

PASSION FOR MICROBIOLOGY LANDS DREAM JOB

Tihema Nicole

NGĀTI TŪWHARETOA | NGĀTI WHĀTUA | NGĀPUHI

It's full-on being a dentist with long hours and you're often on call. You can work with the maxillofacial surgeons and assist them with surgeries such as jaw fractures and replacements. Or if a dental patient turns up to the emergency department and the doctors don't feel comfortable dealing with the situation, they'll call one of the dentists in.

Early years

I started high school in Australia and when we came back to Aotearoa, I went to Onslow College in Wellington. Up until 7th form there weren't many Māori there, but the opportunities and the education that I got were fantastic – I did the sciences and I was also artistic.

After I left high school I wasn't sure whether to do engineering in Christchurch or architecture here in Wellington so I took a gap year. I needed to pay the bills because I was flatting and a friend told me about a dental assistant job down the road. When I applied, I got the job.

The dentists I worked for coached me through the basics of dentistry and within the first few months I decided I wanted to be dentist. At the end of my gap year I decided to apply for 1st Year Health Sciences at the University of Otago and got in.

Studying to be a dentist

It was a bit of a shock going back into study at university because of the amount of people there and the workload.

I'd also gone from being in my own flat with my own group of friends to living in a university hall of residence.

The first year was brutal. I excelled in anything to do with microorganisms and microbiology but I found physics difficult and didn't get in after my 1st year of Health Science.

I got a lot of advice about what to take in my 2nd year of the Bachelor of Science, but I chose microbiology with genetics as a minor. Because I loved those two subjects I got better marks and reapplied for dentistry and got in.

Kia Ora Hauora

My involvement with Kia Ora Hauora began at university. They'd send out monthly emails to us to get us involved as mentors for the younger kids coming through high school and I put my hand up.

Last year we had the National Māori Health Conference in Silverstream attended by students from all over Aotearoa. We did a Q & A session with different health professionals including doctors, nurses, paramedics, pharmacists, physiotherapists, and dentists. A few students wanted to do dentistry and were full of questions. But generally, I think they wanted to know what it was like at university.

Getting into the workforce

When I graduated I worked at Hutt Valley Hospital which offered Māori and Pasifika scholarships and placements during the holidays. I was placed in the dental department and had a good rapport with team so I really wanted to come back here to work.

At the moment I'm content with being a general dentist dealing with a broad range of treatments but I'd like to see more Māori working in health sciences. We have that unique ability to connect with Māori patients on a one-on-one basis, as well as also being an inspiration for our community.

“ We have that unique ability to connect with Māori patients ”

