

PŌNUI STORIES



2006-2025





**With the help of MMM NZ
(Mobile Mission Maintenance)**

**and other volunteers,
the hall upgrade was**

**completed by the summer
of 2010-2011.**

On 12 February a Pōnui Picnic was held to celebrate the completed hall renovations. Peter and Pat Chamberlin did the ribbon-cutting and welcomed everyone in—evidently about 150 people ranging in age from 2 to 90.

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David Chamberlin and camper Star Brooks in the wheelhouse of the barge taking campers to Pōnui Island.

Photo taken by Liz Goodgame 2021.

Campers used to take “Blue Boats” to the island from Auckland’s port, but later, to save costs for campers, the Chamberlins generously began providing transport from Kawakawa Bay.



Peter and Pat Chamberlin on their Golden Wedding Anniversary on the deck of the main Pōnui Hall.

Kia ora e te whanau. Ngā mihi mahana me ngā kupu aroha ki a koutou katoa.

My first ever Scripture Union camp was on Pōnui Island. I was 13 and I had no idea that I was going to have an adventure that I would never forget. I had a wonderful time, and I came away with good friends but as I look back and reflect on that camp, I realise that the true treasure was the growth in my faith that took place because of that camp. It was a formative experience.

This year we celebrate 90 years of camping on Pōnui Island. That's 90 years of campers like me. Over the years thousands of young people have attended these camps, and so many of them have come away changed because of their time on Pōnui.

It's also 90 years of leaders and cooks and speakers and working bees and maintenance and prayer and support. So many have contributed in so many ways to making camps on Pōnui happen well and the camps would not have happened without them. These people have formed a strong network and they have given sacrificially and steadfastly.

And it's also 90 years of continuous commitment from the Chamberlin family. Three generations of Chamberlins have willingly offered their island and their home and supported camps on Pōnui with wholehearted generosity.

Fred and Gertrude Chamberlin made their island farm available for the first camp in January 1932. Later their son Peter and his wife Pat ran the farm and the annual camps continued. Peter had been a baby when the first camp happened, and his commitment to Scripture Union camping remained strong until the end of his life in April 2022.

David Chamberlin and his late wife Ros and their three daughters welcomed hundreds of SUNZ campers every year. Ros's death was a blow to everyone who knew her.

The Chamberlin family's commitment to SUNZ camping continues, and David and his new wife Di are as keen as ever to use their island farm to help children and young people discover Jesus and become lifelong disciples. We deeply appreciate the heritage which the Chamberlins have given to Scripture Union.

During the celebration of 75 years of Pōnui Island we created a booklet chronicling the stories of campers throughout the entirety of the period the camp had run. This booklet contains stories from the further 15 years these camps have continued.

As you read the following stories about Pōnui Island and see God at work, give thanks to him with me. Give thanks for the camps and for all the people who have made them happen. God has used these people to change the lives of so many across New Zealand.

In the words of Psalm 100 verse 5:

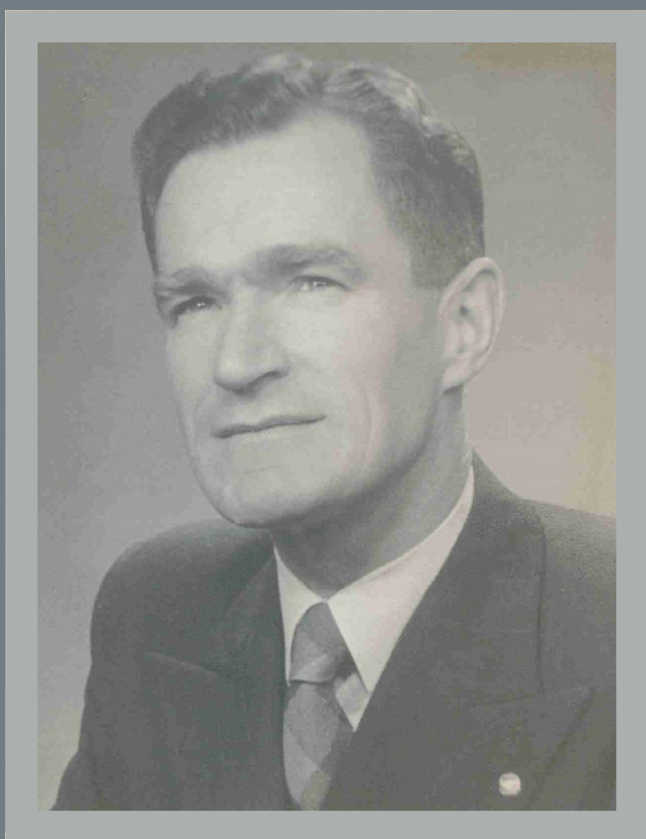
"For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations."

