

Section: Feature

Title: Has Flat Man Done His Dash?

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Intro: Two years after the earthquakes, Christchurch has moved on from the past, but one figure remains true to his mission – Flat Man.

In a suburb not too far away, nestled in the heart of Christchurch, Flat Man and I are cosied up in Flat Mum's wee kitchen. "She is a little nervous, it's her first interview," Flat Man jokingly warns me.

The house is homely and so very warm. Flat Mum offers me a cup of tea, takes one for herself and nestles into her chair. A cute little soundtrack plays in the background on a tape deck – much like the music my Nan plays in her car. His mum, who sports white hair atop a red jersey, is a dame about town who doesn't want her identity compromised – and so is wary about details. Her face beams with pride the entire time her son is talking – although she does make a wee dig about her son's sometimes questionable spelling on social media. "This young man will write anything, but I need to proofread things 100 times... I really admire the way the world lets it be kind of a joke with the spelling being pretty crap." His mother laughs. "But I can't do that." Flat Man responded to his mother by saying that he spells things the way he wants to spell them and that's that.

Flat Man himself is dressed in dark rolled-up chinos, a t-shirt and a beanie, but no mask, no cape and no lycra. This is the first interview he has done without his mask. He looks much nicer in person, but still refuses to be photographed.

"I feel like you can do more as a character and as a symbol or a message," he begins, "than you can as just another person or another face. I guess the whole anonymous thing kind of makes it intriguing. People can relate to superheroes because they've been around for years. It's more powerful as a symbol. I want people to focus on what I am doing, not who I am."

And you'd have to say maybe it's working...

"Ur a true superhero!!" spouts Katrina Brady,

"Some people are not so willing to give up their spare time for others...so superhero or angel it doesnt matter which one...u are awesum!" adds Ness Mackie.

The digital accolades just keep coming.

"FLATMAN for Prime minister!! move over JK we want someone who actually gives a shit about the people in this country and not just money," says another fan.

"Flatman helps so much to keep the love for Chch," someone else adds.

The adulation on Facebook just keeps coming, "Thank you [Flat Man](#) for always making me smile and for all the tremendous work you invest in your communities," pipes up one friend. "Great going FM, your a legend" says another. "Amazing guy – you are an inspiration!" chimes a third.

And the good deeds are many. One minute Flat Man is in Hornby at BNZ receiving vouchers from the bank tellers. Now he's dropping off food packages on Suva Street and darting to a women's roller derby match in Addington. He's talking to kids, adults, students, geriatrics. He's being interviewed by UC Journalism's Ben Irwin, talking to children at a primary school in Seddon. He's part of a charity casino poker championship. He's setting donation boxes up at Beat Street Café. He is planning how to live in a cage for a week. He's getting a cell phone from

Telecom, in bed with big business. He's judging a speech competition and spinning the idea for 'National Superhero Day'...' Such is normality for Flat Man.

But isn't it just all a bit odd? Haven't we all moved on?

In many ways, it seems Christchurch has evolved since the earthquakes. There have been over 200 bars, restaurants, and cafes pop up around the city in the last six to eight months. The city now has a fully operational cathedral, the University is once again fully functional, businesses such as Redesign are planning their move back to the city before January 2014 and TVNZ has relocated. Even the SVA got rid of their old shovel-dominated logo and have transitioned into general volunteering. Quake Kid "hung up his suit" just over a year ago. Meanwhile SVA founder Sam Johnson has been trekking it out overseas in places like New York and the Caribbean. Christchurch is clearly moving on, which poses the all-important question – has Flat Man done his dash?

One thing is different in 2013 – Flat Man has moved from helping students to helping kids. His first primary school visit of the year was Mairehau Primary, on March 27. "Big shout out to room nine at mairehau primary school for my first school visit of the year!!!" he posted to Facebook after. "The kids were awesome and asked some amazing superhero questions!!!! will def be Headjng back there when we organise the new flat mobile!!!! Fm,"

Then came Seddon Primary, Central New Brighton School, Mt Pleasant School, St Martin's School, Lincoln Primary and St Andrews College. These are just a few of the schools he's visited this year alone – he can't even remember; there's been so many.

"I think the kids side of it came it because it was requested – I remember after a *Campbell Live* story a family asked me to come visit their kids and I thought that was pretty cool – to be asked to visit someone's kids especially. Then I got requests to come to schools and I thought, 'Cool I'll do that.'" Flat Man says that the reaction from the kids was amazing and it was like they were hanging onto his every word. When he goes into the schools he doesn't really have a structure – he just asks them about their favourite superheroes and reiterates to them that you don't need superpowers to be a superhero. "A lot of mums talk to me and say, 'My son sleeps better knowing that there is a superhero on the streets,'" he adds, "if they don't have male role models in their lives as well – it kind of makes me realise that what I do say and the message I bring across is important."

Occasionally people wonder out loud on his Facebook about his motives. Flat Man says, as with anything, "there is gonna be haters". But it does beg the question of why he did this in the first place.

