

## Special Talk: Reconnecting and empowering identities

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### Transcript

Five and a half years ago we started a small business called Soldiers Rd Portraits- Inspired by old portraits of Native American chiefs and our own ancestors, we had the simple concept to photograph our people in the same dignified style of our ancestors, but to showcase who we are today.

This simple idea quickly evolved into something more meaningful when we took our first trip to Australia within 4 months of starting up, and realised the potential our ‘experience’ had to reconnect and empower our customers through cultural identity.

Over the last five years we have taken our portrait experience, as well as our own personal experiences in business and Te Ao Maori all around the world- and in doing so, it has become more and more apparent how unique and powerful our culture is, as well as the importance of being strong in our cultural identity.

Throughout our travels and the amazing experiences we have had, and the people we have met from all backgrounds and cultures, we’re constantly reminded how blessed we are- not only to be able to have had these experiences, but also the blessing it is to be strong Maori wahine, and have the strength in our cultural identities- not all of our people are as lucky to be as culturally connected as we have been able to be.

This got us thinking.

How could we give back to Maori?

Our culture is something our business relies heavily on- we use the insinuation of moko, korowai and other traditional regalia, and we start our sessions with whakawhanaungatanga- a cultural practise of connecting; what could we do to bring balance into our business, to give back to our culture, and show appreciation and reciprocation?

Did you know that Maori only make up 14% of the population here in Aotearoa, but we make up 60% of the prison population?

Did you know that if you visited prison as child, you are automatically 2/3’s more likely to end up there as an adult?

Did you know that between the 1980’s and this year, the population of Maori women in prison has risen from 1% to 60%?

As you can see from these statistics, our people are suffering.

Why, as descendants of mighty chiefs, navigators, and tohunga, are our people not thriving on their own whenua?

We thought about this population of our people behind the wire, and how having this experience of connecting with their cultural identity and sitting for a dignified portrait could possibly create a paradigm shift around not only the way others perceived them, but more importantly, how they saw themselves.

So, getting our experience into prisons has definitely been easier said than done, however, in 2016 we entered the Te Ao Marama Maori focus unit at Waikeria Prison with the help of Hinewirangi Kohu-Morgan and the prison director at the time- Kevin Smith to do motivational speaking, but with a twist-

We presented to 50 men about our work, our experiences, who we were, our vision and kaupapa for our people, and asked them directly, would this experience be something they would want to take part in? All 50 men said yes.

Four Months later we entered the same unit and did our pilot program of 28 men who were already taking part in tikanga programs around their whakapapa, whaikorero, decolonisation, addressing their offending, and learning new skills to help them in difficult situations.

We asked the men to write a letter to a tupuna as a requirement to getting a session with us. We wanted them to meet us in the middle- it was important for them to want to meet us in the middle, to show that they were truly interested in changing.

Their letters were insightful, heartbreaking, moving, a glimpse into how these men saw themselves, and their hopes for the future.

We had one on one sessions with the men, and took before and after photos- we did whakawhanaungatanga, spoke with them about their families, if they had anything to do with their culture before going into that unit, and we asked them all the same four questions- who are you, where are you from, if you could go anywhere in the world where would you go, and what message do you want to leave your descendants.

We reminded them that one day they would be someone's tupuna. How did they want to be remembered? What legacy did they want to leave?

Majority of the men had never worn a korowai before, had never had a portrait of them before, other than their mug shots. From the session, we gift the men a portrait to hang in their cells, as well as sending an image home to a nominated whanau member to hang in the home, in the hopes that they will recognise the changes these men are making.

The sessions themselves were transformative, and it was physically reflected in their before and after photos. But it was more than just a change of clothing, it was about connecting with each of these men on an emotional level, and reminding them of their mana.

Here are a couple of excerpts from their letters:

*Kia ora Kuia.*

*I am on a journey of self discovery. Te Reo Maori has brought me closer to you. It is a symbol of unity I think that's why I feel a little bit closer to you. As the matriarch of our whanau, the one we all looked to in times of darkness. I am in that place of darkness at this time of my life, and im writing to you for strength, you are a big part of me. You moulded me into the man I am today, a man with morals, a man of honor, a man of mana. Along the way I have made mistakes, this is a mistake I will pay for, for the rest of my life time. Time I will never get back, but im not the only one paying. My children are, my Wahine is, my whanau is without a Tane, without a Papa, without a Whanau member. Just as we are without a matriarch since you passed on, the memories I have of you are kept deep within my heart and will be forever cherished. The impression you leave with us, the impression of manaaki, caring loving hard at times but fair to all. I love you with all my heart.*

*Your Moko*

*Dear Grandad, I am writing to you to ask for your guidance, to help me overcome the things I am doing that brought me to a place that I know you wouldn't want me to be in. I know that I probably make you*

*ashamed to be my grandfather at the moment, cause you never brought me up to be the person I am today. You wanted the best for me, just like the rest of the whanau did, but since you passed on I just couldn't cope, things just went downhill for me. At times I was doing good and coping with life, but somehow I'd always do something wrong, and end up in trouble again. In court, looking at another prison sentence. I just wish you were here to help me. You were like a dad to me, the only one I'd really listen to. So please grandad, send me a sign or something. To let me know you're up there watching me, and still wishing the best for me. Please send me a sign to let me know that there's hope for me. I'm sick of being that person, the one with no ears, the mischief one. I can't have any of my kids growing up thinking that what I am doing in life is cool.*

*That's what happens when you are growing up, I need to make a change for my wife and kids. I've been apart from them for too long, they deserve better. And it's up to me to do this for them. So with your help Grandad, lets move forward.*

At the end of their program we hold an exhibition in the visitors room entitled 'Rangatahi ki Rangatira'; this is a chance for these men to see themselves displayed in a dignified manner, and also for them to see others viewing their images and reading their letters.

This experience has changed our lives- through our work behind the wire we have learned that being inspired through your cultural identity can help you no matter what stage you are at in life.

More recently we are about to collaborate with Annah Stretton and the team at RAW, working with women at the Wiri Womens Prison, and we are also working with youth in Oranga Tamariki and Youth Justice, doing workshops incorporating our portrait experience, and focussing on encouraging them to be proud of who they are.

I guess we hope that if we can inspire them now through a process of reconnecting with their cultural identity, to help them care more deeply about who they are and what that means, then hopefully we won't see them behind the wire.

Because after all,

He aha te mea nui o te ao?  
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.

What is the most important thing in the world?  
It is people, it is people, it is people.

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