DAVID HAIGH

Interview with Ian Shirley

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Introduction

This interview with Ian Shirley, carried out in 2013, is the third in a series of interviews by David Haigh with practitioners who have made significant contributions to the field of Community development in Aotearoa New Zealand.

26 JUNE 2013
TĀMAKI MAKAURAU AUCKLAND

David Haigh: Ian, for the record can you give me your full name?

Ian Shirley: Ian Francis Shirley.

You worked in Community Development work during the 1970s, who did you work for?

Auckland City Council. It was the 1970s – I was trying to think when I went to Massey University and that was in the late 70s. The history of it was that I had previously been employed for a short period as the National President of the Young Christian Workers Association. Then I went to work for a short while for the Justice Department, in the Probation Service, and then from there

I went to work with the Auckland City Council. At that time there was only Peter Harwood, and there was a woman who had been doing a little bit of work in Glen Innes and she left, she did not stay very long so – oh, and Eddie McCloud, Eddie was in the centre of the city here as well – so I was really assigned to work in the Tāmaki area. So that was really the team.

Your title, was it Community Advisor?

Community Advisor, that's right.

Do you recall anything about what your job description was? What you were expected to do?

It was really interesting. I don't think the Council had a clear idea of what the Community Advisory Service was all about and, in fact, one of the things that really stood out from my early period was that you were to really deal with the social problems of Tāmaki, that was the thing. When I checked it all through, the social problems were really the things that the planners could not actually deal with. You were required to try and deal with some of those things that town planning – and at that stage of course it was pretty embryonic in Auckland because they had only, just prior to that, embarked on their first urban renewal programme, and they had a very narrow view of what town planning was. So, the way I saw it when I went out into the community was that you were just the hand maiden of the planning authority.

So you were there to help the planner?

Yes, that was very much it, and that was quite interesting in the sense that it did not fit with my views about development. I think the thing that is quite interesting is that if I look back in my background, I think how important that actually was. I came from a family that had very strong views about social justice and equity. We actually had a social contract within the family, which now when I look back was amazing really. Every week we would have a family council meeting where all the members of the family were able to comment on how the family was operating and all of that sort of thing. So, we were taught at an early age … it was amazing when I think back to that. From there I became involved with the Young Christian Workers Movement, which was really a fantastic movement. It was based around working young people, mainly in factories and so on – it originated out of Europe. I worked full time for them for a period and then became the National President, also working full time. We got involved in a number of what they called 'social action social justice' programmes. That was my training ground, really, the family and the Young Christian Workers. I got into things like liberation theology at that time, which was really quite new and it was coming through in Latin America. So, even before – or as I started university, because I was working full-time but I also did some university work – I was able to start and follow some of those things, which I found really interesting.

Young Christian Workers – is that a Catholic organisation?

It started as the Catholic Youth Movement but then it became much broader, and it became the Young Christian Workers (YCW). It had quite a cutting edge to it, I think, when I look back at it, in the sense that we had programmes that were based around social issues and how you would actually take action to deal with them. We got involved with housing programmes, in unemployment, in a range of issues like that – even in factories where there was discrimination with workers. So that was my background, really. Some people, like Mr Muldoon, became a friend of mine. He always thought I had a Marxist background and when I took the court case against him they tried to assemble a whole lot of material to demonstrate that and then found out, of course, that it just didn't work. So it was very much from that background rather than any other ideology.

Your family were Catholic?

Yes, I was brought up Catholic. It was a very liberal Catholic upbringing and what was interesting about it was, you see Mary comes from a family of ten – a very Catholic family, but we had very liberal views on what Christianity meant, and Mary's father … I can tell you I was there in the house one day when the local Catholic priest came up and wanted him to tithe, and he said, "Father, I have been watching your presbytery going through all these new renovations and so on. I have to say, if that is an example of your poverty, I would hate to see your chastity." He used to write letters to ministers and took them head on, and that was really different – and my mother was like that, she was very progressive. There are many different strains within Catholicism and I remember we often used to have priests who would come to the house, and one night we had an Irish priest who had just arrived in New Zealand, and he was staying overnight and he left his shoes outside the door, I suppose expecting my mother to clean them. She did not say anything, but next morning when he came out he found the polish and the brush alongside his shoes. So that was interesting.

