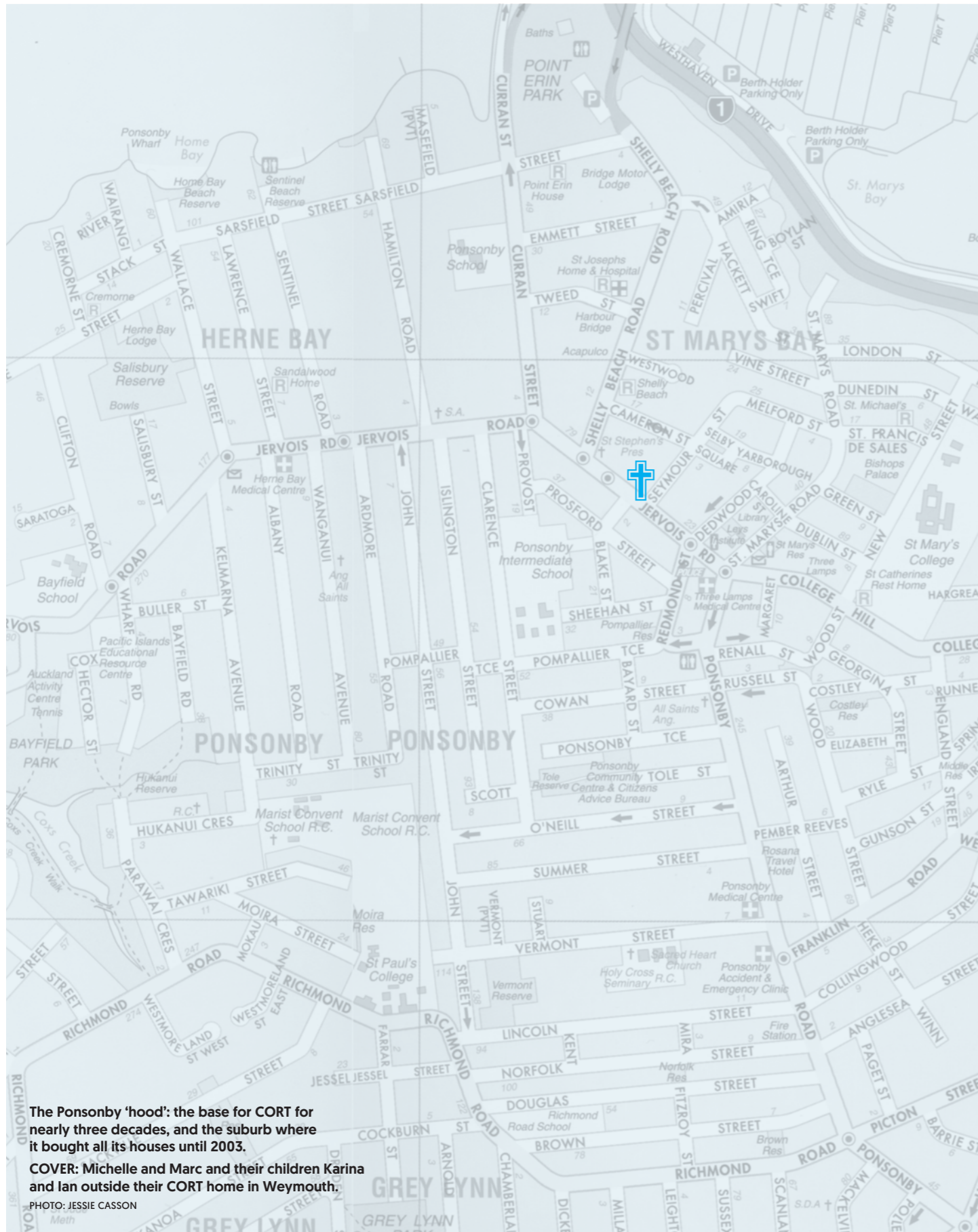


# CORT Community Housing: 30 years







**CORT Community Housing sprang out of an impulsive church project that grew into one of New Zealand's significant social housing providers.**

**This timeline traces the highlights and challenges of its first three decades.**

The Ponsonby 'hood': the base for CORT for nearly three decades, and the suburb where it bought all its houses until 2003.

COVER: Michelle and Marc and their children Karina and Ian outside their CORT home in Weymouth.

PHOTO: JESSIE CASSON

COURTESY OF KIWIMAPS LTD

# we've got nowhere, nothing, nobody



## 1984 BOARDING-HOUSE BLUES

Thousands of people who call themselves 'psychiatric survivors' leave their institutionalised life in hospitals in the 1980s to join the wider community. More of them settle in Ponsonby than anywhere else in New Zealand. Boarding houses are cheap, and on the streets it's easy to feel anonymous, merging into a community of students, artists, and Pasifika families. By the mid-80s, however, speculators are restoring Ponsonby's villas for a new generation, and people who feel vulnerable can see themselves ousted.

Jackie Benson has found a haven at Mata's boarding house in Franklin Road, and has no other options for a home – although she says, 'I was bumped out twice because you were not allowed to overdose on the property'. She adds, 'I knew Mata was going to sell. I remember sitting on the boarding house steps watching the cars go by and thinking, we've got nowhere, nothing, nobody.'

**ABOVE:** Jackie Benson (right) and her sister Gillian Holland shift out of their boarding house to become the first tenants of the Community of Refuge Trust.



