

# What is *your normal?*

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**Look at your life, think about what you consider the norm, then forget everything you know. What most of us take for granted – home, family, a job and security – for many women they're a foreign concept. Their norm is the world of crime, drugs, violence and often jail.**

**No-one knows that better than Annah Stretton. She might be a fashion icon, a woman with a well-established clothing label, but she's also a woman who has taken a giant step across the social divide into New Zealand's dark side, women's prisons. She talks to reporter Sue Newman about her project, RAW (Reclaim Another Woman), that aims to take female recidivist offenders from a life of crime to a life of promise.**

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**A**nnah Stretton is driven to help women whose lives have been spent in a world where illiteracy, poverty, crime and, often, homelessness are a constant state of being; she's driven to help them rise out of that life through education, employment and intensive mentoring.

It's not about providing a hand-out, it's about providing the tools to change and the ongoing support to stick with that change, she said.

For many of those women it's the first glimpse they've had of another way of life, the first time they've dared dream that change is possible, achievable.

Annah is the change merchant that is making that possible.

She's working with her sister Rebecca, a mental health nurse, to turn around the lives of female prisoners, women who are trapped in an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

Yes, it's a quantum leap from a fashion design studio to a prison, but it's one that

has Annah motivated and inspired.

She's always been a philanthropist at heart and in 2013 decided to set up her own foundation.

"I was looking to do something a bit different, to tackle some of our biggest social causes," she said.

A call from the Waikato Women's Refuge to help with a fundraising appeal was to be her introduction to the world of women who lived a life vastly different to her own.

She decided to set up a programme that would work with refuge women where through education they could be introduced to a life where there was choice. That was the pilot model of what would become today's highly successful project RAW.

Success wasn't automatic, however.

"It was a dreadful failure, but that's fine. I love to fail, that's where you learn lessons. This didn't work because women in crisis are not ready to make change,"

Annah said.

The project might have failed, but it convinced her she wanted to work in a space where women who lived disadvantaged lives could be helped to create lives where there was a positive future.

Annah opted to start at the top, knocking on the door of the Corrections Department chief executive. She unashamedly traded on the contrast between her fashion persona and the work her project would do.

"I think he was curious really. I got in front of him and said, 'let me get inside and work with these women in prison, in their space'."

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**Right – When she travels New Zealand on speaking engagements, whenever possible Annah Stretton takes one of her RAW women with her. When it comes to telling the RAW story from the inside, their words come from the heart. At her Ashburton Zonta Women's Day Breakfast she was accompanied by Max who spoke of the years drugs and violence had marked her life and how the RAW experience had turned that life around.**

PHOTO HEATHER MACKENZIE 020319-HM-0069

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He agreed and the RAW project was born.

Annah stepped behind the wire and began a series of pilot workshops in Wiri Women's Prison. These were designed to engage women in a non-threatening learning environment. The goal was to encourage women to take part in more structured and vocational learning.

"Before anything could be achieved, however, I had to get to know the women and what they wanted to achieve."

Initially the women were sceptical, they thought what was being offered was too good to be true and a lot of them thought it might involve too much hard work.

"And there were a few early adapters that we quickly found out were playing us, we had to get our heads around a new kind of normal. These women had been living lives where they didn't think about the future, many were born into these lives."

For most being in prison wasn't seen as a hardship, it was almost a rite of passage.

Prison was a safe place where they were housed and fed. It wasn't a place they feared; for many it was part of a family cycle.

For Annah and Rebecca that meant adjusting to the women's perception of a normal world rather than reacting to it.

Today, the main focus of RAW is on life after prison. And it's tough. There are rules that cannot be broken, behaviours that will not be tolerated, but there's also opportunity, unlimited opportunity for those who want to take it, Annah said.

Women on the programme must relocate to Hamilton. It's about not going back into their old environment, about not getting involved with former associates and family members – even children.

And often there are children, several children, scattered around kin and non-kin carers.

"What they have is not family as we know it. We have to stop applying our normal to their lives."

Women on the programme live, 20 at any one time, in 'incubation' houses in Hamilton in various tiers, according to their time on the programme.

The house rules could be found in many ordinary Kiwi homes, but they're often new to the RAW women – no drugs, no alcohol, no gang associations and visitors are vetted.

There are also curfews that are usually

part of a parole package.

Each tier has women who are well down the track towards changing their lives who are there to watch and guide.

"These are the RAW women. They become part of our succession plan, they're women we're keen to get involved in our conversations," Annah said.

Some of those women are happy to accompany Annah on her speaking tours, telling the story of their own lives and the impact the project has had for them.

Change cannot be made overnight. It takes months or years to break the cycles, the beliefs and the lifestyles the women have grown up with, Annah said.

"It's about keeping them on the right page, keeping them moving forward, about trying to get joy back into their lives. I know how hard it is for these women to make life changes."

Many of the women have addictive personalities. If it's not drugs or alcohol, it might be sex.

For the drug users, making change is difficult. They say they love drugs, love the effect of the drug, the way it makes them feel.

