

Caring for people

By Amo Houkamou

Roma Balzer, doesn't believe in sitting around and waiting for things to happen — she goes out and makes them happen.

She's 29, eloped when she was 20, and returned to Rotorua six years later with three children.

She says, "raising children on your own isn't easy, but I've managed." She's also managed to get behind many community groups. The groups with causes she believes in, like the Womens Refuge Centre in Rotorua, of which she is the Co-ordinator and Maori rights groups.

This doesn't mean she's out waving banners all over town. It involves many things, sitting around talking to people, and playing with the children who come to the Refuge centre with their mothers.

Even when she was at school, she challenged what happened to her. When she was at Rotorua Girls High, she was kicked out three times and each time she fought to go back. "I really liked school, it was nice and safe," she said.

"The teachers thought I was bad, but I disagreed." They thought this because she didn't live up to her "older sister's reputation," she says.

She has had a few breaks, and made a few, in her efforts to take a hold of her life.

"I left school when I was 18, it was a Wednesday. On Thursday I started working at Tokonui, (a psychiatric hospital near Te Awamutu) teaching multi-handicapped children."

Two years later she quit. Roma enjoyed the work, but she felt she wasn't mature enough to handle the responsibilities.

The next six years were spent in different cities, working in restaurants and hamburger bars, and raising her family.

When she was living in Hamilton, she attended evening classes on 'Women in Politics', became very interested in the Womens' movement, and joined the Womens Health Collective, a forum for women exchanging ideas and learning about themselves.

This was a turning point, because here was something she was interested in, and ready to absorb.

"Individuals have a responsibility to challenge what happens to them, and a right to decide what direction they should take", said Roma.

Breaking up with the father of her children was another turning point. She was on her own, with her children to look after, so she moved home to Rotorua.

Stuck in her home, with only her

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children for company, was lonely so she decided to get out and do something. She says it would not have been possible to get out, without the support of family and friends.

She started doing community work, paid and voluntary. Roma was involved with trying to set up a beneficiaries union, a pressure group for people on benefits.

She got a job working for the Fordlands Community Association. The Association is a group of concerned people living in the Fordlands district, of Rotorua.

She was disappointed with the job, because she didn't give it her best shot. There were too many distractions, like the 1981 Springbok Tour.

Roma came out of the Springbok Tour with broken ribs and deep-seated worry. She said "I walked out of the

grounds at Hamilton, after the game had been stopped, people all around me were saying, "we stopped the tour!" I just thought to myself "what is happening to this country?"

She felt Rotorua was the safest place for her during the tour, not because there were more anti-tour people here, but because she knew the people. Her parents did not agree with her protesting, but when challenged about their daughters' actions, they would defend her.

Her father, Clary Balzer, said, "Roma, I don't agree with what she's doing, but she believes in it — and I have to be proud of that."

She summed up her commitment in her struggle against racism by saying, "The day I was sentenced for running onto the tarmac at Rotorua airport, I caught a bus to Auckland, and was ar-