10

MORE MOPPY MAGNIFICENCE

Associate Professor Selina Tusitala Marsh is following on from her award-winning success with *Mophead* by releasing a follow-up book, *Mophead Tu: The Queen's Poem* (Auckland University Press, \$24.99). It's the story of Commonwealth poet Selina being invited to perform for the Queen at Westminster Abbey. But when someone at work calls her a 'sellout', Selina starts doubting herself. We have two copies of *Mophead Tu* to give away. Email: uninews@auckland.ac.nz with your details by 12 December.



MOVING EXPERIENCE

Students of the University's highly respected Dance Studies Programme took to the stage for a well-attended Dance Studies Performance Festival on the City Campus in November. First, second and third-year students shared their original choreography with a live audience over several nights. Dance student Celia Hext (pictured) presented her work *Climbers/Runners* in the third-year show, which was an inspirational and energetic two-hour event showcasing 24 student works.



BLAKE MEDAL TO DAME ANNE

Distinguished Professor Dame Anne Salmond has received another accolade acknowledging her contributions to society. Dame Anne, Professor of Anthropology and Māori Studies, has been awarded the prestigious Blake Medal, named after Sir Peter Blake. The annual Blake Awards recognise people whose leadership has delivered high-impact results for Aotearoa socially, culturally, environmentally or economically. The Blake Medal is the top award. Watch video: tinyurl.com/Dame-Anne-Blake-Medal



ALUMNA WINS LITERARY AWARD

Caroline Barron, an alumna of the Master of Creative Writing Programme, won the New Zealand Heritage Literary Award for the best non-fiction book of 2020. In *Ripiro Beach: A Memoir of Life After Near Death* (Bateman Books) Caroline learns that there are mental health issues, suicide and incarceration in her family and that she is Māori. The runner-up was *Colin McCahon: Volumes I and II* by Peter Simpson (Auckland University Press). Read more about Caroline's memoir: auckland.ac.nz/caroline-barron-memoir



THIS ISSUE

My Story: Perzen Patel	3
Good to Know stories	4-5, 8
– Graduation to remember	4
– Successful space mission	4
– Research honours	5
– Marsden boost	5
– Brian Boyd Rutherford Medal	5
– Shoutout for pronouns	8
– Panther pride	8
– Winning women	8
Russell Snell and Klaus Lehnert	6-7
Gove Grefnes Diaz	9
Helen Sword's writing tool	10
Jake Mahaffy's film	11
Māramatanga: Tim Kuhner	12

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

This is the final *UniNews* for the year. We'll be back in March, with a copy deadline of 14 February. Ideas, as always, are welcome, to uninews@auckland.ac.nz. Thanks to everyone who has contributed to this year's editions – your ideas and availability were so appreciated in what was a challenging year for everyone. You can see past copies of *UniNews* at auckland.ac.nz/UniNews-Archive. Here's to a restful and Covid-19-free summer break and a simpler and more enjoyable 2021. Ngā mihi – *Denise Montgomery, editor*

CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Head to the ClockTower for Christmas Carols on **Friday 18 December** at midday.

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MY STORY

PERZEN PATEL

Perzen Patel was a finalist in the 2020 Velocity \$100k challenge after cooking up an idea for a tasty business.

What's your role at the University?

I'm a digital engagement and communications adviser for Te Tumu Herenga, Library and Learning Services. I help drive engagement with our audiences. I've been in the job since April.

Recently you were a finalist in the Velocity \$100k Challenge. Were you surprised?

I took part to have a go and was sure they'd just choose tech businesses as finalists. I decided to apply to make myself write down a business plan. Getting into the finals was a nice surprise and also great because it was the catalyst to get my business going.

What's your business called?

It's called Dolly Mumma and named after my grandmother. I make and sell Indian spice pastes. We've started the #NoMoreButterChicken movement! I have an ambitious goal of educating Kiwis to know there's more to Indian cuisine than butter chicken and chicken tikka masala! We want people to get a taste of the real India, recipes shared orally through generations.

But Kiwis love butter chicken!

They do, and I do too, but not the bright orange stuff. Kiwi butter chicken is sweet and creamy and not what Indian food is about at all.

Where did you grow up?

I came to New Zealand from Mumbai, India, when I was 15 and went to high school and university here. I returned to India for around eight years before moving back here permanently with my husband and two preschool sons late last year. We had planned to come in 2020 but my husband's visa came earlier, which was very lucky as it turned out.

What did you do at university?

I did a conjoint degree in hospitality management and business at AUT. I've always had an interest in both. I've since flip-flopped between comms and marketing and food-related roles. I started out in catering, then PR, then had my own catering business. I'm happiest when I'm doing both.

Do food and storytelling go hand-in-hand?

Yes, I've always been interested in cooking but more importantly in sharing stories about food. In India, I had a food blog, Bawi Bride, where I

documented lost recipes from my community. When I moved to New Zealand I wanted to do something similar but different.

What did you come up with?

I started a podcast, the Kiwi Foodcast (kiwifoodcast.com). I began recording episodes during the March lockdown and released the podcast in June once I'd built up enough episodes. The idea is to tell people's food stories and shine a spotlight on New Zealand's diverse food scene. I thought it would be a good way to highlight the stories of Kiwi food entrepreneurs. It also ended up inspiring me to get on with my own business.

Do you test your cooking on colleagues?

I do. I'm constantly feeding them. They are much better at giving feedback than my husband who just eats everything!

What else have you done in the food area?

I was really inspired by all the people I met on the Kiwi Foodcast and during my research I found out about The Kitchen Project. It's a foodie incubator run by ATEED, Panuku Development Auckland and Healthy Families. It's a 26-week programme for food entrepreneurs in West and South Auckland and covers everything from food safety, marketing and all you need to know to set up a food business. Doing Velocity as well as The Kitchen Project helped me get to a launch point.

You work full-time, have a food business, run a podcast and have two pre-schoolers. How?

I work on the business and cook in the evenings and on weekends. My husband helps with the packaging and logistics. We have both always had an entrepreneurial streak and want to show our kids you can have it all if you work hard.

Another reason for starting Dolly Mumma was that my kids came here at a really young age and I realised they could lose touch with Indian food and culture if I don't play an active role in retaining that for them. I try to feed them traditional food and I've created these pastes with them in mind. I don't want them growing up thinking that Indian food is just butter chicken and tikka masala.



