30 Queer Lives

To my father for becoming a compassionate queer ally in his later years, and to my mother for her inspiring passion for life. To Yi Zhang for his unfaltering optimism, love and power to lift my spirits, and to Bain Duigan, instrumental in the conception of this book but no longer with us. And in memory of my dear friend, Sam Dunningham.

30 Queer Lives

Conversations with LGBTQIA+ New Zealanders

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Contents

6 Introduction

11 Grant Robertson

21 Takunda Muzondiwa

31 Leilani Tominiko

39 Nathan Joe

49 Eliana Rubashkyn

57 Scott Mathieson

67 Henrietta Bollinger

75 Andy Davies

87 Sawyer Hawker

97 James Dobson

107 Taupuruariki ‘Ariki’ Brightwell

121 Jonny Rudduck

135 Chlöe Swarbrick

145 David Sar Shalom Abadi

157 Sarah Bickerton

165 Peter Macky

179 Carole Beu

191 Gareth Farr

199 Shaneel Shavneel Lal

209 Tom Sainsbury

217 Six

231 Robbie Manson

241 Charlotte Goodyear

251 Meagan Goodman

261 Edward Cowley

271 Ross and John Palethorpe

285 Ramon Te Wake

295 Victor Rodger

303 Loughlan Prior

313 Ann Shelton

326 Further reading

327 About the author

Introduction

Before I began writing this book, I thought I had some understanding of the queer people of Aotearoa, having counted myself among them for decades.

As a gay Kiwi kid growing up through Auckland Catholic schools, books about All Blacks, Sir Edmund Hillary or wealthy businessmen were ubiquitous in the school library or bookshops, while stories about other New Zealanders were rarely, if ever, seen. My motley crew of friends and I wanted to read about New Zealanders we could relate to, but the singular elevation of the sports hero genre led to a sense of isolation, making us feel that perhaps we weren't 'real New Zealanders'.

The people you'll meet inside this book hail from a wide range of backgrounds of sexuality, gender, ethnicity and privilege, and they stretch the length of the country, from Panguru to Invercargill. Travelling across Aotearoa to bring their 30 stories together, meeting them and listening carefully to their life stories cut through landscapes of hardship and tragedy, love and triumph. As they opened a window to their interior worlds, each person I met expanded my own horizons and my understanding of the diversity of human experience.

Most of these people don't see themselves as role models, but to me

they certainly are. The stories of what drives them to forge ahead in the face of numerous obstacles are told with honesty and generosity. They show us how to live with integrity, optimism, hope, determination and compassion. They refuse to fade into the background, or to maintain a self-defeating façade. Instead, they channel their energies into creating lives of meaning, creativity and authenticity.

The conversations that form the base of the stories in this book took place between 2018 and 2021. The pandemic meant that the intimacy of face-to-face was sometimes replaced by technology, but even then I found that the willingness of people to share their lives far outweighed an occasional lagging internet connection.

I wanted to provide a platform for people to tell their stories without interpretation or commentary. The first-person conversational style was the most intimate and direct way to achieve this, so that readers could feel as though they were sitting in the room with us, witnessing the conversation unfold. Before we began, I took care to make it clear to each person that it was fine to discuss only the parts of their lives that they felt comfortable talking about, and I also invited them to ask me anything at any time. If my interviewees were prepared to be open about personal, emotional aspects of their lives, then it was only fair that I should offer the same candour.

Our conversations were rich with insight and hard-won wisdom. Often there was laughter and sometimes tears, and always it was an immense privilege. I hope I've done justice to the trust they've placed in me.

Some of the older people interviewed for this book told me that they've been astonished to see the progress that's been achieved over their lifetimes. As the saying goes, we see further when we stand on the shoulders of giants. In Aotearoa we remember people of

mana such as Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, who created one of our first gay liberation groups in the 1970s, when her travel visa was suspended on grounds of 'sexual deviance'; Carmen Rupe and Georgina Beyer, the groundbreaking transgender icons and activists; and Fran Wilde for her promotion of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill in 1986, which precipitated a more confident LGBTQIA+ community, one in which Rainbow Youth could be founded in 1989 and the hugely popular Hero parades, often attended by prime ministers of the day, could run throughout the 1990s. Louisa Wall's Civil Union Bill in 2004 led to the celebration of full marriage equality in 2013. As I write, New Zealand has the queerest parliament in the world, and the gay conversion therapy ban has passed its first reading.

But for all there is to celebrate, there remains much to fight for. Queer people are more likely to suffer from isolation, we are over-represented in mental health and suicide numbers, and some of us are still pushed away from our families as we simply attempt to live authentic lives.

