



Councillor Raf Manji, Pillars CEO Verna McFelin, Vanessa Smith and mentor Paul Lawrence. MONIQUE STEELE/FAIRFAX NZ

# Breaking the jail cycle for prisoner's children

**MONIQUE STEELE**

A Christchurch mother says an organisation which supports families of prisoners changed her and her children's lives forever.

Pillars came into single mother-of-two Vanessa Smith's life 10 years ago, after her partner went to prison.

Smith received three years of one-on-one parenting support and her 12-year-old son was paired up with a Pillars mentor.

"I wasn't a good parent... It was a rough few years, but Pillars supported us through that.

"Pillars not only gave my life back, they gave my children a more positive future," she said.

Smith now volunteers for Pillars.

The Smiths are one of thousands of Kiwi families to receive help from families-of-prisoners

support group, Pillars.

Pillars founder Verna McFelin said after her husband was imprisoned, she realised the lack of support for prisoner's families and the stigma attached to having a loved one in jail.

"There's over 20,000 children in New Zealand with a parent in prison right now.

"They're nine times more likely to end up in prison than any other child, so our service is vital, we're breaking that cycle, to keep them out of prison.

"We don't want these children to be our future prisoners," she said.

More than \$17,000 was raised at a Pillars fundraiser breakfast on Friday, attended by more than 160 Christchurch business people at the Redwood Hotel's Sequoia 88 restaurant.

Councillor Raf Manji spoke at the breakfast of his time as a Pillars mentor. Eight years ago,

Manji began mentoring a 9-year-old boy named Ted\* who was living with his grandmother, as his mother had addiction issues and was in and out of prison, and his step dad was in prison.

Manji said for kids like Ted, their choices in life were limited.

"We spent four years together and we had the most incredible time."

Years later, Manji is still in touch with his now 17-year-old mentee. "It's a fantastic programme... [And] the pay off for us as a community is huge."

McFelin said the organisation was always needing more mentors - male role models, in particular.

"Twenty children in Christchurch are waiting right now for a mentor... It's \$3000 a year for a one child's sponsorship."

\*Manji's mentee is anonymous.