Perzen Patel's mission: #nomorebutterchicken.



What can we cook with your pastes?

You can make great-tasting Indian food using the Indian flavours, but you can use them however you want. Customers have used our curry paste as a pizza base! Italians will kill me, but I've used our Ghee Tadka to make fettuccine. Replace the cheese and Italian herbs with a dollop of our spiced ghee and it's amazing. You can also use our Indian Everyday paste in all mince dishes. I've also used the Ghee Tadka to cover a whole snapper. Wrap it in foil, put it on the barbecue and you have a new flavour in your repertoire. It's a great way to try the flavours without buying ten different seeds and spices and having to work out the amounts.

What even is ghee?

Clarified butter. If you churn cream you get butter. With ghee you keep cooking the cream until you get a clear fat, then you strain it to become ghee. It's also keto friendly.

What should Kiwis know about Indian food?

There's a perception Indian food is heavy, not fresh and a treat food. But Indian food uses seasonal vegetables and is very fresh; the food we tend to buy here is just from one region and is nothing like the food cooked in most Indian homes.

If we want to eat Indian food in Auckland, where would you suggest?

Well I recommend cooking with Dolly Mumma first of course ... but if you're eating out I like what Cassia is doing and Satya is good too. There's also Saravanaa Bhavan on Hobson Street which makes some of the best dosas in Auckland.

How can people get hold of your pastes?

We're @dollymummanz on Facebook and Instagram. There's a link there to the online store at choice.co.nz/store/dolly-mumma. Note, it's spelt choice.

A GRADUATION TO REMEMBER

Around 6,800 students graduated last month, including 201 doctoral students. The ceremonies were held over three days, with 5,162 students graduating in person and 1,695 in absentia.

The faculties of Arts and Law ceremony was attended by more than 1,000 students making it the largest single ceremony the University has ever had. In all, 119 people gained more than one qualification, 116 gained two, and three people received three qualifications. Ages ranged from 19 to 79. Faculty of Science had the highest representation of graduands with more than 1,200 qualifications conferred, followed by the Business School which awarded 1,121 qualifications. Science conferred the largest proportion of PhDs.

Women graduands continue to outnumber men as they have for more than a decade, with 3,605 females graduating compared to 2,661 males.

And there's good news for our graduates. The Global Employability University Ranking 2020 has placed this University 81st in the world. The rankings are the latest in a 10-year study by international consultancy Emerging, into the most employable study locations for higher education students. In total, 9,000 recruiters from 22 countries rated the employability performance of 6,000 institutions. Auckland was ranked fourth in Australasia.



Relief, joy and pride were written on the faces of the students finally able to attend a graduation ceremony in 2020.

SUCCESSFUL SPACE MISSION

New Zealand's first satellite designed and built by University of Auckland students was launched into space via Rocket Lab's Electron launch vehicle on 20 November.

The students from the Auckland Programme for Space Systems (APSS) conceived, designed and built the satellite, Te Waka Āmiorangi o Aotearoa or APSS-1. It was sent into orbit at 500km altitude as one of 30 satellites aboard Rocket Lab's 16th Electron launch from Māhia Peninsula. All were successfully delivered to precise spots in orbit.

Engineering graduate Francis Moynihan Lavey was one of those involved in preparing the satellite.

"I never really thought I could be part of something involving space, I thought it was something other people did," he says.

Getting the satellite launched was a three-and-a-half-year project that involved more than 26 APSS students. Te Waka Āmiorangi o Aotearoa was part of a Rocket Lab 'rideshare' where each satellite is deployed to a unique, precise individual orbit. To support New Zealand's next generation of

space industry leaders, Rocket Lab provided the launch service for APSS-1 at no cost.

The satellite will measure electrical activity in the upper reaches of Earth's atmosphere, a region known as the ionosphere. Scientists are curious to know about how the ionosphere is affected by geophysical activity on Earth, including whether electrical disturbances that occur in the ionosphere might be correlated with earthquakes. Those insights may help us better prepare for disruption to communications technologies.

Jim Hefkey, director of the APSS, says the launch was achieved with the dedication of a team

of Science and Engineering staff, and the tenacity of a diverse group of undergraduate students.

"The real accomplishment has been giving students this opportunity to achieve an outcome in a complex problem environment using their own initiative. Many have now graduated and are working in aerospace and other high-tech industries. It's so satisfying to see them contributing across a range of government and private entities."

As an added boost, every view of the Rocket Lab live stream of the mission saw \$1 donated to Starship's Paediatric Intensive Care Unit.



Francis Moynihan Lavey, Dr John Cater (Engineering), student Jonathan Mace and Dr Nicholas Rattenbury (Science).

RESEARCH HONOURS

Three Auckland academics have been honoured by the Royal Society Te Apārangi.

Early Career Research Excellence Awards went to Professor Ngarino Ellis (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) in the Humanities and Dr David Moreau in Social Sciences.

David's research looks at the link between exercise and a healthy brain. He is the director of the Brain Dynamics Lab in the School of Psychology.

Ngarino is the only Māori art historian employed at tertiary level in Aotearoa and has pioneered the study of Māori art and culture, focusing on pre-1900 art, especially tribal carving, moko, personal adornment and identity.

Professor Eamonn O'Brien (Mathematics) won the Hector Medal for his contributions in the field of group theory. This includes the development of an algorithm to solve a long-standing problem posed by celebrated British mathematician Alan Turing whose work is considered foundational to modern computer science and artificial intelligence.

■ Read more: tinyurl.com/Royal-Society-2020

MARSDEN BOOST

The University has done well in the 2020 round of the government's Te Pūtea Rangahau a Marsden, the Marsden Fund, with researchers awarded grants totalling \$24.8 million.

"Alongside the research, a huge amount of work goes into applying for research funding," says Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research, Professor Jim Metson. "So it's very pleasing that close to 50 percent of Auckland's final-round applications were accepted."

Individual grants of more than \$950,000 were awarded to six projects, including Associate Professor Christopher Hall (Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences) for research on fighting bacterial infections and Dr Lora Strachan (Science) on whether climate influences the frequency of volcanic activity and earthquakes.

Dr Kelly Burrowes (Auckland Bioengineering Institute) was awarded just under \$900,000 for her vaping research, as was Associate Professor Naresh Singhal (Engineering) for work looking at enhancing the biodegradation of contaminants.

