



# Resilience through Rugby League

Calls for support on the West Coast of the South Island has prompted national mental health organisation Le Va to team up with locals to tackle some tough issues – in particular suicide. In partnership with Australia's National Rugby League (NRL) Welfare and Education programme, Le Va organised a return to the Coast by a local rugby league legend

The untouched wilderness, breath-taking views, friendly locals and smiling children of the West Coast of the South Island are a far cry from some of the tough times the region has faced. Disasters have hit the community, with the Pike River coal mine tragedy in 2010 and the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010-11 leaving scars that are still felt today.

Businesses providing jobs have closed down. Families have moved to find opportunities elsewhere. Tragically, the Grey District has also seen a number of deaths as a result of suspected suicides over the last couple of years, prompting national mental health organisation Le Va to respond with a call to action.

The local Runanga Action Group, which promotes community wellbeing on the West Coast, asked Le Va to lend a helping hand through their leadership in rugby league. Le Va is the National Rugby League (NRL) Well Being partner for New Zealand, advising and upskilling initiatives across the 16 clubs and supporting the NRL's *State of Mind* programme. Le Va also lead New Zealand's national Pasifika suicide prevention programme *FLO: Pasifika for Life*.

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Chief Executive Dr Monique Faleafa has been advising the NRL for four years. She sees rugby league as the perfect vehicle for sending the right Wellbeing messages.

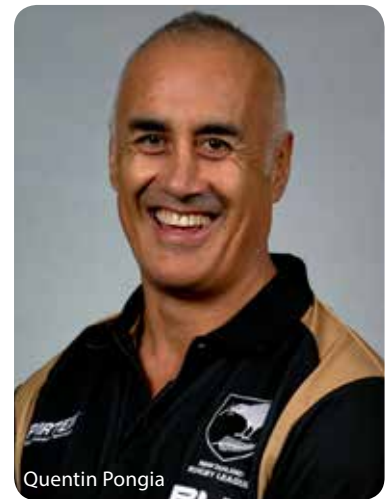
"The rate of suicide for men is twice that of female, particularly for Maori and Pasifika young people. Our rates of depression for New Zealand are also high," she says.

"So we use sport. That has huge reach to some of our most vulnerable, sending messages of how to enhance resiliency and, ultimately, increase help-seeking behaviour by Kiwi men".

The West Coast has towns famous for their league history - producing Kiwi League legends like Quentin Pongia, George

Menzies, Tony Coll, Reese Griffiths, Jack Forrest, and Arnold Green. Le Va brought back Quentin, "the local boy who's done good", which was celebrated by all who took part.

"It's so important solutions for suicide and wellbeing come from local communities," says Dr Faleafa. "That's why we engaged Quentin. He was already linked to our wellbeing work through the NRL and was only too happy to support his whanau and friends."



Quentin Pongia

Le Va Manager and former All Black Saveatama Eroni Clarke and Quentin were hosted at local schools and events. After growing up on the West Coast, Quentin went across to represent Canterbury followed by the Canberra Raiders. In 1994 he won an NRL Grand Final winner's medal. In total he played 162 first grade games from 1993-2004 for Canberra, the Warriors, the Sydney Roosters, St George Illawarra before ending his professional career in 2004 in the UK with the Wigan Warriors. He also played in 35 tests for the Kiwis from 1992-2000.

Coordinated by Runanga Fire Chief Gavin Gibbens, the focus was on building resiliency, informing locals on support services and advising where to get help.

"We invited Quentin and Eroni to tell their own stories, which we know our young men can particularly relate to," says Gavin.

"These guys know about the culture that exists, not only in sports but with our men in general around the choices they make in life which affect their loved ones, families, mates and the community as a whole."

Saveatama is adamant the visit was not a one-off event.

"Le Va is offering assistance to follow through and ensure the right suicide prevention education programmes are available and that we continue to empower local solutions in a sustainable way."