"He pai hoki a Ihowā, pūmau tonu tāna mahi tohu: ā kei tēnā whakatupuranga, kei tēnā whakatupuranga, tōna pono."

Hilary Hague

NATIONAL DIRECTOR, SUNZ

Long-time Campers Share Pōnui Memories



Colin Becroft

Colin Becroft, who served on the Scripture Union staff from 1938 to 1955, had been a camper on the second Pōnui camp in 1933. Here are his memories which he wrote in 1997.

DAWN ON PŌNUI January 1933

Not long after first light, a slight stirring woke me. John Laird, my tent officer and our Camp Commandant, was squeezing out of the tent with his Bible, fully dressed. I wondered what was going on and next morning he invited me to come and see. He leads a few yards up a track through the manuka, and then turned left to climb the steep little knoll behind the tiny cookhouse.

Up there the dew was heavy; it was pretty cool. Lighthouse Bay lay quiet below us, the bell tents in a beautiful curve at the water's edge. The sun was about to come up over the hill in the direction of Coromandel. To my surprise, the camp leaders were scattered around the top of the knoll, each with his Bible—Dave Burt, Gordon Conway, Rowland Harries, Vine Martin, and the rest. One or two were pacing around slowly, most had groundsheets stretched out and were kneeling or sitting. The sight of those young men, each alone with God, has never left me.

Soon we were all back in our tents ready for the bugle call. In no time, the whole camp—all 50 or 60 of us—was lined up along the beach, and at the word we all rushed into the tide—its a terrific commotion. Well, not quite all—the unofficial patrol pulled a couple of laggards from their sleeping bags, one on the end of each pyjama clad limb, and with a “one, two, heave” in they went. High water was only six or seven paces from the tents.



Early Pōnui Crusader Camp, singing and message. Photo from behind the Marquee with the First Pōnui Cookhouse in the background.

Peace descended as each tent had its group Quiet Time, using the daily Scripture Union portion. Breakfast followed, (maybe fish steaks for the whole hungry camp, a rare treat when Fred Chamberlin wielded a garden-fork from his dinghy to collect a huge kingfish cruising past the lighthouse that very morning). After breakfast, the officers took turns to talk to us from the Bible about faith in our Lord Jesus. That didn't seem to stop us from trying to tear them limb from limb later on in Wide Games up on the ridges back of Camp. I have never forgotten life-changing chats with Rowland and Vine in-between times while tramping up the valley or perched out on the barge.

Nowhere else have I ever heard the words that spoke to me as we sang our hearts out in the marquee, with the bass voices giving the beat:

*"I want dear Lord, a heart that's true and clean;
A sunlit heart, with not a cloud between.*

*A heart like Thine, a heart divine,
A heart as white as snow;*

On me, dear Lord, a love like this bestow.

*I want, dear Lord, a love that feels for all;
A deep strong love that answers every call.*

*A love like Thine, a love divine,
A love for high and low;*

*On me, dear Lord, a love like this bestow.
I want, dear Lord, a soul on fire for Thee;*

A soul baptised with heavenly energy.

*A willing mind, a ready hand to do what ere I know,
To spread Thy light wherever I may go."*

What a way to begin the day!

Marion Carey-Smith



Marion Carey-Smith has been camping on Pōnui Island since her childhood days—first as the daughter of ‘Cookie Dewar’ and then with her husband and family. Here she shares 70 years of memories...

I first attended a Bible Study camp on Pōnui Island with my husband Keith in 1998. We found it had just the right balance between relaxation, Bible study, discussion to stimulate the mind and enjoyment of the company of others. This latter was especially so because the campers were all fellow Christians, ‘walking in the way’ and striving to better understand our great God.

Those first camps were crowned by the culinary achievements of Don Biggs who cooked and ably ran the camps. Chamberlin family members often joined in with camp studies and activities and they shared the bounty of fruit ripening in their orchard with campers.

Walks over their farm are always enjoyable and when Pat Chamberlin was alive, she loved to show us interesting aspects of the farm.