## 1985–6 WE WERE INVINCIBLE

In the midst of Ponsonby's transformation Mike Riddell becomes minister of Ponsonby Baptist Church. He sees his faith as a 'dynamic acting-out of the love of God in the arena of the world.' He meets Helen Moroney, manager of the Rangimarie Baptist Hostel for disabled young people. Together they become allies in an attempt to thwart the gentrification of Ponsonby. 'We thought we could change the world,' remembers Helen. 'We were full of possibilities; we were invincible!'

NZ HERALD After seeing co-operative housing in Melbourne in 1986, Mike returns to Ponsonby with a mission, and hears about the Housing Corporation's Urban Renewal Scheme. The deadline for applying to the Housing Corporation requires swift decision-making.

**ABOVE:** Mike Riddell, founder of the Community of Refuge Trust, outside the chapel beside Ponsonby Baptist Church.



## 1987 THE COMMUNITY OF REFUGE TRUST

Minister Mike Riddell puts in a bid for a house, applies for a loan, then needs to formalise his initiative by establishing a non-profit trust. On 16 August 1987 he hastily gathers a small group to establish the Community of Refuge Trust (CORT) under the aegis of Ponsonby Baptist Church. This gives retrospective approval to the purchase of the first house – a hectic approach that becomes a hallmark of CORT's first few years.

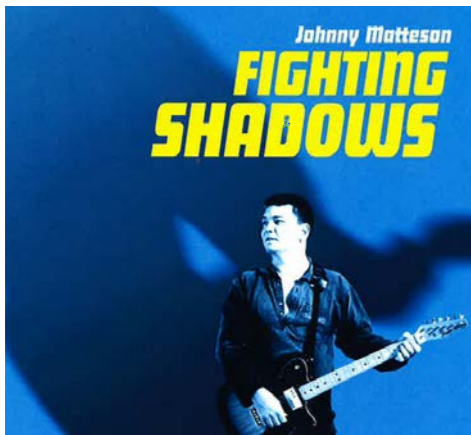
With the exception of Helen Moroney, the first trustees and supporters lack expertise in mental health or housing, but are confident that 'the simple act of providing people with the dignity of adequate accommodation can produce profound changes.'

The Community of Refuge Trust is set up to be legally and financially independent of the Church. The objects of the Trust are to purchase and maintain low-cost housing in the local area, to provide supportive services, to pursue new housing initiatives, to lobby government and others on housing issues, and to raise funds to achieve these goals.

**ABOVE:** The CORT sign outside Ponsonby Baptist Church.



# wild beginnings



## 1987-8 PROPERTY BUYING

The Housing Corporation offers a choice: to lease housing at a peppercorn rental or purchase properties with 100 per cent finance at an interest rate of 7%. The week it is founded CORT purchases its first house at 17 Wanganui Avenue for \$160,000. Peter Jeffries becomes CORT's part-time manager, and confirms CORT's initial decision to buy, rather than lease, its houses. Mike Riddell's free-wheeling style takes over: while Peter Jeffries is away Mike signs up for a decrepit cottage on a Friday; Peter off-loads it on Monday.

At the same time a family going overseas offer the Trust a large house in Ardmore Road to lease. A year later CORT buys 89 Norfolk Street (\$171,000) and 44 Albany Road (\$175,000) under the Urban Renewal Scheme. Mike imagines CORT operating 20 houses: 'If the Trust survives ten years we'll be laughing.'

ABOVE: 17 Wanganui Avenue, the first house CORT purchased. TOP LEFT: CORT life: partying in the church hall; a volunteer working bee; Johnny Matteson's songs in defence of people with mental illness (produced by the Mental Health Foundation).

## A ROLLER-COASTER RIDE

With no equity in its properties, and no reserves, CORT walks a financial tightrope. Paying off mortgages absorbs its rental income, and becomes unaffordable when rent from Wanganui Avenue is irregular. CORT reluctantly takes its first tenants to the Tenancy Tribunal. When the drains block in the street outside the Wanganui Avenue property, CORT becomes liable for a \$7,500 bill. A gift from Christchurch's Spreydon Baptist Church saves the Trust from bankruptcy.

CORT relies on one-off donations for its survival. In 1989 Mike Riddell and Peter Jeffries break with Baptist tradition by applying for grants from the Lottery Board, and become experts at appealing to charitable bodies: 'They have heaps of money that they're dying to give away. They're scratching their heads and you can solve their problem by going along and saying, "Give it to me"'. Seven grants in 1989 bring in \$100,000.

ABOVE: Mike Riddell uses the press skilfully, in this case to publicise the plight of a homeless family. [AUCKLAND CITY HARBOUR NEWS]

## 1988 MANAGING RISK

CORT takes on Colin Hood, an accountant and Director of Baptist Social Services, as its Treasurer. His cautious approach dampens the trend to gung-ho property-buying. Years later in a guide to housing groups Mike Riddell will acknowledge this vital role: 'A community group needs a hard-nosed Treasurer to temper good intentions with financial reality. Look after your Treasurer, and s/he will ensure the health of your legal body.'

ABOVE: Colin Hood, CORT's first Secretary/Treasurer.



## 1988 NO. 1 PICTON STREET

CORT makes an offer to buy a decaying City Council-owned villa in Picton Street. Although the walls are nicotined and the pipes leak, the asking price is too high. The Trust garners moral support from Ponsonby Mental Health Centre, whose support workers spend up to 60 per cent of their time on the housing difficulties of former hospital patients. Donations from charitable trusts make the purchase affordable and CORT buys 1 Picton St for \$254,000. The Springhill Trust in Napier becomes a funding partner for the next ten years.

