

Hato Hone St John Critical Care Paramedic changing young people's lives

Jordan Smith

Helen Bickers is certainly not one to mince her words.

Having totalled over 30 years of service for Hato Hone St John, the Critical Care Paramedic also works closely with Odyssey House in Christchurch as well as New Zealand Police on their Impaired Driving Education Programme (IDEP) for recidivist drunk drivers.

Her motivation? To simply make Aotearoa's young people rethink their decisions before getting behind the wheel when under the influence.

"After thirty years on the front-line with the emergency ambulance service, you go again and again to car crashes that could've been prevented if people hadn't been using substances," Bickers said.

The stats back it up, as young people in New Zealand have a disproportionately higher chance of a fatal car crash by blood alcohol content according to a 2023 Ministry of Transport study."



Helen Bickers, Critical Care Paramedic, Hato Hone St John
Photograph supplied by Hato Hone St John

"It becomes quite demoralising because it just becomes rinse and repeat all over again."

Previously, Bickers worked with Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) while based in Dunedin, but quickly realised "our young people don't really respond to that sort of stuff."

As a result, Bickers found that "stopping these young people from actually getting into the car in the first place" is the way to make change, and the best way of doing that is to share very real events from her time at Hato Hone St John.

"I tell some really hard-hitting stories of incidents I've been to... [I] share some real-life stories without pulling any punches. I don't make it frilly - it's very gritty."

While confrontational at times, Bickers has seen the positive effect her stories have produced, as she said people go from "arms crossed, head down" to "open body language [and] crying" in session.

Going one step further, she said the course's low recidivist rates makes her proud to say how the programmes she's involved in "are actually making a difference," as her aim is to impact every individual she encounters.

Because of her exceptional work, Bickers was recognised with the National Award for Road Safety (formerly the Road Trauma Prevention Award) in 2020, an honour that recognises outstanding achievements by industry professionals who improve road user safety

"I was really proud to be recognised for the work that I do and very grateful to receive the award," Bickers said.

"It certainly motivated me to continue on doing what I do because it's been recognised."

Especially in the case of first-responders, Bickers said that it's simply not in their nature to talk about their successes, so identifying and recognising those who are doing exceptional work is critical to celebrating their success.

"If I saw someone doing it, I would absolutely nominate them," she said.

The award, Bickers highlighted, puts the spotlight on organisations as well as individuals, who would go virtually unknown otherwise.

"Let's get behind these organisations and put the effort in, the funding in and the time in to actually promote these and looking at what works."

Stories like hers, Bickers said, is a massive refresh for a "jaded" public, who is overloaded with negative news.

"I think we need to hold up and go 'we've found something that is making a difference.' It's working, and we're celebrating those people."

"I think the public needs to see a positive story in this space and so we can stop people being the victims of this."