

Review

Families tell **Simon Wilson** what happened the night the floods came to Karekare

Part One: Afghan biscuits
Shalema Wanden-Hannay thought she was prepared. She's the co-ordinator of the Resilient Karekare Network, a volunteer community group in the isolated Karekare settlement on Auckland's west coast. Back in December the group had created an emergency management plan, which they'd printed, laminated and distributed to all households. Now they were getting early warning reports about the approach of Cyclone Gabrielle. On Sunday, February 12, the day before the storm arrived, they met to review their plans. They knew what to do and they were ready.

Shalema did not expect that when she went banging on doors the next night, the flood water rising around her, she would not be able to persuade her neighbours to evacuate.

Nor did she expect she would be crawling on her hands and knees through mud and over broken trees that were slipping from the hills above, in the dark, in the driving rain and roaring winds, not knowing who was alive and who was dead or if she herself would survive. She did not expect that most of her family would be doing the same.

THE WANDEN-HANNAYS live on a ridge above the valley floor at the end of Karekare Rd. Shalema is a community developer.

Husband Shawn is a police officer. Daughter Jess is a university student and a safety officer in the film industry; older son Ben attends Henderson High and younger son Tom is at Glen Eden Intermediate.

Karekare is home to their wider family, too. Shalema's sister Bex lives with her husband, Mat, and their three boys, up on the hill just off the Pihā Rd. Shalema and Bex's parents, Karel and Caroline, also live nearby, at the top of Lone Kauri Rd.

Karel is a retired teacher with deep experience in mountaineering, tramping and volunteer firefighting. He's still deputy chief of the local volunteer fire brigade.

Most of them are members of the surf lifesaving club. This is a family geared to the outdoors. They're trained and experienced and they're intensely community minded.

We go to think we're a resilient lot in this country, that we pull together when we need to. And largely that's true. But what happened in Karekare when Gabrielle came roaring through holds a counter story. Things go wrong.

Choosing wisely and being brave are not the same. Doing the right thing is much, much harder than you might think.

KAREKARE IS just south of Pihā. It has about 60 houses, half of them permanent residences and the other half holiday homes.

There are two roads in, both branching off Pihā Rd, which runs along the ridge at the top of the ranges. Lone Kauri Rd winds the long way down, around the sides of the hills, but Karekare Rd plummets head-first into the valley. The locals call it the Cutting.

Two streams feed into the valley. Like the two roads, they join near the car park by the dunes. There's a narrow river flat and many of the houses are built along it. Others perch on the ridges and cliffs above, some with steep drive-on access, others just with steps or staircases.

It's often stormy on the coast and the residents are used to floods and power cuts. They don't seem to mind: it's the price they pay for living in paradise. But Gabrielle was different.

We're gathered in the Wanden-Hannays' main room. There's a coffee machine that gets frequent use and Bex has baked a big plate of afghanas. Shalema explains that her emergency

network had divided the entire Karekare area into seven neighbourhoods, with a response team and WhatsApp groups in each.

They identified which houses were most at risk, or would need help, perhaps because they had small children or elderly residents. Houses were colour coded, red, orange and green, according to their vulnerability. Owners of empty houses were asked for permission to evacuate people into them.

The plan focused on flooding, because that was their common experience in the valley. No one expected landslides. As Karel puts it, "I didn't realise the hillsides would check themselves out."

Were they ready? "We knew it was coming," says Shalema, "but we didn't really know."

ON THE Monday, Shawn and Jess were at West Harbour Fire Station, 30km away at Westgate, on duty, as part of a life-guard emergency response team, in case of floods in the city's northwest.

But Kumeū didn't flood. Gabrielle lashed the whole city with wind and rain, but reserved its cruellest blows for the Waitākere Ranges and the beach communities beyond.

Shalema and her two boys were at home, along with Bex and her family. By late afternoon the wind was high and there was flooding in the valley. "I saw a twister out the window," says Bex. "On the land, you know, it was the size of a house." When a slip came down on the side of the Watchman, it was "like an iceberg calving".

The power went out about 4pm. A couple of hours later, Shalema's friend and neighbour Amber Rhodes arrived. She'd come down the Lone Kauri Rd but couldn't get the rest of the way home because the road had "basically turned into a river". The two women went down Shalema's drive, linked arms and "river-crossed" to the other side, so Amber could walk on home. Shalema returned through the river on her own.

Karel was with a crew at the fire station near the top of Lone Kauri Rd. As the callouts about slips started coming in, they loaded chainsaws and other tools into his Hilux and drove down the Cutting.