A carpenter undertakes the renovations. He is joined by a dozen church volunteers who hold BBQs on the verandah, and work two nights a week and Saturdays to restore a slum building to its nineteenth-century elegance. After three months Picton Street becomes a symbol of the dignity CORT offers its tenants.

Picton Street marks the beginning of CORT's specialisation in the field of mental health when the Department of Social Welfare grants \$10,000 towards a rehabilitation programme. Penny Clifflin and Peter Jeffries, a couple with a sense of mission, become informal supervisors of a household of six former patients of Carrington Hospital. They foster an extended-family style of home and encourage their flat-mates to develop their skills. Helen Moroney, the Baptist Church's first social worker, delivers medication and manages trouble-shooting.

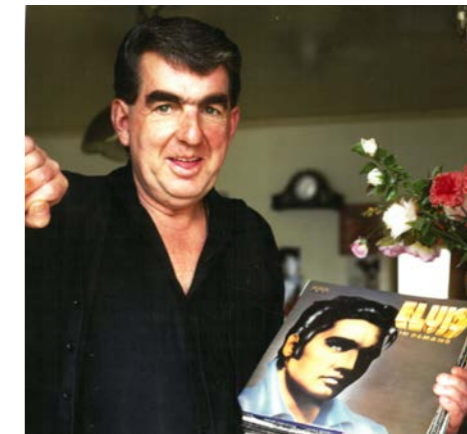
ABOVE: Picton Street residents with CORT staff and trustees on the front verandah.



## COMMUNITY LIFE ISN'T ALL ROSES

One tenant steals the chequebook of one of the household, cashes a cheque for \$800, and buys a car. Another stores up all his medicine, and when the path is being laid pours out hundreds of blue pills for burial under the concrete. At the same time some household members gain a new sense of purpose. After a roving life John Bastin finds a cleaning job with the City Council, enjoys his contact with the public, builds a BBQ in the back garden of Picton Street, and brings home steak and tuna to share on Fridays.

ABOVE: John Bastin, one of the first residents in Picton Street.



## 1989 MUSIC, FOOD AND SOUL

Picton Street becomes CORT's flagship property, a haven for music and food, a base for tenants' meetings, and a springboard for integration into the wider community. The church begins a long tradition of holding annual dinners for tenants, who blend into church life and join in the free-for-all slot in the Sunday service to comment on personal and public issues. Sometimes despairing: 'I've been in hell this week' On other days, high-spirited, with Roger Young impersonating Elvis' 'Blue Suede Shoes' and a prostitute giving advice on condoms. A tenant's mother is blown away: 'It's like a Passion play where everybody has a part. Has it been rehearsed?'

CORT is on a high. It can pay its Treasurer and afford a four-days-a-week salary for its manager. It leases a cottage in Barrie Street, and with Housing Corporation support buys a large villa in Williamson Avenue, a motel block in Jervois Road, another block of flats in Crummer Road. Thirteen new flats in one year. Sixty tenants now in 25 homes.

ABOVE: Roger Young, living in one of the Jervois Road flats, is a keen Elvis fan.



# tougher times

## Minister strips in house sale protest

By JILL GRAHAM

A Baptist minister stripped down to his underpants in front of startled Auckland city councillors last night in protest at plans to sell council housing.

The Rev Mike Riddell, of the Pukekohe Baptist Church, hurried over the heads of seated councillors in the Auckland Town Hall council chamber and, in the middle of the floor, began to remove his clothing, while telling the councillors the sales would 'strip the tenants naked, strip them of their dignity.'

He told the councillors at their monthly meeting that they sat there in their 'fine suits and clothes' and could not see the hardship of the people whose homes they were devaluing.

The mayor, Mr Les Mills, adjourned the meeting as Mr Riddell dragged the edge of his last remaining garment — his boxer shorts.

The mayor and councillors left the chamber while the public seated at the back of the room applauded Mr Riddell's actions.

Afterwards, Mr Riddell said the council had lost its mind but he had

much of its \$82 million of residential housing. But it reiterated that no tenants would be thrown out of their homes.

Carter, a councillor, Dr Bruce Hucker, presented a petition signed by 207 people opposing the plan to sell 46 freestanding houses immediately and make available for sale 624 other houses and units on a case by case basis.

Dr Hucker said it was a disgrace the council had not fully investigated the social impact of its decision before making it.

Such issues as the present recession, the cutting of benefits, rising unemployment and proposals to decrease Housing Corporation public rental stock had also not been considered, he said, and the sales should not go ahead at such a time.

Mrs Patricia Thorp, the chairwoman of the city development committee, which recommended the sale, said the sale had been discussed since last December and had been considered by all community boards and the property enterprise board.

She said it was not local government's job to provide subsidised



Mr Riddell



## UPSIDE DOWN

Radical changes in government policies threaten the future of community housing. After waving a fairy wand for CORT, the Housing Corporation is replaced by Housing New Zealand and a new market model. Church members carry an effigy of the Housing Corporation on a funeral march along Ponsonby Road. When Council housing in Freemans Bay goes up for sale, minister Mike Riddell strips to his boxer shorts at a Council meeting in an attempt to stall the betrayal of vulnerable people.

To survive, CORT taps a new stream of funding. For almost a decade it foregoes house purchases and specialises in providing mental health services by limiting its tenancies to people who are eligible for a supplement to their benefit. The Department of Social Welfare pays tenants' benefits directly to CORT, providing almost a third of its income and funding two part-time residential support workers.

A fire destroys the top storey of the Picton Street house, the last straw in a nervy year. A few months later, with help from insurers, it rises from the ashes.

ABOVE: The funeral procession in protest against government housing policy on Ponsonby Road.

