

Karina Williams – Rainbow Judge – My Little Mate

Cruelly sawn off by cancer at 43, Karina's legacy will long endure. Her wicked smile and humour, her passion for South Auckland youth, her disdain of posers, her desperate need for a fag after a long meeting or heavy court session, her short legs in control of the dirty great big ancient blue gas guzzling Mercedes, the fun she had with a beer, a fag, music and a dance, her ragged moth-eaten but comfortable office chair, the dark blue pinstriped suit, her thick black hair, her total loyalty to friends, her high moral standards, her love for her daughter (her "baby"), her mana and the love and friendship so many of us shared with her.

Nearing the end of her battle, riddled with disease, Karina sought solace in traditional Maori spiritual healing, at the same time continuing with the horrible chemotherapy which finally proved too tough for her weakened body. In character, near the end, angry with friends sceptical of her ability to survive much longer, she decided only family and closest friends such as Laverne King and Ida Malosi could visit. That didn't help the grieving process for the rest of us although the extended tangi did – to an extent. Had I been asked to write about KW a year ago, I would have struggled to find words through the pain. The writing process was in the hands then of the brilliant and professional Catriona MacLennan whose accurate and perceptive tributes to our little mate were appreciated by all.

Born and raised in the small settlement of Ruatoki in the eastern Bay of Plenty, Karina regarded herself as a bit of a rat-bag as a kid, requiring her schoolteacher parents to send her to posh Auckland St Cuthbert's College to "straighten her out" (her words not mine). Not too many brown faces around her there and no te reo offered. New Zealand's premier Maori girls boarding school, Queen Victoria School, was two buses away but 20 minutes on the bike. She biked to her lessons through rain and shine, supported by her school which recognised her strengths and elected her Head Girl in her 7th form year. Her take on this was "I had a very perceptive Principal who fixed me up by giving me responsibility". Pity she didn't take the smokes away at the same time!

Karina lived and worked in her professional life as a barrister and Judge in South Auckland. Thirteen years as a criminal and youth court barrister/advocate plus tenancy adjudicator, firstly in South Auckland chambers at Otahuhu with Beecs, Paddy O'D, Ema A, Jonny Moses, Lisa T, Jo Baddeley, Colleen Newton, Peter McCoskery and others, before starting up Friendship Chambers at Manukau when the court

shifted there with me, Catriona McL, Panama L, John Adams, Colleen N, Simativa Perese, Justin Graham, Rosaline Fuata'i, Mary Tualotalava.

Her commitment to getting young Maori from South Auckland into law was legend. She mentored Maori law students and lawyers. She pressed them to accept responsibility for their race and to work in South Auckland. She was the soul mate, mentor and surrogate mother of a few errant old white males as well! She was the proverbial mother hen whenever we travelled on Mental Health District Inspectors' or Judges' meetings away from Auckland. On one such trip, a colleague was renamed "Nonu" by Karina, after an incident involving Jerry Collins and some of his mates in a Wellington bar at 3:00 am – details omitted!

Her appointment as a Judge was always going to happen. It was something she had to do as part of her journey and, in particular, to serve Maori youth in South Auckland. Her swearing-in was a Kapa Haka competition between Tuhoe (probably the loudest), Te Whakatohea, Tainui, Te Aupouri, and Ngaitai.

Karina sang like a princess and played netball like Irene van Dyke despite being a third her size. She played for Auckland. I caught her one day at Manurewa playing tennis. Apart from having trouble getting her breath she wasn't too bad.

She coached and composed for Kapa Haka groups and worked on the Mangere Bridge School Board, where they all loved her. She was humble. She was sensible. She was a young Maori woman, aware of her huge abilities, but modest to the extreme.

There were personal worries in her life and a few of us shared her agonies, helpless in the main to do anything but support her. Her daughter, Kataraina, is on her own interesting journey. At the age of 13, she is set for a tennis career which is what Karina and Kataraina's father, Richard, both wanted. She too goes to St Cuthbert's. My vocal ribbing of her decision to send her to a posh private school was countered by her argument that a brown girl from South Auckland needs every opportunity in this world compared with "you white middleclass honkies and your kids". I saw her discriminated against in the only Tenancy Tribunal case I had in front of her, many years ago. The male lawyer on the other side behaved badly – until a brilliant Williams "rocket" put him firmly in his place.

She knew what it was like to be young with brown skin and to be pulled up for warrant and licence checking “just because of what you look like”. When older, her brown face driving a flash Merc also continued to attract Police attention – “must have stolen it”!

Mental Health patients loved her in her role of District Inspector. Her empathy and genuine concern for those under disability transferred transparently to all. We worked together as the South Auckland DI’s. Never scared to question the bureaucratic gobbledy gook, she liked to preface questions with “Sorry, I’m just a little brown girl who knows stuff all, but what exactly are you talking about?!!”

This last year has been rough for her friends, her parents, her daughter Kataraina. The pain has probably become more acute in some ways. What a terrible waste. Such talent. What a future. She started up the Manukau Family Violence Court with Chief Judge Johnson and John Adams (the Judge!). “Binning wife bashers helped no one” she reckoned. Improve their behaviour. Stop them drinking, stop the cycle, then we might get somewhere in the long term.

She wasn’t just loved. She was adored. The respect for her from counsel and colleagues was total. She and her Judge soul mate, Ida Malosi (“Scary Ida”), shared the same love and respect. I have kept all the personal emails we exchanged. I often re-read them. I kept her texts and phone messages. Memories of Karina keep her with me in my work and life, as they do for so many others.

“Rainbow Judge”? Russell Johnson described her as such at her burial – a reference to the multi-ethnic makeup of Judges in the Manukau District Court and the end of dominance of mainly white males (“Yeah right” she might say!).

Ka kite. Haere ra my little mate.

Judge Phil Recordon