"We got to the bottom about 7.50pm and started to do a check along the valley," he says. "We got as far as Amber's house. It was in the middle of the road."

THE HOUSE had been hit by a mudslide. Karel called it in and texted Shalema.

"The text said, 'Amber's house is on the road,'" says Shalema. "That was it. That was the message we received, in this house full of children. Basically we were pretty shocked to hear that. This is my very dear friend, we didn't know if she was alive. I'd just walked her across the stream. I was actually pretty f***ing scared for her life, and for her family."

It was dusk and the floodwaters were still rising. They decided Shalema, Bex and 16-year-old Ben would go to help, while Bex's husband, Mat, would stay with the four younger children.

"So we really quickly put on wet suits," says Shalema. She also clipped a surf-rescue tube around her waist. The distance to Amber's house is about 400 metres.

At the flooded road they linked arms, with Shalema in the middle because she was the shortest. The water came up to her ribs.

"I lost my footing completely. If I hadn't been between these two I would have been gone."

When they arrived they saw the house on the road, but they also saw Amber and her family, alive. Karel and his crew were there too.

"It was quite a traumatic

PANIC in PARADISE



Shalema Wanden-Hannay and her father, Karel, the slip on Karekare Rd showing Amber Rhodes' house shattered on the road, Gareth Abraham's house intact on the left and Christie and David Sidwell's house upper right (below). Photos / Brett Phibbs, George Heard



experience for me, seeing that and then finding her and hugging her and saying, 'I thought you were dead.' It was pretty f***ing awful."

Later, Amber told them how she and her husband, Paul, and 13-year-old daughter Beatrix had felt a thud at the back of the house, then another thud. They realised the hill was sliding and Ambers screamed at them, "Run, run, run!" The concrete steps disintegrated under them as they escaped and the house came down seconds later.

SHALEMA STARTED to evacuate people. She went across the road and knocked on the door of a new house belonging to Gareth Abraham and his partner. They had taken in the Rhodes family when their house came down.

"I said, 'We might get another two hours' worth of rain, the floodwaters

could double, you need to evacuate now.' It took a little bit of persuading. And this was where a house has just come down the drive on to the road opposite."

"And," says Bex, "Ben and me were literally standing in the water next to her, with it rising."

Gareth's house is brand new, built to strict council requirements on a platform above the creek which runs along the bottom of the section. He believed they were safe because flood-resistance had cost them a lot of money.

Usually, he told me later, floods are entertainment for the kids. They put chairs by the windows and play a kind of Pook Sticks, watching the debris in the water and trying to guess which bits will move fastest.

Neither he nor anyone else had anticipated the hillsides falling on to the road.

Behind Shalema, Karel shifted his truck just as "a whole heap of mud and debris" came down and wedged him against a power pole. "It was too steep for me to get round and it was tipping my truck over, so Ben and one of the firefighters dug away at it while it was still moving."

"At that point," says Bex, "I was on the phone to Jess and I'm like, 'Grampa's trapped,' and then I basically hung up on her."

Shalema's daughter, Jess, and husband Shawn were still at the West Harbour Fire Station. "I was like, this is it, we need to go, this is our community," says Jess.

With a new shift coming on at West Harbour, she and Shawn headed for home.

"MEANWHILE I'M banging on doors," says Shalema. "One after the other, I'm saying to people, 'You need to get out, you need to evacuate, you need to get your stuff together now.' In a quite direct, forceful way."

They had a plan, but when it came time to put it into action, something else happened. People didn't like being shouted at.

"Some people have this mindset," says Shalema. "They think, 'We've lived through the flooding before. It comes up and then it goes down quickly,'" says Karel.

But Gareth's family did agree to go, along with Amber and her family, and Bex offered them all her own house at the top of the Cutting. "It's still pissing down," says Karel. "So get Amber and Pauly and Ben into my truck and we start heading up the road and the others follow in their people mover."

Before long they met up with Karel's firefighter friend Ezra, and the Abrahams were transferred to Ezra's ute. It wasn't long before they were

confronted by "a torrent of mud, rock, trees, just pouring across the road in front of us". They turned back, only to discover the same thing happening behind them.

They transferred everyone in his truck to the other one and Karel tried to drive through what he describes as an "avalanche of rock". It was still moving and he hit some big rocks and couldn't go forward. He backed up and then rammed the slip again, this time going faster. He got through, and Ezra followed with all the others.

How frightening was it? "Well, my frightened moment would be when I was stuck in it. Once I had punched through it, I wasn't frightened anymore. Not then, anyway. I was frightened later on."

They abandoned the vehicles when they reached the floodwaters in the valley floor and walked on. They had life jackets, but not enough for everyone. They had torches, but they tried not to use them in case they'd need their later.