## 1991 STRIPPED

CORT selects tenants on the basis of their need. Two-thirds are people with a diagnosis of mental illness; others are on very low incomes. Both tenants and CORT feel the crunch when the recently elected National government cuts benefit levels, and merchant bank Fay Richwhite purchases the government's mortgage portfolio and announce a doubling of interest rates to 14%. CORT survives with assistance from a series of donors, and by persuading the new housing minister to postpone the interest increases for two years.

The relentless pressure takes its toll. Peter Jeffries takes four months' leave from managing the Trust, and CORT's chairman declares a moratorium on house purchases.

ABOVE: Mike Riddell's protest against the sale of Council housing is headline news in the *New Zealand Herald*.



## 1992–3 FLYING BY THE SEAT OF OUR PANTS

CORT faces another turnaround when funding for support services is switched to area health boards. Minister Mike Riddell has long been sceptical of officialdom and medical expertise, and encourages a model of tenant care based on friendship. CORT chooses staff for their empathy rather than their expertise. Kay McCabe recalls: 'All fun and no responsibility ... because the clinical team at the Taylor Centre was there if you thought something was up. ... I don't know that I particularly had a model when I first started. I was studying psychology, but I didn't have a clue.'

Staff working with tenants learn through trial and error. They take tenants to the beach, shop, cook and clean with them, manage budgets and weekly meetings in group homes, set up an art exhibition, visit grave sites, and handle medication. They go the extra mile, and some of them suffer because of the intensity of their work.

ABOVE: Helen Moroney was influential in establishing the Trust and stays on as social worker for CORT and the church. She's an effective networker and a great chef.



## 1995–7 UNDER PRESSURE

Accountability to health boards means competing in a tough environment against colleagues in other community organisations. CORT's new manager, Graeme Bruges, is a good negotiator, but despairs about the impermanence of health funding: 'You can't nail anything down.' The commercial lingo of this new world is unsettling, with its targets and outputs, consumers and goals. Constant auditing of support workers is wearying; statistics on every encounter with clients must be supplied. North Health praises the quality of CORT's services and the way it successfully integrates people into the community, but recommends that its workers receive more training.

The staff train alongside Baptist colleagues involved in mental health services, but remain on call night and day for their tenants. Burn-out becomes the norm. The Trust adopts an Integrated Mental Health Care policy, presenting tenants with goals to achieve and a timeframe for moving on from the stability of a CORT house. Tenants are weary of goals, reluctant to abandon the idea of a home for life, and protest that this is no longer a Community of Refuge.

ABOVE: A resident of Wanganui Avenue with her artwork.

# expansion



## 1998 ABANDONING GROUP HOMES

Property decisions are looming. CORT has been budgeting for a loss of \$42,000. Group homes slip out of favour; clashes between tenants at Norfolk Street become more frequent. The demand for vacancies at Picton Street is falling as tenants seek independence in a unit of their own. When a few of the Council's Freemans Bay flats come on the market, the Trust steels itself to sell its Norfolk Street villa and replace it with two single units in Wellington Street. It is the beginning of a new era.



CORT abandons villas for apartments: ABOVE: Norfolk Street, Ponsonby. TOP RIGHT: Richmond Road, Grey Lynn, where CORT buys a scattering of apartments. MIDDLE: Jervois Road, Ponsonby. BOTTOM: Arabi Street, Sandringham.

## 1999 FREEMANS BAY

Peter Jeffries' return to CORT as chairperson revives its entrepreneurial spirit. Soaring Ponsonby property values have added to the equity in the Trust's properties and made it financially stable. After a nine-year gap in property-buying, CORT grasps a rare opportunity and purchases 16 more units in Freemans Bay when the Council puts them up for sale. In one leap this almost doubles CORT's properties. The Trust spends \$40,000 getting them all up to standard, and reserves a third of them as cheap rental units to be subsidised by market rents on the others. Tenants merge into a neighbourhood that combines working families, a Bosnian refugee, a journalist and a gallery director.

ABOVE: CORT buys apartments in Wellington Street, Freemans Bay, from the City Council in 1999.

## 2001 DIFFICULT DECISIONS

While CORT is expanding, its staff and services are too small to compete for funding with larger groups which provide mental health services to 100 clients or more. Graeme Bruges resigns, worn down by bureaucracy, stropy staff and volatile tenants. The Trust abruptly sheds its psychiatric support services, passing its workers and clients to the Te Ara Hou Trust. Its own staff are reduced to a new manager/treasurer, Robin Guy, and a maintenance worker.

CORT narrows its focus to housing. This remains a vital mission when 12,500 state houses have been lost in a decade; rental properties can be dank and overcrowded, and people using mental health services are often rebuffed by landlords.

ABOVE: Dinner at Picton Street with CORT staff Betty Drew and manager Graeme Bruges at right.





## 2003–5 EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES

In a surprise move, the Labour government announces a new Housing Innovation Fund to encourage community housing groups into action. This is right up CORT's alley. It competes in a rigorous six-month process of applying for ten-year interest-free loans that will be written off after 25 years. To add to its capital base, the Trust bites the bullet and sells No. 1 Picton Street, relinquishing the finest of its houses and the flagship for CORT's first ideals of community.

CORT is granted \$4 million from the Housing Innovation Fund: a tribute to its good record of property owning and housing tenants who live with the experience of disability. Robin Guy goes on a hunt for units costing under \$200,000. This means changing CORT's constitution and moving away from Ponsonby. Robin Guy finds properties to look over every Saturday morning. 'Could we live here?' is his yardstick, while shunning flats that are sunless, ugly, noisy or flimsily built. In an intense two years CORT buys 24 flats in Richmond Road, Sandringham, Point Chevalier and Mount Albert.

