

Rolling with the punches

Passionate family and staff pull wallcovering supplier and manufacturer through its darkest hour and into a brighter future.



It was 7 May 2020 when staff at Pacific Wallcoverings received the devastating call. The whole of New Zealand had been stuck in its first Level 4 lockdown for six weeks and the standstill was enough to put the nearly 60-year-old company into liquidation. Neil Macdonald, who had dedicated four decades of his life to the business, rang up the liquidator to ask what they should do.

“The liquidator was locked down in Auckland at the time and couldn’t get down here to Porirua, so I told him we could either look after getting the place all locked up or we could keep it running and then he could see what he wanted to do,” recalls Neil. “He said that if I could get the team together to do that, then do it. So, I made some phone calls.”

One of the calls he made was to his wife, Tanya. She had worked at Pacific Wallcoverings from 1991 to 1997, starting as a receptionist then moved into an accounts role before working as a personal assistant for the management team. It was where she and Neil met. Like the current staff, she was shocked by the news and shared in her husband’s resolution that something must be done.

“I thought, if that door’s going to close, then another door is going to open – and there’s going to be something really cool behind there,” says Tanya.

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left: Neil Macdonald, General Manager (left), and Terry Isaako, Marketing & Design Manager, in the Aspiring Walls showroom. Behind are current designs included in the Resene Wallpaper Collection (from left to right): 36498-4, E386541 and E386503.

top tip

Remember most wallpapers are only available for sale for 2-3 years, so if you are planning to use the same wallpaper in multiple places or on multiple projects, always make sure you have enough when you start the project. It often pays to buy an extra roll or two in case you or your client need a little more later.

In the subsequent months, Neil, Tanya and their tenacious team flipped the tragic narrative on its head. They re-founded as Aspiring Walls in September 2020 and turned it into a family business that was able to retain much of the talent and expertise from Pacific Wallcoverings.

“It may not have originally been my dream to run a wallpaper company, but I’m very passionate about this business and very passionate about the people who helped pull our way through,” says Neil, who now serves as the company’s General Manager.

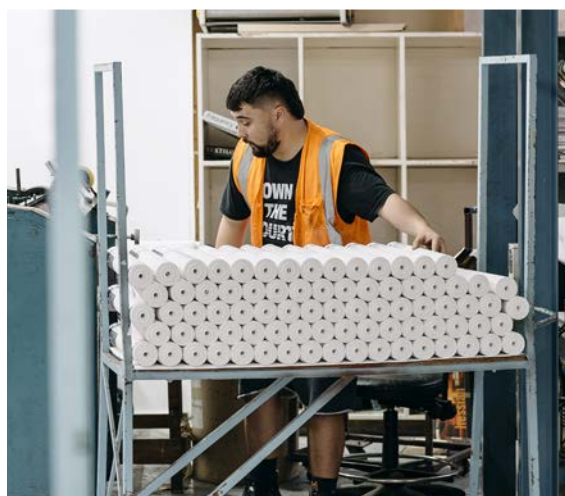
“Between the 29 people who work here, there is more than 225 years of experience. The credibility of being an expert in the field is what makes us special. Our mission is to inspire and support customers on their journey to creating beautiful walls that they can be proud of, and we can only deliver that mission with people that care.”

“It’s a family business, but actually, we’re all in the ‘family’ – even if we’re not related by blood,” says Sales Manager Anthea Dove. “Neil’s got a real heart for people and he took the business on because he wanted to look after the people. He wants to grow this business with that same level of integrity.”

Originally, Neil started his career as an electrician, but his path evolved when he began rising through the ranks at Ashley Wallcoverings – the precursor to Pacific Wallcoverings. “I was only ever interested in being an electrician,” he says, “but when the opportunity came about to move up, I took it. At Ashley Wallcoverings, I was an Electrician, then Chargehand Electrician, then Electrical Technician, Plant Engineer, Production Manager and finally Manufacturing Manager. When



above and right: Ian Warton and Joshua Whiu survey production on the factory floor. Neil says Aspiring Walls manufactured over 340,000 square metres of wallcoverings in 2021 with an international-specialised team, against all the odds of Covid-related material shortages and freight delays. While their aim is to continue growing the manufacturing team in a sustainable way, the potential of their manufacturing equipment exceeds 50,000 square metres per week.





above: Aspiring Walls offers upwards of 4,500 different designs for customers to choose from, which can be ordered directly through Resene ColorShops. Resene Wallpaper Collection 800715 features a black, grey and metallic geometric design. Images by Ryan McCauley, www.ryanmccauley.co.nz.

the company became Pacific Wallcoverings, I was the Manufacturing/Warehouse/IT Manager for both the Porirua and Auckland sites.”

