

Notes from Interview with Fiona Rollings

1 July 2020

Good morning Fiona. I'd like to introduce you to everybody. This is Fiona Rollings, Secretary of BBANZ. It's so nice to have you on the other side of the interviewing today. Let's talk a little bit about you. You've owned Kerry Lodge since 2011 and was it in that year that you've actually joined the Association as well. Can I just ask you how did you find out about the association at that time?

I brought an existing business. The previous owner of Kerry Lodge, Jenny Hoffman, who many of our members will know, was President of the Association at the time. She really encouraged me to join.

You have a background in project management, data analyst and an executive assistant in client service industries but before taking on the role of Association Secretary you were co-opted on to the Board in 2013 for a period of six months with your main responsibility keeping the website updated and looking at the accommodation data information so you already had a bit of a background before you started as secretary and what you were in for! When the association secretary position came available it was suggested that you apply for it and you did. You've been secretary for about 7 or 8 years now. There would have been some changes in your role. Was it always a part time role?

Yes, it's always been a part time role which is one of the reasons I took it. It simply wouldn't be possible for me to run my business, look after the family and work for the Association if it was a fulltime role. There's been a lot of changes in the industry and our Association as well.

You manage to juggle this with also running your B&B do you have any family - who else is with you?

I have my son who is now 13, and husband and a dog who is now sitting right beside me where she is every day.

Tell me a bit about Mumu because she has an interesting story?

Mumu is looking at me strangely because she can hear me say her name and is wondering who I am talking to. Mumu is a rehomed greyhound. There was a documentary on TV the other night about greyhounds. There is a big programme where you are able to rehome a greyhound and we got Mumu through there. She was about two at the time - she's now 13. She has little tattoos in her ears and she's slightly mad. Anybody who owns a greyhound will know what I mean. Runs around like an absolutely mad thing and then lies down and sleeps all day. They are the laziest animals you will ever get.

How do the guests interact with Mumu and with the whole story?

Guests love the story of the greyhound. It kind of feeds into sustainability / recycling theme. She's so gentle, she runs really fast and she absolutely adores people. The biggest issue I have is when people come to the door or park their car and I open the door and haven't seen her escape and she runs as fast as she can to the car. And stops. She doesn't jump up but people who aren't sure about dogs see this big black dog coming running towards them. But once they know her it can be difficult stopping the feeding from the tables, she isn't meant to be allowed down in the rooms. They love her. She's the most photographed and talked about part of our whole household.

We've talked about how long you've owned a B&B but what made you want to get into it the first place?

We moved to the Hawkes Bay from Wellington 11 years ago. We had a little 3 bedroom house and have quite an extended family in Wellington who would all come and stay which was great, and all our friends would come and stay - which was also great. But it was quite difficult fitting everybody into our little home. One of our friends was staying one day and said "you guys need to open a B&B" and we thought Oh!! So, we looked around for a long time for a property that would be suitable. We had some ideas but we didn't really know what we were doing. We wanted a property that was going to be close to something to have an attraction for visitors and a property where visitors wouldn't be living in our space the entire time - they had to have their own space

as our son was young. We looked for about six months and we couldn't find anything suitable. I also wanted to be a stay at home mum for William. I'd just told the real estate agent that we weren't going to look anymore we were going to change direction and the next day she rang me to say that this property was due to come on the market so I came round, had a look, went home to my husband and said this is it. We managed to buy it and took over at the end of a season so I had a good six – eight months to get organised for the next season but it was great because everything was already in place so we just had to tweak it to make it more like us.

That would have been before the Airbnb and things like that, a lot has changed in those years.

A lot has changed. The Association has been around for over 30 years. We came in and Airbnb wasn't quite there. Booking.com was beginning to get going and become quite big. Print marketing was all the rage. I think our first year we spent \$8k on print marketing. Spend nothing on print marketing now – so that's a huge saving for a little business. Marketing was really quite different.

What do you think has worked for you with your B&B, what do you love about your property and your business?

What I love about the property and the business is that we've got something here for the guests to do, they can swim in the pool. The guests have their own area - we have a separate wing with 2 beds and guest lounge so they have somewhere quiet to go that's away from us. We can walk to the Mission Restaurant and Winery and Church Road Winery – nice to have a locals like that on our doorstep. That works really well for us. Our guests aren't here living in our space all the time.

