**Paul Toki-Love**

**A bullying message**

Until I was seven years of age I couldn’t hear a thing. I was completely deaf. It was a symptom of acromegaly, which is associated with gigantism. As the youngest of six I grew up in a loving Catholic household where everyone loved to sing. But I couldn’t hear it.

At the age of 5, once at school I started being teased for being larger than everyone my age and for being deaf, although I didn’t know that I was I being bullied at that stage.

At seven I was given a life changing operation at Wellington Hospital thanks to a medical breakthrough, which gave me my hearing. However, making the adjustment from silence to hearing was much harder than you would think. I couldn’t speak properly and had to understand what all these words people were saying meant. I was seven years behind all my school peers.

On top of being tongue-tied, far larger and taller than anyone else my age at school, at 7 I was a target for a group of 12 year old bullies. I recall one incident where the group huddled around me and for 10 minutes poked fun at me, pinched me and pushed me to the ground. It wasn’t until someone alerted the teachers that they stopped.

I tried to brush off the incident.

Being the youngest in my family, I had always been protected by my siblings but they couldn’t always be there to help me. So in my teenage years, I could became angry and developed quite a temper. I would get teased for my size and while I tried to let it go, it would get to a level of bullying where I would just snap. The only way I knew how to deal with my anger at being bullied was by being physical – I would lash out and break things like windows and school equipment.

The bullying didn’t just come from boys, as you would expect. One day the prettiest girl in the school tried to tell me she liked me and that I should follow her into a room. Once in the room I was hit on the head from behind from a group of rugby players from a rival school’s team. I learnt later that their plan, involving my fellow female school pupil, was to try to knock me out purely because of the way I looked.

Having been raised Catholic I was brought up to be a ‘nice guy’, so I could never understand why kids were being mean.

In my 7th form year at an all-boys school I did retaliate the bullying. But it was to a far lesser degree than I’d experienced as a youngster. I think it was because it was all I knew – that older students bully, it’s just what happens.

You’d also think that when you reach adulthood bullying stops. But I still get bullied today. With my beat boxing I’m often busking on the streets, where I make good money. But people still walk past and call me ‘ugly’ and heckle me. Some even walk past and kick over my money tray.

Being on the streets at night I have come across a number of scenes where people, women in particular, have gotten themselves into some dangerous situations. Using my size and presence (but not my chuffs) I have been able to help them. So I have tried to turn my experience of being bullied into a positive thing, to help other.

That’s why I am getting involved in Pink Shirt Day on Friday May 23. Pink Shirt Day is an international anti-bullying campaign to spread the message that bullying, at school, in the home or community, is not okay.

Thanks to social service organisation, Family Works Northern’s Social Workers in Schools programme, I’m going into schools in south Auckland to talk to them about my bullying experience - and to have some fun and perform for them.

My main messages going into these schools on Pink Shirt Day are:

* For Kids: Don’t be a bully be a hero – everyone loves a hero, and
* It’s better when you can all have fun together, rather than trying to standout by being a bully.
* For adults: Time is precious, there is no time to waste on bullying

**About Paul**

Paul is 31 years of age and is the world recorder for the longest best box session and the five-time New Zealand beat box champion. He grew up in Newtown in Wellington and is one of the most recognisable faces on Wellington streets today thanks to his beat busking. He is the vocal percussionist of the Afrofuturist rock band Olmecha Supreme.

**About Family Works Northern**

Paul is telling his story as part of Family Works Northern’s Pink Shirt Day activities. Family Works is part of Presbyterian Support Northern, an independent charitable organisation which provides social services to at-risk children, their families, and to the elderly, injured and disabled.

[www.familyworksnorthern.org.nz](http://www.familyworksnorthern.org.nz) [www.northern.ps.org.nz](http://www.northern.ps.org.nz)