We do not exist in separate silos, and our identities are not limited to one facet or aspect. Our experience of the world is shaped by myriad intersections — of race, gender, sexuality, disability, culture, age and economic status. In this book Takunda Muzondiwa talks about her Zimbabwean Christian family, Grant Robertson tells of life as a queer man and rugby fan at the highest levels of public service and scrutiny, Nathan Joe discusses being Asian and gay in Christchurch, Henrietta Bollinger recounts life at the intersection of disability and queerness, Leilani Tominiko relates being a transgender Samoan Kiwi in the world of wresting, and Ariki Brightwell considers the impacts of colonisation on Māori attitudes to queerness.

The book has revealed acceptance in unexpected places. Rural Southland and the New Zealand military upend their image as conservative bastions while the Royal New Zealand Ballet, despite being welcoming of queer dancers and choreographers, still finds the telling of queer stories a challenge.

I hope this book encourages empathy and understanding, challenges stereotypes of what a queer life can be, and offers courage and hope to people struggling in their own lives. Although this book is now complete, I've come to see that learning from each other is a lifelong project. Everyone has a story, everyone's life has something to teach us, if only we have the sensitivity to ask the right questions and take the time to listen.

Most of all, writing this book has taught me that despite all our uniqueness, what we have in common is much stronger than our differences. I hope the stories in this book help you find the courage and inspiration to show your own true colors.

Matt McEvoy
Auckland
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Kathmandu

Grant Robertson

Grant Robertson is New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister, the MP for Wellington Central, the Minister of Finance, and Minister for Infrastructure, Racing, and Sport and Recreation. He was first elected to Parliament in 2008.

Dad decided in his mid-thirties that he wanted to get out of banking and become a minister — a Presbyterian minister not a government minister — so we moved to Dunedin from Palmerston North for his religious training. I was about six years old. Our social life consisted of church families and kids at the youth group. Dad was also a rugby referee and, for me, going to Carisbrook, the stadium not far from where we lived, was the non-church part of my weekend. I'm the youngest of three boys, so I'd tag along with my brothers to sit and watch games all day. I was obsessed with it and could name all the players. Rugby was a big thing; my eldest brother never played but my middle brother and I did. The blokey stereotypes of New Zealand men were all around me in the seventies and eighties, and I certainly sensed this, although I never felt that I couldn't be myself; I wasn't put in a box by my parents, never told what I had to be, and I still love rugby.

It was quite a traditional religious upbringing, but not evangelical — Mum was more concerned with social justice than Christian doctrine. A group of families sponsored a Polish refugee family to come and live in New Zealand, however I certainly saw the other side of the church during the Homosexual Law Reform debate. I have a vivid memory

of being at a church rafting picnic when a petition *against* the reform was being handed around for signatures. Yes, most people signed it; it was enthusiastically received. That was the mid-eighties, and I was about 14 years old. I respect the social values I grew up with, but the realisation that a large group within my own community was so conservative and unwilling to support the rights of gay people struck me very hard.

At home, Mum and Dad were on opposite sides of the homosexual law reform issue. I remember some vigorous dinner table debates that caused friction. Dad was more traditional than Mum and he was against the law reform, and yet later in life he was enormously supportive of me. When I was moving out of home years later, and going through all these boxes of things I'd kept, I found some old newspaper clippings showing which way Parliament members had voted. I don't remember keeping them, but clearly it was important to me and it shows the whole issue was very live in my mind even as a teenager. I stopped going to church soon after. The church has struggled over the years with gay issues and ordaining gay ministers; to this day they still haven't sorted it out. My mother was an archivist for them for 25 years, so I was kept abreast of the ongoing debates.

Although the church was difficult, I owe a lot to those values of social justice that were taught. In my maiden speech in Parliament in 2008, I referenced some of what my mother instilled in my brothers and me: that we should treat others as we'd wish to be treated; we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers; work hard and you'll do well — that Calvinist tradition creeping in. At the same time, I was certainly aware of the church being a negative force in terms of human rights.

King's High School in Dunedin was a lower-income working-class school. I do have to sometimes clarify to people that it was quite the opposite of King's College, Auckland. Through those years, I was becoming aware of my sexuality, which was difficult in a conservative, boys-only environment. The reform bill being such a prominent news

story pushed me to wonder if it was me they were talking about on TV and the radio, but most of the gay stereotypes I was seeing didn't feel like me at all. I went through phases of feeling different, but then thinking that maybe everyone feels like this and eventually I'll like girls.

