

20ish questions for 20ish years

An interview with John Harrington

Rod Baxter

Locating the evolution of youth work ethics from 1997 to 2017

We recognise that ethics started before 1997. We want to go right back to understand: Where have we come from? Where are we at? Where are we going?

Rod: Let's start with you, John. What was youth work like when you started?

John: When I started youth work, I started as a volunteer. I was involved in Youth for Christ (YFC) who trained leaders and also gave you opportunities to practice – even at young ages. So I was thrown into running a youth club called Campus Life at the age of 18, with the support of some older people who were experienced. They just said, “you can do this John” so I was leading this group of about 96 young people.

R: Whoa!

J: They trusted me to lead them. I didn't have a lot of leadership experience except I'd been involved in Boys Brigade. They sort of saw potential in you and let you go and try. They'd debrief with you afterwards and give you some feedback. So that was my introduction as a leader, as a volunteer... I guess as a youth worker, although I wouldn't have even called myself a youth worker back then, I would've just said, “I'm a youth leader”.

R: When did you first call yourself a youth worker?

J: I made a conscious decision to apply for an YFC internship that trained you on the theory and practice of youth work. You could either do an internship with Campus Life or through Te Hau Ora (which is now Te Ora Hou) and I wanted to work with young people that no one saw potential in and didn't have the same opportunities as others. I wanted to

work with those young people, I was really passionate about that.

I was turned down the first time I applied; they thought I was too young and needed some more experience. They weren't convinced I was the right person. I had to wait a year but I was really determined. I asked if I could go and work with Stanmore Boys Home once a week voluntarily. I sat and had meals with the boys and played basketball with them. It was really informal youth work, you could say, in an institution. I actually ended up doing that for three years. I was asked to run a programme on life skills, but it was the worst thing I did.

R: Really?

J: Yeah, because of the informal nature of having a meal with the young people, having casual conversations after dinner or as we played basketball or pool; it was a really good way to form a relationship with them. I got to know them really well. Once I started running a programme with them it had to become structured. I had kids running off. It was a different thing, it was just different.

R: So when the youth work relationship shifted from being informal to more formalised?

J: Yeah it changed the nature of that work. I still had the relationship with them though, because in institutions like that you've got young people coming-and-going and you soon work out it's the same young people. It's the same young people getting in trouble and in front of court.

With this experience, I applied to do the internship again; I was accepted and sent to Ōtara, in 1983 – to be trained as a youth worker. The training was to stay there, and whenever I was ready, to set up Te Hau Ora in Christchurch. I was 22 years old.

My training was vast, from hands-on youth work to running camps, and we started running clubs. It wasn't hard to get referrals, a lot of it was just engaging with young people in the neighbourhoods where we were living. The way we set the whole programme up was through camps. We had so many young people we had to split into not just one, but two camps. So we took the young people out of Ōtara to get to know them in a camp environment, which was the best way to do it. It allowed us to form a relationship with these young people and when we were back in Ōtara it allowed us the privilege of going to see them in their homes.

Most of the young people we were working with didn't have telephones and we actually had to go and visit them. It's a part of youth work that I see is missing now. You met their whānau, you met their dog, and you went into their house and you saw where they lived. The challenge for me, being a Pākehā, going into Pacific Island and Māori homes, was there was no trust with Pākehā. The Pākehā they usually saw were either the Police knocking on their door or a social worker coming to see them.

I can vividly remember turning up to a house, knocking on the door and they'd see me and they wouldn't answer the door – because I was a Pākehā. I made the mistake of having a clipboard with me [laughs]. I had a few flyers and I needed them clipped down so they wouldn't fly away but I soon learned not to do that. The only thing that would get me in the house was when the young person I was coming to see would see me and would tell their family, "it's John! It's alright!"

R: The telephone and unannounced home visits are good examples of aspects of youth work that have changed. What other things were amazing about youth work in the 1990s that we might have lost now?

J: We used to run a lot of activities that... [sighs] It's hard 'cos I don't want to sound like we didn't care about young people's safety, because we certainly did. I can remember on a camp we ran in Ōtara, on a farm, we had go-karts and motorbikes and trail bikes and these kids had never ridden motorbikes in their life. They'd get on and they'd fall off and it was hilarious. A kid, who'd never ridden a go-kart before, would get on and all the other kids would chase the go-kart around the paddock. They were so excited! And it was fine. Fortunately no one was hurt.

