

## **SOPHIE ELLIOTT FOUNDATION: 2012 ANNUAL REPORT**

This is the first time I have finished an annual report and thought it would be a good way to acknowledge quite an extraordinary year for the Sophie Elliott Foundation. We began with a change of guard amongst the trustees with three of the originals standing down. Profiles of our new trustees Bill O'Brien, Katie Duncan and Heather Knox can be viewed on this site. I took on the role as chair, ably supported by my deputy Kristin who has been with me from the outset.

The first phase of the Foundation was to set it up and this year we moved into phase two which involves development and implementation of an educational awareness programme around healthy relationships, particularly in a dating sense. In 2012 I was invited to give 51 presentations of Sophie's Story – what WE missed which necessitated me appearing in centres from Waitangi to Invercargill. On most of my travels I've been fortunate that my voluntary manager, Bill, has been able to accompany me. He's valuable in setting up the itineraries, taking care of all administrative functions, helping set up presentations and networking with many people. Better still he either drives my car or a rental and we estimate that this year he drove well over 9000kms which is the equivalent of driving the length of New Zealand nearly five times! We had many amazing audiences from large (600) to small and in total addressed around 3900 students and 4300 adults. There were extensive trips around North Auckland, Hawke's Bay, Wairarapa and Canterbury with shorter visits to places all over the country.

I'm fortunate that throughout 2012 there have been so many memorable moments for me, and one or two that were certainly vivid but would have preferred not to experience. Like the plane trip to Wellington to begin a tour of Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa. Our flight was delayed due to the weather bomb that hit the North Island the first weekend of March. The ATR we travelled in approached Wellington airport from the north in horrendous conditions and it's the only flight I've ever been on where the passengers burst into spontaneous applause when we touched down. Later in the year I saw rainfall that must have been close to biblical proportions in the township of Takaka.

For me the best things have to be the responses I've had to my presentations. When I was welcomed onto the stage at Nelson Girls' College I was momentarily nearly lost for words as I looked down on an audience of about 600. The musical items some of the girls gave were beautiful and I found it hard to keep my emotions in check. I've been in school halls in many and varied settings and all have been wonderful experiences. From the stunning setting of St Matthew's Collegiate School in Masterton to less well-off Sacred Heart College on Napier's Bluff Hill. Here we were welcomed by a lovely young lady, Head Girl Hine-Maria. The deportment of the girls was wonderful. Looking at impressionable young people like them makes me feel confident that what I'm trying to do in making their lives safer and more enjoyable is well worth the effort. At Kuranui College in Greytown I was escorted on to the stage accompanied by the principal and the head boy and girl and their deputies. The entire school was in the hall yet you could hear a pin drop. This, to me, signifies respect for me and Sophie's memory and almost brings me to tears.

Perhaps my biggest challenge for 2012 was attending Napier Boys' High School with a family court lawyer from Auckland who sometimes presents with me. This was the first time I had presented to an

all-male audience and with 400 rather large young men in front of me I was somewhat nervous. We had been told that the boys might need a break after 20 minutes, but 40 minutes later they were still attentive, testament to the seriousness of the message we were delivering. If I had any doubts about their interest it was dispelled when we arrived at Napier Girls the next day. Apparently boys had been texting the girls encouraging them to listen to the message. Feedback like that is really comforting.

Sometimes it is not in a formal school setting that the most effect is gained from my presentation. I was invited to speak informally to the hostel girls and share a dinner with them at St Kevin's College in Oamaru. After I left for another engagement the girls sat around on the couches in the common room and discussed what sort of behaviours they might tolerate from boyfriends.

During our travels there were two special moments unconnected with presentations that will remain in my memory. Just north of Kaikoura we stopped to look at a seal pup colony. Several hundred metres into the bush there is a waterfall cascading down into a large pond. Adult seals were nowhere to be seen (probably at sea feeding) leaving behind dozens of tiny pups in the nursery so far inland from the ocean. To see these little creatures playing together and occasionally pausing to curiously observe us humans was something to behold. An even better display of nature was seen in Paihia. After dinner we were walking back to our accommodation when we stopped to watch a fisherman reeling in a large stingray. Suddenly, just 50 metres from shore, a pod of Orca surfaced and we were amazed to see these magnificent creatures as they glided past, occasionally coming up for air.

Many people have helped the Foundation this year. Zonta clubs and Soroptimist clubs have been particularly helpful arranging talks throughout New Zealand and fundraising for us. We couldn't have covered so many locations in New Zealand without the help of the many and varied family violence networks either and the assistance of school teachers and principals is so very much appreciated. A big thanks to you all. Some fundraising has been on a large scale by groups such as Zonta or Soroptimists; some has been small but heartfelt like the lady in Greymouth who raised \$140 by selling cup cakes. A young man from Christchurch donated a week's earnings from his business to the Foundation as well as organising a charity dinner. People all over have approached us and offered to do fundraising to further our work. These gestures are tremendously gratifying. One that really caught my attention was at Sophie's school, St Hilda's Collegiate. I gave a presentation and soon after the Year 13 girls in their junior Zonta club asked if they could organise an Indian food cooking demonstration night. Even though they were nearing final exams they put in a great effort and raised nearly \$2000.

The feedback I've received following my presentations gives me cause to keep going in the knowledge that I'm making a difference to people's lives. The emails and letters to me personally or through the Foundation info line now run into the hundreds. Many are obviously heartfelt but some strike a real chord. Like the one from a young woman who said that on her way to hear me speak she made a pledge with herself. She said if five things in Sophie's relationship matched what was in hers she would get out of it. This young woman said that the more I spoke the more it sounded like I was talking about her. She did take positive action with the aid of her family and enclosed a photo of herself. She was a beautiful young woman now encouraged to make a better life for herself. I was also told of a young woman who attended a presentation with her mother and aunt and afterwards went out to dinner. The three

women talked about what they should and would accept from a relationship and to me, bringing this issue out into the open is exactly what I'm trying to do.

Perhaps one of the best recommendations I had was after I spoke at a teen parent programme. The teacher in charge wrote: I want to thank you for coming to talk to us about relationships and signs of abuse. It has made a huge impact on our students who have spent class and break time discussing what they consider as abuse and what they are willing to accept in their relationships. Most seem to consider they have accepted too much. Beforehand they did not know it was abuse. Now they have a label. While I know it may cause some upheaval in their lives now to deal with it, I believe what they have learnt will make for a safer future for their lives and the lives of their babies. I can't thank you enough.

I always said at the outset that if we could save just one life it would be worth it. I've no doubt from the confidential correspondence we've had that several lives have been saved this year alone through the Sophie Elliott Foundation. That gives me great satisfaction and something I know Sophie would approve of.

This year has been a year of great progress and ends on a positive note. Next year promises to be even better as we are almost ready to announce where we are at with the educational awareness programme the Foundation is so passionate about implementing. It's too early to say what will happen and who our chosen partners are but all will be unveiled early in the New Year. What I can say is that our recent progress is very exciting so watch this space.

**Lesley Elliott**  
**Chairperson, Sophie Elliott Foundation**