PHOTO: JESSIE CASSON

**ABOVE:** Ivan moves into one of CORT's Sandringham units in 2006 and still enjoys his home 10 years later. He is a passionate concertgoer and movie buff.



## 2005 A BREATHING SPACE

Marie, new to a CORT flat in 2005, recalls her previous life: 'Some years I moved every few weeks. Up to October last year I was squatting for about a year at the old Kelmarna Convent. I had my sleeping bag and slept under the rush matting with no power or water. Bad luck the developers moved in.' She moved to a boarding house in Jervis Road, was hospitalised again, went back to Kelmarna, then a Salvation Army emergency house, back to Intensive Care, two nights at a backpackers' in Orewa, one night in the night shelter in Airedale Street, two weeks in a Salvation Army flat, ten weeks in a couple of Te Korowai Aroha houses. 'That's what I know how to do.'

'I was an honours graduate ... If you're white and middle-class you're not the stereotype of homeless. Boarding-house managers think, "Here's trouble. Beware!" That's why I feel thankful to CORT. I thought I'd have to see out the winter in a boarding house. I was overjoyed. I hope I know when I'm well off. I've got a breathing space.'

**ABOVE:** Marie finds refuge in a CORT flat around the corner from Victoria Park.



## 2007 A SUPPORTIVE LANDLORD

CORT takes a major leap when the Auckland District Health Board offers it a long-term contract to house people who are under the care of Community Health Centres. Funding is sufficient to lease private rentals and then sub-let them to the new tenants, and to employ three housing workers.

Staff members are working with 75 more people and again face the challenge of balancing residential care with the role of landlord. 90% of tenants are on sickness or invalid benefits. Staff win the ADHB Community Health Innovation Award in 2007 for services to mental health, with the commendation: 'CORT focuses on the needs of individuals rather than trying to make them fit into the system. It's the epitome of the sort of care an NGO can provide.'

CORT has held surveys several times, but commissions its first formal Tenant Satisfaction Survey in 2010. In response to tenants' enthusiasm for social events, CORT funds the church to employ a community worker. Jim Pearson runs BBQs, movie nights, bible study and excursions, and occasional trips to the Coromandel.

**ABOVE:** BBQ for CORT tenants and church members at Ponsonby Baptist Church.



## 2010 A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

CORT takes a pivotal role in founding the Auckland Community Housing Providers' Network. It combines the skills of the ten largest community housing groups, and transforms these competitors into a powerhouse to critique Council and government policy. It lobbies the Council to ease restrictions on the use of land, and the government to release more funding to subsidise community housing.

CORT's chairperson, Geoff Henshaw, and trustees also find it difficult to ease the everyday hardship of tenants like Rosa who says: 'My dream? I don't have a dream! On a sickness benefit you get stuff-all and it's reviewed every three months. My rent comes straight out of my sickness benefit; I pay \$245. Then I have \$80 cash in hand: \$12 for child support and arrears; power \$10, phone and landline \$10, \$50 for food.' The trustees stand behind Peter Jeffries and the Network when they lobby government to make their tenants eligible for state house tenants' Income Related Rent Subsidies – meaning they pay only 25% of their income in rent.

**ABOVE:** CORT's symbol for its advocacy role is used in its Strategic Plans.



# cort becomes a developer



## 2011 WE'LL BUILD THEM

The shortage of one-bedroom units in Auckland makes it almost impossible for CORT to purchase cheap properties. Half of CORT's units are sublet from private landlords who expect their earnings to parallel Auckland's escalating rents. To keep its tenants' costs down, CORT is forgoing \$600,000 a year by holding its rents below market levels.

Housing New Zealand demands that social housing groups erect new homes if they want further funding. CORT is fearful of becoming a developer and entering a high-risk area in which the Trust has no expertise. But Peter Jeffries – a natural entrepreneur – has returned to CORT as CEO; Royston Noel is chairperson of the Trust and gives a confident lead as trustees decide to take the leap. CORT meets strict criteria to compete for a slice of the new Social Housing Unit growth fund, and receives funding to build 21 units.

Cash in hand, Peter scrolls through Google Earth for large properties with lonely buildings, pursues real estate agents, and lobbies the City Council to relax restrictions on how many buildings can fit on a suburban section.

ABOVE: Peter Jeffries (left) with Paul Majurey from the Tamaki Collective at Waimahia, 2014.



## 2011–2013 ON A SHOESTRING

CORT begins a new era of development in 2011 when it buys a half-developed property with four units in Jellicoe Road, Panmure, and builds another two units behind them. It goes on to demolish a state house in Eastview Road, Glen Innes, and erects six units.

After intense lobbying Peter Jeffries persuades the Council to allow CORT to build eight units on a single section in Princes Street, Otahuhu. With low interest loans from the government's Social Housing Unit, and grants, CORT is ready for innovation, and hires eHome, a start-up building company producing cheap, high-quality homes. Using modern German technology for prefabricating houses off-site, eHome's assembly line can produce the components of a house in 12 hours, and erect completed walls – with windows and linings – on site in another 12 hours.

In 2013 two double-storeyed buildings are built on 200 square metres. The cost of each apartment (including land) is \$240,000, approximately 60% below the cost of similar units five years later.

ABOVE: Experimenting with eHome's prefab construction system in Princes Street, Otahuhu.