My interest in camp meals is influenced by my background, especially relating to Pōnui. My father, Ernest (Ernie or ‘Cookie’) Dewar was camp cook and general maintenance man for many boys’ camps beginning with the second camp ever run on Pōnui, in 1933.

Since I first went to Pōnui in the 1940s as a small child with my family, there have been many changes to the campsite and general running of camps. But two features have remained constant; the incredible generosity and kindness shown by the Chamberlin family and the saturation with prayer of any activity associated with Scripture Union.

After we married, Keith and I came to Pōnui with our three sons and Keith was medical officer for several summer camps. We usually stayed in the cottage Fred Chamberlin and my father had brought down from further up the valley. To this simple board-and-batten, two-room cottage Ernie added a kitchen, bathroom and a second bedroom. The cottage has now been enlarged again and is used by people who conduct research on kiwis.

My father Ernie also wired the whole island including the camp area for mains power and

internal phone communication, and he helped install much of the equipment still used today. Ernie and my mum Hazel continued their summer visits to Pōnui until he was in his eighties. His last visit was at age 90, after Hazel had died, when he came with us to the 1998 January study camp.

Looking back, I have fond memories of family holidays on Pōnui when my father cooked for the advance party and for the boys’ camps. Fred and Gertie Chamberlin were very hospitable and there were usually several families staying in different sites near the farm homestead. The big old house and associated buildings accommodated different families.

We were invited to join campers for the Sunday morning service in the worshipful atmosphere of the manuka tree glade. Invites also went out for the camp concert with its ingenious and hilarious items making you forget you were sitting on hard forms. We also joined campers for the full-day picnic outing and launch trip, usually completely encircling the island. This adventure was one of the highlights of the boys’ camp.

On picnic day the boys were transported in the barge which was towed behind the launch. If the weather was nice, a sandy bay on the north-end farm was chosen for the picnic site. On the way, the boys were allowed to jump off the front of the barge, catch a rope at the end of the barge and climb on board again. We youngsters riding on the launch would dive off the bow and catch a rope at the stern.

Sometimes the launch pulled alongside the lighthouse where Peter Chamberlin would harpoon a kingfish if one happened to be nosing around the pylons. A group of diving birds often signalled kahawai fish chasing a school of sprats. Fishing lines with a hook and a piece of rag were held over the side and fish were hauled in. All that fish meant that my father, ‘Cookie’ Dewar would be extremely busy for the remainder of that day!

Overnight hikes were another highlight, and also playing ‘Storm the Heights’ on the hill at night, attempting to ride the farm donkeys, and a visit from the girls’ camp at McCullum’s Bay when the girls came across to the island for a picnic.

Post-war camps borrowed vocabulary and structures associated with army life: the camp leader was the Commandant with his Adjutant with a loud whistle, the Quartermaster was in charge of the supplies and officers kept control in the tents.

My memories of Pōnui Island and camps span 70 years and attending Bible Study Camps in more recent years rounds off many happy experiences for me and my family.

The Pōnui New Year Camp caters for families of all ages and runs from just after Christmas until early in the New Year. It is followed by Pōnui Junior Camp, then Pōnui Senior Camp and finally the Bible Study Camp.

Jillian Blakley

LOOKING BACK OVER 23 YEARS OF CAMPING ON PŌNUI

Years ago, an advertisement regarding a family summer camp on Pōnui Island was brought to my attention at Massey Presbyterian Church. A Christian family camp at the beach, with no cars, shops or electronic distractions and a cook preparing all the meals. As a busy mother of three young children, I wanted this holiday!

I wanted fun, fellowship, relaxation and Christian input at the beach, which is my happy place. It took a few years of prayer and persuasion but finally, in 1999, we booked to go. We have never looked back!

The summer camp fulfilled all my prayers and more. All our family of five loved it and we have received many God-given blessings there. As each camp ended, I could feel the pressure of returning to 'the real world.'

I have always viewed Pōnui as a refuge, an escape, a time to have fun, build relationships and spend time with God. It is a place that has really helped build faith for my husband and me. We ended up co-leading the family camp for a few years too.

As a family we attended so many family camps. The children loved Pōnui Junior and Senior camps, my husband has helped at working bee camps and now—over the last eight years—he and I have attended the Bible study camp.

Pōnui Island camps have been a part of our family for 23 years. We cannot thank the Chamberlin family enough for enabling Scripture Union staff and volunteers to carry on the mission of Christian camps on their island for 90 years.





