

# Young artist thrives in inclusive environment

When Taita College student Danni-Lee Kokiri won big at the national IHC art awards, it was consistent with the school's approach to inclusive education – individual expression within a supportive team environment.

Nestled among green leafy hills in the Hutt Valley suburb of Taita, is Taita College, where there is an emphasis on the value of each individual.

It is a philosophy that aims to be inclusive, and yet nuanced. And a young artist has gained attention by reflecting that environment in her artwork – not just the beauty of her physical surroundings, but the benefits of being in a place where her talents can thrive.

Danni-Lee, 18, pocketed \$5,000 for her work 'Chakra Forest', which was entered in the competition for young artists with intellectual disabilities.

The Lower Hutt high school practices inclusive education, but as principal Karen Morgan says, this does not mean a one-size-fits-all approach. And it certainly doesn't mean setting students up to fail. Where Danni-Lee and her peers are included in classes throughout the college, there is an emphasis on scaffolding lessons and differentiating the work required.

And the results are there to see – Danni-Lee and her peers are thriving. The prize just shows what can be achieved.

## Inclusive practice in action

At Taita College, specialist subject teachers work with Danni-Lee and other ākonga within the learning support class.

The students who are part of the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) have a base classroom, but they are encouraged to join in other classes in which they are interested or passionate about, if and when appropriate for their learning programme. They are also valued participants in sports teams, and in school-wide drama productions.

Some learning support students also participate in the school's Te Ahikaa programme, which is a set day of learning each week to focus on learning through a te ao Māori lens. This involves students going out into the wetlands at the back of the school and learning various skills in a different context each week – this includes waiata, karakia, moteatea, haka, sustainability, science, geography, and more.

Inclusion does not mean losing identity, Karen says, and she steers away from the term 'mainstream'. Rather, it means creating an environment where it is safe to be who



## **"Inclusion is about accepting people for who they are and respecting them, their strengths, their identity and their important place in our world."**

Karen Morgan

you are. And it also means not just focusing on academic achievements. She says key competencies are a major focus, and this is where the front end of the curriculum is vital for all learners.

"It's about social, it's about cultural, it's about sporting, it's about life and developing the skills needed to be as confident and self-sufficient as possible once students leave college. It's about helping to shape all our students to be the best that they can be.

"Inclusion is about accepting people for who they are and respecting them, their strengths, their identity and their important place in our world."

Karen says the school expects all students to be respectful, and through their actions, demonstrate

manaakitanga and kotahitanga, which means supporting each other to raise one's mana and strengths.

"An example of our students doing this is with the 'Poly Group', which two students from the learning support class have been involved in over the last few years.

"What is wonderful is that all the students in the group awahi them, and absolutely look after them so that they are fully included and loved."

Karen says all ākonga are learning with and from each other. Students learn to be gentle, to listen, to guide, to help, and quickly learn different ways to communicate for deeper understanding, which is not always verbal, she says.



### **Relationships the key**

As principal, Karen says a critical part of success is building the relationships and partnerships between staff, students, and whānau/families. When that is working well, she says magic moments occur every day.

Karen says school should be a fun, happy, safe and exciting place to be. She adds that it's about relationships. The closer the bond, the more effectively they can work together towards positive outcomes.

"One of our values is 'one heart, one beat', which means whanaungatanga – we are family, we look after each other and do all we can for one another.

"The staff here are so committed and dedicated to doing everything they can for every student because they know their students – and that is gold. When you know them well, it makes a massive difference."

And this means the school should be working with whānau as well as students, says Karen.

"It's got to be that team approach to success, and it has to be all of us to make that happen. It can't just be in isolation."

Karen is keen to emphasise the contribution of teacher aides in this team approach, who she says do not always get enough credit.

She adds that teacher aides are fundamental to students' success: "They work relentlessly and go over and above the call of duty in order to make a difference."

### **A special part of the school**

Teacher aide coordinator Lynn Offord has been at Taita College for the past 18 years, and works with Danni-Lee and students in the Learning Support class.

Lynn says Danni-Lee has grown socially as well as academically since she first came to the school.

"As soon as she walked through the gate, we knew Danni-Lee was at school. Now she comes in like a young adult. She's grown into a lovely young lady."

Taita College's HoD Learning Support, Jo Yeoman, says everyone is a valuable part of the school – but it's important they keep their identity.

Danni-Lee has been practising her art for four years, both in the Learning Support class and across the rest of the school. She takes part in sports and drama classes and does work experience in the library. She also had paid work experience with Kapura, the organisation that makes the school's lunches, and even works part-time at nearby Avalon Intermediate.

"Danni has been a valued part of our school for five years now and we're really going to miss her when she leaves," says Jo.

### **Danni-Lee the artist**

In class, Danni-Lee is clearly in her element, showing confidence with her work and with other students.

Her art teacher, Regan Nicholls, says his student is very good at working with colours and shapes, and he has been impressed with the progress she has made this year.

"She used to be hung up on making mistakes, like if you made a mistake it was all over, forget about that, rip it up, throw it away. Now she just goes with it, she rolls with it.

"You call them happy mistakes in art. So instead of fighting against the happy mistakes, she makes them part of her work, which is pretty sophisticated. There are professional adults that still need to learn that."

But Regan says her growth has not just been within the subject, and that she has also made huge strides as a person.

"She just bosses it," he says.

The art class in question goes further with integration too, mixes students from Years 11 to 13, which gives them a chance to learn from each other.

The relationships that Karen, Jo, Lynn and Regan refer to become clear as Danni-Lee talks freely with them and other students. She tells Karen the teachers at the school have helped her a lot, and that she was shy and nervous when she started at the school.

But it doesn't seem that way now as she exchanges greetings with passing students, where mutual respect is evident.

With a supportive learning environment and an inspiring physical environment, Danni-Lee is in a perfect place to be all she can be.

*Titiro whakarunga ki ngā puke* is the school's whakatauki. Look upwards to the hills, aim high. ▲



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