

Natalie's Story - I work, I work hard

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A single mother of two who has made sacrifices for the sake of her children in order that they should have the best possible upbringing she can offer, by nurturing them and being there for them through their formative years is not recognised for her valuable contribution to society. Despite her efforts at making the very best out of an otherwise difficult situation, Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) still expects her to meet unrealistic "work obligations" that are hard for her to achieve due to her family responsibilities as well as limited opportunities in her location. She has a sustainable food supply that benefits others, volunteers at her children's school where they desperately need help. But Natalie is not allowed to receive the In-work tax credit portion of Working for Families - \$72.50 her children would greatly benefit from.

"Yes I work, I work hard. But WINZ does not believe I am meeting the work obligations of my benefit because the paid portion of my work amount to about ten hours and according to them I should be in paid work for twenty hours per week. But I don't care what WINZ thinks, because I know I work hard in both my paid and unpaid work. The biggest reason why I don't care what WINZ thinks is the extreme lack of financial support that WINZ provides that forces me to undertake unpaid work because without it my boys and I would starve. I do work. Very hard.

From here I will not distinguish between types of work on the basis of how it is remunerated (both within this blog and in my real life) because making that distinction feeds a value system which helps to marginalise the whole volunteer sector, much of the efforts of women and many traditional Māori practices, and I am not going to be a part of that. It also marginalises me. I work and I work hard.

I forage, I love foraging. I find it fulfilling to forage for food. Maybe more so than working to be paid and actually purchasing food. I love that my work directly correlates to the outcome I want: to have food and to eat. Today we picked apples, crab apples, quince and walnuts, this is work. As I write this blog I have a pot on the stove cooking the apples, crab apples and quince to be made into quapple (quince and apple) jelly. This is lovely on toast with feta, cream or cottage cheese and also great with pork, venison or lamb (hogget or mutton). I also teach foraging: what seafood can be foraged, when and where to look for fruit, nuts, berry and mushrooms, how to prepare, preserve and/or cook these foods. So as well as adding to my own cupboards, I trade, gift or koha my produce, so an hour foraging then a couple of hours cooking can result in vegetables and meat or accommodation, I also add an intangible value to the lives of others and my wider community. I work and I work hard.

I keep a garden, I love gardening. Spending time tending the soil, watching over my seedling, raising plants, creating pest controls, admiring the strength and resilience of the weeds, trying new ways to beat the frost, harvesting and preserving is satisfying to my soul and is work. The result of this work is food in my cupboard and food to koha, gift or trade. I work and I work hard.

CHiLD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

I keep stock. We have chickens, who happily free range about my property. Work-wise they are not intensive, they are fed in the morning and we collect eggs throughout the day. We have geese, they keep the grass down. Again these are not labour-intensive animals. They do require a clean swimming area and a handful of grain. In spring they will lay eggs and raise goslings, who will be ready for the freezer or oven in mid summer. So for my work I get geese for my table, trade, gift or koha. We have pigs, they are engaging creatures, and fantastic help when breaking in new garden beds, as they turn the soil as they root and they convert food scraps into compost. So for my labour of building large pens and shelter, feeding of scraps from our kitchen as well as scraps from a local cafe, I get diligent WOOFeRs and eventually pork, bacon and sausages for my table, trade, gift or koha. We have goats, keeping goats and a garden can be challenging but it is manageable. Goats are fantastic creatures, they weed control, they bush clear, and they provide milk (which of-course can be made into cottage or feta cheese). They are the most work-intensive of our stock with daily milking but they are worth it. I work and I work hard.

I work at school, helping our wonderful school for about five hours per week (one school day a week). Just doing whatever is needed: cutting things out, helping with a math group, doing the dishes, running workshops, providing moral support to stress parents and staff. But most importantly I am there being part of a caring supportive community, because caring supportive communities can't exist without caring supportive parents. I work and I work hard.

But according to WINZ, not one minute of that work counts. My work counts for nothing, according to WINZ me, my family and my community would be far better off if I worked full-time in a minimum wage job. Let me tell you something for nothing: WINZ is wrong. Because I work and I work hard and my family and many others benefit from the work I do."

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