Others to gain major funding included Distinguished Professor Dame Anne Salmond (Arts), Associate Professor Nancy November (Creative Arts and Industries) and Professor Janet McLean (Law).

Emerging researchers won Fast Start grants of \$100,000 for three years. These included Dr William Schierding of the Liggins Institute, Dr Sam Manuela (Science) and Dr Jessica Parr (Arts).

■ Read more about the details of the funding: tinyurl.com/Marsden-Funding-2020



Dr Sam Manuela is looking at how Pacific psychologists are changing the discipline.

SHEER BEAUTY

A stunning night-time photo of Buller's shearwaters/rako, captured in the flash of the camera with the Milky Way as a backdrop, was named People's Choice at the NZ Geographic Photographer of the Year awards.

Doctoral researcher Edin Whitehead from the School of Biological Sciences waited patiently for the winning shot perched on a cliff edge at the birds' only known breeding ground, Tawhiti Rahi/ Poor Knights Islands in the Hauraki Gulf.

"I've spent the past three years studying these amazing birds so the fact people loved this photo is inspiring to me. I'm really grateful," she says.

■ See full story: auckland.ac.nz/edin-whitehead-birds



BRIAN BOYD MAKES HISTORY

In the first year New Zealand's top research honour, the Rutherford Medal, has been open to the humanities, it has been awarded to Distinguished Professor Brian Boyd from the Faculty of Arts.

Brian is widely acclaimed as the world's leading scholar of Vladimir Nabokov, the Russian-

American writer some consider the greatest of the last century.

The Rutherford Medal, awarded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Te Apārangi, has recognised Brian's two main accomplishments: his specialised work on Nabokov and his wider work, introducing evolutionary and cognitive perspectives on literature and art, and linking the arts, humanities, and sciences.

"As some New Zealand writers have pointed out, my work is better known in London or New York than here, so it's great now to have this wider recognition in my own country," says Brian.

He has published five books, about 200 articles and a website of 1,550 pages (so far) on Nabokov, and edited ten books by the author. His Nabokov books have been translated into 11 languages.

The Rutherford Medal recognises outstanding research, scholarship or innovation by a person, or team, in any field of engineering, humanities, mathematics, sciences, social science, or technology. It comes with prize money of NZ\$100,000 and Brian, the first in his family to go to university, intends to donate it to University of Auckland scholarships for first-generation students.

■ Full story: auckland.ac.nz/Boyd-Rutherford-Medal



Distinguished Professor Brian Boyd: the leading scholar of Vladimir Nabokov.

IT'S ALL IN THE GENES

From diseases to goats' milk, the work being done by a pair of geneticists and the team in the School of Biological Sciences is vital for health and the economy.

“It’s blinking lovely when the Prime Minister stands up and starts talking about genome sequencing – it’s marvellous,” says Professor Russell Snell.

“Coronavirus is the wrong genome for our team, but the fact she’s using those words is putting the language out there. It has considerably helped to normalise the language around genetics.”

Russell, from the School of Biological Sciences (SBS) in the Faculty of Science, is a pioneering geneticist who was part of the team that first identified the Huntington’s gene. Huntington’s Disease is a neurological disorder that leads to extensive loss of control over bodily movement, along with dementia, psychological disturbance and premature death.

Russell is a leader of the Biomedical and Applied Research Group at SBS. He has a long-term interest in finding out how the genes behind the illnesses are inherited – by exploring human gene variations in diseases such as myotonic dystrophy, tuberous sclerosis, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s and other neurogenetic conditions.

Recently he and the person he calls his “partner in crime”, Associate Professor Klaus Lehnert, delved into something a little different – goat genes. Russell and Klaus identify high-value dairy goats through genetics. Their work was recognised when they became finalists in the PwC Commercial Impact section of the KiwiNet Research Commercialisation Awards.

Working with the Dairy Goat Co-Operative (DGC) they discovered that goats with the PM-1 gene variant produce up to 20 percent more milk. The finding is significant because goats’ milk is used in infant formula, one of New Zealand’s highest-value export products.

Russell and Klaus had been given three years by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment who provided the funding, to identify the genetic makeup of the best-performing goats. They found the gene variant that produces more milk in the first year of the grant funding. The industry began using their research to create high-producing goat herds within two years. The foray into goat genetics might seem out of left-field

for two scientists usually working on the human genome, but both men worked together some years ago for ‘the other dairy industry’.

“I grew up on a farm training school,” says Russell. “But I was voted the least likely person to be a farmer – by me – I was more interested in blowing things up or burning things down.”

He may even have been considered the person least likely to be a geneticist. “I didn’t do any biology at University because I thought it was boring. I did physics and accidentally ended up doing genetics, which is actually like physics.

“It’s all about numbers. And it’s unencumbered with dogma. Same for my work with Klaus – he knows it all biologically. I can imagine stuff with kind of a blank brain really and wonder ... Klaus can go ‘yeah that looks interesting’. We are very complementary in how we approach the genetic world. He knows how to do stuff. I don’t know how to do stuff, and vice versa, and we make stuff up.

“The University of Auckland is up there with dairy research. Part of that comes down to breakthroughs in genetics and genomics.”

– Associate Professor Klaus Lehnert

It’s been very successful over the years.”

“Russell is supremely creative,” says Klaus. “He thinks thoughts most biologists never think, mostly because it’s been trained out of them.”

Russell says while their genetic research has focused on human disease, the pair are equally interested in applying their tricks to other species if it is useful for farmers and the economy.

“It’s kind of a balance,” he says. “We live in New Zealand and it’s a primary production country regardless of how we want to view it – it’s farm-based. Now that tourism has been hammered, this research is even more important.

“Our focus is adding value to New Zealand however we can do it. The more wealthy New Zealand can get, then the better the health service we will have, the more options our next generations will have.”

The University also has a postgraduate dairy school, which might surprise some people.

“There’s probably a historic view that Massey, Lincoln, AgResearch and Waikato were the dominant players in dairy research,” says Klaus. “Now Auckland is up there too and part of that comes down to science – breakthroughs in genetics and genomics are responsible for that.”

“Genetic diversity is what we can do, whether it’s human genetic diversity or animal genetic diversity,” says Russell. “We apply the same philosophy across both. There isn’t enough research money to support us wholly doing human stuff in New Zealand so, like everybody does, we do what we can to make a contribution elsewhere.”