## 2013 FIGHTING FOR INTENSIFICATION

Auckland City Council's Unitary Plan is open for public submissions on what you can build where. As Chairman of the Auckland Community Housing Providers' Network, Peter Jeffries leads the fight against plans that allow only 18% of Auckland's land to be available for intensification. The Network champions the ideal of low-level intensification, blending two- to three- storey housing into suburban streets. In the media and public meetings the Network joins a range of pro-intensification groups to argue for greater housing choice throughout the city. They face powerful opposition from homeowners who are determined to preserve Auckland's suburban past. The traditionalists win on the first round, but by 2016 the Network and other supporters will persuade the Council to increase the density of houses in residential zones for its Unitary Plan.

To assist its public role the Community of Refuge Trust – sometimes confused with women's refuges – changes its title to CORT Community Housing.

ABOVE: The Community of Refuge Trust's new logo, 2013.



## 2014–15 MOUNT WELLINGTON

CORT employs an experienced project manager and begins the construction of 19 units on Mount Wellington Highway, close to Sylvia Park, and welcomes Prime Minister John Key to the opening. Small developments like this are CORT's ideal: 'We want to be part of a current neighbourhood, not undermining it by inserting a ghetto.' It also widens the range of its tenants so that newcomers include single-parent families and older people.

Development is a rocky ride. The next project is 11 units at Lynton Road in Mount Wellington, using the same prefabricated methods as in Princes Street. The technology of eHome may be the way of the future, but halfway through construction one of its projects down south goes sour, forcing it into liquidation. CORT picks up the pieces, relieved that the receivers see that CORT's units are completed. An Onehunga project falls through after long months of lobbying, planning and design, but CORT forges on with an alternative site in New Lynn.

ABOVE: Patrick and Litia in front of their new unit in Mount Wellington.



COURTESY OF WAIMAHIA INLET PARTNERSHIP

## 2014–17 A BOLD NEW MODEL

CORT joins in a bold experiment at Waimahia (Weymouth) on the shores of Manukau Harbour, where there is Crown land ripe for development. Waimahia is the first Special Housing Area in Auckland – which means the Council will guarantee a fast track for developers.

A consortium of iwi and NGOs is ready to grasp the opportunity. The project is unusual: a large area in a deprived region south of Auckland is to be developed by social housing groups rather than the state or private developers. Its houses will present residents with a range of the affordable options that social housing providers can offer: from rent-to-buy or shared equity schemes to subsidised rental properties – as well as houses for sale on the open market.

The consortium members share their vision and pool their skills: the Tamaki Collective has financial and legal expertise (and the first right of refusal to Crown land), while the NZ Housing Foundation has undertaken large construction projects, and CORT has experience in tenancy management. Their spirit of collaboration enables speedy decision-making.

The Social Housing Unit grants \$29 million towards the purchase of land and as capital for development. The government's long awaited agreement to Income-Related Rent Subsidies is a boon to tenants and housing groups, and guarantees future stability for both.

'It could have all gone belly-up,' says Peter Jeffries, but within two years the consortium has built 293 houses while progress on other Special Housing Areas is shamefully slow. CORT purchases 25 of the homes.

Waimahia is designed for families, Maori and Pasifika families in particular. The presence of children encourages spontaneous contacts between households. The consortium members help foster this sense of community by holding BBQs and neighbourhood meetings. Owners of houses sign up to join the Residents Association and contribute to the community. The mixed community of owner-occupiers and renters avoids any risk of the creation of a ghetto. CORT's operating manager, Stephen Hart, comments, 'What makes a community a great place to live? It's not just bricks and mortar, bike racks and trees. A mix of people makes a difference.'

ABOVE: The Waimahia development in Manukau.



PHOTO: JESSIE CASSON

## 2015 LEAVING HOME

CORT's growth means it needs larger premises than Ponsonby Baptist's chapel. It leaves its heritage site and chooses a new home in Grafton with motorway access to its building developments across the isthmus and beyond.

CEO Peter Jeffries pays tribute to the church: 'These buildings, the church's history and the community that worships here is what has anchored the Trust for 25 years.' But the Trust's decision to shift off-site feels like a betrayal to those church members who are sceptical of its new role as a developer, and nostalgic for the earlier connections between CORT and the church.

The Trust's first chairperson, Graham Davison, defends the idea of growth: 'For some of us CORT has always been too big. It was too big in 1987 when we bought the first house. Too big in 1990 when we had 25; too big in 2015 when we have a couple of hundred. Will it be too big when we have 1,000? CORT is at the forefront of social housing; tenants contribute to the life of the church and the city. It keeps us outward-looking, stretches our imagination. We belong to a big Gospel.'

ABOVE: Gary Corbett, property manager, in front of CORT's new offices in Grafton.



PHOTO: PENNY ASPIN – TIMELESS IMAGES PHOTOGRAPHY

## MAINTAINING THE VISION

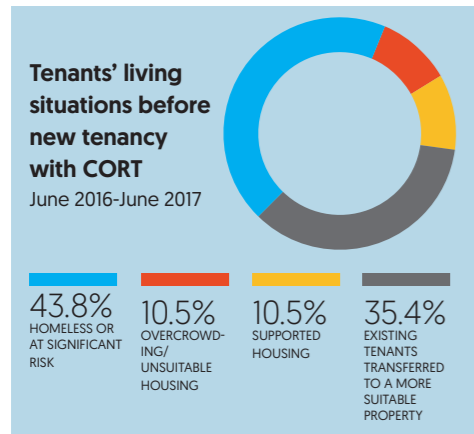
A film grip, two scientists, a social worker, and a lecturer in restaurant studies were among CORT's early trustees. CORT's constitution allows church members to select or vet the board of trustees, with members of Ponsonby Baptist forming a majority on the board. As CORT's work has become more complex, its trustees have been selected for specialised skills. Recent newcomers include John Deyell, an accountant who has worked in an NGO involved in mental health; Alex Duncan, a former director of corporate finance at Fonterra who can confidently calculate risk, and co-opted member Julie Dudfield, a tenant with a career in social housing in Australia.