That waxed and waned until I was about 16. By then I was quite sure I was gay and eventually I told one or two close friends, which led to a particularly unfortunate incident. There was a big house party and I wasn't invited, which was unusual. I decided to go anyway and in a reckless moment of self-indulgence, I bought a bottle of gin and proceeded to drink the whole thing on the way there. By the time I arrived, I was completely off my face. On the front door of the house was a note saying 'no fags'. I don't remember much after that, but apparently I let fly at a few people. The host called my parents to come and get me. I got home and was violently ill.

I probably should have come out to my parents then, but I didn't because I was just so embarrassed about the whole thing. The rest of that year was a struggle with worrying about who knew and who didn't, and I withdrew deeply into myself. I tried to put all those anxieties in a box, and focus on study and not think about it. When I became head boy at King's, I took girls to the formal balls.

At Otago University I did a politics degree. It was good because I met other gay people living normal lives and learnt more about it. In my second year I moved into a flat and everyone in my circle knew. So I thought, I have to come out to my parents now. I organised to come home for dinner on a Sunday night to tell them. Events did not go according to plan. I got a call from Mum the day before the dinner saying she was upset and needed to come and see me. I immediately thought someone had told her, but actually it was much worse. My father had been arrested for theft as a public servant. As an

accountant, he'd been stealing clients' money for a long time. It was a complete shock to the family — and also meant I parked the coming out till a little later.

Dad went to prison. While he was in there, I finally told Mum. She obviously knew, as mothers do. Some of her first words were 'don't get AIDS', which I suppose was understandable in 1992. I told Dad when he was released from prison. He was a bit annoyed because he'd heard rumours through people he knew at university and thought I should have told him, but he was incredibly supportive after that. So, I didn't get to come out in quite the manner I'd planned.

I became president of the Otago University Students' Association in my third year, and then president of the New Zealand Union of Students. Jim Bolger was prime minister at the time; he referred to me as a fulltime paid-troublemaker. That was definitely a career highlight. How radical was I? Well, the International Socialists criticised me for not being radical enough while the Young Nats thought I was the harbinger of all evil, so it felt like I was getting the balance about right. I've always been on the left, always believed in the power of institutions to make change. Our focus was on student welfare: fees had increased sharply while allowances were being cut back. We led occupations at every university in the country in 1996, and kept student issues on the agenda until the Clark government came in and made some of those changes we'd fought for.

After graduating, I was recruited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Being a National government, I was a little surprised they hired me, but to their credit they wanted more diversity in the diplomatic ranks and so I was posted off to Sāmoa to manage New Zealand's aid programme, and to see that it was used effectively for basic education, women's empowerment and healthcare.

My next posting was to the United Nations in New York. It was spectacular for both my career and my queer life. I'd only been to a few gay places before, like Casper's Bar in Wellington and the Staircase and

Legend clubs on Karangahape Road. In New York I enjoyed the huge dance parties but felt more comfortable in slightly grungier bars in the East Village, with their jukeboxes playing the alternative music I liked. And by then I'd met Alf. In 1998, a friend, Dean Knight, was assembling a rugby team called the Krazy Knights to play a match against the Ponsonby Heroes, the world's first inter-gay rugby match. Dean's a law lecturer at Victoria University now and still active in gay issues, but I wasn't easy to recruit; it took a lot of persuading. I loved rugby but my previous experience of rugby culture wasn't great and I'd stopped playing because of the distasteful, homophobic macho culture — and I was older and didn't want to get hurt.

But Dean persisted, agreeing to let me play number 8, so I finally caved and said yes. It was brilliant fun. It allowed me to finish my rugby career in an enjoyable setting, while other guys got to exorcise emotional demons they still felt from being excluded from rugby all through school. Alf was the halfback; 10 years later we had our civil union in front of a Presbyterian minister, and now I'm the Minister for Sport it feels like parts of my life have come full circle.

One of the proudest achievements of my career was at the UN in New York. Alf joined me there about a year later. I was often invited to diplomatic dinners and most people would bring their spouse. I asked around and discovered there was something called the 'blue book', which named every diplomat at the United Nations, their nationality and the name of their spouse, and was used to help organise official UN events and dinner invitations. Alf was not listed alongside my name as my spouse.

When it was time for the new year's blue book to be produced, I asked them to list Alf Kawai, but they said that's not possible because the United States doesn't recognise same-sex relationships. I challenged them on

this discrimination; it took stubborn persistence, but I won. They finally relented, changing UN diplomatic protocol and listing Alf's name with mine. As soon as it happened, there was a wave of congratulatory phone calls and meeting requests from diplomats across the UN.

