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# CLAIRE STEWART
## Facing the Challenge

By ANNE CALCOTT

**I was born in:** New Plymouth
**I was educated at:** Fitzroy Primary, New Plymouth Girls' High School, Palmerston North Teachers' College
**I grew up in:** Paynters Avenue, Fitzroy
**My greatest childhood memory is:** Times spent swimming at Fitzroy Beach in large surf
**The first job I ever had was:** Teaching at Devon Intermediate
**My philosophy on life is:** People are the most important resource
**What New Plymouth needs now is:** Business enterprise to lift employment levels
**What New Zealand needs now is:** Accountable politicians
**I have travelled to:** China, Europe, USA, UK and Australia
**My favourite country was:** China
**I would like to go:** Back again to China **because:** of the rapid changes it is experiencing, and see the progress
**My hobbies are:** Walking, music, art
**My favourite pastime is:** Listening to music, walking in native bush
**What will your job involve?** Patience, stamina and clear vision
**The car I drive is:** Japanese import using unleaded petrol
**The car I'd like to drive is:** Any car using unleaded petrol
**My favourite food is:** Salads
**I like to cook:** Sometimes
**The book I'm reading right now is:** Backlash, by Susan Faludi
**My favourite TV programme is:** I don't often watch TV
**My favourite piece of clothing is:** My tracksuit
**I am superstitious about:** Nothing
**My present ambition is:** To bring an excitement and urgency to the position of Mayor
**My most triumphant moment was:** Winning the mayoralty.

**"It's been an interesting life so far," comments New Plymouth District's new Mayor, Claire Stewart, with a smile.**

This particular mayoral day had started at 7am, enjoying breakfast with a group of sportspeople at The Devon, where Lion Red had made a major contribution to the fund for the Aquatic Leisure Centre at Kawaroa.

"I'm really looking forward to working with the Council, it's an exciting prospect," says Mrs Stewart, "but I can see that it will be necessary to reserve some personal time-out for my family and friends."

How does a candidate spend election day?

"Nervously," she laughs. "My mother came to stay for a few days and we spent the day preparing for the evening gathering arranged at my home for my supporters and old friends.

"I have a wonderful support group; they worked very hard, helping in all kinds of ways. But it was a very anxious day and I think my mother was even more nervous than John and I.

"I had a ring from the Council's general manager just before 7pm to tell me I'd been elected. I was absolutely thrilled. I knew there was strong support for me but realistically I felt I might have to stand again."

The day after the election was spent as a normal Sunday.

"I'm a member of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church and I went to church in the morning, and in the afternoon a couple of the councillors came to see me and we chatted about their committee preferences and their views on Council matters. But since then I've been very busy indeed."

Claire Stewart is proud to be the first woman elected to lead the New Plymouth District.

"I've had good feedback on this," she admits, "but to be elected you must have support from a wide cross section of the residents and I believe it was the issues raised during the campaign which contributed substantially to my election."

The number of women on the District Council has now doubled, from three to six.

"There's been a strong trend towards voting for women candidates throughout the country and I think that's important. Women's contribution and perspective results in more balanced input and decision-making."

She is not sure whether the presence of a third candidate affected the voting pattern significantly.

"There was always a chance that Bill Hall would attract a protest vote but it's difficult to tell whether it made any difference to the final outcome."

Mrs Stewart confirms that the election campaign increased her awareness of the issues uppermost in people's minds.

"I have learned that the community expects to be consulted about Council activities. While there is exciting development and progress going on in the District, the Council must also be aware that many people are having a hard time economically and our policies should reflect that.

"The rates issue is an area of major concern and in fact a recent survey shows that spending power in New Zealand has dropped quite dramatically due to health, power and local body charges."

A review of the rating system will be one of the new Council's priorities.

Says Mrs Stewart, "A legal firm in Wellington has prepared an excellent document which Council will consider early on and I also hope that we shall be able to consult with the community and have some public meetings in the District before making any final decisions."

The ongoing corporatisation of energy distribution and retailing has resulted in a

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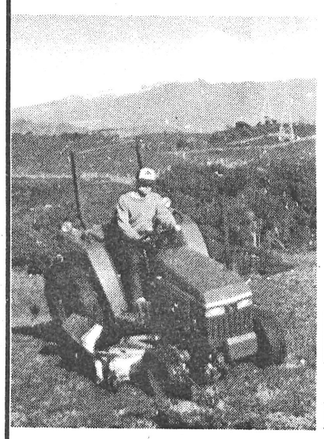

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rapidly changing scene but the new Mayor believes there is still room for the consultative process.

