

Safe Haven

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Salisbury School seems little more than a legend to locals. It's tucked away down a tree lined driveway, with a few clusters of buildings, a large field and a playground. The buildings are painted in the same respectable tones that every secondary school is painted, although, without the typical teenage noise: that built up orchestra of laughter, shouting, gossiping and pushing, it is barely recognisable as a school.



It's something that the students love, that it's their own safe haven. An environment where their complex learning needs can be given extra focus without the hubbub of a thousand others. The school helps students to increase and improve their learning, social and behavioural skills, through an incredibly individualised approach. For many it's their last resort, they've never found their niche in mainstream education nor developed friendships *"when they come to Salisbury it's really a time for their lives to start, they get a new beginning"*.ⁱ

Last May the Ministry of Education decided that the school was no longer the best option for girls with learning disabilities. They failed to see its relevance in our society and how much it has impacted everyone both regionally and nationally over nearly 100 years. Supporters of the school spent the next year attempting to convince the government of the school's importance today. During their fight the support that they received from the wider community was enormous. Most people had not been directly impacted by Salisbury, yet they all agreed that it had an important and irreplaceable role to play in education.

Originally Salisbury Girls School was a necessity. Around the time of establishment newspaper reports show the increasing need of safe houses for young *'defectives'*ⁱⁱ The ground chosen for Salisbury to plant its roots was once the homestead of William McRae. After William's death the family sold the land which was to become the site of Richmond's 'Home for Defectives'. Opening in 1905 it served as a home for Boys who were deemed mentally unstable and unsafe. It was not until 1916, after there was large demand for a residential facility to accommodate girls with special needs that the 'Richmond Special School for Girls of Feeble Mind' was established. In its first year it consisted of fifty students and only two teachers. Although they were stimulated outside of their usual English and maths, partaking in 'character building' activities, it was still very primitive compared to the colourful friendly atmosphere seen there today.

It was not until 1947 during the time of Principal Katherine McRae that the school developed its revolutionary teaching style which was sculpted around the girls varying abilities, so as to teach them in a way that was most suited to their needs.

This prominent difference continues to be one of the main reasons that Salisbury is still so successful.

1963 saw the arrival of a new principal Nora Hurley. Miss Hurley made her mark by setting higher standards for the school. There was the construction of another hostel block, (named Hurley in her honour), a gymnasium, arts and crafts centre, and classrooms along with numerous other alterations around the school, including its name, becoming what we know it as today: Salisbury Girls School.



In the early 1970's Maori culture and arts began to be a significant part of Salisbury. This partially resulted from the large percentage of students enrolled who were of Maori descent, (in 1970 50% of the students were Maori). Maria Robinson (nee Hippolite, who later became a principal of Salisbury School) was the main driving force behind this and also helped to craft Te Whānau o Salisbury: the philosophy that at Salisbury, the people come first.

In the early 1990's the school was faced with a serious closure threat, however the change in government reversed the decision and Salisbury School remained open and consequently watched many of their girls succeed. Special Olympian Rebecca Heath benefitted hugely from her time at Salisbury. Miss Heath used to struggle with school and would become violent when frustrated. Her two years at Salisbury taught her how to control her emotions and now, at 27 she works as a teacher aide at Wellington High School.

Yet even though the school had proved its worth in successes after the closure threat of the 90's it seemed too little, to convince the Ministry of Education that it was an invaluable part of managing special education. In 2010 a review underwent exploring the possibility of closing special residential schools and placing the students back into mainstream schools. To the schools relief the decision was made to keep the schools running because no matter how much they cost the government "*the cost to society would be greater without them*".ⁱⁱⁱ But just two years after, the school was presented with another closure threat.

May 11th 2012 the Ministry of Education announced that it intended to close Salisbury School replacing it with a wrap around service supporting mainstream schools as well as turning Halswell Residential College in Christchurch, into a co-educational facility. The purpose behind these changes seemed to be a way of reducing the cost of special education.

Residential schools are government funded meaning each student enrolled is fully paid for by the government. Salisbury School costs about \$74 000 per student, per year, whereas each student in mainstream education only costs \$7700^{iv}. The new model had an estimated cost of only \$29 000. Although this dramatically reduces the cost of special education, there were concerns that as a result of the different level of care offered within their new model there would be further costs and problems in the future, if it was less successful than Salisbury. As one teacher at Salisbury commented 'A year for a girl at Salisbury is much cheaper than a year spent on her in prison'.

Salisbury's only flicker of hope left to save their school was to submit their ideas for the projected 'wrap around' plan.

The community both nationally and locally supported the school and by June 15th they had submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Education's plan that included 240 physical signatures, with thousands more online.

The first stage of the decision process was released on August 27th announcing the plans to continue the closure of Salisbury, allowing Halswell to remain but become co-educational. This judgement was not an option welcomed by the school who believed that a single sex school was necessary for girls with needs as complex as theirs. The school was worried that

by schooling boys and girls together, the safety of the students would be compromised. That no matter how much money could be saved as a result, safety of students was more important.