As finance minister, there's not usually a partner invited to meetings, but attending sporting events, I'm often expected to bring a partner. People have always been fantastic about making Alf feel welcome; he is a private person so he doesn't chase opportunities to attend events, but where there's a good case for it we're not shy. I do realise I'm a white male in a position of status and so our experiences would seem effortless compared to others in the queer community.

Was I worried about people's reaction to a minister of sport being gay? No, I asked for the job. I said to Jacinda, I really want the sports portfolio. I believe there's an overemphasis on sport in New Zealand. We don't have a good balance; we should value our arts and culture much more, particularly in boys' schools like the one I went to. The government is trying to address this in the way we diversify the honours system to be not only sport and business, so people such as Annie Crummer, the Topp Twins and Joy Cowley have been honoured in recent years. Theatres and performing arts venues are vitally important creative places where non-conforming people of all varieties can be themselves and explore their talents.

I don't think sport is the only driver of the aggressive macho culture in New Zealand, but it's certainly wrapped up in the same cultural fabric. The whole idea of the archetypal Kiwi bloke being a fearless stoic is slowly changing with the likes of John Kirwan's openness about mental health and depression, but the stereotype remains and it does make it hard for young men to talk about problems and emotions. It's still seen as unmanly to ask for help, an admission of vulnerability. There were times when I wasn't able to articulate my own feelings, which probably led to a period of drinking too much at university. We can't separate sport from

politics because they're both part of our country's identity.

A problem occurs when a public clash of beliefs results in hurtful rhetoric, such as when Israel Folau made those comments ['God's plan for homosexuals is HELL . . . unless they repent of their sins']. This was an important moment for New Zealand rugby and I was encouraged by the many sportspeople who stood up and said they didn't agree with such damaging comments. Some of the All Blacks wore rainbow-coloured laces in solidarity with queer people, and it was uplifting to have those guys say 'its OK to be you'. TJ Perenara, the All Blacks halfback at the time, said Polynesian sexuality had always traditionally been diverse and I think he donated some money to gay rugby teams.

Music has been a big part of my life; my mother played guitar and piano and there was always music around the house. Unfortunately, I myself am tone-deaf and can't play an instrument or sing, but at uni in Dunedin I'd be out watching bands every weekend: The Chills, The Bats, The Clean, Straitjacket Fits. Brilliant times. And if you can't actually play music, one way into the music scene is to carry around the sound gear, so that's what I did. Then I learnt to do the lighting, and from there I started managing bands, such as a band Matt Heath was in called Kid Eternity, and a novelty band that accidentally became quite popular called Too Many Daves. There's some truly dreadful footage of me on YouTube where I'm bouncing around the Empire Tavern with them, singing a song called 'Bollocks to the Real World'.

I think being queer inclines people towards the liberal, progressive end of the political spectrum, which has been the strongest supporter of minorities and social progress. But as barriers are broken, some within the community often move to more conservative positions. The gay male community has always had a strong libertarian streak and since decriminalisation in 1986, this has become more apparent. The lesbian

community has remained champions of social equality and maintained strong links to the left and activist groups. Labour has traditionally been good at embracing social causes and equality as an objective. I would still ask gay men, having achieved a number of milestones that make life easier for themselves, to have a sense of responsibility to their community and please not to forget others who are struggling.

We definitely still need places that represent queer culture, whether it's a bar or in films or books; equally, people should feel comfortable walking down the street holding hands — that shouldn't have to be only in a queer space. While we've made great progress in my lifetime, as a white homosexual male many obstacles have been removed for me that still exist for others in the queer community. For some people it still hasn't got better, I'm very aware of that. We have to keep supporting them.

Occasionally, I do have a moment where I step back and consider where I am — budget days, for example; billions of dollars that is not just dollars and cents but people's lives. At those times, I realise the privilege and responsibility of the job. We all have moments of self-doubt, we shouldn't deny that. Every time we're faced with a new challenge, we should expect some uncertainty, and not pretend we're superheroes but realise that we're humans with frailties and anxieties.

I feel optimistic about the future of New Zealand and its queer people, but we can't pat ourselves on the back now that we have marriage equality and say we're done. It's a long path before everyone in society is accepted and has the freedom to be themselves, but I have confidence. I see us on a journey from tolerance to acceptance, and then to the embracing of queer people. The further we travel down that path, the better the world we'll be living in.

Takunda Muzondiwa

Takunda Muzondiwa is a performance artist and poet from Zimbabwe. She is best known for her speech at the 2019 Race and Unity Speech Awards, the video of which made global headlines and has been viewed over one million times.