A lot of the youth work we did back then, we did things on the spur of the moment. There was a lot of gang tension in Ōtara when I was there. Lots of the young people we were working with were in street gangs. There were so many street gangs. Quite often they'd have organised fights, and we'd hear about them because the young people we were working with would tell us. As youth workers, we'd jump in a van and we'd go down to the town centre. We'd try get weapons off young people and get them in the van. The Police would turn up and there would be a standoff between the Police and these young people. And we're talking about a hundred young people.

So we'd go over to the Police and let them know what we were trying to do. I remember this one policewoman looking at me and going "what are you doing here?" I said, "well, I'm a

youth worker" and she asked "what difference are you making?" I replied, "Oh, here, I've got a few knives that I got off some young people and I'd better give them to you, because I don't want to be walking around with them." She was in total shock and asked, "how'd you get those?" and I said, "they gave them to me."

We had a relationship with these young people and they trusted us. We could say things like "look, if you hang around here, you're going to end up in trouble and we don't want to have to end up supporting you in court. You just don't wanna go there." We'd get them in the van and we'd go for a ride. It's dark. We'd go to the beach, we'd have some towels with us, and they'd go for a swim. They were really pumped in the van when we were going there because they wanted to be in town where the action was. But by the time we got to the beach (it took a wee while to get there), by the time we'd gone for a swim and come back, they were totally different. We'd have a feed of fish and chips and take them home.

What we didn't do was think about things like kids swimming in the sea with jeans on. But back in the 80's that was youth work practice – and it worked. It got them off the street. It got them away from a potential situation where they would end up getting arrested. That was our way of intervening. It was crisis intervention.

Looking back, would you do that now? Ethically? You wouldn't. Too many risks. First, we're taking young people to the beach in the dark and we're letting them swim in their jeans. We could've lost them. We wouldn't have seen anyone if they'd drowned.

R: These are amazing stories. What other things happened back then that would not happen now?

J: We used to engage with young people through activities. We were trying to have lots of fun, stretch their confidence and take some risks. So we used to play games that you wouldn't play now, like 'Bullrush', 'Storm the Heights', (dare I say it) 'Fire Soccer', 'Bonnet Riding' where you'd get an old bonnet with a curve in it, tie it behind a car, in a paddock,

kids spinning out... Young people loved it. We used to play 'Fridge box races' where you'd put a big fridge box over your body and run into each other and kids would get hurt, even though the boxes gave you some protection. These activities were really fun! Young people used to come to our programmes because of those activities. You can't do those things now.

R: One of the things I remember you talking about in ethics workshops is youth workers rewarding young people with cigarettes, can you tell us about that?

J: Yeah so, some context... Back in the '80s and late '70s, a lot of youth workers smoked. A lot of social workers and people in the caring professions smoked. The majority of youth workers smoked when I got into youth work, even in faith-based organisations. It wasn't seen as a bad thing to be seen smoking around kids, or even with them.

When I was volunteering at Stanmore Boys Home, young people would have to hand over their cigarettes when they came in. They were told that, for good behaviour, they'd be allowed to go and have a smoke with the staff. In the context, it wasn't seen as unethical practice, it wasn't challenged. And to be honest, y'know, youth workers formed really good relationships with young people when they shared a smoke with them. Standing outside the youth centre, or even inside back then, the conversation was quite different. It was more relaxed, cigarettes seem to relax people. You were seen as a good youth worker if you gave them to a young person that couldn't afford their own. They'd even share cigarettes.

R: In those days, did youth workers ever discuss ethics?

J: We certainly discussed safety. Reflecting back, we did put safety plans in place for those activities. There was always a first aid kit available. We realised that, in these activities, some young people might end up getting hurt, so what would we put in place? The thing we didn't have at our fingertips were cellphones; if something did go wrong, you couldn't get help straight away.

But, yeah, youth workers didn't want to see young people getting hurt. We didn't intentionally go out to run activities like that. It wasn't, y'know "they've gotta toughen up", it wasn't like that. Not at all.

