

## TIGILAU NESS - Activist

“Today New Zealand is a multi-cultural society but back then, there was none of that.” Tigilau Ness, activist and musician, is painting a picture of what it was like being one of the first wave of emigrants from the Pacific Islands during the early 1970s. “Racism is racism is racism – no matter where it is. I experienced a taste of that at Mt Albert Grammar School when I was told to get a hair cut. I had an afro, so they expelled me.” Ness had been placed in a special academic class at the school; he loved English and was studying French and Latin. He says that he would have ended up in prison had he not re-directed his frustration and educated himself about the struggles of minorities in other countries.

“I had friends at university who would give me information because you didn’t hear about that sort of thing. I was inspired by the civil rights movement and the Black Panthers,” he says. Ness became a founding member of the Pacific Panther Party, a highly organised, community based crusade that provided legal aid, educational guidance for young Polynesians and distributed food to those in need. It was a revelation. “The Maori language was banned – it was cultural genocide – it wasn’t until 1987 that Maori was made an official language. We agitated and protested only to make sure that we survived culturally.” His dedication to the cause found him incarcerated after the Springbok demonstrations in 1981.

Upon his release, the Panthers had dissipated and he turned to Rastafari, finding a new strength in its teachings. His reggae group, Unity Pacific, have been playing together for close to 20 years, and are preparing to record their third album this year. His commitment to social politics, his faith and music are comfortably entwined. “Music is a different way of putting ones views across, it can change people’s attitudes and minds. People come together at our gigs and that’s what Unity Pacific is about.”

In 2007, Ness was approached by filmmaker Bryn Evans, who proposed making a documentary about his colourful life. “We started in February and didn’t finish until July. He was in my face most days but I really got to love the guy. It was unnerving at first, opening yourself up in front of a camera,” he admits – especially since Ness didn’t see From Street to Sky until it was finished. How did it feel, watching his life, thus far,

unfold? “I was really humbled. He captured my life in about 60 minutes. It was like, what else can I tell this boy?!”

Interview Rebekah Davies