

Hooked on the fishing industry

Ronni Symon

Ronni Symon may not have hooked the \$50,000 prize-winning snapper at the 2005 Ninety Mile Beach surf fishing contest but she came away with much more – a Te Ohu Kaimoana Global Fisheries Scholarship, a year in Japan studying fisheries management and the promise of a job that will move her career into management level, reports Sheridan Gundry.

In the middle of the competition, after being short-listed for a scholarship, Ronni was called away to Wellington for an interview. She flew back to resume her position on the beach.

"I only caught a couple of kahawai in the end," she laughs.

The 34-year-old Gisborne woman has been a commercial fisher for ten years. But a year-long recovery from a horrific accident which left her with a mangled collarbone, broken ribs, punctured lung and a dislodged trachea saw a change in direction. She started working for her iwi Te Aitanga a Mahaki and began learning about customary fishing with consultant Ian Ruru.

"Ian told me about the scholarship but thought Te Ohu wanted marine biologists, university types. I applied because I had the experience but didn't hear back until after I'd started tutoring for Tairāwhiti Polytechnic's commercial fishing course in early 2006.

"Other scholarship winners have had degrees in science and used the scholarship to further their specialties. I'm getting a broad overview of Japan's fisheries management. I want to look at aquaculture, advances in research and, if possible, go out on a commercial fishing boat."

"Anyone who has met Ronni knows that her enthusiasm is unstoppable," says customary fisheries tutor Ian Ruru. "She holds a unique mix of credentials – commercial fisher, industry training assessor and Polytechnic tutor. Add to that the commitment that she showed in our Kaitiakitanga Programme and it is easy to see that she will be a leader in her field. Kia Kaha Ronni!"

It took a few years' work in shearing gangs in back-blocks Gisborne and as dishwasher then cook in a Parnell Italian restaurant before Ronni got her entry ticket to the industry.

When the fun ran out on a North Island road trip, she drove her girlfriend to Leigh where she was to start on her father Alex Aitken's longliner. Ronni cadged a trip out of interest ... and the fisheries bug stuck like a sea lice.

"I thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world."

She started as a deckhand then worked her way up, gaining experience on various boats in Northland fishing for Leigh Fisheries while gaining her deck hand, skipper's and coastal master's tickets.

She started with Alex (Aitken) on the 50 foot *Kaiata* fishing for snapper in the Hauraki Gulf, then with Graham Bailey on the 34 foot *Sea Harvester*, which she later ran. She was fishing for hapuka and snapper



Ronni on the *Lady Jaquelyn*, Tairāwhiti Polytechnic's fishing boat.

on the 57 foot *Triton* when she found she was pregnant. Undeterred, she downsized to the 40 foot *Dawn Breaker* fishing from Whangaroa, Northland, working until she was eight months pregnant and couldn't reach over the rails.

"Then one of the tuna boats sank off Cape Brett and in the same storm my boat spun around 180 degrees. I was trying to get to Whangaroa but the boat was heading to Mangonui so that's where I went."

She credits her attention to fish quality to Leigh Fisheries.

"Leigh Fisheries were always very particular about the quality of fish – how the fish were killed, slurried, and the cold chain maintained so the fish went to Japan in a pristine condition. That's all I knew. From the start, quality has always been a major thing for me."

She stayed home for a remarkable seven months with young son Marlin but then began sharing skipper duty on the *Dawn Breaker* then *Blue Seas* with partner and skipper Mike MacGibbon. She returned home in 2002 to care for her ageing father and before long was fishing for hapuka and blue nose on the *FV Debra Lee* for Gisborne Fisheries.

Despite her accident on board the *Debra Lee* when a hauling block

broke, Ronni remains passionate about the industry, a passion reflected in the name of her eight-year-old son – Marlin.

"I wanted to stay in the industry and did that by working with my iwi. This opened up the whole research side with eel and stock analysis in the Waipaoa River, working with scientists, removing otolith to age eel and moki, aquaculture, Resource Management Act and traditional fishing styles. Even though I have been a commercial fisher, it doesn't mean I'm only interested in taking from our moana. Sustainability is a key factor in the success of this industry for the future."

She says it's not difficult being a woman in the industry "if you're good at your job." But she did have to work extra hard to begin with.

"There's no job at sea I'm not capable of doing. Women do things very efficiently and a woman's influence can be a calming effect when there's too much testosterone around."

Despite the good job at the polytech, the scholarship and new career position ahead, Ronni misses being at sea.

"I have always been one to care about the moana, the fish. I love the freedom, fresh air, hard work and people you meet. You can look out what is essentially your office window and see dolphins, whales, rainbows coming off the moon and the stars that you can track through the year. You're reliant on nature and working with nature."

Ronni hopes to use the knowledge gained in Japan in an operations management role, and help integrate research and fishing.

"It would be more efficient and you'd get better data if you had a scientist/fisherman position. What you see and feel every day is different from just grabbing brief snippets through the year. I also want to gain knowledge to help make the right decisions for Maori, the moana and our environment."

Ronni was heading for Tokyo in January.



Ronni and Bill Ruru assessing the day's catch.



Ronni checking the eel net in the Waipaoa River.



Ken Mui, Bill Ruru, tutor Ian Ruru, Jack Tomoana and Ronni collecting data for their Kaitiakitanga Training Programme.