

# FOCUS

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EXCLUSIVE



# A GANGSTER'S LIFE

He is the elder statesman of New Zealand's underworld, the Black Power leader who was convicted in 2005 for heading a million-dollar drug empire. In the first interview since being released from prison, Abe Wharewaka gives a rare insider's perspective on our enduring gang culture - his golden years living the high life, the power of a patch, and why he has no regrets. By Tim Hume.

"HONGI HIKA was the first gangster, if you like, in Aotearoa," muses Abe Wharewaka, the 67-year-old Black Power president, of his Ngapuhi forebear who instigated the Musket Wars.

"He got on a ship to England, all those years ago, and met the [King], who gave him some armour. He stopped off in Sydney on the way back home and sold it and bought all these guns instead. Then he came back here and he smashed every c-- over. He killed them all, all these Ngati Whatua - bang! bang! bang! - all the way down to Whakatane, across to Taranaki.

"That's gangster! Our ancestors, they were the entrepreneurs. We started selling our women to the Pakeha first, drinking whiskey first. That's part of my make-up," he says. "It's in me."

Wharewaka is the eldest gang leader in the country, the grandfather of New Zealand's underworld. An avid reader, globetrotter and entrepreneur, variously fuelled and hobbled by his unremitting appetites for methamphetamine and prostitutes, Wharewaka has been to the top, and lost everything. Twice. He has "plenty of outs"

"Those three years I had that [massage] parlour, I had the best time of my 60 years. Abe Hefner, that's who I thought I was."

to justify his three decades at the helm of Auckland's Sindi Black Power chapter, he says, the Hongi Hika defence being just one.

"People expect me to be six foot with tats and a huge afro, and just grunt at them," says Wharewaka, who is considerably shorter, with a dyed-black, John Rowles pompadour and, aside from the swearing, is almost gentlemanly in his speech. "I don't believe in bullies; don't believe in being

bullied either." Wharewaka advocates a diffidently principled brand of gangsterism: he is broadly opposed to violence, although not above turning loose his "soldiers" when necessary. He served time, decades ago, for violent offending. "There's a saying that Pakeha generals lead from the back and Maori generals lead from the front.

To Focus, C2



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Abe Wharewaka's dreams haven't changed: the big house, the big boat, a bit of dope and the odd ho.

Photo: Lawrence Smith



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