

Dark Times



It was the first morning of the first day back at school. Rumours had begun to circulate around the playground of police collecting people, unaware, without question and with absolute prejudice. There would be no warnings, no patterns to predict when police would raid homes.

My brother Tama and I were in first period when the alarm bell rang, the sound pierced through the hallways. Teachers who would stay in their rooms to wait for their next groups of students, suddenly appeared out of their rooms and they started herding us into small groups. Their faces wrinkled, seared with panic and concern. My Pasifika classmates and I were hastily ushered into a cubby hole by our day carers. I noticed that every student in the group, like me were of colour. We were hastily positioned underneath the stage. Some of us on our knees, others were crouched into small balls, trying not to breathe heavily or give our position away.

The teachers had already whispered their warnings for everyone to hush and remain quiet. On the corners of the stage, large curtains spread over 30 meters wide and draped across the sides like haunting shadows. From where we were positioned, we could see the source of our fear. Police officers, the very people we as children were taught to trust and obey were handcuffing and dragging children while they kicked and screamed in agony and terror. Some of the children who were not so fortunate as I in finding a hiding spot, were caught and regrettably taken away. From our hiding place, I clung onto one of the teacher's hands, who had carefully steered me into safety. Before the commotion began, I was holding my friend's hand so we could squeeze each other's hand if it became too much.

However, after watching what had unfolded, our faces had turned from cold hard fear, to stifled tears and a pain that I couldn't explain except that it was from within.

That was the moment, my heart shattered, and I was too little to know that what had transpired, what I had witnessed, was one of the darkest times ever recorded in New Zealand history. Police had forcibly removed my peers, children from their homes, schools, places once we had once known to be safe and secure. I felt so helpless and powerless. After this traumatic event, Tama and I were sent home after the police left. This has left us unable to feel safe or trust police.

When we arrived home, fear and anguish began to subside, and I smelt the delicious dinner my mother had cooking. My worries and fears were forgotten for a brief time and food became a distraction. After my family learnt of what had happened. We were comforted and it was all laughter and hugs all through dinner. My brother and I began to joke with one another while my mother and father watched, concerned but also proud of how brave we were.

Feeling the unbreakable bond of family brought about feelings of peace and clarity. As I lay in my bed, I was sad for my friends and those affected by the dawn raids, but I was thankful that I hadn't been taken away along with the others. That night, I learned to cherish my family and all that I had. There would always be fear of the unknown. But the events of the day had worn me down, and I couldn't keep my eyes from closing. My sleep was disrupted by yelling and screaming, similar to what I had experienced earlier that day. I woke up to our glass windows and front door being smashed in. Large men in uniform swarmed the house. They came in with guns pointing at us, demanding that we follow their instructions. "Raise your hands up! and get on the floor!" My family and I followed their demands as we dropped to the floor with our hands up. My mother let out an unforgettable scream that still rings in my ears to this day. Hearing that scream meant, she and my father were hopeless to do anything to protect us or themselves. Her cries for help left unanswered, shivers ran down my body. I no longer felt safe in my home. I instinctively, kicked at our captors and ran towards the door, hoping to escape them. Unfortunately, my feeble attempt was futile, and I was captured and put back on the ground with my family.

I was face-down on our cold, textured tiles. It was now brushing gently against my face. I was a hostage and I was at the mercy of these armed men. I was so scared, I thought we were going to die. I started to feel angry, so I dared to look up at the officers for that brief moment but it just increased my sense of feeling small. After all the commotion had settled down, we were marched handcuffed to the vehicles and transported to a detention centre. Where we would be deemed criminals. The ride on the way to the detention centre was quiet, the only movement made, was our heads that jolted up and down as we passed over speed bumps. Once we arrived, we were forced out of the bus by officers' holding batons and we were pushed and shoved to the processing station. Once we were processed, the officers realized the mistake they had made. They had harassed and traumatised the wrong family.

In New Zealand, families were racially profiled and others like me, experienced these atrocities. I never wish this experience on anyone and although it was the hardest thing I had ever experienced, I was grateful because this event made me stronger. I used this negative experience to help me be the strong woman and mother I am today. I often share this experience with others to help them heal and to support the work, to build a better future for our people.