Guests love it because they get to experience a real kiwi family life. As I'm doing breakfast in the morning, I'm getting William off to school, Brent's running backwards and forwards as he goes out to work and they are really experiencing that whole kiwi lifestyle.

Are there any parts that you would change if you could?

The only thing I would change, and we have looked at how we could do this, one of our bedrooms doesn't have an ensuite. It has its own bathroom and toilet but not an ensuite. To change that and to ensure we have a separate downstairs bathroom is a major cost. We have to dig up the concrete floor and replumb. That's the only thing I would change simply because NZ guests in particular aren't keen to have the external bathroom. Once they're here it doesn't matter but if I could change that I would. That's the only thing as we have a separate lounge anyway.

Are you doing anything different with the lounge area? Are you going to keep that just as it is - thinking of NZers again?

In the future we are joining the “double couple bubble revolution” which we were looking at doing anyway. We'll have our main room with the ensuite for “Mum and Dad” and the guest lounge and then another room for children or second couple. We may look at putting a kitchen sink in that lounge and microwave. At the moment that's where everyone goes for tea and coffee and it's got a fridge but we may just put a little kitchen sink and make it more “friendly” for people who might want to get a takeaway for dinner and heat it up the microwave.

You're an avid gardener. Were you always an avid gardener? I've stayed with you a few times and I love your gardens. Has that always been with you or is that something you developed once you started your B&B?

My parents and entire family look at me like I'm a bit strange because they don't understand where it's come from. I've always had a bit of an interest in gardening and had little gardens. It was so good moving here and having a big garden. Because we've got children and the previous owners didn't have children, we needed to clear a bit more area and just redevelop it and do what we wanted. That's what I do in winter. I'd work in the garden 9 to 5 if I could. I love it. I think also coming from Wellington where you had nurture your garden, intensively nurture your garden, to here where I just stick a twig in the ground and it grows – has been great.

What's the thing that guests talk about the most when they're reviewing your property?

Mumu! I thought it would be the amazing round feature windows which are fabulous to sit and look out of and which I thought was one of the main attractions of the property. Or, I thought the garden that I slave in so much but no, it's the dog!

And if I'm visiting your property what would be the top three things that you think guests should do once they're with you.

Definitely visit the Mission and Church road wineries - they're NZ oldest wineries. Whether you like their wine or not they are still pretty good and they have a great history. And you can walk there.

The art deco in Napier I think it is really undersold. It is an incredibly beautiful little city, Napier.

As for the third thing, I would take a tour out to the gannet colony. There's two tours, both are really really interesting but with the overland tour you drive over the top of the cliffs to get to the colony which is part of the whole experience. I'm not really interested in birds but the scenery and the commentary and the history of the land is so amazing and interesting. It is really well worth it and then you get there, and the birds are great too, but it's the scenery and spectacular cliffs – really good.

And then there's the wineries and cycling.

Can I just round everything off by asking you about the Association, and this is bit more off the cuff, moving forward what's your view because obviously we're working on building membership and the rest of it. How do you feel we're sitting in the market and why do you think people should join now as opposed to when you joined 8-9 years ago?

I think there is a huge opportunity for the Association to provide more education to people whether they are members or not. I think at the moment there's a huge opportunity for the Association in a wide range of areas. I there's a huge opportunity for operators to make use of the Association. I think the big challenge for the Association is going to be make sure is making sure that what operators want and what it can provide actually marry and meet – that is continually evolving. For instance, we spoke about when I first started there was no Airbnb. It changes so quick. The Association needs to be quick, it needs to be fast and it needs to keep ahead a little bit so it can ensure it's providing up to date and relevant information. It is quite difficult to do. I think there is such an opportunity for the Association and for operators too.

Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us about your B&B that maybe I haven't asked before we round everything off?

I will say it's an interesting experience being at the other side of the interview question. One thing I've noticed is that we have such a lovely wonderful Board, and all the boards I've worked with have been amazing, the board members are really amazing and dedicated. But one thing I've notice is that none of us, including myself, like to talk about ourselves. We all want to help other people. We all say how can we help you and deflect the question back onto the person.

Donna: Fiona, you are the heart of our association and so I just wanted to take say publicly thank you so much for the work you do for the Association because you've had to move with the times as well and keep reinventing yourself and reinventing the Association. I wish you every success for your B&B over the season and in these new times and I'm looking forward to working with you throughout the next couple of years.

Thank you and it was a real pleasure to be talking with you today.