Most of what Russell and Klaus do, with colleague Dr Jessie Jacobsen, is done by sequencing genomes.

“When we’re looking at human disease, this could lead to a new approach to treatment or specialised diagnosis or reproductive options for the family,” says Klaus. “For example, a family can find out the chance of having another child with a particular genetic condition, and consider reproductive options to have a healthy child.”

“For many families who have a child with a condition it’s important to find out that there is a genetic cause,” says Russell. “When we find mutations, many families are just content to know the specific reason. It’s no longer a mystery. People always worry if it was something they caused themselves. When we can say ‘no it was sheer bad luck and nothing that you did’, that’s really helpful.”

Says Klaus: “For many families, it’s better than being sent home and the parents being told, ‘it’s probably nothing you did’. That’s not enough for many people. If they have a child with a disease, they often want certainty.”

“This is where the ethics of genetics, particularly



Professor Russell Snell, left, and Associate Professor Klaus Lehnert, right, work closely with colleague Dr Jessie Jacobsen. Photos: Billy Wong



Associate Professor Klaus Lehnert, left, and Professor Russell Snell were recent finalists in the KiwiNet Research Commercialisation Awards for their genetic discovery in dairy goats.

human genetics, matters a lot, and our ethic is that the individual owns their own information,” adds Russell. “Nobody else should own that information other than if they’re sharing it for research and even then it is protected.

“Each family is different and we can’t walk in their shoes. Some people want to know, for instance, whether they carry a mutation present in their wider family, and others don’t want to know. For example, less than half the people who have Huntington’s in the family want to know whether they’re going to get it.”

When a person is being tested for genetic variations, another factor comes into play.

“There’s something called incidental findings,” says Klaus. “These are findings not related to the primary reason for testing and we ask families whether they want to know this information or not.”

The SBS team doesn’t deal directly with patients – the information is conveyed to the medical professional who requested the genetic analysis.

“We stay firmly on the side of the research fence so we don’t deliver results directly to patients,” says Russell. “We collect information, do the sequencing and discover mutations. If we find what we think is a mutation causing a condition, we contact the clinician and more testing takes place.

“Often that will lead to counselling an individual, and you might need to be counselling the family about the implications for the wider family, and it’s not our training to do that.”

Klaus, Russell and Jessie are part of a research network called Minds for Minds. They set it up, with others, to better understand autism spectrum disorder. Using genome sequencing, the scientists can identify the specific DNA variations that are responsible for this and other neurodevelopmental disorders. An example of one of the research strands undertaken is using the latest genome sequencing technology to look for

“Our focus is adding value however we can. The more wealthy New Zealand can get, the better the health service we will have and the more options for our next generations.”

–Professor Russell Snell, geneticist, School of Biological Sciences

a genetic diagnosis in children with undiagnosed, rare neurodevelopmental disorders. Twenty families took part in a two-year pilot study to discover the genes responsible for disorders that couldn’t be explained through standard tests. Of the 20 families, researchers discovered the gene or mutation responsible for the condition in 11 individuals.

“Often we get referred patients with extremely rare and undefined conditions, and other patients who have been put through a normal clinical diagnosis, but have come out the other end with no answer,” says Russell. “We tackle those, particularly in autism or developmental conditions but not limited to those; we look at genetics behind cardiac disease as well. We try to relate DNA changes to what we call phenotypes, which includes the clinician’s observations, testing results and whether a DNA variation could cause a disease. We rely on the genome to tell us the story and our ability to read the genome to find what’s different.”

They both say that just because you discover the genetic variant causing a disease, that doesn’t mean it’s the end of the road for the people affected. “For parents to know ‘why’ is a huge thing, rather than to be left wondering why it happened and whether what happened will happen again,” says Klaus. “So if the incidence is one in eight billion, this is valuable information for families planning to have another baby.”

The information is also hugely beneficial when developing treatments for various conditions.

“There’s a new treatment for cystic fibrosis that works really well but costs an awful lot of money and hasn’t been approved here yet,” says Russell. “It’s small molecule treatments and will absolutely extend people’s lives. The biochemical knowledge for that came out of discovering the cystic fibrosis gene in the 1980s.”

Russell was involved in finding one of the genes that causes tuberous sclerosis, an inherited form of cancer. “There are treatments for that now based on the understanding of the gene. Treatments are also progressing for Huntington’s and hopefully Alzheimer’s. You need to understand the genetic variants in order to derive a drug to treat them.”

The hope that they can contribute to treatment is what drives the group’s research.

“Discovering existing variants in genes that cause human disease, or have beneficial effects in farm animals, to cure the disease, improve our economic efficiency, or minimise our environmental impact, that’s our objective,” says Russell.

Looking at the list of areas in which Klaus and Russell research – from autism to goats’ milk, it’s hard to imagine what their work days look like.

“Research is essentially like operating a lab,” says Klaus. “We’re writing essays, producing data points, getting things ready for what we call interpretation. It’s like running a manufacturing plant that makes three or four or five different models of whatever car. Various things come to various points on various days and we just deal with it.”

■ Denise Montgomery

SHOUT OUT FOR PRONOUNS

Incoming AUSA Queer Rights Officer, Lavi Abitbol, reckons language can play a big part in fostering an inclusive campus.

Lavi is studying Law and Arts, majoring in psychology, and takes over from current Queer Rights Officer Victoria Hawthorne in early 2021.

“I want to take staff through an educational process to understand gender and sexuality as social constructs. For example, understanding why it’s important to introduce themselves with their name and preferred pronoun at the start of the year, how certain language they use might translate into transphobia, and how they can teach their courses in an inclusive way.”

Lavi is co-chair with director of student equity, Dr Terry O’Neill, of the LGBTQITakatāpui+ (Rainbow) Staff and Students’ Network.

At a recent meeting, the issue of pronouns in University communication was raised. It was suggested there be an “ice-breaker” in tutorials

at the start of the year. “There is growing support for use of pronouns,” Terry says. “We are seeing an increase in use in email signatures.”

That’s not the only area Lavi wants to address. He says his personal experience of isolation when he started at the University was a significant driver in his bid to become the Queer Rights Officer. “The size of the University and the competitive nature of first-year courses, such as law, can make it hard to make friends.”

Living in halls helped socially, but Lavi felt isolated by the assumption he was straight, when he identifies as queer. “I don’t feel halls are the best environment for queer students – unless you are openly queer, you are assumed straight.”

