

Lifetime experiences guide social worker

By Rawiri Wright

“It's harder being a social worker than a probation officer,” says Rotorua social worker, Mr Charles Marsh.

“Social workers don't have ‘the whip in the back pocket’ which can give a person a bad report,” he says.

The demands on a social worker are greater in that they don't have the law behind them to force a person to do something they might not want to do.

As a social worker for the Rotorua branch of the I.H.C. Charles deals with families of intellectually handicapped children and individuals.

“Helping people to adjust to something they don't know about is a big part of the job,” said Charles.

“Many parents feel out on a limb with their I.H. child and often just need someone to talk to.

“Visiting the families as often as possible and offering them advice on what benefits are available and what educa-

tional facilities there are for the I.H. person is also part of the job.

Adjustment is something Charles has had to deal with first hand. “In 1974 I was convicted for failing to account for \$119 and served six months of a nine month sentence at Mt Eden and Ohura Prisons.

“Having been on the other side of the desk” as a probation officer, Charles said it wasn't as hard for him to understand what was going on in the court proceedings, besides being a first offender.

“For many people, appearing in court is a very traumatic experience.

“It wasn't for me, but adjusting to prison life did take a while. There were times at Ohura when I wished the truck we rode to work in would run off the road, and explode but then the other 15 guys in the truck probably didn't want that,” said Charles.

Being served with separation papers while at Ohura was another thing Charles had to adjust to. “It was hard

to imagine going home to an empty house, so after being released from Ohura, I lived in Taumarunui for two or three months.

Charles used this time to adjust to being on the outside and having to start at the bottom of the ladder again as he had done in 1960.

In 1960, he joined the probation department in Rotorua, and worked his way up to being a probation officer by 1969.

After this he became secretary of the Maori Arts and Crafts Centre Rotorua, before going into partnership in a painting business.

Then followed his time in goal.

Coming home to Rotorua, Charles also had to adjust to the sideways glances of past acquaintances.

After six months unemployment he went back to painting and paperhanging with his old firm before becoming a hammer-hand for a local construction firm.

The main thing on his mind then, was the shame he had brought on his family, close friends and those who had put trust in him as a probation officer.

By now he had destined himself to being a builder for the rest of his life.

The second time up the ladder was harder but it was his new wife, Mihi who encouraged him to apply for the job with the I.H.C. when it came up in 1979.

“If it wasn't for Mihi's encouragement pushing me along, I wouldn't be here today,” said Charles.

“I applied for the job, told them about my ‘record’ but managed to get selected ahead of 15 other applicants.”

Since then Charles has moved quickly up the ladder having been promoted on merit and recommendation by fellow workers.

He's proud to be able to put something back into the town he grew up in.

He was born and bred in Rotokawa, Rotorua, and went to primary school in Rotorua. Between 1953-1958, he went to Te Aute College in Hawke's Bay.

In his last year of school there, Charles was head boy and a keen sportsman.

After leaving school Charles spent one year at Auckland University studying for a science degree, but had to give it up because of a lack of money and his mother who was sick.

Being a social worker for the I.H.C., Charles feels, is the most rewarding job he's ever had.

“There are lots of things that touch someone who has been in prison or who has lost something, to adjust to what is new,” said Charles.

“Many parents have found it hard to adjust to the fact that they have a handicapped child and it's my job to find out where the problem lies. If there is one, then I try to provide advice, or to direct parents to the most suitable agency to deal with the problem.”

