

Parent-run trust provides a vital resource

by Kate Manson

Approaching Thumbs Up in Petone it seems like there's a party going on - the music's pumping and by the sound of it, everyone's having a blast.

It's 9.30 on a brisk autumn morning and Thumbs Up staff and clients - young people with intellectual and physical disabilities - are enjoying a music session before getting into the day. And it'll be a varied day - among other things there's a drama session, a Meals on Wheels run, and some of the group will be heading for a Friday ginger beer at the Petone Working Men's Club.

Twenty-six-year-old Brian Mills who has been coming to Thumbs Up since its doors opened in 2007 enjoys what it offers.

"I like meeting people who are here. I like the music and going out to do woodwork at [Days Bay's] Menz Shed, we have been making coasters for glasses."

The Thumbs Up Trust is an independent charitable organisation offering a highly individualised service for the young people who attend. It was formed by a group of families who shared a vision of the kind of service they wanted for their children once they left school.

Thumbs Up Manager Briany Howes says the group looked around the community for suitable providers but nothing really excited them, so they decided to form their own service. Initially joining a larger organisation, they were able to go it alone by early 2013.

"They were able to go back to their original vision of having a parent-run organisation," says Miss Howes.

Board member Lisa Bartosh, whose daughter Danielle attends the service, says finding Thumbs Up was a "godsend." When Danielle was ready to leave school it was a huge challenge finding a place which would allow her to engage in her community. Mrs Bartosh says there are not enough places like that for people with disabilities.



Music time at the Thumbs Up Trust gets everyone moving.

"We looked at so many different places, talked to so many different people. It's very hard finding somewhere where they are not just babysat. We want our young people to have a fulfilling life; we want them to be useful in the community. We want them to know people and to meet people and do things that they find fun, like any young person," says Mrs Bartosh.

Supporting its 23 clients, aged in their 20s and 30s, to engage in, and contribute to the life of their community is one of the main focuses for Thumbs Up.

Miss Howes says jobs like delivering Meals on Wheels and taking part in activities such as volunteering for the SPCA, or cleaning the Thumbs Up vehicles - which is Brian Mills' regular Friday job - allows the young people to contribute in a meaningful way and helps them make connections in the community.

"It's about engagement, participation, contribution," says Miss Howes

Finding enough money is always a challenge but Howes says the organisation is hugely lucky with the community support it receives.

Funding for Thumbs Up comes from government agencies, parents' donations and grants from community organisations, clubs

and councils. The Pelorus Trust has been a major supporter with donations allowing, among other things, the purchase of the Thumbs Up land and building.

Support also comes in the form of time donated by organisations like Hewlett Packard.

"Hewlett Packard coming in [to do a working bee] meant that our staff didn't have to spend half a day cleaning...so what seems like such a small thing actually gave us a half, or probably a full day of training during the term break which is pretty precious time," says Miss Howes.



Brian Mills.