Ethics... I guess we started talking about things like "should you do that?" and whether it was "right or wrong?" But the word "ethics" was not something you heard a lot. Even with the training I had at YFC, we never discussed ethics. We talked about how to be a good leader.

R: When do you first recall conversations about ethics?

J: 1995. I don't know if it was the first time. There was a hui in Ngaruawahia for the purposes of the sector coming together and talking about forming a national body because the Industry Training Organisation (ITO) wanted to consult about the qualifications they were starting to write. The Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) funded and organised the hui, after the ITO asked the sector to run the hui and DIA supported that. One of the things that came up at the hui was "who's driving the waka?" around setting up a national body.

On the programme there was a discussion on 'youth work ethics'. I'm not even sure who put that on the programme. Maybe it was part of talking about a national body, because the thing that's common with such bodies is they have a code of ethics. There were about 100 people at the Hui and there were maybe 20 at the Ethics Workshop. There was a discussion about what sort of clause headings should be in a code of ethics for youth workers. And if you look at our Code of Ethics today, most of those are in there. So they came up with the obvious things like: youth workers will not beat up a young person, will not sell them drugs, will not have sex with them. The things that people know are common sense. And there were things like

confidentiality, empowering young people, not taking advantage of them...

So that workshop presented back to the wider hui. One of the clauses they'd written created a huge discussion and controversy. It said: "youth workers will not use mind-altering drugs within the hours of their work". When do the hours of youth work finish? Some believed what a youth worker does in their personal life is their private business; so long as it doesn't impinge on our professional life, we can do what we like. So you're saying that it's OK to smoke dope or do whatever so long as it doesn't affect your work? Well, it does actually affect your work.

Unfortunately it split the hui into those who smoked dope and those who didn't. In some ways it was good that this discussion happened because it was the reality, it was where the sector was at that time. But at the same time it took away from the really good work that group had done on those ethics clauses.

The National Youth Council, back in the 1970s, I don't know if they had discussions about ethics, but they certainly had discussions about organisations collaborating together, supporting each other and sharing resources. They'd done research into the needs of young people at the time and actually written a book about it. You can't disregard all the work that had happened beforehand, to lead up to this hui in Ngaruawahia.

I don't think the sector was ready to set up a national body. We weren't unified enough. We weren't ready for it. We were sort of forced into it because the ITO was writing qualifications for us anyhow. So the Aotearoa Youth Workers Collective (AYWC) was formed in 1997 and it didn't last long; it went down in 2001, because there wasn't support from the wider sector.

R: So what happened after the 1995 hui?

J: After Ngaruawahia we ran a South Island Youth Workers Hui and we covered the same issues, we ran the same programme.

R: And how did ethics go there?

J: Yeah that was a much better conversation. We still had a conversation about that clause on mind-altering substances, but that was where Canterbury probably became really serious about ethics. Canterbury was actually given the mandate to write the constitution for the AYWC and ethics sort of sat with that. Other regions had other responsibilities – Wellington had 'membership' I think.

R: So there was 'ethical interest' in Canterbury?

J: Yeah, definitely. But it didn't go anywhere for a while because of capacity. It wasn't until I started actually working full-time for the CYWC in 1997, and this is probably where the journey started.

R: So how was the Canterbury Youth Workers Collective formed?

J: In 1990 I got involved in the Canterbury Youth Workers Training Forum, originally set up by DIA under Muldoon's Government, which eventually became the Canterbury Youth Workers Collective. I really valued the networking. We got to know each other really well. There weren't many of us to start with.

R: And how did Canterbury decide to create a Code of Ethics?

J: I was personally very passionate about ethics for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I was trained by a person who was a paedophile with young people he worked with including some of the youth I was working with in Otara. Secondly, there was another high profile sexual abuse case in a residential house; there used to be lots of these houses for street kids, run by well-meaning people, but lots of stuff went down in those houses.

In Christchurch, there was a tragedy in 1996 in the 'House of Hope'. Seven street kids were killed by a fire, in what they called the 'snake pit', where they were inhaling glue. One of them accidentally set fire to some of the

“Would you give a young person cash, if they asked you for cash to get on the bus?”

glue and the whole place just blew up. They were killed instantly. There was an inquiry and youth workers, social workers, people... were just trying to blame each other.