As they made their way along the flooded road, Karel fell. "I was about four or five metres behind the person in front of me," he says, "and I just face plant. Because I can't see."

EVENTUALLY, SHALEMA and Karel's groups met up. Shalema had evacuated some people and safe houses were arranged for those who needed them, including the families with Karel. Shalema's family headed for home, the firefighters with them. The water was still moving fast and the storm had not let up.

They linked arms to get across the river, which again saved them, because they walked into a log under the water.

"If we hadn't been linked up," says Bex, "that would have been it."

Karel was very cold. His heavy brigade uniform was wet through and

he was at risk of hypothermia, but when the firefighters announced they were going to walk back up Lone Kauri Rd, he decided to go with them.

"I was thinking, 'I'm the most experienced in our brigade. They might need me.'"

"When I said goodbye to Dad," says Shalema, "I'm compartmentalising in my head that I was not going to see him again. I thought that was it. I didn't want him to go, but I just, you know, Dad's a stubborn bastard, there's nothing we can do to make him stay."

He says he didn't think he had hypothermia but he also knew he'd fallen over "more times than I normally would".

Shalema said to him, "Are you coming back?"

He told her, "We're not going to make it back."

IT WAS about 9.30pm. The firefighters climbed over the big first slip "and the stream is a raging torrent, it's over knee-deep across the road", over more slips with the mud "like porridge", over fallen trees, edging their way uphill in the raging stormy dark.

Ezra had phoned their mate Piriipi, who was able to drive a ute down some of the way to meet them.

Karel, who was now "really cold", got in the car and the others went to check on slips and households on tracks off Lone Kauri Rd.

Piriipi and Karel headed for home, but new debris had fallen across the road so Karel sent him back and walked on by himself.

"You asked me before, was I frightened? Yeah, I was. The noise. The noise of the rain, the wind, the crashing branches, and I could see the power wires down."

He phoned his wife Caroline and

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Shalema and Shawn Wanden-Hannans (rear), with sister Bex at left, Orampa Karel and their three children, Jess, Tom and Ben; David and Susie Munro at their home (below) and a slip showing their collapsed lawn (below right). Photos / Brett Phibbs



for the first time that evening managed to get through. "I asked her to come and pick me up. Until then she didn't know where I was." She found him shortly before 11pm, got him home and warmed him up. "I had some tea and went to bed," he says. It was "mild hypothermia," he says.

He's "timeless", he says, when I ask him how old he is, Shalema tells me he's 70. That road is 8km long.

WHEN SHAWN and Jess drove away from the West Harbour Fire Station, they had no idea how far they would get, what they would find or what they would be able to do.

Jess used the family's WhatsApp chat group to ask if anyone was okay, and got a reply from Bex: "I love you."

"We weren't too confident," says Jess. "That was the last message I got."

At the top of the Cutting they suited up in their wetsuits and left the car. Jess had a helmet and Shawn was wearing a life jacket. They didn't have a rope and their torches were weak.

Almost straight away, they came to a tree across the road.

"So we start climbing over this tree and this mud," says Jess, "and then next minute we're on a 50-metre-long landslide. I was waist-deep in mud. I shine my torch up and the whole thing is just water and mud and it's active... and we're going, like, 'Ho-ly...'"

They had a sheer cliff on one side above them and a long sheer drop on the other. "And I'm thinking that at any time there could be a landslide from above, or the road could go out from under us."

Suddenly, they realised they might die. Jess sobs as she talks. "I remember thinking to myself that if, you know, if we got trapped in a landslide, I hope we're together. You

know? If we're trapped in the mud then we'll be together."

They were used to surf lifesaving and fire service rescues, with teams of people and helicopters and all the gear. "But no one's coming. We were on our own."

Shawn had told the police at West Harbour their plan was to get home, but they knew no one would be able to reach them.

They kept going, the air filled with "booms and cracks", trying to stay close, trying at least to stay within earshot.

"We had to crawl. You couldn't walk."

"You'd get stuck..."

"You reach down and free your foot from it."

"You're up to your knees."

"And you can feel it moving, you know the road could go at any time, but you have to keep going, there's no turning back." Then they saw torches coming round a corner below them. They both thought it was firefighters and they would be rescued.

BUY IT was two road workers, Tuff and Hayden, who'd been sent out much earlier to clear trees off the road and become trapped. They'd abandoned their truck and were just as frightened as Jess and Shawn.

"So Dad went, 'I'm a police officer,

I'm a lifeguard, you're fine, we'll get you out of here." They talked to each other about fate.

