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PERSON OF THE YEAR 2009

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MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Humble winner: Pukekura Park's Boat Shed bridge provides the perfect setting for Taranaki Daily News Person of the Year winner George Fuller and his trophy. Photos: MARK DWYER

By PETER BINGHAM
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THE mouse that roared has won again. George Fuller, the man who beat bureaucracy in 2009, is the *Taranaki Daily News* Person of the Year.

"Goodness me, that's overwhelming," the 80-year-old said when told of his award win yesterday.

"I hadn't thought much more about it after seeing the callipers of the other candidates. This is very humbling."

Mr Fuller received the award ahead of retiring TSB Bank managing director Kevin Rimmington, pro surfer Paige Harsh, orthodontist and founder Julian Hazard, ultra-distance runner Lisa Tamati and Rhodes Scholar Thomas Hills.

It capped a memorable year for Mr Fuller which included the campaign, the naming of Fuller Lane in Henderson as recognition of the part his parents' orchard business played in the area in the early 1900s and success in developing a pure yellow *Disa* orchid after years of trial.

"And now this. What can I say."

Mr Fuller hit the headlines in June when he stood his ground over a stand of 25 native trees in New Plymouth's Pukekura Park. The trees, many of which he planted in the 1960s, were in the way of a planned revamp of the racecourse entrance to the TSB Bowl of Brooklands.

The former park curator was having none of it and for eight weeks, including a week-long vigil at the proposed site, mounted a campaign that eventually convinced the New Plymouth District Council to change tack.

As he soaked in his win, Mr Fuller basked in the praise of key developers of the park whose names rolled off his tongue — Robert Clinton Hughes, who orchestrated the setting up of the reserve, W.W. Smith from 1908-24, who



As curator I was so lucky and have always said I was living and working in paradise.

George Fuller



Beloved kauri: George Fuller can no longer stretch his arms around the kauri he planted which was once destined for removal.

pinus radiata in the world in Brooklands. None of us realised that."

They were blown away by its size, which was remarkable given they were from California, where pines are common. The group was stunned at the expanse of the park and the uniqueness of a primeval podocarp forest within the city limits.

"They have studied the canopy of trees in tropical countries and never anywhere seen the density and diversity of this type of growth in any forest. They were so enraptured they are coming back."

"If you stand anywhere in the Bowl of Brooklands and admire the

surroundings it's a total 360 tree skyline. By whatever means you have got there you have walked under a canopy of trees, you can't do that in many places in the world so close to a city. It's uncanny, wonderful."

"As curator I was so lucky and have always said I was living and working in paradise."

He started planting trees almost straight away. "It was very personal. I planted them and now can't get my arms around their trunk."

In New Zealand it was possible to plant a tree in your youth and stand under it during your lifetime. In England you plant an oak for future generations.

"Here in New Plymouth it is a combination of equitable rainfall and temperature. There are no extremes of temperatures and there is a spread of rain. The third factor is the soil which is about 100ft of a volcanic ash. There is little clay in it so it doesn't contract and expand with different moisture levels. It's stable and that's why we've got the ferns, you couldn't do that anywhere else."

He casts an eye out through the lounge window of his Torbay St home and points to a walnut tree.

"See that. I planted it in 1982 and got 70kg of walnuts from it last year."

His final word is a tribute to the council.

"I am impressed in every sense that the councillors and staff finally accepted that [the final entrance option] was the right thing to do. Thanks to the engineers and designers or whoever have made it such a successful venture. I'm sure everyone will be thrilled and proud of it and all that was done to protect a wonderful stand of trees. They will be here for a long, long time."

Community crusader deserving of award

By PETER BINGHAM
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THERE are no other George Fullers, according to Friends of the Park president David Medway.

"What George did to deserve the award is pretty different to the norm," he said. "It shows a real concern for our community and environment. He is unique. I wouldn't have done what he did and I can't think of any others who would."

Mr Fuller worked for 25 years as curator of the park and 20 years after retirement he was still putting his heart and soul into it.

"George has been a respected member of the Friends of the Park since its inception and we were more than happy to let him do his personal vigil. We supported him 100 per cent and some members were down there every day, but it was really his campaign."

The vigil at the 400-year-old puriri tree was pivotal.

"Thankfully the need for campaigns like this don't arise very often. He has always been to the fore with issues involving the park. This is the first time we have had to undergo a campaign of this magnitude in order to sort out what we considered an inappropriate development."

Friends, with 400 members, was a

watchdog group ensuring the integrity of the park as a botanic garden and recreation ground was maintained.

"Modesty is the right word when it comes to George. He doesn't seek the limelight. He is dedicated to his causes to the extent that it is not always beneficial to his health."

The Friends of the Park formerly took up the issue against the closed mind of the racecourse bowl road.

"We know the story of that as a result of what the Friends did, what George did, what the engineers did and what the public did by way of supporting us. We got the district council, unusually, to change its mind and we've ended up with a road that is much better than it would have been."

New Plymouth Mayor Peter Tennant said it was most appropriate Mr Fuller received the award.

"George has made a huge contribution over decades to this community, particularly the park. I don't think it was ever about taking on the council. It was about this community and what he believes what was best for this community. That is what George is all about."

"It's a wonderful selection. There are 100,000 good folk here [in Taranaki] and you picked six beauties and it is most appropriate George is recognised," Mr Tennant said.



David Medway

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Index	● Puzzles	2 ● World	7,8 ● Magazine: Garden & Lifestyle	11-12
	● Regional, national news	2-5 ● Letters, editorial, opinion	9 ● Sport and racing	13-20
	● Business	6 ● Television, weather	10 ● Classifieds	19

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New Plymouth 21°C Hawera 19°C
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