

The surprising key to Kiwi ingenuity

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Alongside *The New Zealand Herald's 'Who Am I' series*, partner Spark looks into exactly why we have such a 'can do' mentality.



New Zealand has a long history of high achievement with inventions. Photo / Thinkstock

"My students are more discontent than ever and I couldn't be happier."

Such is the view of Wendy Kerr, Director for the Centre of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the University of Auckland. She sits within arm's reach of our youngest and brightest, and from that position keeps a keen eye on what motivates Kiwi students to put a new twist on the "Number 8 Wire."

New Zealand has a long history of high achievement with inventions: Rutherford split the atom, Timaru's Colin Murdoch invented the disposable syringe and an early version of the electric fence was invented by William Gallagher in 1937 with not a lot more than an ignition coil from his car and a Meccano set.

Now a new breed of inventors are creating lifesaving software, drone technology and making leaps and bounds with artificial intelligence. And all of them, according to Kerr, have one thing in common. "These young Kiwis want change and rebellion. They want to make a difference. The cost of living doesn't match their salaries. They are discontent."

Don't be alarmed. Many a well loved Kiwi has obviously read the same script: Necessity is the mother of all invention. Could Ernest Rutherford have achieved so much if he were satisfied? Or AJ Hackett? Or Norma McCulloch, a housewife from Rongotea who developed a hand pump for extracting air from freezer bags in 1975?

According to Kerr, the definition of ingenuity is "using one material to solve many problems. Finding something that may be so specific and small, but explode with possibilities."

But what gives Kiwis the Number 8 Wire ingenuity we're so famous for? "We are curious, something which surely drives the D.E phenomena. We're restless and want to discover other nations and people. We want global. Many of us question the status quo", says Kerr.

Before Kerr joined the University of Auckland she began three tech startups, one of which was a share trading platform. "I was up till 2am most mornings, but I loved the challenge. Could I make it work? It was exciting." Now she runs Velocity, an entrepreneurship programme that has been operating for 14 years, has raised \$200 million in capital and created over 400 jobs.

Along with Velocity, there are many great programmes helping to foster innovation in New Zealand. One of which is Spark Lab in Britomart Auckland, a space dedicated to ideas, products and experiences.

As Spark's Chris O'Brien says, "Technology is hugely important, but there's a tide of new tech to keep on top of. Things are evolving fast, and the pace is not going to slow, which is why we feature leading speakers and thinkers to motivate and inspire New Zealand business."

Number8wire rockstar, scientist and inventor Ray Avery believes New Zealand is a country of geniuses: "If Aussie is the lucky country, then New Zealand is the clever country." This from a man who himself invented medical devices that saves millions of lives in developing countries.

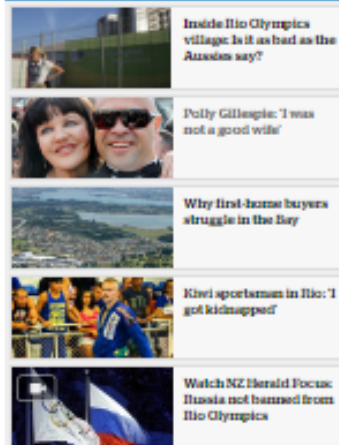
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