"When you're on that stretch of road," says Jess, "it's nature's day. Does nature want to put a landslide into you or not? You've got no control, if it wants to take you, it takes you."

When they reached the valley floor things were easier. "We had places to run," says Jess.

"But we knew Mum and Ben were

I think the leadership in an emergency can't be the people undertaking the response. You need calm, clear heads.

David Munro

missing and we wanted to find them. The first priority was to get Tuff and Hayden to safety, so we could keep searching. We came across Karel's truck, so Dad and I are just screaming into the night, 'Shalema! Karel! Mum! Ben!' Just screaming our heads off, hoping they'll hear us."

THEN JESS got a message from Caroline: they were safe.

"That was a massive relief. But

then Hayden says, 'I'm having an asthma attack.' We're still halfway down the valley and Dad says to me, 'Why don't you run ahead?' because we knew there was an inhaler at home.

"I ran ahead and started crawling through these slips, and across this river that's running across the road, by myself in the dark, and then I ran up the driveway and opened the door and my little brother helped me get the inhaler, and I basically said, 'Hi,' and ran off back into the storm."

"It was a complete shock," says Shalema. "They were supposed to be in town, and it's the middle of the storm and there's my daughter on the doorstep."

"And she's going back into the floodwater," says Bex. "She was gone again before we even think, 'Hang on, we don't want her crossing the floodwater by herself.'"

But Jess was already back in it. "It's really hard, going against the stream. And then I was running around in the dark. I got confused which house we planned to meet at. I'm knocking on windows, screaming, 'Shawn! Shawn!'"

A neighbour pointed her in the right direction and she arrived to find Shawn helping the roadworkers get dry. "I gave them the inhaler and we left them at this safe house for the night."

Jess and Shawn crossed the river together and returned home. After "a bit of a family debrief", all of them exhausted, exhilarated, happy to be safe, they tried to get some sleep. It didn't last. Shortly after midnight they heard "a massive rumbling sound". The land just beyond the back corner of the house had slipped.

EVENT that wasn't the end of it.

At 4.03am, Karel was woken by a call to tell him his friends Chrissie and David Sidwell, an elderly couple who lived in the valley, had called 111 to say they were trapped in their house.

Karel cries, telling this story. "Our friends are trapped and the slip is still moving. And I know I can't get there. So I ring Jess."

Karel did not know, at this point, that two volunteer firefighters at nearby Muriwai, men he knew well, were missing. Caroline had decided not to tell him.

Down at Shalema's, says Jess, they "spring into action. We start grabbing torches, stripping off and putting on our freezing cold wetsuits that are out in the rain, and Mum's running and grabbing axes, hatchets, sledgehammers, ropes."

The Sidwells' house is up a steep slope above the road and they thought it had probably slipped down the hill. It would be a difficult rescue.

Because of her work as a film-set safety officer, Jess had two large Pelican cases of emergency gear, including oxygen bottles, a defibrillator and other trauma equipment. They took the lot.

The rescue party was Shalema, Shawn, Ben and Jess. And they had to get through the river, which was "tummy deep on me", says Jess.

"And the road was nothing like what we knew," says Shalema. "There was a big nikau log in it, all the tar seal had been ripped up, it was like the road was hitting me on my shins."

"And you can't see," says Jess. "You're going against the flow, so it's just awful walking across it. Then we get a bit further along the road and there's a new slip that's come down since Dad and I went through."

When they reached the place they discovered the house hadn't come down but the long wooden staircase leading up to it was hanging, broken and unusable. The hillside had slipped away and water was streaming down the muddy cliff.

"And these trees looking like they're about to fall," says Jess. "Even staying where we were on the road, we're going. We could be covered by a landslide."

"I said, 'I can't do this,'" says Shalema. "I thought, 'We're going to die if we do this.' And Jess was like, 'But these are our friends and we've got to do something.' And I'm like, 'No. We need to leave this whole area, we need to get out of here really fast.'"

They turned back. On the last stretch back home, they were crawling through the big new landslide, still carrying all the gear, when it started to move. Jess and Ben were on the other side, Shalema was close to getting through and Shawn was still in the middle of it.

"I'm on my hands and knees," says Shalema.

"Dad's in it," says Jess. "He's moving metres. Mum's yelling at Ben and me to run."

"I'm trapped in it," says Shawn.

"And Mum's trapped in it, too," says Jess.

"To make it easier for herself, Shalema threw her tools to the kids."

"And they were yelling, 'Don't throw the tools at us!' But it wasn't them, so we were having a bit of a

fight. Like, 'I'm literally crawling through the mud, and it's moving, and I'm yelling at the kids, 'Run!' Because I think this whole cliff is coming down on top of us, right now. And the kids were not running."