Reflections on Pōnui Senior Camps

The week-long Pōnui Senior Camp is held mid-January for high school students who were in Years 11, 12 or 13 during the previous year. Some students fly in from around the North Island to attend this popular camp, and there is always a waiting list for any cancellations.

Here are contributions from four Pōnui Senior camp leaders...

BEN DREW



Ben Drew was the first intern to come to New Zealand as part of Action Abroad, a Scripture Union UK programme giving young Christians an opportunity to serve overseas. Ben continues to have a strong commitment to following Christ and he and his wife and family currently live and work in a country where Christianity is not the majority faith.

Pōnui Island is a very special place. I had the privilege of serving as a leader at Pōnui Senior Camp 2006 as part of a year volunteering with Scripture Union New Zealand (2005-2006).

It is a truly wonderful location where young people can hear and read God's word and have time to reflect and chat with other campers and leaders about it.

They can do all of this while enjoying God's creation, and great food, fun and company. This balance provides a phenomenal environment that welcomes the Holy Spirit to work and allows young people to make life-changing and defining decisions for Christ, without big hype or an artificial atmosphere.

LIZ GOODGAME



Liz has served the Pōnui Senior camp for several years taking her children with her. She has mothered the campers and their leaders and been greatly blessed herself along with her family who have all loved being on this island.

I have been Camp Mum at Pōnui Senior for five camps from 2014 and 2019-22. The first time we attended camp (invited by our friend Matt Browning) our youngest son was just learning how to walk.

My husband was working and so I came on my own with our four kids, and a babysitter. It was a challenging experience, and I don't know if I added much value to the camp that first year . . . but something powerful grabbed my heart the first time we stepped on the island, and it has been an important part of our family story ever since.

You can taste and see the truth of the Gospel written on the hearts and lives of people who have experienced camps on Pōnui. Beauty, grace, courage and faith have made their home on the island, and it has been an honour to witness God's goodness poured out for the benefit of high school students year after year.

The hard-won legacy of the Chamberlin family is written on the hearts of countless people, mine included. I am thankful to have played a small part in this big story of Pōnui Island.

AARON DOUGLAS



Aaron Douglas has been a long-time leader at Pōnui Senior camps. He has also served on staff as a SUNZ Youth Consultant and as part of SUNZ governing Board.

I had the joy of leading on Pōnui camps for seven summers, from 2007 through to 2013. For three of those years I was either an adjutant or a tent leader, and I was camp director for four years.

Those years were a time of significant growth with camp numbers growing from as few as 35 campers, to maxing out at 96 campers in my final year. This growth reflected the culture and community created by the wonderful team of leaders and resulted in a groundswell of returning campers and new campers coming via word of mouth.

Two stories from this time. During my first two years at Pōnui I had the privilege of leading with Tony McLean before his tragic and sacrificial death in 2008 trying to save the life of a student in an adventure activity at Mangatepopo Gorge.

The summer following that tragedy was particularly hard for the many campers and leaders who knew Tony. The way the Pōnui community rallied around those who were grieving was very helpful as was the space created throughout camp to honour Tony and be thankful for his impactful contribution to Pōnui. The annual lighthouse swim was renamed the Tony McLean Memorial Lighthouse Swim in his honour.

My second story concerns a young lady who was 'made' to go to camp. This young woman made it clear she didn't want to be at camp and her displeasure began affecting her tent and buddy group. That was until Day Five when she asked to speak to me and stated: "I want what you guys have got!"

From my experiences at camp, I believe the impact of creating an intentional community cannot be under-estimated as a living witness to the Gospel being preached.

STIRLING MCLACHLAN



Stirling has written about the impact on him of his first camp on Pōnui. He attended Pōnui Senior camps (2011-13) and Pōnui Xtreme (2011-2012). Deeply impacted from his very first camp, he went on to become a tent leader on Pōnui Junior (2016-2022) and Pōnui Senior (2018-2020). From 2011-2020 he also helped at the Pōnui Maintenance Camps each Labour Weekend and has also been involved with some other small projects over the years.

My first camp on Pōnui was Pōnui Senior 2011. I remember arriving at the boat ramp at Kawakawa Bay along with lots of other people and realizing I knew absolutely no-one.

I was pretty shy and awkward as a teenager, and I struggled to fit in anywhere. However, as camp went on, I made friends and found that people accepted me despite the differences I felt self-conscious about. Through the teaching and spiritual content at camp I clearly remember feeling these things didn't matter because God loved and accepted me just the way I was.

