GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Will Hansen, Trustee – Kawe Mahara Queer Archives Aotearoa



1. What is your name and what do you do?

Kia ora koutou! My name is Will Hansen, and I am a trustee of Kawe Mahara Queer Archives Aotearoa (formerly known as the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand, Te Pūranga Takatāpui o Aotearoa (LAGANZ)). Kawe Mahara is a charitable trust that collects, preserves, and makes available for research the materials and taonga of queer people and organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our records are housed in the Alexander Turnbull Library. We use "Queer" as an umbrella term for people who identify with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and innate variations of sex characteristics, in acknowledgement of the fluidity of identities and the multiple acts of identifying and finding ourselves through time and space.

As a volunteer, my role is very varied and I am afforded the great privilege of being able to do the work I'm most excited about. Alongside governance duties, I am focused on Kawe Mahara's outreach. Queer histories are infrequently taught in schools or by families, so I am interested in finding ways to enable younger people to connect with the queer past. I produce youth-oriented content, such as zines and social media information (@kawemahara), give talks in schools and run interactive workshops.

As a transgender man, Aotearoa's trans histories have my heart. I'm in the process of launching a new Kawe Mahara working group focused on actively collecting digital-born trans and intersex materials.

2. Can you tell us a little bit about the path that led to your current role?

When I was closeted in high school, researching queer histories on the internet became a way for me to feel connected and empowered. I knew that Wellington was home to Kawe Mahara, and moved down as soon as I could, to pursue a degree in history at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University. As part of my degree I signed up to do a summer internship in 2017, and luckily I was placed at the Alexander Turnbull Library under the mentorship of Roger Swanson,

one of Kawe Mahara's curators and (at the time) a Research Librarian at the ATL. My task was to create a research guide that would help researchers navigate queer archives in Aotearoa. During this time Roger invited me to a Kawe Mahara board meeting, where the trustees indicated that it would be great to have more youth and trans representation on the board…tick and tick! I have been serving on the board since 2017, and it has been a fantastic way to be of service to local queer communities while I completed my studies (I am due to graduate with a PhD in history in December 2025).

3. What is your biggest challenge in your current role?

Trans communities are under attack, in Aotearoa and elsewhere. I feel as though every month the urgency to archive trans materials in the current moment, to keep them safe for future generations, grows and grows. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed and scared that Kawe Mahara itself will come under threat from the right-wing. When I do have these feelings, I remind myself that Kawe Mahara has been through it all before – including literally being targeted by arsonists in 1986, not long after the victory of the Homosexual Law Reform Act. We survived then, and we will continue to resist the suppression of queer lives and queer histories.

4. What is your favourite archive or collection you have seen or would like to see?

My favourite collection has to be the HERO and Devotion magazines, produced in the 1990s to accompany queer festivals and dance parties by the same name in Auckland and Wellington respectively. They are so playful, colourful and sexy, and provide such an interesting snapshot of contemporary queer communities. Over the years both HERO and Devotion became increasingly aware of the necessity to platform marginalised voices within queer communities, and so each have stories from trans, takatāpui, disabled, bisexual, and queer Pasifika communities.

5. What do you most enjoy about the work you do?

I most enjoy being able to feel connected to queers of the past. They are not my ancestors by blood, and yet I relate to them deeply. I owe so much to those who fought so hard to make the world a better place for myself. I feel so privileged to have the opportunity to learn more and more about queer histories, and to find ways of honouring them.