“When we took over in September 2020,” says Tanya, “I worked until the end of 2020 in the Aspiring Walls accounts area. At the same time, I was carrying out my other role as Executive Officer at Tawa Intermediate. They were kind enough to give me two terms of leave to manage the accounts support for Aspiring Walls and build the business back up. Our two daughters, Hine and Stacey, also work for the company, so it definitely is a family business.”

Marketing & Design Manager Terry Isaako says he also very much feels like a part of the Aspiring Walls family. He began working for Pacific Wallcoverings more than a decade ago and his background in both marketing and interior design has culminated in a unique hybrid role.

“From a marketing perspective, I love that I’ve been involved from the beginning of the new chapter and how our existing and new products are perceived and received in the market,” he says. “From an interior design perspective, wallpaper has the ‘design trifecta’ for elevating a space – colour, texture and pattern – all rolled into one. It can also be the starting point of inspiration to a colour or style schematic. I love that wallpaper expresses your personal tastes, makes an impact – whether it’s subtle, sophisticated texture or loud ‘look at me’ patterns – it really can be transformative to creating a dynamic space.”

As the revived business grows, Terry is looking forward to increasing their design offerings. “We’ve recently met with and looked at opportunities with the local iwi around their long-term housing and building initiatives where custom Māori-designed wallpaper could be a possibility. There is a gap in the market for New Zealand-styled papers, which is something that we’re already working on with some local artists.

“Over the last couple of years, we did see a steady increase in demand for imported product. However, our manufacturing has gone from strength to strength and sits around 70% of our total offering to the market. Our top selling ranges are those we manufacture, which I believe is attributed to shorter lead times over imported products, the conservative market that we’re in which is obsessed with neutral colours and natural fibre textures and last – but certainly not least – the consumers and trade customers committed to supporting local New Zealand businesses.

“Overseas art houses have continued to push the boundaries of wallpaper design in ways that are both exciting and bold. The visuals make for the great inspiration that we see in media, and I predict that demand for imports will continue to grow as we see built environments become more expressive and bolder,” adds Terry.

As one of the only wallpaper manufacturers in the Southern Hemisphere, Neil says there are advantages that locally-made products can offer to New Zealand and Australian projects. “The harsh sunlight in our part of the world means that we use inks with the best lightfastness and our New Zealand-made wallpapers have the very best components to give stability and durability.”

With the business now thriving, one of the most positive outcomes he has seen since taking the helm is being able to support staff, customers and suppliers during a very stressful period. “Meeting people more than halfway has resulted in some very cool stories where these positive outcomes have taken place. I have received feedback from all over the globe about how we have influenced people and businesses in honesty and transparency. A number of these people and businesses have said that they would not have survived; their success is down to them, we just want to do what is right.”

“When I met Resene’s Managing Director Nick Nightingale to ask for his company’s support, I didn’t know him. I had only met him once before. It was very encouraging to have him being so positive about the market and business in general. Resene is a family; yes, they are also a big company, but the family foundation is firmly in place. When I speak to any of the staff at Resene, I am always impressed by the positivity of their people. I believe that this is driven by Resene’s culture of being caring, supportive, professional and trustworthy.”

While no one knows exactly what the future holds, Neil predicts challenges ahead but is optimistic about their ability to continue to support specifiers. “We are all living in a different world since the pandemic started,” he says. “We all want to live in surroundings that create an atmosphere of peace, and our business exists to inspire and support our customers in their wallpaper journey to creating beautiful walls. Our team is able to produce the best quality wallcoverings and do it here in New Zealand, which is going to be key as freight becomes even more of an issue over the next few years.” **BW**

To learn more about Aspiring Walls, visit www.aspiringwalls.co.nz.