There were several cases of youth workers taking advantage of young people, including sexual abuse, and it was just tragic. It marred our practice. I was determined to do something about that.

The first day I started working for the CYWC, I wrote this long letter to the Minister of Youth Affairs at the time, Deborah Morris. The letter was about the state of youth work in our country and it included these events that were happening. Basically even if these people went to prison, they could get out and they could just carry on as youth workers. There was nothing in place, nobody to hold them accountable; they couldn't be stripped of their profession. There was evidence of this actually happening.

When Deborah Morris came to Christchurch and met with me, she asked what we were going to do about it. And I told her I wanted to write some ethical standards that our sector agrees to. We've had some discussion and youth workers already say that it's not ok to beat young people up or have sex with them or sell them drugs. Deborah encouraged me to work with the Ministry of Youth Affairs. Harry Tam was working for the Ministry then and he had the portfolio for 'youth work training'. They actually had someone in the Ministry back then who held that portfolio. I expressed to Harry that I didn't really have the mandate to write a code of ethics but I'd love to be involved. Harry said to me, "John, just do it. Just do it. Who else is going to do it, John? No one. So just do it."

I thought "Oh crap – I can't write a code of ethics!" But I remembered I had people around me in Canterbury who could help, so I committed to writing a draft.

Around that time I was off to a conference in Australia. There were lots of workshops about youth work as a profession. It was really interesting, a totally different perspective from what we'd been discussing. They were way ahead. I went to a workshop on ethics led by Howard Sercombe. In

Western Australia he'd facilitated a workshop called 'herding the cats' with youth workers, a bit like what probably happened at Ngaruawahia, and they wrote a code of ethics. It was short bullet points on three pages. I went to Howard after the workshop and I asked if I could take it back to New Zealand.

R: How was the first edition of Canterbury's COE created? And received?

J: I met with the CYWC management team and showed them Sercombe's starting point. I mentioned how I thought we could develop it, including some bicultural stuff and references to the Treaty. We established a working group and wrote a draft. There was a group of about five of us and Jane Zintl was one of those. Because Jane had a legal background, she very kindly wrote some policies to sit alongside the code. She spent an incredible amount of time writing those, and it was all voluntarily. To her credit, she was really passionate about it.

We worked on the code in 1997 and during 1998 we held consultation around it. We consulted with Māori, we asked youth workers what they thought about it and we ran several workshops. We made amendments and finally launched it in 1999. It was quite a long process.

R: Was there much resistance?

J: No. I don't think so. Back then the sector was much smaller and we had good relationships with each other. And CYWC had grown hugely in 1997, we had more members and we engaged more widely. It was no longer just about those who were working with young people "at risk". Our goal was to represent the diversity of youth work being carried out in our region.

R: What was the first complaint like?

J: I can remember it vividly. We had two complaints officers in place, one of whom was Jane, our most experienced person, and she was actually away at the time. So it was handled by the other person, who was pretty inexperienced and unfortunately the process wasn't followed through our policies. It was a real learning curve for us. It could have potentially turned to custard for us.

R: What was the nature of the complaint, broadly?

J: Oh it was about a youth worker who had believed they'd seen another youth worker manhandling a young person in a public place.

R: What was the outcome?

J: We ended up bringing the two parties together for some restorative process. To get to that point was quite a drama. There was a challenge back from the person who had been complained about, and their manager, and rightly so. The best thing about all of this was that it enabled us to get it right the next time. We certainly learned from our mistakes. But it wasn't the best way to start! The outcome was that the complaint was dropped after mediation.

R: How many complaints has the CYWC had in total?

J: There were probably four that were followed through with the Ethics Committee between 1999 and 2005. They were varying degrees. A young person put a complaint forward and they decided to drop the complaint.

This is one of the things we learnt about our complaints process, even though we tried to make it as supportive as possible for young people to make complaints if they needed to, at the end of the day, the process is very much an adult one. It's just really hard for a young person to go through that and feel supported, or free from the threat that the youth worker in question will know who it is. In this case, it was unfortunate because the young person had a valid complaint and it's unfortunate it wasn't carried through.