On top of all this I met awesome young Christians who I could tell had a real and personal relationship with God, and this motivated me to build my own relationship with Him.

Although I grew up in a Christian family and certainly considered myself a Christian, that camp was a defining moment when I began to take my faith really seriously. That week at Pōnui didn't change my life then and there but the relationship with God that grew in my every-day life as a result of that camp, sure did.

I have remained involved in Pōnui one way or another since then and it has continued to play an important role in my life. I've made life-long friends and met many people I look up to as examples of what it looks like to follow Jesus.

Reflections on Pōnui Junior Camps

Pōnui Junior is held over six nights in early January for students who were in School Years 8,9 or 10 in the previous year. It is always a large camp and sometimes presents challenges for those in leadership.

JAMIE GRAY



Jamie Gray (nee Bycroft) first attended Pōnui Junior as a camper and since 2018 as the Team Leader. Her husband, Paul, is a significant member of the team.

While there are many stories I could tell from Pōnui Junior camps over the years, the story of PJ'21 always makes me grateful for the grace and the love of our God.

PJ '21 was anything but a simple camp: we were hit by multiple sicknesses resulting in a few leaders needing to be isolated and eventually sent home. This stretched our leadership team as we had to fill in spots in tents and cover other jobs with other members of our core team.

Along with sickness, there were some behavioural situations that meant as Team Leader, I was involved in 'putting out fires' almost daily. Because of this I became exhausted and felt completely disconnected from what was happening for the campers.

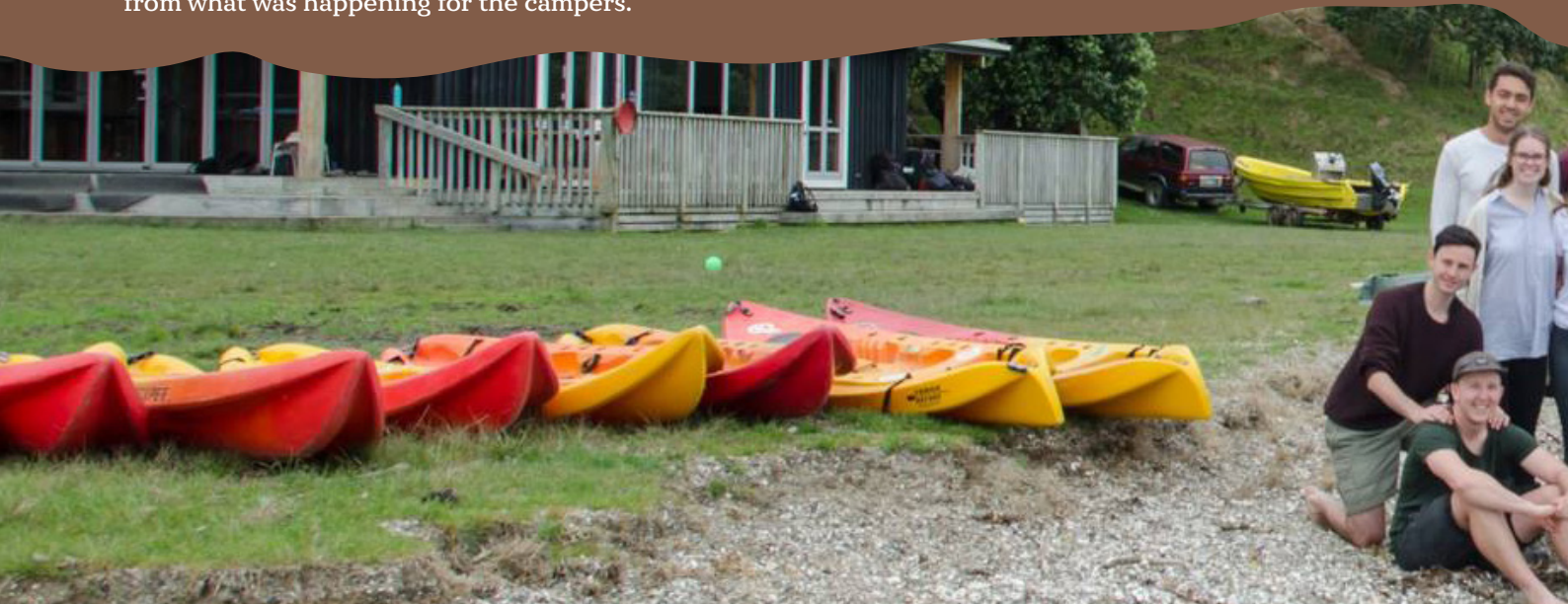
On our final night on Pōnui Junior, we have candle time. It's a time of prayer and reflection over the week that has been. A time to thank God for what He has done and to take a moment to think about what we want to take back home with us.