Were there any particular individuals in that period that influenced you?

I think there were people in the YCW, a number of quite strong characters when I think about it, but not in terms of leadership in the wider community. I have never really been impressed with that. I think that we learnt a lot about what some of the social justice movements, in Latin America in particular, were doing … very much Paulo Freire and his approach. I had certainly understood that very well … [though] … I could never see or agree with his view that when you went into an area you had to set aside all your values and beliefs and really work with the people. I don't think you can do that. My view of it was that his notion of getting in and storytelling and working with people, development from below, was a wonderful approach, but you had to also recognise your own values and your own beliefs and how they interacted with the people you were working with.

In fact, that was one of the interesting things that was largely responsible

for me leaving community work. … I really enjoyed … community work in Tāmaki but … I had some real concerns about the focus, about being the sort of hand maiden of planners – that you were just simply a tool in their operation or that you were somehow going to solve the social problems of the community. So what I started to do was to turn that around, and I think that was very much the influence of people like Paulo Freire, that you started to recognise that there were people in the community who had entirely different views. When you started to look at the so-called 'social problems' like housing in Tāmaki, you then said well, actually, it is not just a problem of housing … what lies behind all of this?

I will just tell you one other anecdote. When I first did a paper at university in the first year, we had this professor – I think he must have been the original mad professor – but he decided that he was going to send us all out into the community to really look at social problems, that was the big thing. We were all sent out – first year, we knew nothing – and I remember going out to Ōtara and the first person I went to see, it seemed to me this was the problem you see, I went and I interviewed Garfield Johnson at Ōtara College (or Hillary College, as it became), and he said to me, "Do you know what the problem is? The problem is people like you coming out here and conducting research on us. Actually, the best contribution you can make is to go back and if you want to work anywhere try the East of Auckland, that is where the problems are." I left. I was pretty devastated but when I went back and reflected on it I thought, that is really important. It is the way in which you perceive the community.

When I confronted a similar situation in Tāmaki, I thought, right, I am not doing that again. So I tracked back – in fact that is how I first wrote up the *Planning for Community* book (Shirley, 1979) – and I tied it in with what I was doing at university, I decided to track where the people of Tāmaki had come from and that took me back to Freemans Bay. It took me back to the urban renewal programme and the way in which the suburb was bulldozed, the people were relocated – because they did not even have the housing ready for them in Tāmaki they went into the transit camps at the Domain and places like that. Then, having created the bloody problem in the first place they then send in Community Advisors to try and sort out the problem. I learnt a great deal. I said this when we were meeting with the Tāmaki Transformation Group, that was like an apprenticeship because the people there taught you about what good community development meant. So, people like Pia Williams, who was the Public Health Nurse, a wonderful woman and I used to go around with her and we would visit homes and they had been making bread; and people like Kuini Arana and Tom Pomare – a wonderful group of people but as far I was concerned, I was learning off them. So, that is my background.

> *That is a great story. You have to dig deeper than just the surface of housing.*

Absolutely, and you did things then that I think we *could* do at that time. I remember we had one housing inspector who was an absolute pain in the arse and he was evicting people from homes. He was supposed to be working for the housing corp or whatever it was called at that time, and he was actually

evicting them. So we decided to set up a whole community forum and we invited him along, and it was open slather and he was moved on within weeks. That was from the community, that was not me, and I think you were just one of the community that was trying and supporting from behind.

Within the Council, what sort of support did you get? Politically and from staff?