The other thing to note is that we could only take complaints from people who were members of the Collective. So if they weren't a member, we couldn't do anything about the situation. Other than encourage the complainant to approach the youth worker's employer.

The complaints officers got lots of phone calls. After they'd tease it out, and clarify the written component of the process, it often wouldn't go any further. There were definitely a significant number of complaints received by the complaints officers

that never went any further, simply because they were asked to write it down. We would put it out to our sector that the whole point of this was to stop gossiping and backstabbing. If you've got a real issue with a youth worker's practice, then make a complaint and deal with it professionally through that process. Some people would ring up and discover that their complaint didn't actually breach the CYWC Code of Ethics.

R: What was it like monitoring the Canterbury Code every two years?

J: We reviewed the Code every two years by taking submissions from our members. We had some really interesting submissions that made changes to our Code. I can talk about two in particular.

One was around smoking. With the new legislation and 'smoke free' policy, an increased awareness about health impacts and the banning of smoking cigarettes in public places, a discussion was created about "where does this fit with youth work?" In particular in youth centres and places where young people hang out, and engage with youth workers who smoke. The submission said, "youth workers should not smoke with young people." The decision was unanimous. If a youth worker wants to have a cigarette, they need to go away and do that somewhere else, away from where young people are.

The other part of this submission was, "youth workers should not give young people cigarettes." And this created a huge response from those people who worked in mental health, in residence and with young people who were really strung out or suicidal. These youth workers said that if they were with a young person in a crisis state and they asked for a cigarette, they'd give it to them. The person who made the submission had not actually thought this through. It raised a big question and several organisations proclaimed "we cannot sign up to this code of ethics".

Then someone asked if a young person wanted a joint, would you give them a joint? Or if a young person wants to go to McDonald's and eat twenty Big Macs cos they're

strung out? It was a good discussion, in the context of our societal views on smoking and where we sat with it in the caring profession, working with young people? It informed the CYWC code and the national code.

The second memorable submission that was made was about a specific clause in our code. Roughly it said, "youth workers will not take advantage of young people by swaying them to their religious views". This came from an organisation that worked with young people after they'd felt proselytised and they needed support for how that affected them. The outcome of the discussion was that this shouldn't just be about evangelism, but it should be about any of our political, cultural, personal views and not swaying young people to believe what we believe. It was actually a faith-based organisation that volunteered to rewrite the clause based on feedback.

The best thing about the process was discussion. It brought the sector together. We took submissions at our AGM. Submissions were distributed in advance and people came with ideas. It was hard for the person facilitating, because discussions got pretty heated!

R: So inspiring! It's a shame this doesn't happen anymore.

J: Yeah, it's like that earlier conversation we were having about how youth work has changed. You're right, the national code, as it is now, it probably is time to look at what has changed. That was the reason why Canterbury wanted to revise it every two years because we realise, youth work practice changes. We published several editions. Seven, I think. At least four... five? Check with Jane.

R: So how did we go from a Canterbury code to a national code?

J: It was natural in many ways. CYWC had been asked to share the code with other regions. Jane and I were invited to Tauranga, the West Coast, Nelson, Whanganui... There were youth work networks there, they were interested in ethics and they even wanted to adopt the code. We formed relationships with people who were on the same page.

R: When, how and why was the National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa formed?

I decided we could do better than just visit and talk about the code. Since we'd formed relationships, we could stay connected. Telephone conference calls started in 2002 with a group of passionate youth workers around the country who wanted to see youth work develop. This was the shaping of the National Youth Workers Network, and a big part of that was the code of ethics.

Canterbury weren't precious about their code actually and were prepared to support the development of youth work nationally. But we didn't think it was a good idea just to adopt the CYWC code because it needed to be owned by the sector nationally.

R: How was the first national COE written?

J: We travelled to as many regions as we could around New Zealand. We did a roadshow in 2007 throughout the country, 'Let's Not Be UnCode'. We'd just become incorporated as the National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa. [John transitioned from his role with CYWC after several years to establish NYWNA]. We went to Kaitia and to Invercargill and virtually everywhere in between. We covered lots of regions, as much of the country as possible.