During this time one of the camper's prayers was 'Thank you God for showing me how it feels to be loved again.' In that moment I knew I would do that week all over again—with all its challenges—just for that one camper.

My prayer as Team Leader as we go into each Pōnui Junior is that we can, for one week, create an environment where the Gospel is lived out—and live in the Kingdom of God for a week.

What a privilege that God has used me to plan and co-ordinate a week where even just one camper gets to experience the love God has for all of us.

What a reminder of how God would do it all again—just for you!





PATRICK SAN JOSE

Patrick San Jose has been a tent leader at Pōnui Junior for four years from 2019 to 2022

My involvement as a tent leader at Pōnui Junior Camp began in 2019 when I was recruited by Alejandra, a former leader.

I became a buddy leader with Shelley and although our team Kawaka-watch was probably the youngest group in the entire camp we still managed to come in at fourth place overall!

Since that first year I've made sure I've continued to go to Pōnui Junior as a tent leader, helping Jamie and the team. There are plenty of new campers each year and I enjoy getting to know them and seeing them grow. I've also seen growth in myself and in my fellow leaders who all share the same passion for God.

Being a camp leader, I've learned so much about myself and how to work with different buddy leaders and different ways of connecting with people. Most importantly, I've learned about the character of God

and the importance of having a personal faith and relationship with Him.

I often reflect on my time at Pōnui and realise I definitely would not be the person I am today without Pōnui Junior and the opportunities I've had to serve there and be involved in various ways.

One of my favourite memories is throwing our adjutant Mikkah into the sea after pretending to take a lads' group photo with him. Apologies Mikkah, but it was a golden opportunity!

I would like to thank the Chamberlin family, especially David, for taking us out on the barge every year and sharing stories about the island without ever losing his enthusiasm and awe of God's creation. I would also like to thank Jamie and Paul Gray who have been consistent leaders of Pōnui Junior and have made every camp feel welcoming and fun.



Reflection on Pōnui Xtreme



Pōnui Xtreme was a small camp held during the Spring school holidays, a time when the weather can be more extreme than in summer, and so for this camp, bunking down in the boat shed trumped sleeping outdoors in tents. The title of the camp also reflected the call of Jesus to live all out for him even if it might seem somewhat extreme at times. This camp continues to the present but has now been renamed Going Deeper.

JAMIE GRAY

Pōnui Xtreme 2014 was the first camp I co-directed, along with Mikkah Drake. It was a smaller than usual group which was perfect for us as new young directors.

The last day of camp was also my 21st birthday—and Pōnui is the best location I can think of to celebrate that event. Jenny Mackie even baked a 21st birthday cake for me in the wood burner oven!

Over the week campers engaged with the Bible, enjoyed games and activities and helped dock lambs and build fences on the farm. Being part of a smaller group allowed us to form deeper connections and, over the years, many of these campers have gone on to lead on Pōnui Junior and Pōnui Senior camps.

In true spring style the weather was stormy on the day we were due to return home, and it looked as if we might need to stay at camp for another night. It was at this point that Mikkah and I really started relying on the steady support and experience of Jenny Mackie.

We were young and not mentally prepared for camp to last longer than planned, but the trust Jenny displayed in us, and her calm experience, kept us sane. The campers entertained themselves for hours in the hall with a game they created using water bottles and tennis balls—a game that has been played at many camps since!

Fortunately, we were able to head over to the mainland that evening, but not without some excitement. It took about an hour to ferry us across to Kawakawa Bay as we had to stop frequently to let the storm pass before starting up again!

Richard Deeble

FISHING ADVENTURE CAMP



SUNZ Youth Consultant, Andy Banks planned to commence this boys-only fishing adventure camp on Pōnui in the Easter holidays in 2020. Covid isolation requirements put a stop to that, but the camp happened in 2021 and 2022. Richard Deeble has been a team leader on each occasion.

There has always been something special about the mixture of outdoor adventure and encountering God that camps at Pōnui provide. Our overnighter for the 2022 Fishing and Adventure camp was no different. Held in the autumn holidays after Easter, an overnighter is significantly more challenging in terms of weather and daylight. After walking over the island from Home Bay to Mine Gully in a squally south westerly the boys set up their bivouacs for the night then walked down to the coast to fish off the beach and rocks for the last hour or so before dinner and sunset.

