

Digging deep

Family tragedy led to a different way of doing business for Kenai construction founder Caleb Male.

STORY PETER THORNTON



WHEN CALEB MALE walks onto a construction site, his dad is with him. Fourteen years ago, Male (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu) lost his father in a forestry accident. It was a devastating blow. “Dad was my best mate,” says the 38-year-old. “He was my mentor and hero. He was the glue for our family, with a wide-reaching touch within his community. To lose him so suddenly left things in quite a mess and it took us all time to mourn and recover.”

For Male, founder and managing director of Kenai Limited civil engineering company, his work is more than a role. It’s his purpose in life. He was born in Kenai, Alaska, and grew up in Rotorua where his dad ran a small forestry company. People from all walks of life came through their home, the doors were always open. “There were always loads of people around us and that made for a colourful life,” he says. “School holidays were spent running around on forestry sites. It grew into a natural passion for the outdoors and that’s what I’m trying to recreate in Kenai, that wider family, and sense of community.”

Having a wider community around him

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We want to invest in our local people and give them opportunities.
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provided him with great mentors and supporters, and he continues to have them today. The example his father set, through the impact he had on those around him, drives Male to follow suit.

In 2020 he started Kenai construction company – where, he says, health and safety is paramount. “I’ve seen the flow-on effects, not just on the business, but the family. We want to make sure everyone goes home every day to their loved ones.” The company says that Kenai health and safety systems have been reviewed and scored a 92 percent over and above the Health and Safety at Work Act and AS/NZS 4801 requirements.

He is also driven by making a sustainable impact on communities and the environment,

adding that civil construction by nature can be a destructive and disruptive industry. “Anything we do is ripping stuff up. We have the environment as a forethought rather than an afterthought. We try to look after it as much as we can and protect it for future generations. That’s how I was brought up. As a community and humans, we’re here to work together and to uplift each other. We want to invest in our local people and give them opportunities.

“These are the Kenai values; ESG [environmental, social and governance] is embedded into our values, it’s included in what we offer. So, we do all our carbon tracking because we believe in it. We’re tracking our waste. We’re trying to uplift the people we work with – and all those pieces are not an added-on cost. It’s just who we are and what we deliver.”

Recent projects include the Whātapaka urupa slip repairs project with iwi, Mokoia Pa Park with Auckland Transport, sewer maintenance repairs with Woolworths/Oyster Group and the Whakarewarewa wallaby containment fencing project with the Bay of Plenty Regional Council.



1, 2. Kenai was one of the three recipients awarded an Air New Zealand Ka Rere grant last year. 3. Company founder and managing director Caleb Male.



PHOTOGRAPHY ETTIENE DU PREEZ

The business has around 15 staff, and 10 fractional/part-time independent contractors, which enables the company to scale up and down as needed. Fractional employment has allowed “virtual” members in the team, with people in Auckland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Wellington, Nelson and Otago. Male has had wide-ranging feedback on this approach. “There’s still some old attitudes out there in the industry – they will just have to play catch-up – and others who are really supportive of the mission to look after the environment and grow that contracting base and knowledge around us.”

Kenai and its contractors have been nominated for several national awards, including a Highly Commended award at the Auckland CCNZ Hynds Construction Awards, for projects under a million dollars.

Last year, Air New Zealand launched Ka Rere, a diverse-business accelerator

programme. More than 250 businesses applied, and Kenai was one of three selected to take part in a 12-week mentoring round. As well as a \$20,000 grant to invest in and grow their business, they had access to a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience within the airline. Male says it helped Kenai define its values proposition and that the biggest lesson was about broadening its network.

“As we grow as a company, there will be peaks and troughs, and it’s being able to resource that in a structured way, rather than chasing our tail all the time.

“Having a platform with experts from Air New Zealand was invaluable. One of my reflections was Air New Zealand was there to learn from us, just as much as we were learning from them. So that was a good affirmation of the work we are doing.”

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GRACE FALWASSER, FOUNDER AND CO-CREATOR, AĒ BOTANICALS NEW ZEALAND

Skin deep

When did you start your business? We launched in 2024, with a passion for creating effective, multi-use vegan skincare that’s gentle on the skin and the environment. Our goal is to celebrate New Zealand’s unique native plants and traditional knowledge, bringing luxurious, sustainable effective beauty to people worldwide. Each product combines potent natural ingredients with refillable, premium glass packaging, offering a sustainable approach to skincare.

Achievements and challenges? Our proudest achievements include the global interest we’ve garnered and the recognition of our product quality and commitment to sustainability. Partnering with Suzanne Hall, an internationally renowned formulator, to co-create our range at the Ngawha Innovation and Enterprise Park has also been significant. Scaling internationally has its challenges; refining our supply chain and ensuring high standards across all markets is critical. Educating consumers about our products is also essential as we grow.

Future plans? We’re excited about expanding to Europe, the UK and Asia. Our plans include broadening our product line while keeping our values of sustainability, luxury and New Zealand-sourced ingredients at the core. As we grow, we aim to partner with select retailers who share our commitment to sustainable beauty.

How do connections like the Whāriki Māori Business Network help? The Whāriki network has been invaluable, providing a supportive and culturally grounded community. Being connected with other Māori entrepreneurs gives us both inspiration and opportunities for collaboration. This network reinforces our mission to uplift Māori knowledge, practices and values within our business, creating a brand that represents Aotearoa New Zealand. aebotanicals.com 📍