"Very little thought went behind it," he openly admits. "After the earthquakes I spent a lot of time at my friends' places. I was always partying there and crashing on their couches, and I thought I should really do something for my friends – they're all students and they're all pretty poor. I had this idea of leaving a food package to every single flat that I spent the most time at and also deliver one to my own flat. Everyone would wake up and be like, 'Who is this package from?!', it'd be a one off thing and create a bit of confusion. Then I thought, imagine if I just delivered to randoms, delivering to flats I could be... Flat Man! And at the time I was in my room, I was in a flat in Riccarton and I jumped on the web and I found a costume and made a Facebook. That was before I even did my first drop."

"There was a year when I didn't tell anyone," he goes on "friends would read out articles in front of me and I'd be like 'Oh that's interesting what's that about?' I was always making up excuses as to where I'd been."

Even Flat Mum didn't know. "I don't think I took the full enormity of it when he first told me. Then I saw his Facebook page and realised there were hundreds and even thousands of people that were behind this it was a bit of a shock, really, to see how big it was. I just thought he was up to some random thing and I didn't really take much notice."

"If you know me [though] then it's clearly me," Flat Man concedes. "The language I use on Facebook and the things I do, it's just obvious." It's only being outted in the media that concerns him.

In many ways he is like any other 20 something year old male. He's handsome yet flighty, he doesn't seem to respond to his phone or Facebook fast enough – but at the same time is always posting statuses and photos. He's forgetful, somewhat disorganised, totally sporadic and possibly not the best at ranking things in order of importance. My requests for an interview go unanswered for weeks on end.

"As far as ideas go I am always up here." The boy in the mask points up to the ceiling. "And then logistics come later." He laughs. "Anyone that writes in, I write it up and slowly go through them – I don't like saying no to anyone."

Flat Man is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, so it's no surprise he's a hard man to find. Trying to track him down is its own full-time mission. One dreary Thursday night in August I was supposed to shadow him at Christchurch Casino for a poker charity night – but I was only to wait in the wings for two hours. Flat Man was in the VIP section. I wasn't allowed in. I made small talk with the organiser, who promised to write me with details of the event. She never did. Flat Man informs me later found I was meant to have participated. The next day I make my way to Hornby to meet Flat Man at a school visit. I pull up outside and try to find him, but to no avail – turns out the school didn't need him anymore.

Flat Man does understand that it may be a short gig. He knows he can't be prancing round in lycra forever and he has been thinking about his exit strategy. "I've thought about it, I've talked to people about it. If I ever did give up Flat Man, what would I do? Would I pass it on? Maybe I oversee auditions and let someone else do it – but I'd always be looking over their shoulder." He laughs.

Flat Man is known as a local superhero, but he appears to some as a full time escapist. Many love the idea of a superhero out there solely to help those in need, but is Flat Man someone who is continuing to grip on long after the city has recovered, or is he doing a service by bringing volunteering back into the collective memory long after it fades? The question remains... has Flat Man done his dash?

He says no. For Flat Man it's important to recognise that 'Flat Manning' has "kind of transitioned from disaster relief and it's moved far beyond that [into more general volunteering and goodwill]." He has so many up and coming projects and he's so busy there is not really any time to stop – nor any reason. He's so busy he's even thinking about taking on a new sidekick. "It'd probably be a girl, and she'd have to be pretty badass."

When it comes to general volunteering, his ideas are endless. "I want to create a building for people to start up their own charities. Like a one or two person team with your own space in the building and it'll be open plan and you just feed off of each other. Kind of what I imagine Google would be like [laughs] – a fun creative building and if you outgrow your space you can find another venue. Just one to three people and I'd call it the 'League of Extraordinary Charities'. Another idea is to create a book or brochure to give to kids at schools on tips to being a superhero. Kids really relate to that whole superhero thing."

What will he tell his kids about this? "I've definitely thought about it. I've got this idea of a room with a trap door and my suit in a glass case and I won't tell my kids till they reach 18." He's half-joking, I think. "Then I'll be like 'It's time to bring it on!' It's just such a cool image; if I build a house I have to have that room. Not to bask in my own glory but just because it's cool. If I had the money I'd make things like this!" He throws back his head in laughter.

Is Flat Man an overgrown boy, or is he a man who has found his calling in volunteering?

On the one hand, how much praise can you heap on someone who won't show their face? On the other, not many people are willing to go out there, completely anonymously just for the good of the community when it seriously cuts into their own personal time.

Overall Flat Man thinks that it has helped him as a person. "I feel I'm more aware when something is not right and I feel more inclined and proactive and confident to be able to say something. Not saying that I do everything right I just tend to act on it if I notice. I also tend to have more patience."

When asked if there were any downsides to having a superhero as a son, his Mum admits "at times when we get together, it's a big part of our discussion now, so we have to be really careful that it doesn't dominate."

So with no plans to hang up his suit anytime soon, it seems he will continue on to "Be a bruv... share the luv." Poor grammar be damned, one thing is easy to understand: "It's my passion."

* Every grammatical error is his.