"They think, 'why would I stop if it makes me feel good?' I plead with the girls not to take drugs, to get off drugs. Sometimes they say to me, how would I feel if I was told I could never have something like a glass of wine again," Annah said.

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The downside was that when they were on drugs, they thought they were invincible, bullet-proof and the cycle of anti-social behaviour began over again.

RAW is about educating women, but that's an anathema to most.

"Many of these women have never engaged in learning, but in the programme learning is non-negotiable. Inside prison, however, everything is negotiable. You can learn or not. You might not be entitled to parole if you don't but a lot don't care, all they care about is just doing their time."

Breaking the cycle of crime won't happen overnight. For older women it could take three generations; two if the women RAW works with are younger.

When it comes to reducing New Zealand's incarceration and reoffending rates, Annah believes we're tackling the problem the wrong way. Taxing higher income earners to generate money for the country's poorest people was not the right approach, she said.

"All their lives they've been on benefits and the criminal process is even better than the benefit. Crime pays for them, it's easy, much easier. We need to teach them to fish, not give them fish."

Evidence that the current system is not working comes in muster numbers – 300 women in prison in 2014; 900 today. The population is multiplying rapidly.

Currently, Corrections contracts out-of-gate providers to take women for three months on release, providing jobs and accommodation.

"That's hugely challenging because they can't get jobs and after three months they're out on the street doing the same old stuff. The Corrections model simply doesn't work," Annah said.

Under that model there was no options. The women were thrust back into their old world where they often had no-one and no



Annah Stretton's passion for the RAW programme is obvious as she speaks at Zonta Ashburton Women's Day Breakfast last weekend.

PHOTO HEATHER MACKENZIE 020319-HM-0127

connections other than criminal ones.

"We deal with the ones the country has written off – the women Corrections won't put any more work into. It's harder for these women to seek help."

And the hardest step for those women was the first step, Annah said.

"If you've been in a space where you've been paid to be at home why would you change? That's where the Government misses the point."

The cost of keeping women in prison was high, but if the costs incurred on the outside through lawyers and welfare



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agencies was included it was horrendous, Annah said.

"We have to rethink this, step back and look at what we are doing. If learning in prison was not optional perhaps you'd find everything would shift."

Among the 60 women to date who have been part of the RAW programme outside prison, only one has gone back inside.

"Yes they're not all totally on the programme, but they've moderated their lifestyles."

The lost woman appeared to have broken the cycle. She was a high achieving environmental law student, close to graduating and she derailed.

"At the end of the day, drugs meant more to her and she's back inside. It's heartbreaking to see, but you have to accept that it's her journey. For us, the question is, why we didn't pick this problem up sooner."

It was easy to be fooled and believe the women on the programme were doing well, but people needed to understand just

how difficult their journey was because addiction was so often part of who they were, Annah said.

"RAW is a long-term commitment, it's not an easy tick."

In addition to the RAW out-of-prison programme, Annah and Rebecca run RAW on the inside. This is for women who will be unable to relocate to Hamilton on release, it's about helping them believe there is another life than the one they've left behind.

Many have partners who are involved in crime or partners they're afraid of and many are crime world matriarchs in their own right.

"These women are good at what they do. Their mothers are like them and they're probably not happy with their daughters in RAW. There are no proud RAW mothers out there, but we should be proud as a country of what these women are achieving."

The programme is open to any woman in prison who wants to change her life. The

key is wanting to change and being prepared to stick with rules that, while normal in many people's lives, are foreign to most of these women.

RAW graduates become part of an alumni, it's a programme you never really leave, Annah said.

"It's like a family, we become extended whanau, but we don't create dependency."

Reflecting on the unlikely link between fashion design and a prison self-help programme, Annah said she had always wanted to be involved in tackling some of New Zealand's big social challenges.

"These women have given me more than I've given them. They've given me a balance. If you can measure success in human capital it is worth so much."

Over the next 20 years, she plans to throw herself into her work in prisons and to step back from her business. Daughter Sam is taking over the reins. It's time for new blood and some younger ideas, she said.

"My bigger goal with RAW now is to have the bigger conversations about the process around incarceration."

She believes the state does not have the answer in helping women in prison turn their lives around, that re-integration belongs with the community.

"These women need support when they're coming back into the community, into a different world, they can't go back to their old stomping ground."

Annah believes it is possible to work across the 900 women living inside New Zealand's prisons.

"I'm inspired by these women and I know how bloody difficult it is for them, but this work is so worth doing. We have such a problem in this country and throwing more money at it won't solve the problems with the dysfunctional poor," she said.

Annah spoke at Ashburton's Zonta women's day breakfast last weekend and was accompanied by one of her RAW women, Max, who gave guests an insight into the harrowing events that had preceded her time in prison. Over many years Max has had seven spells in prison, most for incidents involving violence.

The programme would not succeed without the willingness of sponsors to become involved in the women's lives, Annah said.

Gallaghers in particular played a huge role in providing work opportunities, she said.

"Their ethos is to be relentlessly innovative and they believe RAW reflects that. We'd love more people who can think about what they can do to be involved too."