The fishing in that hour was exceptional. Across our three groups we caught 20 snapper and several kahawai as we watched terns and kahawai feeding on bait fish offshore and saw snapper swimming in our berley trail.* The overnighter itself was challenging as the forecast for a few showers turned into light but persistent rain. Despite the need for the odd emergency bivouac repair, most of the boys did really well to stand up to the challenge presented by the rain.

After walking back to camp and having breakfast we had the most appropriate conclusion to our adventure. We ate freshly smoked fish and read John 21 as Jesus encounters his weary disciples fishing and provides a miraculous catch and cooks them breakfast on the beach.

**A berley trail consists of minced up fish bait. A frozen "bomb" of this fish bait is put into a bag or other container so it can disperse and attract fish into the area where the fishing is taking place.*

Top photo features Isaac Young with his catch.



Harvey Stewart

Pōnui SUNZ Camp Site Development Since 2003

For the last forty years, Harvey and Margaret Stewart have played a major part in the maintenance and development of the camp facilities on Pōnui Island. “The Camp Buildings’ Saga” which Harvey wrote for The Pōnui Story described significant developments from over the years, and in this article, he lists the continued improvements. Harvey and Margaret have given unstintingly of their time, their talents and their gracious organisational skills which have inspired and encouraged the many willing volunteers who have worked alongside them year after year to make the Pōnui camp site a wonderful place to stay.

Since the construction of the boat shed in 2003, there has been a programme of improvements to make the camp safer and more enjoyable for all age groups.

Most of the big projects have been built by volunteers from SUNZ and from MMM NZ (Mobile Mission Maintenance).

MMM NZ is a Christian organisation which provides volunteer labour for construction or maintenance projects to churches, missions and camps all over New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

MMM NZ has enabled the following projects to be done on Pōnui.

- Upgrading of the meeting/dining hall with a new roof and wall cladding, decks and serving room and vastly improved ventilation
- Construction of a bathroom for the cooks
- Construction of a freezer room, a workshop, and a laundry
- Re-roofing of two buses and two caravans
- Painting of all roofs
- Construction of a new canoe shed
- Staining of the exterior walls of the boat shed which was built in 2003

The buildings listed above have improved the camp considerably and architect Jeff Gray is thanked for his very fine designs and drawings.

There have been many other improvements also, including the construction of two composting toilets, and two more permanent showers than the ones originally rigged up annually just before the summer camps. Since 2020 the wood fired stove in the kitchen has been fully reconditioned, the sink bench has been replaced and the vinyl floor has been re-laid.



Every Labour Weekend volunteers come to prepare the camp for the summer and to cut a year's supply of firewood from the trees that have fallen during the year. And just after Christmas another team arrives to set up the tents and put everything in order before the New Year Camp begins.

All the above has been financed by renting the camp to various groups and from generous donations from trusts and individuals.

David Chamberlin is thanked for providing the barge transport for all building materials and volunteers.

Dianne McClay

Privileged to be in the

Pōnui Family of Campers

Dianne is one of many campers who come from outside of Auckland to enjoy the Pōnui Bible Study Camp. It has already become her “go to” place for several summers.

I was invited along to my first camp by Sharyn and Bruce Coull. I was in a SU tent all by myself next to Hugh and Margaret Badger. It was so memorable to be next door to this devoted couple ... hearing them read their Bible together and listening to their chuckles that came through the canvas walls and filled my tent too.

It soon became obvious that I was privileged to be part of the ‘Pōnui family’. Some campers had been coming for more than seventeen years. So far, I have clocked up only five.

I love the simplicity of life at camp ...the shared meals (and no cooking required of me), the exchanging of stories, learning together from the Bible with excellent speakers, laughing together (much of it coming from Jenny Mackie’s wit and able leadership), enjoying the beauty of the location whether that is climbing the hills or swimming in the sea...and the huge amount of free time.

From the loading up of the barge at Kawakawa Bay to the unloading and goodbyes nearly a week later, it is a special experience for which I am very grateful to all those who make it happen.



Sylvia Coulter

Camps Shatter Stereotypes

Memories of SU Bible Study Camps (formerly known as Canvas Camps)

Sylvia has been a member of the SUNZ staff for almost twenty years, but she'd heard of the joys of Pōnui Island years before when she was a child, when her older brother went to camp there for three summers in a row. That was in the 1950s in the days of "boys only" camps on Pōnui.