It was only when Lavi joined Rainbow Law, one of many faculty groups for queer students, he felt a sense of queer community at the University.

Lavi will now take part in training for residential advisers who work at student accommodation facilities in a bid to help improve the experience for gay students.

Lavi’s goal is to provide information for staff, fellow student leaders and students about



Lavi Abitbol takes up the role of Queer Rights Officer in 2021.

gender-diversity and inclusion. “Some people see queerness as this radical, very different thing in society. People don’t realise it’s not so different.”

■ To join the Trans on Campus support network (staff and students): transoncampus@auckland.ac.nz

Info about pronouns and inclusive teaching:

auckland.ac.nz/LGBTQI-support-on-campus

Rainbow support: equity.auckland.ac.nz/rainbow



WINNING

WOMEN

Dr Siouxsie Wiles was named the supreme winner at the 2020 Women of Influence Awards as well as winning the Innovation, Science and Health Category. Professor Jane Kelsey won in the Global category.

Siouxsie is a microbiologist (Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences) whose clear messaging through the Covid-19 pandemic made her one of the country’s most trusted voices. Professor Jane Kelsey (Law) has worked at the University for 41 years. Judges describe her work challenging accepted wisdom over such issues as international economic agreements as “exceptional”. See the full story of their achievements: auckland.ac.nz/women-of-influence.

PANTHER PRIDE

In an honest, personal story, Dr Melani Anae (Pacific Studies) reflects on 50 years of involvement with activist group the Polynesian Panthers in her new book.

The Platform: The Radical Legacy of the Polynesian Panthers (BWB Texts) recounts how as a quiet, grief-stricken Samoan teenager who had just lost seven members of her family (five to a plane crash in Samoa), she found camaraderie and a shared cause with the Panthers, a movement created in response to the racist treatment of Pacific people in New Zealand.

“Our worst enemy was media coverage back then, the ‘man in the street’ had an English accent and there was negative coverage of Pacific people everywhere,” she says. “We were portrayed as rapists and criminals, so we needed to tell our version of events.”

Aged 17, she “snuck out” with a friend on a cold winter’s night in 1971 to the inaugural meeting of the Polynesian Panther movement, later to become the Polynesian Panther Party with 20 chapters in its heyday. The group was inspired by books like *Seize the Time* by Bobby Seale from the American Black Panther movement, and its central philosophy became a three-point platform of peaceful resistance, Pacific empowerment and educating New Zealand about persistent and systemic racism. As well as legal advocacy, homework centres, stopping unlawful evictions, information sharing

and peaceful protests, the Panthers’ activism eventually culminated in daring early morning raids of their own on politicians in response to the mid-1970s’ Dawn Raids, where police had burst into the homes of Samoan and Tongan ‘overstayers’ in the early hours of the morning and carted them away to the criminal courts.

Melani says the legacy of the movement lives on in her own classes in Pacific Studies at the University, several books, and annual high-school talks, where she and other members pass on the Panthers’ story to the current generation.

■ Full story: auckland.ac.nz/polynesian-panthers



Dr Melani Anae, a founding member of the Polynesian Panther Party, is proud of what they achieved.



Gove Grefnes Diaz: "I felt like part of the community."

"I'm not Māori or Pacific, but it doesn't matter." Photo: Billy Wong

NOTHING PRICKLY ABOUT LANGUAGE

Gove Grefnes Diaz arrived here from Mexico in 2011 talking about cacti. Now he's all about linguistics and mentoring Māori and Pacific students.

If you meet Gove Grefnes Diaz, it's unlikely you'll run out of things to talk about.

He's Mexican.

He doesn't like the heat.

He speaks numerous languages.

He's a great cook.

He's a tuākana.

He knows a lot about cacti.

Gove (pronounced Govay) did his first degree, a BSc specialising in botanics and environmental sciences, at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico. He had started out studying animals but didn't enjoy the lab work. "I ended up cleaning up coyote poo for months. I hated it. That's when I turned to plants."

While studying, he assisted an environmental educator with her research on endangered cacti in Jalisco, on the western side of Mexico. There are 1,400 species of cacti in the world, 669 of which are in Mexico and 518 are endemic.

"I worked for a year reproducing cacti and it was great. Then there was a massive forest fire just outside the city in the late-2000s. We held workshops to help with reforestation in the area and replanted native cacti. It was a really cool thing to do."

Then he decided to travel. His love of, and ability in, languages helped with that. He's fluent in English and Spanish and holds his own in several others.

"I can live in Japan and France without a

problem," he says. "My Japanese and French isn't perfect, but I can live there and do normal stuff. I couldn't discuss philosophy though or write an academic paper but for daily life, I can do that."

Gove is also a great cook – his brother is a chef in Te Anau and his sister is a pastry chef so the culinary gene is strong.

"And I learned Portuguese in a kitchen with Brazilians when I was working as a chef."

Gove came to New Zealand in 2011 on a working holiday for a year. He loved the place and lived in Te Anau for five years before deciding to answer another of his callings.

"I was working in a butchery and I had been thinking for a while about my love of languages. I thought, well what am I going to do about this?"

After researching where would be good to study, he began doing linguistics at Auckland.

"I started my BA and found out halfway through I could do a postgraduate diploma, because of my science degree. That was such a relief, because it saved me two years. I was studying part-time and working to pay for university.

"Halfway through the BA I realised how much I really loved this. I knew I needed to keep going."

His grades were so good he earned a University of Auckland Postgraduate Scholarship and a Linguistics Postgraduate Scholarship to do honours in linguistics. Then this year he won a University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship to do his PhD from 2020.

"I wouldn't be able to do the PhD without it, I don't think. Having this scholarship just means I don't have to work 40 hours in a cafe in Ponsonby then come to uni. The second weekend after I got the scholarship, I quit my job. It was a Friday night and I went to see a movie and I thought, 'Oh, this is what like normal people feel like'."

When he was asked by a colleague to become a tuākana for Māori and Pacific students doing linguistics, at first he was unsure.

"I mean, I'm Mexican. For a while I felt really awkward ... like I was invading someone else's space. Although once when I was in Samoa I was mistaken for Samoan – I'd say talofa and the next minute people would be speaking full-on Samoan at me. I'm like, nah, I wish, but I've only got talofa."

But he says the experience of being a tuākana has been incredibly rewarding.

