

All you need is love

By Kelly Hawkins

Allan Witana – loving husband, musician, grandfather, gardener, all around good guy, and living with Albinism.

Spending time with Allan brought a smile to my face and warmed my heart. At 66 years of age, Allan is full of optimism, positivity and has a can-do attitude that many people in today's society could do with.

Allan is partially sighted, and has been since birth due to his Albinism. But that hasn't stopped him continuing to be his down to earth self: "I'm an albino – I just tell people to like it or lump it because I'm here, I'm me. And you should never be ashamed of who you are," he told me in a matter of fact way.

I asked him if it's challenging being Māori with Albinism: "It's only challenging if you let it be challenging. If you go and face it head on, then people are usually pretty accepting and once people



get to know me, especially in South Auckland, then it's okay."

"You've got to have a real good attitude towards people regardless, whether you're blind or not. And I think a lot of blind and partially sighted people need to open their eyes more and do things for themselves and not look for self pity or wait for others to do things for them. Sometimes people I've met are too caught up in their sense of entitlement because they're blind. But you get from life what you put



Allan in his recording studio.

1961 and has been a musician ever since he left. He played in a band for 40 years, entertaining the crowds at RSA clubs, private functions, nightclubs (although he no longer does the club circuit as, in his words, they're a bit too late and noisy now) and socials. It was at one of these that his life took a very interesting turn.

At the time, a young lady by the name of Isabelle, who was also a former student at the Foundation and partially sighted, made contact with a then young Allan, to see if his band would be willing to play at a social that she was involved with. He agreed, of course, and let's just say they've never looked back!

That young lady is now his lovely wife and together they have four children, one adopted child and 18 grandchildren. Most of the family still live locally and I had the pleasure of meeting a few of them. It's clear to see the same values have been passed down. The importance of family is obvious with Allan and he openly talked about the lessons he's learned along the way: "Relationships can get tricky but people need to give it a good go and look at the important things

in. And lots of people still have that to learn."

Such wise words, so what does someone so insightful do with his day? Well as you'd expect, he's no couch potato. Allan likes his gardening, he mows lawns, paints, enjoys a bit of DIY, helps out on a number of disability and blindness related support groups, but above all else, his real passion is his music.

He schooled onsite at the Foundation in Parnell from 1957-

Our people



Allan and his wife Isabelle.

that brought them together. So many relationships have fallen apart and the children suffer. People are too casual with relationships these days – they've lost the values and respect for each other," he explained.

"We've seen a lot of our friends get together and then a few years later, they separate. And that's a real shame."

'So what's the secret with the two of you?' I quizzed. Without even hesitating, he replied that it's all about communication, values and respecting each other: "You've each

got responsibilities in a relationship. You have to face them and take it through to the end. If you've got children, then respect your children and you'll get it back right throughout your life. What you put in to a situation, you'll get it back," he said.

He's the first to admit that together, he and Isabelle have been very successful at bringing up their family. They play an active role in what they do and how they do it, and it shows. Their home is a home filled with love and it's one that they can both be proud of.

But it's not all a bed of roses – they just have the right attitude. Isabelle loves cats. In fact I was greeted by at least five when I arrived, all vying for my attention and affection. But Allan isn't afraid to state that he's not too fond of their feline family. He tolerates them – "I grunt at them occasionally but most importantly I respect her (Isabelle's) wishes to have them around. That's her life and I support that. And besides, we have no bad habits. We don't drink or smoke so I guess a few cats isn't too bad," he chuckles.

We wandered down to the back of his property to his pride and joy –

his music recording studio. Built with the help of family, of course, it really is a labour of love.

Yes, Allan uses it to record his music – everything from ballroom right through to country ballads, blues and jazz – but he also offers it to people, groups, families, who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford to record in a commercial recording studio. It's clear from listening to him talk that he gets a real buzz from helping others out and seeing them all get so much joy from recording.

“I can't offer everything, but I can offer the use of my studio. I really enjoy working with families and seeing them get a kick out of hearing themselves on CD. They send it off to their families overseas and seeing that joy makes it so worthwhile.”

I had started out researching for a story about a man with Albinism, and realised very quickly the story would simply be about the man himself. His Albinism and sight loss is irrelevant to him and he has succeeded throughout his life in being the person that he is today, by not letting it rule his life. And what a man he is! “I haven't let it change my life at all,” he concluded. And that was obvious.

About Albinism

- People with Albinism have absent or reduced pigment in their eyes, skin or hair. It's this pigment, melanin, that is essential for the full development of the retina.
- Lack of melanin in the development of the retina is the primary cause of visual impairment in Albinism.

The Albinism Trust provides a range of services to encourage individual capabilities and enjoyment of life for people with Albinism.

These include:

- Peer support.
- Counseling.
- Regional seminars around New Zealand.
- Information and support for parents and siblings of Albino children.
- Health education for awareness about sun sense and environmental safety.

For further information, please visit www.albinism.org.nz