

# David vs. Goliath story inspires feisty film

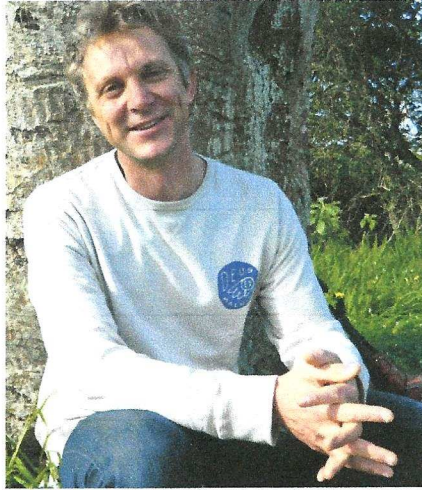
In a mini version of the 1981 Springbok Tour, a small Coromandel community is split apart by a clash of values which boils down to jobs and promised riches vs. the environment. Julianne Evans talks to one man who was in the middle of it all, islander Brani Mead.

It is New Zealand, 1983. The National Government under Robert Muldoon is in its last year of a long and controversial reign and the visit of the US nuclear-powered frigate *Texas* sparks widespread protests.

And in other news, an American gold mining company who have a permit to dig an open cast mine in the Coromandel hills, swaggers into the laidback beach community of Kuaotunu, promising 400 jobs and plenty of money for all if gold is extracted.

Many of the locals, however, are not impressed with these airy assurances, believing the environmental threat to their beautiful, sleepy backwater to be far more serious and longlasting than anyone is admitting.

The resulting confrontation, which was to drag on for 15 years, has become the basis for a low budget feature film, *The Z-Nail Gang* - made for \$30,000 and a huge amount of goodwill and donated services - and now showing at Waiheke Cinema.



Brani Mead: "We had to fight and we had to win, or we would lose everything."

corporation and winning. Naturally, the David vs. Goliath narrative sits strong in the heart of any Kiwi and captured the imagination of the local community

humour, it wasn't so much fun at the time, Brani remembers.

"We were asked to carry huge sense of responsibility. At nine and ten, my brother and I became aware that the world was a very big place.

"At any time, money and power can arrive on your doorstep, put dark forces into play and try to take everything you have. We were standing for our home and our lives, we had to fight and we had to win, or we would lose everything."

And with their mother and surfer stepfather at the centre of the protest - lobbying, writing letters, raising money, contacting newspapers - and often absent, the young brothers' job, says Brani, was to take care of the house.

"We were to feed the animals, collect the eggs, do washing, get ourselves to school and not f\*\*\* anything up. Our parents were away two or three nights a week running local meetings in community halls all over the peninsula and this went on for 15 years."

A central character in the film (played by *Underbelly* star Erroll Shand), Brani's stepfather was an American from San Francisco, who left the country disillusioned by American foreign policy and the Vietnam War.

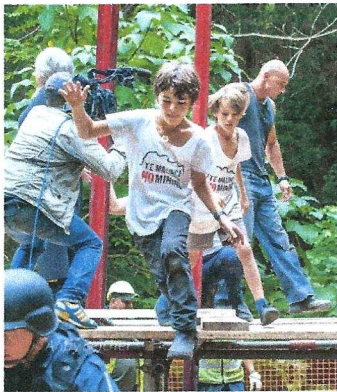
"He went to the farthest country, as far away as he could get from America and built a house on 250 acres of bush deep in the Coromandel Peninsula.

"Here he thought no one would ever find him. Of course, they did, and they brought their arrogant American Cuban missile crisis style of diplomacy with them."

With the backing of the government and the law, he says, the mining executives arrived "in helicopters and limousines".

"They promised the world and derisively painted us as backward hicks stifling the country's progress into the modern economy; which was true of course, we were stifling progress because we thought their form of progress was old school colonialism.

"This isn't just an environmental issue, it's also about a long standing Kiwi tradition of us naively giving away our resources for far too little and the mine itself isn't the only problem, it's managing the byproduct from it that's the largest issue. They stockpile the waste in dams which sit toxic for thousands of years.



Above - The young boys are caught in the protest crossfire and right, Vanessa Rare puts in a strong performance as 'Auntie' in *The Z-Nail Gang*.

These events also have a local twist with the involvement of 43-year-old Waiheke resident Brani Mead, who was only 10 at the time his family became the centre of the community's vocal - and passionately determined - protest group, Coromandel Watchdog.

And it was as a result of telling the story of his turbulent boyhood to friend and filmmaker Anton Steel that the film came to life.

"This is a story of a bunch of cake stall holders taking on a massive multinational

where Anton lives.

"The film was shot in Te Puke, 400 people worked on it for free, local businesses donated food and equipment, all the cars trucks, helicopters... everything was given from around the local community. Maketu pies even supplied the food for the crew during filming. It's an amazing tribute to community power; I'm in awe of their achievement."

However while the film itself has approached the issue with a light touch and lots of slapstick 'Keystone Cop' - style

“The track record of these companies is awful, there are dozens and dozens of examples of tailings dam failures all over the world, engulfing villages, killing hundreds of people, and abandoned sites seeping toxic sludge into rivers and habitats with the local populations left to manage it long after these companies have left the scene. It’s criminal.”

And in the 1980s, New Zealand had no checks and balances on how foreign corporations were expected to treat the environment.

“We [the residents] owned the land but via the government, these companies could access the minerals under it.

“They could move people off their land, dig it up and give it back when they were finished. These laws were created in the 1880s when they dug caves with picks and shovels.

The new and super efficient methods of the 1980s, he says, required crushing the hills into dust and mixing it with large quantities of clean water and toxic chemicals in order to extract the gold.

The Talisman Waihi mine has been in action for more than 20 years. It produces 1.25 million tonnes of tailings every year, around 30 million tonnes to date

“The revenue the gold nets is staggering; the Waihi mine has produced 1.965 million ounces. At US \$1200 an ounce; that’s US\$23 billion dollars.

“Our country receives about \$6 million a year in taxes and royalties. The foreign companies take the gold offshore and leave the toxic tailings behind in a dam that’s supposed to last forever. We’re denying our grandchildren the benefit of the gold, we leave them a toxic legacy and gift the gold to a foreign company that puts it back in a vault in their own country.”

And the mining issue, which polarised the community throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, still hasn’t gone away.

Earlier this year, dual-listed New Talisman Gold Mines announced it was looking overseas for finance so it could begin exploratory work at the site’s old mine in Waihi.

In December 2013, it secured a ‘heads of agreement’ with a Chinese-backed investor group, St Albans, for nearly \$11 million in funding, subject to due diligence.

In return, St Albans would receive 65 per cent of the 32,200 ounces of gold catered for in a pre-feasibility study.

And as for the film’s likeness to events from real life, Brani says his friend Anton has “let his own crazy sense of humour and imagination” take over, but most of the events in the film did actually happen including the film’s climax, a tense confrontation between police and protestors



Protestors clash with the riot squad in The Z-Nail Gang.

on a drilling rig in the bush.

“We had the s\*\*\* kicked out of us basically, men, women and children, and the media was there so there were references to the Springbok Tour all over again on the front page of the *Herald*.

“To these globalised corporations we are just another third world country to be taken advantage of. When companies like this show up in our communities, it’s important we show them that hell hath no fury like a community scorned.” •