Stereotypes of all kinds are shattered at Pōnui Island camps. There was I, arriving at my first adult Bible study camp in January 2000, and wondering how the week was going to work out with so many older campers. Needless to say, that stereotype was soon shattered when I got to know those dynamic and inspirational 'oldies.'


A teenage camper's stereotype was shattered when he grudgingly parted with his cell phone for a week, only to discover that he didn't even miss it!

Stereotypes were shattered when a girl wrote a note on the walls of the long drop toilet: "Don't worry! It's all part of the experience!" Her inscription helped more than a few campers shatter stereotypes and their squeamishness about primitive outdoor plumbing.

Back in 2000, I was in my 50s and a dean at Westlake Girls' High School. I'd carved time out of a busy schedule to attend Canvas Camp and wondered how that first week would go. Well, it was marvellous, and I've returned many times since. I made friendships with older people who had lived great lives at home and overseas and who were still energised by their humour, grace and Christian faith.

At that first camp I got to know Cathie Smith, then SUNZ national director. As we rowed out into the bay, she spoke of staffing needs and wondered if I might have a role in SUNZ. I said "No" at that time, but later things changed, and in February 2003 I became Auckland Regional Director. What a privilege! Some of the friends I made at Pōnui became my supporters and prayer partners.

Today I'm in my 70s and still working part-time for SUNZ, perhaps shattering more stereotypes about age!



The first Canvas Camp, held in 1998, was the brainchild of Ken Edgecombe, then SU national director, and Don Biggs, the North Island Bible Ministries co-ordinator. An ordained Methodist minister, Don led Canvas Camp for 15 years, finding skilled communicators to ‘unpack’ deep Bible studies into every-day language. An experienced first-aider and voluntary St John Ambulance officer, Don is also an accomplished cook who produced tasty meals on the wood-fired stove, while inspiring young helpers who have gone on to become capable camp cooks.

Here are some memories from my 2000 diary:

“Pat Chamberlin took us on a long walk over hills and down to beaches on the other side of Pōnui. John Schoneveld (SU youth worker) gave seven of us kayaking lessons, me being the least experienced. Some learned how to get out of an upside-down kayak, but I wasn’t game enough to try!”

We had a low tide walk around the bays and visited the old Chamberlin homestead. Colin Becroft, a gracious old man of 84, walked some of the way, with me holding his hand for fear he might slip on the rocks.

In the mornings, Tim Meadowcroft led us in an enlightening Bible study of the Minor Prophets. At night Helen Hawke, a high school science teacher from Masterton identified stars in the night sky for us, and she also pointed out phosphorescence glistening like jewels on the waves.

One day we barged to another bay for a picnic and had fun playing pétanque and damming streams. On our last day we dismantled the tents before the rain came. We got very wet barging home but enjoyed ourselves holding a tarpaulin over our heads and singing hymns with nautical themes!”

When Don Biggs stepped back from leading camps, Jenny Mackie took over. Like Don, she has the gift of making people feel at home. With her long experience in Pōnui teenage camps, Jenny is an ideal leader, running ice-breaker games and doing entertaining interviews with campers in the evenings. She finds volunteers to help run camps and

creative people to lead Bible studies to help campers ‘tease out’ Scripture as we apply their meaning for today’s world. These in-depth studies—combined with loads of leisure time—are highlights of the Bible Study Camp.

In 2012 Wayne Fraser, then SU National Director, envisaged an election campaign with each group taking a section of the Sermon on the Mount and turning it into a political policy. It was thought-provoking and most entertaining.

In 2017 Warren Prestidge took us on ‘A Great Walk Through the Bible on the Holy Spirit Track,’ with activities including original art creations and haiku poetry.

Campers bring musical instruments and lead worship times, share communion together, pray for one another and friendships (and sometimes romances) grow. David Chamberlin tells stories of farming on an island, and we discover Pōnui’s role in kiwi regeneration projects, and perhaps do a stint of night-time kiwi spotting.

Hundreds of people—teenagers and older folks—are deeply grateful to the Chamberlin family and the many volunteers who facilitate these wonderful summer holiday camps.

Thanks to all who shared their stories for this publication. We deeply value your contribution. Give thanks to God for his blessings on so many lives through these Pōnui camps on this beautiful island, and for how the Chamberlins have blessed us for these 90 years. We look forward to the future with confidence that God will continue his good work through our camps, these people, and this place.