I think with the staff we sort of went our own ways in many respects, so there was not a lot of collaboration. There were certain things that ones like Peter Harwood pushed, of course, he wanted the Citizens Advice Bureau. I think we had different approaches and Eddie McLeod – nobody could put him in a box! Then other people came along, like Erolini Ala'ilima-Eteuati – so you had a gradual expansion. I found the planner at the time, Gordon McFarlane, he was very good, he was excellent. He was one you could actually talk with and he had a broader view of what it was all about. But then we had a chap come in from overseas, Bill Berrett, and as far as I was concerned he was imposing his views on all of this and he didn't understand the community of New Zealand at all, and that was not very helpful.

He came from Milton Keynes in England.

That's right, he did – and of all places to then start and talk about community.

What about politically?

The politicians, I thought at that time, were very liberal. I mean basically they were conservative, Eric Salmon, Harry Dansey, Lindo Ferguson, and Robbie [Auckland Mayor Sir Dove-Myer Robinson] was great, he was one you could go to. We actually got the garden in Glen Innes through Robbie. We invited him out to a hui and in the context of the hui he said, "Yes, you should have a garden." And that was it, and then of course the Council reacted but it was too late. He was good, and there was a Town Clerk there at the time, Jack Shaw. He was a very nice man and very astute, again conservative. Because what had happened was during that time after I became really involved in what I thought was real community development, I was then invited to make that speech – the Rhona Frame Memorial Lecture – which upset Mr Muldoon and he wrote to the Council privately to get me removed, and the councillors were very supportive and that was very interesting, in fact Lindo Ferguson said to me, "We actually listened to what you said but we would like you to write a paper like that for Council." That is how supportive they were, to which Mr Muldoon wrote back and asked for the names of the councillors who made that decision. It was so funny. Jim Anderton was on the Council then and he said "Oooh, they are going to send us to Waiouru!" Cath Tizard was there too. Interestingly enough, both the councillors that were the most supportive, in my view, I found were the conservative ones but who were liberal in the sense that they could actually see the value of community development, and that was interesting.

From what I gather it was that group that really pushed to get Peter Harwood appointed in the first place.

Ones like George Salmon and Lindo and Harry Dansey were very positive about this sort of thing. Nobody had any idea much what it was. You were already established in Manukau at that time but there were not many others around. It was risky, you had no idea actually what was going to happen.

What about opposition then, within Council – staff or politically? Was there any strong opposition to what you were doing?

No. I did not find it and one of the reasons for that was, what we tried to do was engage the councillors with some of the things that were actually going on. Like we invited Robbie out to a hui and we invited councillors to come and see what was happening. We had a range of programmes that started from within the community. I suppose the one area of opposition, which was very funny, really, was when we started the urban marae. This actually came from working with a group of young Māori men who were all unemployed, and one of the things they talked about was that unemployment wasn't the only issue. The issue was where they could have an environment, a cultural environment that would reinforce their values and so on. So, we talked about an urban marae and we had a wonderful kaumātua, Tai Nepia, and he was the one who said, "Well, I think we can go ahead. Why can't we set up a marae here?" Of course, when that came out Ngāti Whātua were very upset, so we got a real reaction from Brownie Puriri. Brownie was very upset – you can't just do this. Tai Nepia was a lovely man and he said, "Why not? We can do this and we are going to do it." And we did. The marae actually set up a whole series of programmes – carving, preparation of food and the garden itself was part of that. We got approval because of Robbie, for the land behind the Citizens' Advice Bureau – they ploughed it up, it was park land, and put a garden in. For me it was actually quite exciting because people were just carrying you along. The Advice Bureau was really interesting because it was largely populated by middle-class women coming from outside, from Remuera and St Heliers and so on, whereas all the other activities were from within. But nevertheless, I think the Bureau gradually modified its behaviour and became more part of the community.

During that time, what did you see as the Community Development values that you tried to work by? What sort of values would you say were the key ones?