"It just felt like family. I felt like part of the community. I'm not Māori or Pacific, but it doesn't matter."

He is also a graduate teaching assistant and says the advice he gives to students studying his beloved linguistics is simple.

"I say 'don't be afraid of it'. Linguistics can sound daunting at first but try to be consistent and come to class and keep up with the work every week because if you don't, at the end it looks like this horrible monster.

"If you do it week by week, you see how things fit into each other and there's no problems at the end. You don't want to be finding all the pieces for the jigsaw at the last minute."

Gove says he hasn't met many Mexicans in New Zealand, but apart from missing his family and Mexican food he's not too worried about not returning home. Being able to cook means he considers his Mexican offerings better than anything he's had in restaurants.

He loves the New Zealand way of life and the temperate climate and plans to become a New Zealand citizen soon.

"I'm nearly there. Getting a New Zealand passport will be the best, certainly a bit more useful than a Mexican passport."

He's visited plenty of places around the country in the nine years he's now been here.

"I just have Tauranga and Napier to tick off. I love Fiordland and Otago and I recently went to Northland and was so amazed by it."

With an innate skill in mentoring and teaching, he may end up in that field. But he has another subject he'd like to explore too.

"Working with endangered languages or helping communities to document their languages is my romantic ideal. I'm looking at languages in the Solomon Islands, because I bumped into a pattern I thought was interesting. So that would be cool."

From endangered cacti to endangered languages. Not many doctoral students will have taken that path.

Donations to the staff giving programme are always welcome and help students with scholarships and living costs. See: giving.auckland.ac.nz/HandsUp



Professor Helen Sword and Freddie. Photo: Billy Wong

WRITING TOOL TO SHARPEN YOUR STYLE

Professor Helen Sword would like us to get active. Not in a physical sense so much as a verbal one – by making our writing active.

Helen, an internationally acclaimed expert on writing in all genres, lectures in English in the Faculty of Arts and is an affiliate of the Centre for Arts and Social Transformation in the Faculty of Education. She is a scholar and a poet whose passion is helping others improve their writing, especially academic writing.

Originally from Southern California, she has lived in New Zealand for nearly 20 years with her Kiwi husband, Dr Richard Sorrenson. Her popular book *The Writer's Diet* was published by Auckland University Press in 2015 and is supplemented by a website (writersdiet.com) that attracts around 100,000 visitors a year from all over the world. Through the website, writers can paste their text into an analysis tool that determines whether their prose would benefit from tightening up.

"The website tool is popular but you have to cut and paste a chunk of text into it, which can be unwieldy," says Helen. "I had an idea about ten years ago that it would be great to be able to analyse a whole Word document on your own desktop. Unfortunately, I'm not a coder, so it was a great idea but didn't go anywhere."

Until now. A philanthropic gift from Dr Beate Schuler, a major donor to the University in science and education, provided funding for Helen and her colleagues to develop improved resources for writers. The grant allowed her to contract the software development required to launch an improved Writer's Diet tool.

"The new Writer's Diet app sits on your menu bar in Microsoft Word and you activate it once you've written something that needs checking."

The add-in can be downloaded by anyone who has Microsoft Word installed and it's free.

Helen points out that it's not a spelling and grammar correction tool like Grammarly. "It's much more holistic and tries to get writers to think about their writing and see bigger patterns. It uses a unique algorithm to scan the document and create a kind of heat map that reveals what parts of the document need attention.

But she says there's only so much that algorithmic tools will pick up. "Once the problem areas have been highlighted, it's up to the writer to use that knowledge to improve their document. Even though people want to be able to click a button and fix their prose, it won't do that."

Helen advocates reducing 'zombie nouns', or nominalisations, which are nouns created in place of verbs or adjectives by adding a suffix such as -ion, -ment or -ance. Her TedTalk on the subject has been viewed more than 960,000 times. She says academics, business writers and lawyers love zombie nouns, but they tend to weigh down otherwise active sentences.

An example: 'The student dancers *held a performance* for their families' compared with 'the student dancers *performed* for their families'.

The Writer's Diet add-in cheerfully points out an overuse of zombie nouns. "It lights them up with colour when you have a lot of nominalisations. The tool isn't saying 'get rid of all of them', because that would be impossible. It simply alerts you to the problem. It encourages you to reflect, learn, change and grow."

Helen created the tool mainly with academics in mind, but since writing the original *The Writer's Diet* book she has been surprised by who has used it and expects the same could be true of the app.

"I get emails from people who use it for their novels or screenplays, even report writers at the United Nations. My favourite email was from a woman in the UK who contacted me to say she gives free copies of the book as a prize in the online courses she teaches for dog trainers."

Speaking of dog training, Helen's using a lot

of active commands herself at the moment – including sit, stay and dance – with the recent acquisition of Freddie, a one-year-old bichon frise.

"Apparently if you're a dog trainer you'll have all these great techniques that you want to write about for dog owners. But you're probably not trained as a writer. The book helps the writer keep things concise."

Helen's other books on writing include *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012) and *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (2017).

"Academic writing is an ongoing and, to some extent, controversial issue. There are pressures to use big words, long sentences, abstract language and jargon."

Helen says the biggest danger comes when people move into advanced postgraduate work, "where they start to get rewarded for writing in a certain opaque way".

"After a while you don't even notice that you're no longer able to communicate like a normal human being!"

She says people shouldn't, however, take her online tool too seriously. There's a touch of humour to its analysis, while at the same time pointing out where writing could be tightened.

"It's an algorithm. It has no brain but you have a brain, so you need to use your judgement."

The next phase will be an advanced version that allows people to adjust the algorithm themselves.

"If you are a journalist or a lawyer or a scientist and you didn't feel that my version quite got things right, you can change the words it analyses."

Helen, who is half-time at the University, has held writing workshops at around 100 universities in 20 countries but Covid-19 has meant that work has moved online. "During lockdown, I offered a free workshop called 'writing in the time of Covid-19', a play on the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*. I ran it three times over three days so people in any time zone could attend live."

Hundreds of people from about 40 countries joined the Zoom. "That made me realise there is a hunger out there among academics and PhD students, especially, who are really desperate for an international community of writing. I've offered that kind of support locally and at individual universities but now I'm doing it on a global scale."

She has a free newsletter, a YouTube channel called Helen's Word, runs writing workshops and does consulting work for universities via Zoom.

