

## Erika Lodge

**Erika Lodge is the President of the 78 Seniors Club, a resident social seniors group on Kensington public housing estate. Erika is originally from New Zealand. Her mother is Estonian and her father is Maori. She is from the Nagtipaupa tribe which translates to guardians of the land. Erika is a local community leader and champion. During Covid 19 she has been supporting older residents with food supplies and home cooked meals, even going grocery shopping. She was recently a finalist out of over 60 nominees in the prestigious Melbourne Awards, for her tireless support of her community this year.**

Her mother was a wonderful cook and gardener and passed on her knowledge and enthusiasm for helping people to Erika. Erika's mother initially came to Australia after World War Two in 1945. She was a nurse which came in very handy on the boat, as she saved a young boys life. She kept in touch with the family and decided to move to New Zealand shortly after arriving in Australia as it was too hot for her here. They kindly paid for her boat ticket. On the boat to New Zealand she met her husband, who was coming back from serving in the Maori Battalion.

### Growing up

Erika's mother and father moved to Titahi Bay and had a family. Sadly three of their children passed away very young. Erika was the last child. Her mother had trained as a chef so growing up Erika was always surrounded by good food. *'Mum had an amazing big garden separated into three sections, vegetables, herbs and floriana'. She made lots of preserves from the fruit she grew including passionfruit and even passionfruit icecream'.*

Erika recalls having to pick the fruit and lots of other chores too like picking up all of the cow poo! Erika recalls their table at home was always full of food and her mother used to support and feed a lot of people, from lots of different countries – German, Russian and French to name a few. One of Erika's chores was to go around the neighbourhood and give the food to neighbours. Erika has definitely followed in her mother's footsteps in this sense.

Erika's mother also cooked Maori food for her husband's family when they visited. Her family had a big farm – 33,000 acres in fact. It had dairy and fruit and vegetables including grapes, passionfruit, apples and cucumbers. Erika loved visiting her nanny at the farm.

When Erika finished school she enrolled in University. *'After 3 months I called my mum, and said - mum, it's too hard, what should I do? Mum said – you've got three choices Erika - get a job, get a job or get a job!'*

Erika's aunty was a university professor and was married to an American, so Erika went to America for 3 months and worked out what would be her next move. She returned and got an



apprenticeship as a chef, following in her mother's foot steps. She worked for the New Zealand railway and cooked catering for the boats travelling between the two islands.

### **Starting a family and moving to Australia**

Erika met her husband and had three children, two boys and a girl. Her husband had a truck business. He played football and got injured so that meant Erika had to take over the business for a while – including driving the big 18 tonne trucks. There was only one other woman driver. The men would try and give her a hard time but she knew how to deal with them and always had a cheeky comeback ready for them.

The plan was to move to Sydney initially but business plans fell through so they moved to Melbourne, as Erika had family in Warburton. They lived in Rowville and Erika worked at the Ashdene Boy's Home – a first offenders institution for young boys. She worked there for nine years, mostly cooking meals. *'It was a great place to work. I was asked to do a course to become a personal assistant while I was there too'.*

After 33 years of marriage Erika's marriage broke down. She began working at the Epping Hospital as a personal care attendant in the hospice, working with people at the end of life. Erika describes how she had an ability to manage this difficult end of life phase for many patients delicately and with compassion. *'I had an empathy with death so I was well suited to the job'.*

### **Homelessness**

Four years after Erika's divorce things caught up with her and she had a mental and physical breakdown. She lost all of her savings on an investment that turned bad and Erika found herself homeless for two years. Erika describes this experience as teaching her two things; *'One - the humanity and the good in people. Two - not to be judgmental of others. I spent my time mostly in St Kilda and learnt quickly to be resourceful and self-reliant. The bathrooms opened at 7am and I could wash every day. I wasn't often hungry. Still of course it was a very hard time. You had to become resilient'.*

After connecting in with St Vincent de Paul she managed to get a home in Kensington Housing Estate. That was 15 years ago. It took Erika a while to adapt to living there. *'I slept on the floor for 8 months. I found it claustrophobic and hard to live in a limited space again. But I was so happy to have the safety of my own place and be able to invite whoever I wanted to my home'.*

Erika met a community of people when she was living on the streets and she is still in touch with some of them. *'I met a lot of good people along the way and you bond with people when you have gone through a similar experience'.*

Sadly both of her boys have passed away. Her daughter Tamie lives in Berrick with three children. Erika says *'life gives you a few knocks and it is how you deal with it that counts. I always say, be grateful for what you have. Life is an education and just when you are not expecting it something good happens'.*

## Community champion

Erika always sees the good in people and in situations and is always helping someone. She loves living where she does. She likes the sense of community, being able to know your neighbours and the ways people look out for each other. She talks about the *“lost art of caring for your neighbours”*. She is always looking at ways of bringing people together to help develop that sense of community. Her favourite way of doing this is by cooking for everyone. She is the driving force behind all the big 78 Seniors community lunches such as Christmas Day lunch, Boxing Day lunch, the Grand Final BBQ and the Melbourne Cup BBQ.

The Melbourne Awards are the City of Melbourne’s highest accolade, celebrating inspirational Melburnians and Erika was selected as a 2020 finalist, going from 60 nominees down to the top four finalists. All year Erika has supported seniors in Kensington public housing by sourcing surplus food from markets, stores and charities, cooking up big pots of soup and delivering it to people's homes as well as distributing food hampers each week and leading our Healthy Living and Learning take away program as the Chair of the 78 Seniors Club (HLL partner). She has also been doing shopping for those neighbours who couldn’t get out to the shops. Having Erika knock on your door, serve you one of her tasty soups and have a chat has helped so many people get through these lockdowns. *‘Cooking for others keeps me out of mischief. It keeps me occupied and is a way for me to get to know my neighbours.’*

She is a keen gardener and has been one of the driving forces behind getting the different garden beds installed across the public housing site. If she sees a garden bed that is looking a little empty she will plant it up immediately. Erika loves growing vegetables for her local community to use as well as flowers. The irises she planted this year were beautiful.