Sue Watson is an astute chairperson with extensive experience in governance. Zheyne Tahana brings the perspective of a long-time tenant and opens monthly meetings with a karakia. Bill Alexander comes from engineering and marketing; Tony McNamara from IT management in health and local government. Graham Davison is a former geriatrician; Ponsonby Baptist minister Jody Kilpatrick keeps the church's vision alive within the Trust.

ABOVE: Sue Watson, current chairperson of CORT Community Housing.



# when home is a car



## MOVING IN

Jade Thorne, a CORT tenancy manager, says, 'When there's a vacancy you need quick action. People are sleeping in cars, they have no fixed abode; you can't wait. We're usually the last port of call. They've gone through private landlords, Housing New Zealand; they're homeless. They come from other NGOs, Citizens' Advice, WINZ case managers, referred from the Ministry for Social Development. There are 100 on our register, waiting. I meet someone to find out if the property is suitable for them, and vice versa if they're suitable for the community. We don't want to set them up for failure. If they have a clinical team at Te Whetu Tawera (Auckland Hospital) or community mental health centres we work with their staff to make it work.'

'Matching homeless people with buildings is not enough. It can be horrendously stressful when tenants first move in. They have nothing. They're getting a whole household together. They can borrow money from Work and Income, and CORT has a storage garage where they can choose things; the Salvation Army gives them free stuff. A parents' group in West Auckland has set up a Facebook page for parents with nothing. We link tenants to support services; they can get complete wrap-around services.'

PHOTO: JESSIE CASSON

ABOVE: Jade Thorne, tenancy manager.

## 2016 WINTER OF MISERY

Auckland's housing crisis worsens. Rising property values encourage landlords to sell up or raise rents. More families are squeezed out onto the streets: people are letting out their garages to strangers. In May Te Paea Marae in Mangere opens its doors to 54 families, then calls for the Army to build shelters. Public outcry provokes the Ministry of Social Development to pay for emergency beds in motels. CORT's role at the cutting edge of housing is reflected in the needs of people it accepts between July and September:

- Living in a garage with son at family home
- In emergency housing, then a car
- Transfer because of stigma and neighbours
- Three weeks from giving birth, living in caravan with ex-husband and child
- Homeless
- Sleeping on a couch
- Applied to Te Paea; ended up in overcrowded family home
- Living in a shed, ongoing medical issues



## 2016 TENANTS' VOICES

When CORT was part of a small community in Ponsonby its tenants could easily convey their needs or dissatisfaction. Now that its flats are scattered across Auckland CORT's staff are developing a pattern of chat cafes to bring tenants together, stimulate their feedback on CORT, and link tenants to each other and to their local community. Zheyne Tahana and Julie Dudfield pull the events together, along with a staff member. They make a good 'double act' – Julie with 25 years' experience in housing in Queensland and Zheyne, an expert BBQ chef, already deeply involved in his own community in fund-raising to providing free lunches. Food and a chance to socialise in small groups encourage people to speak openly about their concerns. Julie edits 'CATCH-UP', a newsletter for tenants, in which she reports back on their suggestions.

PHOTO: JESSIE CASSON

The results of CORT's Tenant Satisfaction Surveys are overwhelmingly positive. In 2017 CORT's major strengths are its staff members (95% approval), the location of its properties (92%) and the promptness of repairs and maintenance work (94%).

ABOVE: Perpetue, who came to New Zealand as a refugee from Burundi in 2009, and her daughter Brielle, outside their Mount Albert house, 2017.



## 2017 PROFESSIONALISM

As CORT's work becomes more complex, the days of employing unqualified staff who are jacks-of-all-trades are long gone. Ten years ago CORT replaced volunteer working bees with an engineer to oversee the maintenance of its properties. The first operations manager, Miles Hennighan, brought his experience overseas to define boundaries: 'We're a landlord; we provide accommodation. We're not there to be a friend, to be super-compassionate. You're looking at everything through the single lens of mental health. All kinds of people need help.' CORT also employs tenancy managers, an accountant and assistant, an office manager, and an experienced project manager to supervise new housing developments.

In 2017 the Australasian Housing Institute gives Peter Jeffries, current CEO, its Award for Excellence in Social Housing for the New Zealand region. From his early role as manager, to chairperson and later CEO, he has been innovative, resilient, and adaptable, and a keen champion for vulnerable people.

ABOVE: CORT staff at the Australasian Housing Institute Awards, 2017. From left: Gary Corbett, Julia Saunders, Makinsie Baker, Elizabeth Joynt, Peter Jeffries, Sue Watson (Chairperson), Jade Thorne, Stephen Hart.

# 30 years



CORT has ridden the roller-coaster of social housing for 30 years. The organisation has experienced extraordinary changes: from precarious finances to stability, from small beginnings to a place as one of New Zealand's larger social housing providers. Its early decision to purchase rather than lease its properties put it in good stead. Its geographic presence has widened as its focus has shifted from Ponsonby to building developments across the Auckland region. Its early inexperience and gung-ho risk-taking have evolved into professionalism at every level.