I think recognising that people had to be fully engaged in the development of the community themselves, and arising from discussions and engagement in activities. For example, they set up a budget advisory service and I remember there was a Rarotongan woman who was very good with figures and with accounting, she had some experience and she took over as the treasurer of that particular initiative. I think it was about how you worked from the ground up. How you ensure that your role is behind that sort of development, and working with it rather than imposing your views. That doesn't mean to say

that you didn't get engaged, because one of the things that I really enjoyed was when people saw you actively engaged with them, they were prepared to argue, disagree … so, there was an environment of interaction and action which came out of that.

One of the interesting things was, if I go back to the YCW, we used to have a programme that was called 'See, Judge, Act' and then 'Action, Reflection,' which bought into the Freireian model. That is what we basically used. We used to do that. We would look at a particular issue and say, "Righto, let's get all the facts together, then we come together, let's make some judgements and now what are we going to do in terms of action?" For me, one of the key values in it was making the links between what Freire talks about as word and action, discourse and action – you can't have one without the other. Then you reflect on that and you start again. So, it was a continual process and it was a wonderful training model, in my view, for people working in the community.

Stressors in the job – I suppose here we can bring in Muldoon later, but what did you see generally were the stressors that you had to deal with?

I think the stressors internally were, when the Director of Planning changed and you had a different approach, different interpretation of what was going on, so that probably added some issues. I found the actual engagement in the community was extremely reinforcing and positive. I could drive out from the City Council building and get out there and all of a sudden feel – right, I am now involved, I am in the community. So, you would go out to actually work on projects and so on. For me it wasn't actually a stress, it was positive reinforcement, it was just great. No matter what you were involved in doing. So, I spent quite a bit of time with the Health Centre, with the public health nurse and Dr Woodruff, who was there – wonderful people. I spent a lot of time going around the houses with them. I spent a lot of time working with the Anglican Brothers in Tāmaki, who were a wonderful group. This is where you got your ideas from. They were right on the opposite corner to Tāmaki College and they set up a homework centre, which the Tāmaki students thoroughly enjoyed! Wonderful to be involved with them. One of them now, Donald, is leading a major programme in Queensland for the Anglican Church on care in the community. They were a great group of people.

I think one of the things that used to get me about the way in which community work was perceived – it came through very strongly in the Milton Keynes-type development, the 'new town' – was that you needed to have leadership of working-class estates. The assumption is that you can only have leadership from outside or from above and that is Bullshit 101. As far as I am concerned the leadership was there, the people were there. People like Tom Pomare, who was a truck driver for Winstone, and he became the leader of the Māori community, a great guy. In fact, Winstone were so happy that they supported his work full time to work in the community. People like that were just inspiring. I think that is one of the things that reinforced for me that leadership does not come from outside, it does not come from experts, it comes from within. That is quite powerful.

The main thing that changed everything for me was after the Rhona

Frame Memorial Lecture, where I addressed the whole issue of poverty and I actually asked them – I used the situation of the young men who had been working with me, or I had been working with them, building the marae – would I be able to use their situation? They were very keen for that to happen. I was one of them in a way.

Can you just run through very briefly what you actually said?

Basically, that I challenged the whole basis of egalitarianism, the issue that we were not as egalitarian or as just a society as we said we were, but I talked about the examples of people in the community. I also had a go at social work as a profession, because it seemed to me that social work was dealing with the after-effects rather than what I think development is about, building alternatives. So it is more about prevention, whereas social work was a palliative. I remember being fairly critical of that, but the thing that really got up the nose of Mr Muldoon was that I talked about the elite in society making decisions, and used Auckland and talked about the east of Auckland, so he was not happy about that.

What did Muldoon do then?