"I'm strongly in favour of the public ownership of energy," she states, "and the Council will be a shareholder in the new company, Taranaki Energy, formed from the merger between New Plymouth Energy and the Taranaki Electric Power Board.

"The Council will also have representation on the Board of Taranaki Energy."

Another area that Claire Stewart would like to give prompt attention to is economic development.

"The District Council has made a start in this direction but I feel we need to look at ways of speeding up the process.

"There is a co-ordinating role for Council here, with the aim being to retain and create jobs, to minimise the outflow of local money and to create additional local income.

"We need to target certain areas, pick winners and support business enterprise while aggressively marketing the District. We should also be in communication with local groups that receive funding from central Government, for example in housing, health, education and the Maori community, to ensure that the best use is made of local expertise.

"The Taranaki Work Trust has put out a very valuable and practical document on ways in which Councils can assist in the economic development process and we shall be studying this.

"Once we have established the District's resources we should be able to target two or three specific areas, and also monitor the outcome to continually improve our performance."

The Council will be operating in a different way under her leadership, hopes Mrs Stewart.

"I want to involve the councillors more in committee work and I am also hoping to form a strategic planning committee, with myself as chair, and with broad representation from all councillors."

She would also like to see councillors accepting a higher profile in the wards they represent.

"Two-way communication between residents and councillors is very important. I should like to see residents working through their ward representatives more often.

"The quarterly newsletters, which were decided on some time ago by the previous Council, will also be a part of that two-way communication."

Communication must also extend out into the rural community.

"There is still that rural/urban gap. Although the rural community has benefited financially from the new structure of local government, an effort must be made to make them feel a part of the District.

"I'd like to see the Council representatives on community boards making regular reports so we can keep in touch with rural concerns."

A natural corollary to the concept of two-way communication is the feeling that care and concern for each other should be fostered through community development.

"Such things as the Neighbourhood Support Groups, the Safer community and the Healthy District concept are very important. I was born and raised here and I'm continually meeting people I have known all my life. I'd like to see more people enjoying that sense of community that comes from knowing your fellow citizens and working together with them."

Claire Stewart's own involvement in the community has seen her play an active part in many organisations.

"For instance, I had nine years with the Girls' High School, including chairing the Board of Governors and the Board of Trustees, but it's important to move on and allow others to come in with fresh ideas.

"As for my other interests, I'll try to keep in touch with them all, even though I may not be able to devote so much time to them."

For the time being all her energies will be concentrated on getting to grips with her new responsibilities.

"It's a period of considerable adjustment but David Lean has been very generous and is helping to fill in the background for me on various things I need to know."

Now that the District has a woman mayor, some people may be wondering what is the correct title for Claire Stewart's husband, J.J. Stewart.

"Yes, there's been some discussion on that," smiles Mrs Stewart, "but I think most people will just go on calling him J.J."

However, her husband seems to have different ideas. "I think I'm going to enjoy being the mayoress," he chuckles.

Claire Stewart acknowledges that her husband has been "wonderfully supportive" as have all her family, albeit from a distance for sons Richard and Chas in the USA, son Campbell in Brisbane, and daughter Sarah in Japan.

Closer to home, son Terry is a tutor in computer science at Taranaki Polytechnic.

"I was quite surprised when she got elected," he admits, "but I think she'll be a good Mayor. She's got integrity." Ω


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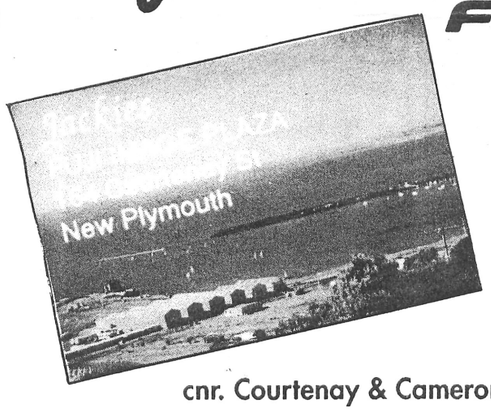


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