

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

### **Claire Szabó: Gifted Child in the 1980s, Young Executive of the Year 2010**

I was a 'gifted child'. At four years I was multiplying fractions and I went through school the youngest in my classes. My bookish and brainy older sister, Katherine, and I attended the Gifted Children's Association in Auckland. By fourteen, I was accomplished on three musical instruments. An extraordinary level of time, money and effort went into my education and achievements. So whatever becomes of kids like me?

The fact that I'm writing for *Tall Poppies* is perhaps a hint that things have panned out fairly well (and testimony to the best database tracking system of past club members in the world, or more likely a very active network of aunties and teacups!) The trigger, I believe, was being named New Zealand Institute of Management / Eagle Technology Young Executive of the Year for the central region. On 2 December I will go up against the southern and northern winners at Sky City in Auckland for the national title.

I was nominated for the award by the chair of English Language Partners New Zealand – where I am the chief executive. I was appointed to this role in 2006, at the age of just 27. The organisation itself works with 8000 migrants and refugees annually, providing language and resettlement support through a network of 22 member organisations, 280 staff and 3000 volunteers. Over my four years in the chief executive role I have restructured the national office and the national remunerations systems, negotiated multi-million-dollar contracts for new services, increased funding for teachers of more than 300 language classes, led a name change and rebranding, and brought in a new strategic plan. In every case, the work was supported and promoted by a team of very able and loyal colleagues in my office in Wellington and around the country.

So how did I go from musician to executive? After completing my schooling at Diocesan Auckland, I undertook a degree in performance 'cello at Auckland University. Graduating with an A average, but not convinced of music as a career, I spent the following five years in Budapest, Hungary. The move was inspired by my father's refugee story, coming out from Hungary during that country's unsuccessful uprising against Russian occupiers in 1956. It was the late 1990s and I aimed to dig out my roots, learn the Hungarian language and figure out my next steps. In reality, I discovered the very enjoyable work of teaching English as a foreign language; undertook a post-graduate diploma in Management in Education extra-murally through Trinity College, Dublin; opened my own small consultancy business; and had clients from Berlitz Language Services to the European Union.

In 2005 I returned to New Zealand and landed a project management job at English Language Partners' national office. When the chief executive position came up in 2006 I was the successful applicant. Since that time I have continued post-graduate study part-time through Victoria Management School. In August 2010 I submitted my master's thesis in management: *The Not-For-Profit Chief Executive: an insider view*. It has been awarded an A grade and a distinction pass.

So what's my link with gifted children? I was a member of the Auckland-based club for gifted children, aptly named the Explorers. The club met at that time in a community house in Epsom, a decent 30 km hike from Papakura, where my family lived. Considerable effort was put in by my parents in taking Katherine and me in and out of town one Saturday each month for the meetings. We attended sessions over the course of a number of years in the mid-to-late 1980s. Highlights in

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my memory include attending camps, playing card games with 'older' kids (who might have been 12 or 13!), and hearing speakers on topics I would not have come across at school: candle making, shell collecting and the history of street names come to mind.

Being named a gifted child comes with a number of things. It comes with a level of challenge – for the child, the parents and for teachers. There is also a certain stigma to it. In some situations it is hard for a gifted child not to feel apologetic or awkward about the label. Ultimately, it comes with expectation. This child will top her classes. She will be successful. She will go on to do things that others will not.

Reflecting on my own experience to date, I believe the level of support and effort on the part of my parents and teachers, the opportunities to be with those for whom being gifted is not an issue but a fact, and that sense of expectation have played important parts in my story.

By the way, Katherine undertook a PhD on a full scholarship at the Australian National University and is now an innovative and highly successful archaeologist based at the University of Wollongong. She has an impressive shell collection.