

# Michael Barnett

Class of 1968

Companion of the New Zealand  
Order of Merit



## Michael's Story

St John's College was a brand new school back when Michael transferred from Marist School in Hamilton East. A senior at Marist, he recalls the transition to being a junior once more as "quite the change".

Michael remembers St John's as an environment of discipline. In those days, the consequences of learning and the direction you intended to take did not appear to be linked - there was a curriculum and that is what you were taught.

*"There was no storytelling to emphasise the worth of knowledge, to explain the tool you were creating."*

Looking back, he considers himself an average student. But he liked maths and Latin - and successfully applied that love of numbers, processes, and precise language throughout his professional career and life.

After high school, Michael worked with an engineering company in Hamilton that produced stainless steel milk tanks and silos with materials imported from offshore. Two of his colleagues formed a start-up which he joined and soon moved to Christchurch to manage their operation there. The market crash in the eighties hit NZ hard but also created opportunities. Michael was given the

opportunity to turn around the fortunes of a loss-making enterprise, which he did, and the business was sold on. A big part of the role included international travel and Michael spent considerable time in Japan and Korea visiting steel mills and building a better knowledge of the supply chain.

Michael joined the Chamber of Commerce in 1983 to manage its international division. This role expanded and again time was spent in South America, the Asia-Pacific and Europe promoting NZ businesses and their capability in those markets.

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# Michael Barnett

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*Note to self: A job is not for life. Just start somewhere. Any job will give you leverage. It'll teach you basic skills, customer service, good attitude, and it'll give you a network. Look at this as an asset that you are starting to build. You will find a profession you like and, with that, your sense of purpose in life.*

He took over as the CEO of the Auckland Chamber of Commerce in the early 90's, it wasn't a large operation, but he believed the delivery model should change from a focus on large businesses to the small and medium enterprises who had greater needs. His lobby for SME grew and the Chamber was seen to be the voice of business. He identified three areas that he believed would assist the NZ economy, support the SME sector and make a difference to most communities.

In an environment then of skill shortage, and yet a plentiful supply of new migrant talent the Chamber set up a "new Kiwis" program that enabled migrant workers to become employed. Even today the Chamber assists over 600 new migrants into employment annually.

A second area he encouraged the Chamber to focus on was tackling unemployment in South Auckland. At the time Michael initiated a program our national unemployment rate sat at around 3-5% but South Auckland, with its large Maori and Pasifika population, battled a 20% unemployment rate. The program was called "CadetMax" and still operates successfully today. It shows kids how to write a CV, manage an interview and job search. Associated with this program was the knowledge that kids with a driver's licence were seven times more likely to get a job. To this day, the Auckland Chamber of Commerce supports around 5000 kids annually to get their licence.

More recently Michael initiated a program focussed on Mental Health and Wellness for business owners and managers. The program looked to remove the stigma associated with mental health and promote courageous conversations within a group of people who are often simply expected to shoulder issues and lead decisively. The initiative used a website and social media as its foundations and in its first 12 months had over 400,000 visitors. The program was entered in the World Chambers competition at their conference held in Geneva and won. Reflecting on professional achievements, Michael is most proud of being the voice for SMEs in Auckland. However, it's often the curveballs life throws at you that test your strength and ask you to reassess priorities. Michael was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2010 and underwent radiation treatment and chemotherapy. Diagnosed at the same time as Jock Hobbs, the two went through the unsettling uncertainty of what the future might bring and gave each other moral support. He admits lying awake at night without hope and says it's family, prayers, and Jock's words that saw him through.



Michael received the NZ Order of Merit in the New Years Honours in 2012, the Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2023. He was inducted into the NZ Business order of Fame in 2023.

*"Don't focus on the things you can't change, change the things you can." (Jock Hobbs, 1960-2012)*