



Damien Nikora with his Rural Rugby Team mates : Pipiwai

GOLD NUGGETS:

Scene Magazine May 2009

I recently caught up with Damien Nikora, a self-made fashion photographer with an international career, who has recently moved back to New Zealand and is enjoying “gold nuggets” of quality time here in Whangarei.

Damien, 32, describes the suburb in which he grew up as the “Bronx” of Hamilton, where he attended local school Fairfield College. Even at this age, Damien was determined to find success in life; he decided he wanted to attend Hamilton’s top private school Church College instead. Having come from a poor family with no money for private school tuition, he convinced the school to let him work as a janitor to pay his fees and spent his spare time cleaning the school’s toilets. It was here in the school darkroom at Church College that Damien first found he had a love of photography. “Looking back, I was actually very bad at taking photo’s, although I didn’t know it at the time!”

Damien was raised as a Mormon, and after leaving school he was sent to Sydney to minister his faith. Being in Sydney really “burst his mind”, as he puts it. He was stationed in Bondi Beach, and had never seen a woman in a bikini before. With his religious upbringing, he didn’t quite know what to make of the Bondi scene, but after talking to the locals, he realized that these bikini girls were cool people too. The Bondi beach girls must have made a lasting impression on Damien, because in a few short years he would be making a career out of photographing girls just like them.

Back in New Zealand Damien began a nice, stable career as a builder, but inside him was a nagging desire to become an artist. Photography was still a hobby for him but he wanted more. Finally, with encouragement from his wife Whakarongotai, he quit his apprenticeship, and together with their son Nazareth, left once again for Australia with one bag of clothes each and five hundred dollars.

Damien admits he lied through his teeth to get his first job in Australia, at a design firm. “It didn’t take them long to figure out I had no idea what I was doing!” he says.

However, they gave him a chance and this led to a job while studying and practicing design and 3d animation. From there he got a job working for a company called fuzzy eyes, who make games for playstation, where he was the lead concept artist. This let him indulge in his passion for drawing, and finally he felt he had forged his career as an artist.

Eventually Damien and Whakarongotai decided to go out on their own and start their own photography company, initially doing wedding photography in Brisbane. Here he started entering his images into the Australian Institute of Professional Photography annual awards. "I am most proud of the first bunch of AIPP awards. It was my first time, I was showing my work to other industry workers so I was super nervous. In fact I was sick and I had to leave the judging room. Much to my surprise I won 5 awards." His Brisbane studio was a growing success, "I decided one day to be cheeky and start charging ten thousand for a wedding, and to my surprise they kept on coming!"

Wedding photography was hard work though and soon the couple decided to switch from weddings to commercial photography. They opened up a new photography and design studio that provided a full service to clients, and soon were producing advertising and promotional material for Australian fashion companies, where Damien had full creative control, sourcing the models, shooting the images and designing the advertising. Soon it became apparent that this new studio was just as much hard work, with demanding deadlines. Damien recalls starting a project on Monday, and finally getting to sleep on Wednesday night.

At this point Damien was coping with an internal struggle. His Mormon faith lay in strong contradiction with the semi naked women that were in front of his camera. However, the life of an artist is often fraught with such contradictions, and Damien strove to be open-minded and embrace where life took him. Now he says he can call himself a much more relaxed Mormon! Damien's strong relationship he has with his wife is what he says helps him feel good about shooting fashion. She was the first girl he had ever kissed, and she was the support and encouragement that helped him make that initial shift to Australia. "Whakarongotai is most definitely the brains behind our business, she's great with words, accounts, contracts, that sort of thing. She keeps it real for me" he says, and he accredits his success to her. "There is a very strong trust between us, which helps considering I spend so much time around models!"

Damien Began to feel that his Brisbane studio was all work and no play, and he began to feel that he really needed a break. Eventually he and Whakarongotai, 30, decided to move back to her hometown of Whangarei, where they have been living for a year now in their house on Whakarongotai's family land in Pipiwai, spending quality time with Nazareth, 9, and their daughter Opal, 7. At first Damien didn't warm to Whangarei, it felt like stepping back in time. He was used to a fast paced lifestyle and there were no models and no makeup artists on tap like there had been in Brisbane. However, after some time Damien finally began to relax, and he found that life in Whangarei concealed some "gold nuggets" as he calls it, like time to be a family, and the new friends he has made here. Some of the most precious of which are his team mates in the Pipiwai rugby team. Damien loves playing for Pipiwai, he says it helps his brain to wind down.

Damien has a striking photographic style when it comes to portraiture, mixing classic lighting techniques with modern digital design, and his influence from his days as a graphic artist shines through in his work. His beautiful imagery has attracted a wide clientele within the fashion, music and commercial photography industry. This has seen him travel to many different countries for work assignments. "I like to take my wife with me as much as I can, she gets paid as my assistant, and we get to stay in super nice hotels and eat the best food. Its so nice to be able to spend those time's with my wife" he says. Damien mainly works in Australia, Asia and the pacific, but he says the most memorable place he's been to is Southern Alps of NZ. "All the nicest places i've been to have been in my own country. Its (New Zealand) just breath taking."

One of Damien's more memorable photographic assignments was when he was employed by the president of Taiwan's daughter to document the two week period leading up to the birth of her first child. "They flew me to Taiwan first class, where she was staying in a ten thousand dollar a week hospital, and she had been there for three months!" Damien's latest overseas excursion was to Fiji, where he shot real estate for a high-end marketing firm. At the moment he is having fun working with the girls at New Zealand agency Nova, where he has free range to models and makeup, working with them for their Nova portfolios.

