

## MY MAHI TOI

Kathryn Wright



I am creative. I am patient. I teach. I am a writer. I am a counsellor. Some days, all of these things collide.

I work a .4 position as a guidance counsellor at Northern Southland College in Lumsden, one day a week at Te Anau School, and one day privately with adults in Te Anau. Before I went back to study, I was a professional cake decorator – I had a small mobile commercial kitchen placed at my home on our deer farm. You name the theme, I have made a cake to match. Probably several. Cake decorating is an art form and luckily I was never in it to get rich, as I'd be waiting a long time.



I stopped that career to study – a double degree in psychology and sociology with Massey, followed by a bachelor of social services (counselling) with Otago Polytechnic. The cakes were cast to the domain of only my own children's cakes and the odd close friend or sometimes a charity raffle. That was six years ago, yet I still field enquiries.

Fast forward to actually working in the real world with children and young people. I knew that it was usual to bring some kind of art or craft into the counselling room – for many reasons – keeping hands busy and allowing the talk to flow, helping the client achieve completion of a project and conversing/exchanging communication are some of the obvious ones. I am a creative soul anyway. I have always painted, created things, written poetry and other pieces of writing, and I have many happy childhood memories of being surrounded by art and craft supplies on a rainy day – it was real feeling of safety and satisfaction. So this practice came somewhat naturally to me.



During my Otago Polytechnic/Capable journey, I enlisted a wonderful cultural supervisor, Graham Green from Oamaru. Somehow we got talking about my old career, and Graham said suddenly: "Well why don't you incorporate your cake skills in the counselling room? It's like your harakeke weaving!" I had never considered this before. Why hadn't I? The art of making gum paste flowers was something that I had mastered, it was something that people are interested in – I could try it. During my graduation presentation with Capable, I demonstrated the making of gum paste roses in a way that symbolised my journey – starting off as a simple but formed bud, taking on layers of information (petals) and experimenting with different modalities (flowers), and how imperfections and irregularities make up who I am as a counsellor (fully formed rose).



With my primary-aged children, I started with sugar Christmas-themed cookies. I had already baked the cookies and prepared the decorations. The children and I spent precious time communicating about how best to decorate the cookies, they learned skills that some of them had never had the opportunity to learn or see before, and they came away with a huge amount of pride and satisfaction at creating something extremely special. Activities like preparing food can be a great attachment-creating tool and I felt it acutely with my kids. Currently we are working on Easter cupcakes.

I brought gum paste flower making to the high school students at NSC. They sank into it with gusto – boys and girls, senior or junior, they have all loved it. I started with very simple flowers such as hydrangeas and daisies, and we move on to more complex ones such as frangipani's and poppies when they are comfortable. Roses come somewhere after that.

As far as I am aware, no other counsellor uses this medium – there is no literature that I could find suggesting that this is the case. Having me teach them one on one in the room is fulfilling many of their needs – connection, learning, completing a task and communicating. If a student is new to flower making, there is some dialogue at the beginning to learn the basics, but after that they can follow along with me. The conversation comes easily as in ways, they feel as though the pressure or the expectation to talk is removed from them, and then it comes naturally. Kneading malleable icing in their hands seems to be therapeutic to them – the icing yields to their touch, and in ways I wonder if the very fact that they are in control of what they create is empowering for them.

In some ways, flower making with the students in my counselling room feels nurturing – maybe it is connected to that primal need to teach and learn about food preparation, or maybe the closeness and connection that comes within this learning. I understand that this is not what you would call a conventional counselling activity, but just maybe it should be?

**Kathryn Wright** is a counsellor who works with children, teenagers and adults in the Te Anau area. She has special interests in rural mental health and in family violence prevention. She writes a regular blog on her website and many of her articles are published in other publications such as Young Farmers and in school newsletters. Email: [Kathryn@kathrynwright.co.nz](mailto:Kathryn@kathrynwright.co.nz)