

Media Release

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National festival special for Te Kaha community

Thirty seven years after it began, Te Matatini National Kapa Haka Festival will be hosted by the Bay of Plenty for the first time. The February 19-22 event is expected to attract more than 40,000 visitors to Baypark Stadium in Tauranga.

For Te Kaha's Leanne and Warwick Morehu the event has a very special meaning as their kapa haka group Tauramaitawhiti, from Te Whānau a Apanui, will perform on the one year anniversary of their daughter's death.

"Awi was the lead guitarist for the group. She was on her way to join us for the national qualification round when she was killed instantly in a car accident," says Leanne.

The group made the difficult decision to carry on with the performance and qualified for the national competition which takes place at the end of the month.

"Our son Te Whanarere took over from his sister as the lead guitarist, he's really risen to the occasion," says Leanne. "My husband and I were going to give up kapa haka when Awi died but she's actually become the driver for us to keep going."

The Kapa Haka Festival began in 1972 as the Aotearoa Traditional Maori Performing Arts Festival in Rotorua and is held every two years. Teams are judged on six disciplines within their 30 minute performance; whakaeke (choreography), moteatea (traditional chant), poi and waiata-a-ringa (action song), haka and whakawatea (exit). As well as the main performance prizes, teams compete for Manukura Wahine and Manukura Tane (best female and male leaders), kakahu (best costumes) and use of Te reo.

Tauramaitawhiti Kapa Haka group was established in 2005 by Leanne, Warwick and other local people to give their local youth an opportunity to compete. They are one of six groups in the competition from the Bay of Plenty, which is preparing to compete as well as host the event.

“The pressure is certainly on and like all other groups we’re striving to win the prestigious title,” says Leanne. “Our young people are just as passionate about kapa haka as the older generation. The other group in the area – Te Kapahaka o Te Whanau-a-Apanui – is mainly made up of more experienced performers and we wanted to give our youth something to strive towards and be passionate about. This is only the second time we’ve competed in the nationals.”

Leanne and Warwick are the tutors for the group which involves everything from organising the practice sessions, coordination of the performance items, selecting the team and keeping everyone motivated to win.

“We need to make sure that everyone is prepared, mentally and physically. Kapa haka is a very physical activity and we are one of the few cultures in the world to combine dance and song – it’s not as easy as it looks!” says Leanne.

During practice the group found that they were running out of breath towards the end of their performance and realised that fitness was going to be the key to their success. Leanne believes that the improvements made to their health will give them the edge when it comes to competing on the day.

“One of our performers had a goal to lose 25kilograms before the event. She has already lost 20kilograms and is well on track. She looks and feels amazing. Her voice was fantastic before but since she lost the weight, it’s improved even more.”

Many members of the team have achieved health and fitness improvements through preparing for the competition.

“We set ourselves some key goals; to eat healthier, get fitter and drink more water. Another one was to be nicer to each other. It sounds simple and we found that as everyone’s overall health and wellbeing improved, this (being nice to each other) was easier. Getting more active includes kick boxing classes, weight training, running and walking groups here in Te Kaha. Two people live in the Bay of Islands and four in

Wellington and they do lots of walking and have joined a gym – anything it takes to get healthier. Everyone is much more aware of the level of fitness required to compete.”

The team has regular health checks with one of the Te Kaha clinic nurses. “We test blood pressure, blood sugar and BMI,” says Leanne. “Two people had high blood pressure and are now taking steps to improve this.”

Leanne also enlisted the help of Stephen Cameron, the Healthy Eating Healthy Action (HEHA) community educator at the Bay of Plenty District Health Board. Stephen delivers health education programmes focusing on nutrition and physical activity. Leanne said that Stephen’s sessions were fantastic and they gave everyone the basic knowledge and motivation to make small yet important changes to their lifestyle.

Leanne says that kapa haka is much more than just performing and competing. “Kapa haka is a big social event for our community and it teaches our young people about leadership, commitment, dedication and self esteem, as well as how important it is to be healthy.”



Tauramaitawhiti kapa haka group and supporters



The Morehu family from left to right; Warwick and Te Whanarere at the back with Awi, Erina and Leanne.

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