Damien has some sound advice for fashion photography hopefuls. "In my opinion. The first thing you need is true passion and to believe in your self, I had so many people all around me said I could never do it, at times including my self. Good thing is I don't hear it any more. Second thing is a love for either clothes or the human body, for me I truly marvel at how we are designed and built, I feel we are true works of art and I get the privilege to take photos of masterpieces, and I don't just mean models. Thirdly be observant let your eyes and heart be stimulated by everything around you and love what you see, its what gives you great ideas. When something makes your brain tick take a photo of it! Last is knowing how to use a camera, I chose this for last because you don't need to know all the tech stuff about photography. Your passion and time will teach you how to get better, and to be honest the camera is a tool you will keep learning how to use for the rest of your life. Oh yeah one more thing: if your going to get married pick a good wife, honor respect her, and be grateful she lets you shoot with models. It doesn't matter what any one else thinks of you except her."

Damien feels that living in Whangarei gives him the perfect mix in life. He can still have his international photography career and balance it with relaxed family time, playing with his children, renovating their home, and playing rugby. He has now got the time to do some of the little projects he has always wanted to do, like stiki.com, a kiwiana vinyl sticker website he and his wife have created, and he is currently in the initial stages of designing his own swimwear range. Damien's favorite saying is "The best luxury of all is time", and he feels like he has finally enjoying that luxury.

FASHION

SCENE | MAY 2009

MAY 2009 | SCENE

gold nuggets

Damien Nikora, 32, a successful self-made fashion photographer who has recently moved back to New Zealand, is in for "gold nuggets" of quality time here in Whangarei.

Damien describes the suburb in which he grew up as the "Beverly Hills" of New Zealand, where he attended Ross School for six years.

Belonged to the same club, he decided he wanted to attend Hamilton High school. "Christy" (his wife) missed his conviction, the school to let him work as a printer for six years and spent his spare time reading the school's books.

In the seventh semester of Christy College he met Mervyn, a friend of his who had a passion for photography. "I don't know if it was the time."

Damien was based at Mervyn's.

MEGAN BOWERS talks to photographer **Damien Nikora**



He eventually got a job working for a company called Fuzzy Lines, who make games for PlayStation, where he was the lead operator until a lot of his image in the game for drawing and "giving the feel" he had brought the better as an artist.

Damien and Whangarei then decided to go out on their own and start their own photography company called Damien Nikora Photography in Whangarei. There he started working for a number of clients including the Whangarei Hospital and the Whangarei District Council.

It was in 2004 that Damien began to consider a career in photography. He was working for a company called Fuzzy Lines, who make games for PlayStation, where he was the lead operator until a lot of his image in the game for drawing and "giving the feel" he had brought the better as an artist.

Damien and Whangarei then decided to go out on their own and start their own photography company called Damien Nikora Photography in Whangarei. There he started working for a number of clients including the Whangarei Hospital and the Whangarei District Council.

It was in 2004 that Damien began to consider a career in photography. He was working for a company called Fuzzy Lines, who make games for PlayStation, where he was the lead operator until a lot of his image in the game for drawing and "giving the feel" he had brought the better as an artist.



And to my surprise they were coming!" he decided to switch to commercial photography. A few photography and design studios that provided a full service to clients, and soon began producing advertising and promotional material for Australian fashion companies, with total respect and interest. It was very rewarding work with tough deadlines, his model wearing one posed on a Monday and really getting to sleep on Wednesday night.

At the time Damien was coping with an internal struggle. His faith lay in strong contradiction with the man-made system in front of his camera. However, that all started to change with some contradictions, and Damien began to feel more in control and embrace where he took him. Now he says he can call himself a true believer in the industry.

Damien's strong relationship with his wife, who helps him feel good about shooting fashion, "Whangarei is a great place to be in the long term, our children. She grew with words, accents, contrasts, the sort of thing she uses it well for me and there is a very strong trust between us."

Damien's relationship with his wife is a great one. They are all work and he plays. So the family moved to Whangarei, New Zealand.

Whangarei was the best thing for a year now from his time in Whangarei. He has been in New Zealand for a long time and he is enjoying it very much.

Whangarei is a great place to be in the long term, our children. She grew with words, accents, contrasts, the sort of thing she uses it well for me and there is a very strong trust between us."

Damien's relationship with his wife is a great one. They are all work and he plays. So the family moved to Whangarei, New Zealand.

Whangarei was the best thing for a year now from his time in Whangarei. He has been in New Zealand for a long time and he is enjoying it very much.

The first thing you need is true passion and to believe in yourself. So many people all around me told me I couldn't do it, at times including me!

for three months Damien's latest overseas location was in Fiji, where he shot and edited for a night's shooting. At the moment he is looking for working with a girl at home.

Damien's most recent work is for the fashion photography market.

"I'm not sure you need a true passion and to believe in yourself. So many people all around me told me I couldn't do it, at times including me!"

Whangarei is a great place to be in the long term, our children. She grew with words, accents, contrasts, the sort of thing she uses it well for me and there is a very strong trust between us."

Damien's relationship with his wife is a great one. They are all work and he plays. So the family moved to Whangarei, New Zealand.

Whangarei was the best thing for a year now from his time in Whangarei. He has been in New Zealand for a long time and he is enjoying it very much.