We basically ran a workshop asking two questions: "do you think we should have a national code of ethics?" There was certainly a unanimous decision about that. And then, "ok, if we're going to have a national code, what should it look like?" We didn't even take the CYWC Code with us and we didn't show an example. People knew there was a Canterbury code, but we said "we want this to be open, a blank page, so we're starting from scratch." We did it a bit like they did at the Ngaruawahia hui.

We invited youth workers to imagine what clause headings would need to be included in a national code. We saved the detail under each clause heading for later. Then we asked people to consider all the varied contexts youth work is carried out in. We threw some ethical scenarios around. For example, some youth

workers in New Zealand actually have young people come into their houses for pyjama parties. In contrast, some youth work in New Zealand includes casework, and they'd never do that. The first youth workers would ask the caseworkers, "how on earth do you form a relationship with young people if you're not spending time with them? If they don't even know where you live?"

These scenarios prompted debate, and people didn't even realise, but we were starting to define our practice. If you say it's unethical to hold pyjama parties at a youth group leader's house, then you're basically saying "well that's not youth work. We don't accept that." Is that what we're saying?

Other scenarios included giving your personal phone numbers and visiting a young person in their house without anyone else home. So yeah we were thinking about ethical dilemmas but we were also acknowledging that this happens in youth work. It's the reality of our practice. Would you give a young person cash, if they asked you for cash to get on the bus? We know that happens, but is it ethical practice to do that as a youth worker? Let's have some ethical discussion around that.

We talked about how the nature of youth work means there are lots of young people involved; we've got lots of younger youth workers. What impact does that have on ethical practice? We've got people living in rural communities. We've got Māori and Pasifika, should that make a difference to our ethical practice, how they work and how Pākehā work? All these questions emerged and it was all collated. If I remember rightly, we ended up with about 120 clause headings.

So when the NYWNA set up the COE working group, it was strategically put together. We wanted to ensure that we covered as many of the contexts of youth work as we could. We covered the voluntary sector, the LGBT/rainbow sector, we were totally committed to our bicultural partnership and had tangata whenua representation, we included real grassroots youth work, faith-based, adventure based learning (ABL), disabilities, Pasifika... Believe it or not, we managed to pull it off.

We first met in December 2007 and had the Code completed by May 2008.

Initially we set an open time frame to write the Code. We needed funding

to publish it. The Ministry of Youth Development offered funding as long as we completed the code ready for the Involve Conference to be held in June that year where the Minister could launch it.

It just changed the whole thing. We had to rush the process. To the credit of the group, we worked our butts off, meeting monthly then twice a month. We were all doing work outside the meetings, emailing each other, sending through our thoughts on different clauses as we were writing and rewriting and writing and rewriting! It was a really interesting process to be involved in. There was obviously huge debate, robust discussion, and in fact, looking back, I don't know how we pulled it off!

It was an amazing effort by an incredible group and I feel privileged to be a part of that group. They were all so dedicated to making it happen. We got to know each other so well because we were talking about our practice, which was dear to us.

This interview was conducted on 28 March 2017. Rod could have listened to John tell stories all day long.

*The **National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa** launched the first edition of the **Code of Ethics for Youth Work in Aotearoa New Zealand** in 2008 at the **Involve 08:Relate** conference in Wellington, along with a submissions booklet seeking feedback immediately. Submissions were incorporated into the second edition, which was delayed after **Ara Taiohi** was launched at **Involve 2010** in Auckland. In fact it was Ara Taiohi's inaugural AGM on 22 February 2011 that the second COE was launched, the same day as the earthquake in Canterbury.*

Since early 2011, we've seen the impacts of earthquakes and other natural disasters on youth work. Hundreds of youth workers have been directly involved in disaster response and recovery. Resilience holds a different meaning than a decade prior. We've also seen the rise of social media permeate the lives of young people and youth workers are wrestling with ethics in digital/online spaces. Government funding contracts are seeking new levels of data and becoming more individually prescriptive, notably with the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) service.

Continue John's story for yourself. Consider what's happened since the COE was released...

- What changes have happened in society and in our culture?
- What changes have happened in youth work practice itself?
- What are youth workers facing today that the COE doesn't address?
- How have legal changes e.g. Vulnerable Children's Act, Health and Safety impacted youth work?
- And what's next? Where's youth work ethics heading in Aotearoa?