"The Writer's Diet app was funded through a philanthropic grant, so the basic version will always be free. I'm offering a free masterclass on 10 December called 'Teaching with the Writer's Diet' which explains to teachers how to coach writers using the new app.

"I'm an educator. I want to get these writing tools out there to as many people as possible."

■ Denise Montgomery

See: helensword.com and writersdiet.com

JAKE MAHAFFY: SHOOTS TO THRILL

When the crew of *Avatar 2* re-entered New Zealand in May it created some angst over ‘privilege’ in a Covid-19 world. But getting the film’s production back on course created jobs for around 400 New Zealanders in the midst of a tourism-smashed economy.

Lord of the Rings, *Cowboy Bebop* and *Sweet Tooth* are now in production; another two are in pre-production after more crews completed their quarantine and got on with their work, while also creating jobs for more than 3,000 people. Six international productions and three New Zealand films are under way and RNZ reports they’ve provided a \$650 million boost to the economy.

Associate Professor Jake Mahaffy’s film *Reunion* was completed in early 2020 and opened in theatres around New Zealand on 5 November. It’s not remotely on the scale of *Avatar* – and was never intended to be – but the contraction of film festivals (some going online) and cinema closures delayed the movie’s release.

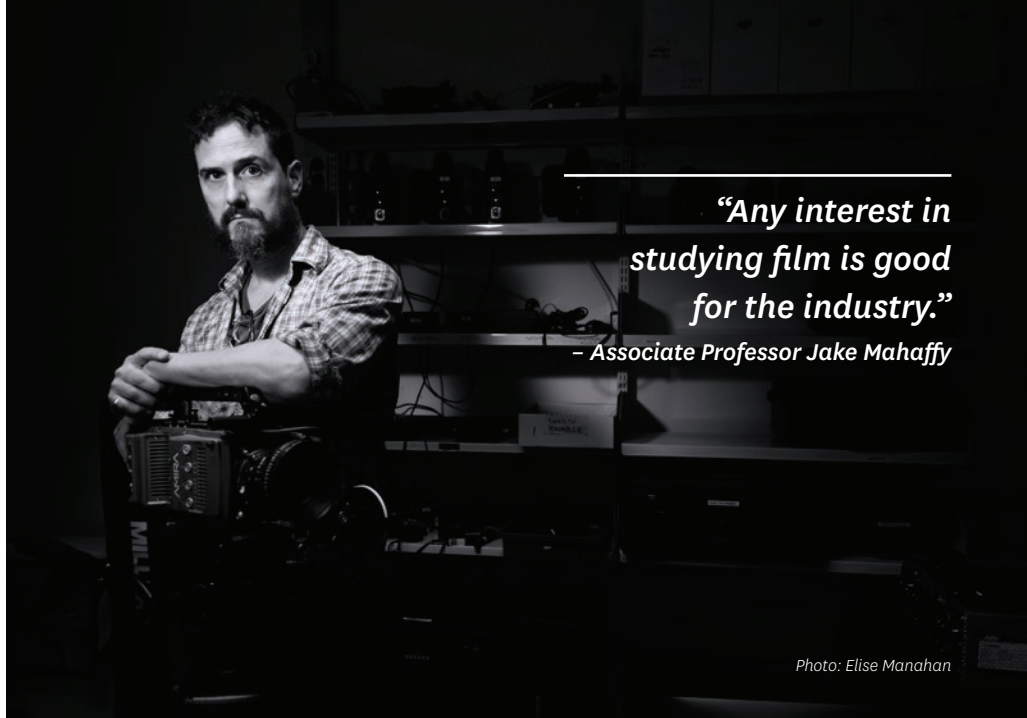
The film stars Emmy Award-winning actress Julia Ormond (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Legends of the Fall*) and local actors Emma Draper, Cohen Holloway and John Bach. It was funded by the New Zealand Film Commission alongside private US partners.

“It’s a relatively low-budget film but the biggest I’ve worked on,” says Jake. “Often, to get private equity investment in a project you have to attach a recognisable name to the cast. That was Julia.”

Jake wrote and directed *Reunion*, the story of a pregnant woman who returns to her old family home to discover her estranged mother there waiting for her. When Jake conceived the film in 2010, he set it in New England in a large snowbound home. After emigrating in 2013, he developed it for a New Zealand setting and shot it in Upper Hutt. “It’s a deeply psychological film with some horror genre elements, magical realism and esoteric content.”

Jake joined the University of Auckland eight years ago and lectures in Media and Screen Production in the Faculty of Arts. He’d been living in Providence, Rhode Island on the East Coast, and had founded two filmmaking programmes at American universities. He has achieved recognition from the Sundance Institute, Cannes, Venice, Guggenheim Foundation and other institutions and festivals, for writing, producing and directing low-budget short films (more than a dozen) and features (four). *Free in Deed* (2015) won Best Film in the Orizzonti Section at the Venice Film Festival.

Jake likes the creative process of both movie formats. “It can take a long time to get a film up and running, even more so if it is unconventional



“Any interest in studying film is good for the industry.”

– Associate Professor Jake Mahaffy

Photo: Elise Manahan

in style or content. Directors make fewer films compared to people in other roles who move from project to project as they arise. For me, short films are a way of keeping active. Shorts may take a few days or weeks to shoot and a few months in post-production but a feature takes years to complete.”

“I’ve finished two self-made features and two produced films and I understand how the scale of production affects the process. I have a better idea now of what I would attempt in a bigger budget versus no-budget or low-budget projects.”

Jake made his first film, *Egypt Hollow*, for his BFA thesis at the Rhode Island School of Design when he was 20, and it’s still the one he’s most proud of. It won several awards.

“It was a desperate and inventive film. After all this time, I would love to return to that style of creative process.”

Students in the undergraduate or the postgraduate Screen Production programmes don’t require a film background to be considered.

“We take 40 students each year in the undergraduate Screen Production major. The classes expose them to new ideas and new films. In the second year, they learn the fundamentals of production techniques and storytelling for screen.

“With the postgraduate Screen programme, which is limited to 18, the classes are specialised and students learn advanced skills while creating an original portfolio of work.”

The film production equipment available to students is high quality but postgraduate enrolments are limited by gear availability as well as the number of teachers on staff.

“New Zealand universities aren’t like the US in this regard. When I was a professor in the US, both of the programmes I started up had been initiated by targeted alumni endowments.”