CORT has shifted its priorities from housing to caring for people and back to housing – sometimes influenced by the personalities of managers and staff, but more often in reaction to radically changing government policies on housing and health. The Trust has always been skilful at grasping opportunities and exploiting available funding. Since 1987 the bulk of the finance for CORT's expansion has shifted from the Housing Corporation to six other government bodies in turn.

With a current balance sheet showing \$66 million worth of property, five development projects on the go, and another two on the drawing board, CORT feels that it's

**ABOVE:** Seeti and Faith and their children Rosalie, Elena and Wallace live in a new three-bedroom CORT home in Waimahia.



taking off. The plan is to build 100 new homes a year for the next three years or until funding runs out. But growth is not the only goal. CORT aims to be a model of the way in which small groups can have an edge, setting a high standard in their care of tenants and in the design of new apartments.

CORT's vision is clear: to be a voice for vulnerable people and to produce affordable housing for people who have to rent in a city with the most unaffordable housing in the world. Its work still rests on the founding belief that 'the simple act of providing people with the dignity of adequate accommodation can produce profound changes.' With 152 units of its own and 80 properties it manages for private owners, CORT currently provides homes for more than 300 people on very low incomes. The tenants' gain can be immense: a load lifted, a stroke of good fortune, a breathing space, a chance to think about what comes next.

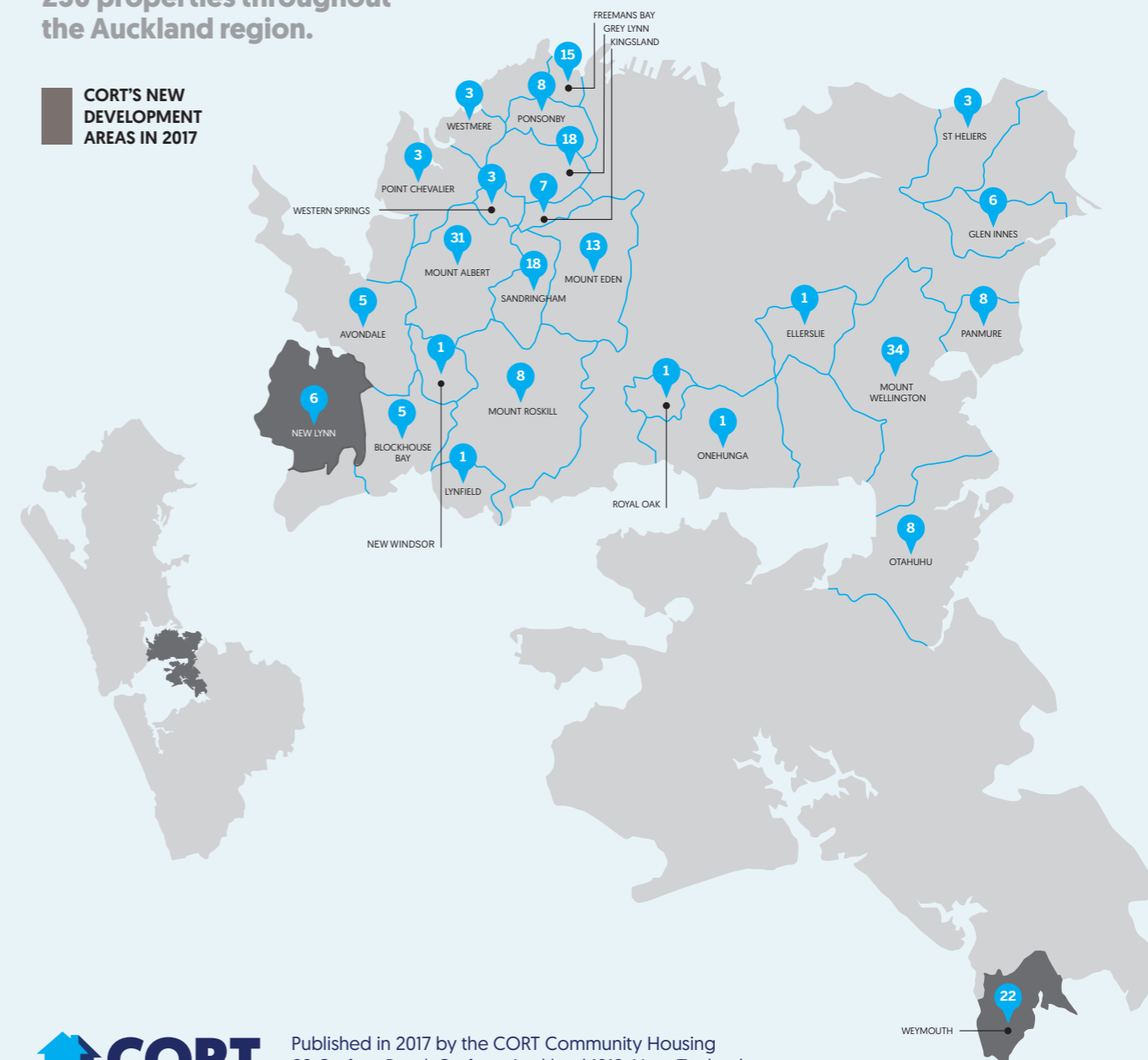
Jade Thorne, working at the grass-roots of CORT's developments, says: 'I'm blown away with how a roof over people's heads can change their whole life.'

**ABOVE:** Tony Jones tending his deck oasis in his Mt Wellington Highway unit.

## CORT PROPERTIES

In 2017 CORT manages over 230 properties throughout the Auckland region.

**CORT'S NEW DEVELOPMENT AREAS IN 2017**



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