In spite of the schools concerns, the final decision made on October 31st confirmed the closure. Salisbury School would not reopen at the beginning of 2013. Except Salisbury refused to let that decision be the end, they refused to let the government carry out a plan which they considered carelessly overlooked student safety. They took their concerns to the high court, where under the judging of Justice Dobson their opinion was validated. On December 11th 2012 Judge Dobson ruled that the actions of Minister Parata would be illegal, if carried through. He stated that it took little more than common sense to understand exactly how unsafe the situation could be that *“the risk of sexual abuse for girls with impaired intellect is likely to increase, the more they are in the company of potential abusers”*.^v

In response to this ruling Hekia Parata announced that the school would be safe for the remainder of 2012 and also for 2013. Though this brought some relief for the girls just before they returned home for the summer holidays; it seemed unlikely due to their dealings with Minister Parata for their school to remain safe, permanently. It therefore came as shock to those involved when on May 21st, just over a year after the first formal announcements; Minister Parata visited the school with welcome news: the Ministry no longer harboured intentions to close it. The government finally recognised the important place that Salisbury has in our society.

Salisbury students have always had an active part of the regional community, their public garden parties of the past showcasing their crafts, doing work placement in our shops, playing in the Nelson netball, joining neighbouring churches and performing kapa haka. In particular they make a huge impact environmentally: for eight years they have helped to restore Bluemine Island in Queen Charlotte sounds. Since 2006 they have worked towards protecting and restoring Mangarakau Swamp on the West Coast. They take part annually in Arbour Day and have planted trees all around the region. But not only is it the little ways in which students there impact us, but more how they have the potential to create a positive impact for New Zealand as a result of Salisbury. In today's world we recognise that people are not completely limited by their disabilities, they are *“valued a lot more and also expected to contribute to society”*^{vi}. Salisbury School provides a unique environment for complex learning needs that cannot match any mainstream high school in the country. The students at Salisbury learn on a 24/7 basis. No matter the systems in place and tools available the same high level of care is impossible to replicate in the mainstream. Fourteen year old Savannah has already benefited from her time there. Savannah suffers from Aspergers Spectrum disorder, Dyspraxia, Hypersensitivity, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder and Bipolar Disorder. These conditions affect the way she understands information and make her understand things differently to others. Because of her differences her peers bullied her so badly that police involvement was required. Her teachers could not sufficiently support her needs and Savannah found herself becoming increasingly depressed as a result. After what she



experienced at her old school she needed time away, a safe haven and “Salisbury was the one school that could offer everything she required”^{vii}.

While tasks such as tying shoelaces or using a knife and fork may seem simple to most people, for Savannah the conditions from which she suffers would not allow her to learn these skills as easily as most. Now after attending Salisbury these are some of her successes. Also, Savannah’s confidence levels have increased, she has at last found others who understand and accept her regardless of her disabilities “For the first time in my life I can be myself disabilities and all”^{viii}

After Savannah has completed her two years at Salisbury she will return home and re-enrol into mainstream, but now she goes back with confidence, support systems and teacher aides so she has the best chance possible to continue making progress.

Savannah’s success along with every other student of Salisbury do not result in a small impact, the school enables the girls who go there to become greater contributors of their towns and their country.

By spending money on educating girls while they are young, we are helping to prevent future costs. They are taught about the dangers of drug use, they are taught about contraception, they are taught how to be independent and how to manage in the workforce. Just taking the time to teach these simple things can save money on benefits and create more citizens who are not only willing but able to contribute to our society.

For a lot of the girls, Salisbury is not only a chance for their academic ability and social skills to improve, but is their first chance to finally have a go. In the mainstream they may have always been picked last for sports, left partner-less in class, been left behind finishing their schoolwork. At Salisbury they finally have a chance; they are able to make friends and have fun and play the lead in a play. It’s opportunities like these that help define who we are as people, something that most young people take for granted but many of the girls have never experienced, until their time at Salisbury.



ⁱ Salisbury staff quote from group interview on 25/06/2013

ⁱⁱ Otago Witness, ‘Schools for Defectives’, Papers Past, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=OW19070717.2.84&e=-----10--1---0-->

ⁱⁱⁱ Editor, McIntyre, P., ‘A special place with a vital role’, Nelson Mail, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/nelson-mail/opinion/5991047/Editorial-A-special-place-with-a-vital-role> ,

^{iv} Roberts, A., ‘School for girls faces closure’, Nelson Mail, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/nelson-mail/news/6910259/School-for-girls-facing-closure>

^v ‘Salisbury School Calls for Minister to Listen to the High Court’, Salisbury School, <http://www.salisbury.school.nz/news/board-news-and-media-releases/>

^{vi} Quote from email interview with Tanya Black, of Attitude Television

^{vii} Savanna, and her Mother, ‘Savanna’s Story’, Friends of Salisbury, <http://friendsofsalisbury.co.nz/celebrate/savannas-story/>

^{viii} Ibid

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