But he says New Zealand is a great place to make films. While in the past Jake has pictured films in his mind set in the US, that’s changing.

“I’ve written a few recent things that are specifically intended to be shot here. It also avoids the mess of trying to travel for now.

“New Zealand has developed as a destination for the international screen industry and that’s set to grow even more, especially with so many people afraid of coronavirus.”

Behind the scenes, the importance of the film industry to the economy is already recognised. Manatū Taonga, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, is supporting the screen sector to develop a 10-year strategy setting out its aspirations to 2030. That includes supporting “sustainable careers” for New Zealand screen workers. The Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, Hikina Whakatutuki, is also working through options to continue to support the long-term success of the screen sector.

Jake says the ubiquity of media content and online distribution, as well as access to technology, have led to increased production and opportunities in many facets of the industry. There’s a global demand for media ‘content’.

“It has become difficult for any local mid- or low-budget film projects to get crew here because so many crew are hired out on longer-term, bigger-budget movies and Amazon and Netflix series.”

Jake says there are plenty of choices for students in their creative film endeavours.

“We’re not just teaching independent writer-director auteurs. There are different industry pathways whether as a line-producer, cinematographer, editor or documentarian. But the fundamentals are the same: understanding visual narrative, production techniques, organisational skills, collaboration and creativity.”

Several universities have recognised future potential in the screen sector and offer programmes; Victoria has developed a lab in Miramar, and Massey has a new course.

“I’d recommend Auckland for creatives interested in developing original material, but at the end of the day any interest in studying film is good for the industry – that’s the main thing.”

■ Denise Montgomery

See: auckland.ac.nz/screen-production and vimeo.com/jakemahaffy

IS U.S. DEMOCRACY TOO POLARISED TO SURVIVE?

Prior to 3 November, 2020, 35 percent of Republican voters believed the election was going to be unfair. President Donald Trump had told them so.

In July, he claimed, “2020 will be the most INACCURATE & FRAUDULENT Election in history.” At a Wisconsin campaign event in August, Trump warned his supporters that “the only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged”.

These statements coincide with hundreds of others that Trump has made since losing the popular vote (by nearly 3 million votes) to Hillary Clinton. That four-year campaign culminated in Trump’s announcement, at 2am on November 4, 2020, that he intended to remain in office regardless of the vote:

“This is a fraud on the American public,” he stated. “Frankly, we did win this election [and] we want all voting to stop. We don’t want them to find any ballots at 4 o’clock in the morning and add them to the list.”

With these words, Trump attempted to stop state election officials from counting lawfully cast ballots within the existing deadlines.

After all the major news networks had called the election for Biden, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo assured the world: “There will be a smooth transition to a second Trump administration.”

By that same time, the percentage of Republicans questioning the fairness of the vote had doubled. According to a Politico/Morning Consult Poll, 70 percent of Republican voters deny that Biden and Harris won a “free and fair election”. That figure dovetails with polls indicating that the percentage of conservatives who trust the mainstream media declined to 13 percent during Trump’s first term.

Historian Edward Luttwak defines a coup d’état as “a special form of politics that requires guns as an aid to persuasion”. However, Luttwak adds that coups usually fail if those guns have to be used. When it comes to an illegal seizure of political power, despots aim for a swift and bloodless takeover. That requires strong ideological support at grass-roots level. The goal, after all, isn’t to run the country through an oppressive apparatus of generals, jails, torture chambers, captive judges, congressional co-conspirators, and secret police. Rather, it’s to reshape worldviews in the leader’s favour, thus enabling a smooth takeover, a more exalted and profitable period of rule and, at all times, a lower risk of failure.

At the date of writing, it seems Trump’s power won’t prove authoritarian enough to compel



the other branches and levels of government to undermine the election. Despite Trump’s record number of judicial appointments and a million-dollar reward for evidence of voter fraud, his legal claims have fallen flat. Despite pressure from the President, it’s unlikely that state authorities will give Trump electoral votes that Biden earned. The same goes for the possibility that US attorneys would manufacture evidence of widespread voter fraud and that courts would credit that evidence under duress. Although they wouldn’t necessarily have had to use them, Trump and his co-conspirators probably would have needed guns to accomplish such things.

But what if Trump never really expected to pull off a coup d’état? What if his primary objective all along has been to stage a coup de théâtre? First and foremost, Trump’s refusal to concede may be a theatrical mechanism designed to generate greater ideological support.

Although he will likely fail to defy the vote and seize a second term in 2021, Trump has apparently convinced the majority of Republican voters that Biden’s victory is fraudulent. Only 5 percent of Republican members of the House, 10 percent of Republican senators, and 25 percent of Republican governors have recognised his status as President-elect. Which is to say, perhaps Trump has already succeeded in laying the foundation for a second term starting not in 2021, but in 2025.

What better way to prepare for the 2024 presidential race than by deeming Biden’s presidency illegitimate, undermining any possibility of bipartisan cooperation, and ensuring that America will be ungovernable?

That poisonous strategy was visible not just in Trump’s pre-election claims about voter fraud, but

also in his pre-election claims about Biden himself. At the Republican National Convention, Trump labelled Biden “a Trojan horse for socialism” and the leader of a “radical movement” that would “destroy ... the American way of life”. Days earlier, conservative activist Charlie Kirk had pronounced Trump “the defender of Western civilisation” who would “protect our families from the vengeful mob that seeks to destroy our way of life” and ensure that “America remains the greatest country to ever exist in the history of the world”.

Both speakers set the stage for an election that would be fought to the end. Kirk: “This election is a decision between preserving America as we know it and eliminating everything that we love.”

Trump: “This election will decide whether we save the American dream or whether we allow a socialist agenda to demolish our cherished destiny.”

Those were the bookends of the Republican Party’s appeal to voters. And voters responded. Trump received 73.5 million votes – 10.5 million more than he received in 2016 and the second-greatest showing in American presidential history, behind Biden’s 79.3 million votes.

Can a citizenry that disagrees on basic facts, core values, and the legitimacy of an election ever function as a political community? Can there be democracy among enemies? Trump has lost the election, but he may yet win the war. Nobody should envy Biden come January.

■ Associate Professor Timothy Kuhner (Faculty of Law) is the author of several books about political integrity. His latest is *Tyranny of Greed: Trump, Corruption, and the Revolution to Come* (Stanford University Press).

The views in this article reflect personal opinion and are not necessarily those of the University of Auckland.