



New Commissioner has sorted role

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You might find her boogie boarding at Waihi Beach. Or battling in the boardroom for her beliefs. You're not likely to find her peeling spuds in the kitchen. But you will often find her in high-powered business meetings and deep discussions with some of New Zealand's leading executives.

As New Zealand's newly appointed Retirement Commissioner, Diana Crossan has one objective firmly in mind: making New Zealand a better place for all New Zealanders. The best way to achieve this, she believes, is through saving and financial planning, not just for retirement, but throughout life.

In fact, if she were not constrained by the Retirement Income Act, Ms Crossan would prefer a title other than "Retirement Commissioner" to better reflect this wider focus. The Commission's hugely successful public education campaign, Sorted, is aimed at New Zealanders of all ages, right from school students through to retired people.

Over 18 months since it was launched, more than 400,000 people have visited the www.sorted.org.nz website featuring the cute savvy mouse. It has won several awards and reflects the Retirement Commission's public education strategy – a strategy which recognises that if individuals and households make sound financial decisions throughout life, then they are much more likely to achieve their retirement income goals.

It's a philosophy close to Ms Crossan's heart. As Retirement Commissioner, she'll spend her new role encouraging New Zealanders to get their finances sorted. In another role, she'll continue to spend part of her working week at FUNZ, a Trust she established to look at ways of helping New Zealand families save for their children's tertiary education and training. "They're complementary positions and each will be able to benefit from the other," she says.

One of the challenges, Ms Crossan says, will be in making personal financial planning and saving something people want to do. "For now, financial planning just isn't perceived as exciting, but I'm hoping to change that".

Diana Crossan grew up in Central Otago and South Canterbury, one of four daughters, close in age. Her dad was headmaster of the local high school. Her mum was also a teacher, "but since my father was headmaster of the only local high school, she knew better than to work there and left teaching when we girls came along," Ms Crossan recalls.

Always keen to see the bigger picture, Ms Crossan took a year out of her schooling at Pleasant Point District High School to take up an AFS in North Carolina, the first of many mind-broadening overseas forays including study in Swansea, Wales, for a postgraduate Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, at the Kellogg Graduate School of Management in Chicago and Stanford University Graduate Business School in California. While Ms Crossan's three sisters all became teachers, she had something different in view. She had her heart set on social work.

Ms Crossan has worked extensively in the business sector and has also held numerous voluntary and community roles. Until recently she was chair of the J.R. McKenzie Trust for 10 years; and currently she is on the board of Relationship Services.

On graduation from Otago University, at 22 years of age she started her career as a probation officer, a role she performed in Christchurch, Wellington, Tokoroa and Taupo for 13 years before she "hit the glass ceiling".

Then followed a period as chief executive of the Group Employment Liaison Service (GELS) managing field workers throughout the country whose role was to work with disadvantaged groups to help them gain better access to government support.

She then set up and ran the Equal Employment Opportunities Unit for the State Services Commission. "That was quite a mission," Ms Crossan says. "There were particular challenges in getting people to understand the need for equal opportunities in the public sector and getting it built into the Act was a major achievement."

She is proud of the role she played in getting the legislation changed in 1988 and in leading the way for companies to rethink their approach to recruitment, training and promotion.

In the years that followed, Ms Crossan took on increasingly demanding and influential positions in the public sector. From 1990 to 1992 she was director of policy for the Ministry of Education; from 1993 to 1995, Group Manager Human Resources, Department of Justice and General Manager for Criminal Justice Development.

Her career took a different route in 1995 when she became a consultant to the Core Project Team for the Electricity SOE Development Group, which led to her temporary role as acting general Manager for Hydro, comprising the Clyde and Roxburgh Power Stations. She laughs when she recalls her time there. "On the site they just couldn't believe it. Not only was I a woman in charge – but I wasn't even an engineer!"

Then followed a period as a management consultant during which time Ms Crossan advised organisations including Victoria University, City Gallery, Land Information, the State Services Commission, Radio New Zealand and the Institute of Personnel Management.

It was in 1997 that Ms Crossan first worked in the financial services industry, joining AMP as Manager of Agency Development. "It was a time in which AMP was repositioning itself to both retain its role as a major player in its traditional insurance markets and to become a serious contender in investment and saving."

Still with AMP in 2000, Ms Crossan was appointed as leader of a team based in London. Her role was to merge four AMP-owned financial services companies with a combined total of 4.1 million customers – more than the total population of New Zealand.

On her return to New Zealand in May 2001, Ms Crossan was approached by an Auckland businessman who had some ideas about how New Zealand families could be supported to save for their children's tertiary education or training. Consequently she agreed to establish a project that would consider the issues and evaluate ways to help. She set up a team that is working with the finance sector, academia, New Zealand businesses and Government to develop a unique solution to this issue.

Ms Crossan lives in the Wellington suburb of Northland with her partner, educationalist Neale Pitches. They have a holiday home in Waihi Beach and when not contemplating New Zealand's future, Ms Crossan enjoys tennis, walking, swimming, boogie boarding and food – "that's eating it, not cooking it!".

Looking back over her career to date, Ms Crossan can see a common thread. "It's all been about helping to make New Zealand a better place for all people so they all can have a better deal. As Retirement Commissioner, I want to encourage people to see the life events ahead of them and to plan for them. It's not just about 'retirement' because many people don't really retire these days."

She is looking forward to working with the industry – banks, insurance and financial institutions – and bringing them together to share their thoughts on how to work together on improving people's personal financial skills. She is also looking forward to working with the successful Sorted programme. "I see personal financial management as crucial to helping people improve their lifestyle. Financial planning doesn't start in your fifties, it's something you do all your life."

She's keen to use her connections to encourage the education system itself to help give New Zealanders a new attitude towards saving and learning personal financial skills, to make financial education relevant – exciting even. "I'm pleased to be coming into an organisation that is already highly regarded and has made great progress in a variety of areas. But I'm aware there is a heap more to do and I have a lot of great people to help me."

While the Commission itself operates with a team of just five people including the part time Commissioner, Ms Crossan says since news of her appointment became known she's received counselling from "about 350 unofficial advisers. It's an issue everyone has an opinion about and I'll be listening."

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