Well he wrote to the Council, he wrote to Lindo Ferguson as the National Party Leader on Council, effectively, and he told him that I should be paraded before my permanent head and told to behave myself in public. Then when that came out, that is when Lindo asked me to come to a meeting with him and the Town Clerk, and we discussed it all and I said, "Well, here is the evidence." And they said that they supported me and asked me to write a paper for Council, and I said I was happy to do that. Of course, Mr Muldoon was very upset that they did not take action, so he wrote back to the Council and asked for the names of the councillors, and just carried it on. But what it actually did was really interesting. It actually changed my role because, effectively, what he did was give me a public platform. So, no longer was I involved in community development and I had a platform for some months where I was invited to speak all around the place, and I did. I carried on the same sort of themes about poverty and injustice and inequality, and the sort of things that we were doing. After a few months of that, because my role had radically changed, I mean I had amazing support from the community – there was never any question and there was nothing they could have done about it – but Tai Nepia said to me, I used to meet with him quite a lot, and he said, "I think things have changed. I think that you need to start walking with both feet. You have been in this role here with us and we valued that but you are now moving into a different role and you need to explore that further because it isn't going to work in the long term for us or for you. Why don't you consider focusing on the people who we see as the problem rather than working with us?" At the time Massey University had seen what was happening and they flew me down to Palmerston North and offered me a job – it was the right thing to do. I suppose that was stressful, because I was speaking all around the place and there was a lot of reaction to that from politicians, but that was no longer community development.

You were into policy and politics.

Absolutely, and it seemed the right way to move. I thought I would go to Palmerston North for three years. I remember Mary and I were following the removal van in and I said, "What have we done? We won't be here longer than three years." Then, of course, it was really interesting because it opened up other avenues for me, because then I became involved with the Development Institute in Paris and started to do some work with them, and that is when I learnt a great deal about development in Third World countries.

In terms of local government involvement is social issues, which really started at that 1970s period, particularly with the appointment of Peter Harwood and one or two others, have you observed any changes that have taken place in local government over that time? Has there been an impact of the work that we did?

I think that there has been a reaction to that work. I think it has become more closed. I think it has become more bureaucratic. I think you have seen the rise of what is best described as a sort of right-wing reaction, talking about why doesn't local government get involved in core services, core activities. I think one of the problems with all of that … one of the very good things about community development in the period you are talking about, was that you were able to develop a holistic approach. You did not see community development as addressing one particular issue, it was a whole series of things and there were connections between all of this. There was a framework, a development framework within which we worked.

We might have done it in different ways, but I thought it was one of the strengths of that time. That has changed. So what you have, and particularly with the advent of economic fundamentalism in the 1980s and into the 90s, you had that whole idea of basically issues being reduced to the lowest common denominator. The housing thing became supply and demand. Everything was dealt with in isolation. Academics did the same, following individual disciplines fulfilling what Keynes, I think it was, said: "They know the cost of everything and the value of nothing." We were good at that, but when you narrow things down you don't get the whole picture and I think that this is why, in some respects, Indigenous people have an incredible advantage because they come from a different cultural frame of reference, they have a more holistic model that they are dealing with. It also means that sometimes they get immobilised by that but, nevertheless, it can be empowering. I think when you are starting to deal with individual things … I think local government, what has happened is that it has branched off in a lot of areas but I don't think it has had a coherent strategy for local government in New Zealand, and what that means. National government certainly doesn't. Now you are getting this tug-of-war over who is actually going to control the governance of a locality or a region or whatever.

There is the potential in Auckland with all the local boards again, but the resources aren't there and I can't see that happening. The report by the Royal Commission on the governance of Auckland undermined the whole notion of popular participation of people and, in my view, that is one of the most

damaging things we are confronting today. I think if there is one thing that has happened, we have undermined the whole notion of government – local, regional and national. I see that as one of the big issues.

Thank you, Ian.

Reference

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David Haigh has a long career in community development. He is the former head of CD for the Auckland Regional Authority and has recently retired from Unitec | Te Pūkenga, where he taught in social practice, sociology and not-for-profit management. David is active in Auckland Action Against Poverty.