



Transforming a Kiwi institution

We believe every young New Zealander has the right to experience a genuine outdoor learning experience.

This statement has been the foundation of our Y Central Outdoor Education programmes for five years – we’re constantly evolving so we can deliver those genuine outdoor learning experiences to all Kiwi kids.

Five years ago, our Outdoor Education unit wasn’t financially viable. Our programmes ran at a loss. We only stayed afloat thanks to other more profitable arms of the organisation. It simply wasn’t sustainable to keep siphoning money away from other departments to prop up our programmes.

But the Outdoors team, management and the board, believed in the vision and that we could turn our programmes into a self-supporting enterprise that delivered on this vision. With the support of the board, we were able to take some risks and invest some funds to help us pursue a modern, sustainable Outdoor Education programme. Last year we finalised a merger, joining YMCA Greater Wellington with YMCA Central to become YMCA Central Inc. Our larger, more streamlined, operation is just one more way we’ve overhauled our business to help us become a major national provider of outdoor education for Kiwi kids.

Setting a new standard of safety

Our first step was to employ a star manager. We were extremely fortunate to recruit Russ Jacobi as our Outdoor Education Programme Manager. Russ’s experience in the outdoor pursuit industry, and his teaching background, gave him the wide-ranging knowledge he needed to transform the business. As soon as he came on board, Russ identified OutdoorsMark certification as a major focus for improvement:

“Safety had to be the factor that underpinned all the goals we set in 2016. That’s what would help us succeed and back then we were a long way from achieving what we now consider to be a high enough standard of safety,” says Russ. When he started

in his new role, the OutdoorsMark audit was only a few months away, and Russ spent a significant amount of time in his first month rewriting the safety management system for the Y Central Outdoor Education programmes.

“Our system in theory was great, however we still had some way to go with our heights activities,” he explains. That led to the voluntary withdrawal of our adventure activity accreditation at the time, which was a tough pill to swallow, but necessary to overhaul our systems. It took 12 months and \$55,000 worth of investment before we could once again provide outdoor adventures at height.

Overhauling the client experience

Honestly, thinking hard about our customer experience wasn’t something our outdoors team had ever done before. But over the past five years we’ve scrutinised every step of our clients’ interactions with Y Central. We started by looking at our staff-client relationships, then our food and our infrastructure. We knew we could give people a great experience up in the trees, or on a river, but what about the hours and weeks before and after the big thrills? For people to want to come back, we needed more than short-lived fantastic activities followed by below-average food and service.

We identified four important areas for change:

1. Investment in future-proofing essential onsite infrastructure, equipment, and activities. Run-down facilities and equipment would no longer cut the mustard.
2. A food programme that would provide a nutritionally balanced home-style food plan. We didn’t need to provide fancy food, but it needed to be healthy and tasty, giving clients long-term energy for physical activities – the same positive vibes you get from great home-cooked meals.
3. A simple, customer-focused booking process that streamlined the booking, budgeting, and invoicing processes for schools and clients. We needed to make it painless for our clients to interact with us on the administrative side.

4. A change in the instructor staff role from activity support-based programmes to instructor-led programmes. This builds much stronger positive relationships during our programmes and supports our clients to achieve their personal goals.
5. Where we once offered only the Kaitoke Outdoor Education Centre, we are now ‘Y Outdoors’, with sister site Raukawa Adventure Centre located on the Parapara Highway north of Whanganui. This has allowed us to develop our safety management systems and programmes across both sites, lifting the standard for both centres.

Fostering a climate of support and encouragement

The instructor-led model was a big step forward in programme quality. This is not a new method in the industry, but it was new to most primary school camp programmes. Traditionally, instructors were posted at an activity, helping with that specific activity as each teacher-led group arrived. The instructor-led model means each instructor works with a group throughout the day, taking them around various activities. This has some major advantages, particularly the rapport that develops between instructors and kids. Instructors get to know who needs pushing, who needs reining in, and they can foster a climate of peer support and encouragement. As an extra bonus, it makes the experience less stressful and more fun for the teachers and parents.

The instructor-led model had an immediate impact: many of our returning schools from 2016 told us they attended our programmes because of how our instructors interact with their students.

“By using us as the experts to run the outdoor side of the camp, the teachers can focus on doing what they do well and meeting their school’s own values,” says Russ. “Once the schools have been through our camp system they come back, because they love what we do.”



Using physical activity and nature as a tool for recovery

The pandemic and lockdown of 2020 proved a huge challenge for Y Central, as it did for all New Zealanders. We relied heavily on the Government wage subsidies to keep our 230 staff engaged with significantly reduced revenue. It was an enormous relief at this time not to have to reduce our staff numbers, and during the lockdown, we reflected individually and as a team on how we could give back.

One common denominator among our organisation was almost all of us used physical activity of some kind and time in nature to help us cope with the stresses of lockdown. It felt as though one-way New Zealand could bounce back from lockdown, both physically and mentally, was to help everyone spend time being active outdoors.

In June, we waived all our fees for junior sports leagues for the remainder of 2020, as part of the nationwide drive to ‘Let Kids Be Kids Again’.

“Sport and Physical Activity is such an important part of Kiwi life and I think most of us missed it,” said Brendan Owens, CEO. “It also has a vital role in helping us all recover our confidence. But for sport and physical activity to be able to play its role in the rebuild, it needs to be accessible, affordable and sustainable. Removing these fees is one step in making that happen.”

We also cut the price of our holiday programmes in half to support working parents: “We aimed to help families where one or both parents have lost hours, or lost their jobs altogether,” said Amy Moreland, Children’s Services/Safeguarding Manager. “There are a lot of families struggling and we’re doing what we can to help them get back to normal.”

And two local high schools, Durie Hill School in Whanganui and Cloverlea School in Palmerston North, won \$5,000 funds towards their school camp at Camp Ruakawa, so their students could still afford to attend camps.

“Cost can be a big barrier when it comes to where we can go and what we can offer,” said Leiana Lambert, principal of Cloverlea. “This makes a big difference – we were really excited about winning.”

Developing new outdoor courses and employment pathways

The Y Central Outdoor Education programmes are now a sustainable business, allowing us to invest in improving and expanding our activities. We recently developed journey-based programmes, Duke of Edinburgh awards, high ropes courses and canyoning, which have opened our outdoor centres up to more senior secondary school students. Schools use these programmes to build culture and community within their school groups and to increase students’ connection with themselves, others, and nature. We hope to foster an affinity for the lifelong pursuit of healthy living.

With the support of NZOIA we continue to develop our team and our outdoor instructor volunteer programme. We encourage ‘on-the-job’ training, working towards qualifications to help young people who are passionate about the outdoors have a pathway into a career.

The past five years have turned a loss-making business unit into a successful, sustainable outdoor education operation that is now able to grow and give back to the community.

“My journey at the Y and that of our two outdoor education centres has been one of real learning, with many ups and downs,” says Russ. “But ultimately it’s a real success story and something I am very proud of.”



PLANTING THE SEEDS OF ADVENTURE



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Profiles of organisations are welcomed for the back page series "Planting the Seeds of Adventure". Contact editor@nzoiia.org.nz



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