"And Shawn's yelling, 'I can't f---ing run, I'm stuck in the mud!' And I'm yelling, 'I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to the kids!' And I'm yelling at them, 'Run for your lives!' And they're standing there, going, 'Mum, throw Dad the rope!' We were having this massive family argument."

"So we made it out of that land-



slide," says Jess, "and Dad got given the rope. We got Dad out of the slip, we get Mum out of the slip, make it back across the river, come home. And then, you know, we're living with the reality that we've had to leave our friends and we think they're dead or dying. It was an awful, awful thing."

"I came home and I cried," says Shalema. "Because I thought, these people are dead and we haven't been able to do anything."

Part Two: Ginger crunch and banana cake

The soil lies shallow on the land. The Waitakere Ranges are made from volcanic rock and lava, with a thin covering of earth held in place by tree roots that can't always penetrate to a surer footing. Too much rain and it all slips away.

The bay at the north end of the beach is called Tahoro, which means "pour out" or "knock down". Sir Bob Harvey, who has a beach house at Karekare, translates it as the Bay of Avalanches.

The Karekare Rd is still there. Even the steepest parts of the Cutting survived the storm, because it's carved into the rock face. The soil and trees poured down the gullies, over the road and on down the precipitous cliffs. But they didn't break the road away.

It's a small blessing.

On the morning after the storm, Tuesday, February 14, 5-year-old Archie Patterson got up and took his Lego outside to play. He and his family were staying the night with his grandparents, David and Susie Munro, who live two houses up the ridge from the Wanden-Hannans.

Achie played on the lawn for a while and then came back inside. "The grass looks different."

They went to see. The end of the lawn, which used to slope away into mānuka scrub, had disappeared into the gully below. A swing, tied to a plank cantilevered from a tree, hung over the void.

"We've got an infinity lawn now," says David. "Complete with infinity swing."

WE'RE HAVING coffee at the big table in the family room, with ginger crunch and banana cake. The Munros built this house. There's a big woodstove in the middle of the room, a balcony out the front and picture windows on three sides.

On the day of the storm the Munros watched the weather wreak its havoc on their valley.

Susie was worried about the Sidwells: she and Chrissie Sidwell are sisters and phone contact had been intermittent.

Shortly after Susie and David went to bed, they were woken by a roar. They looked out the window: the hillside behind them was collapsing.

Even though it was very dark," says David, "the underside of the nikaua are a silvery colour. You could see them, racing down the hill." But the house was built on solid rock and they decided to stay where they were.

Claire Inwood, another member of Shalema's volunteer group, had spent the night with several displaced neighbours.

"They knew about Amber Rhodes' house and others on the road, and that the Sidwells' staircase was broken, but they didn't know the couple were in danger."

At 6.35am on the Tuesday, Inwood called them anyway, just to check they were okay.

David Sidwell told her they were not. The house was off its foundation and a steel joist had thrust up into the bedroom, right beside the bed. They were still trapped inside and they were terrified.

He told her there was another set of stairs in the bush nearby and they could probably get up using that.

Inwood and her friends rushed over and found Shalema already there.

An argument broke out. Shalema, still believing the whole hillside was too dangerous, refused to let anyone go up using the other stairs.

In the end, the Sidwells were rescued by a visitor staying in another house on the hillside, who was able to

lay a long plank across to them. They crawled over it to safety and then all three came down together, using the other staircase.

"Locals looking after each other, eh," says David. "That's what happens."

SEVERE TROPICAL Cyclone Gabrielle killed 11 people, including the two volunteer firefighters at Muriwai, a beach settlement north of Karekare. This makes it our deadliest weather event since Cyclone Giselle, better known as the Wahine storm, in 1968.

On the Tuesday morning in Karekare, everyone got together. "It was really super-helpful," says Shalema. "We identified who's in the community, where have we evacuated people to, what empty houses are left." There were 97 people, including 19 children, and 26 of them had been displaced.

Resident Michael Glazer, a chef, organised a kitchen and for those first few days, with helicopters bringing in supplies, he ran a crew of volunteers to feed the community. The kitchen helped bring everyone together, but many people have questions about the volunteer emergency response.

There is frustration about the evacuation process and especially about how the Sidwells' situation was handled. David Munro posted a question on WhatsApp: What good things did their emergency response achieve that night?

I asked him what his own answer was, and he said there weren't any.

THE SURF club is the hub of the community and it's fractured now. David is president; Shalema and her family are active members. Gareth Abraham is a surf lifesaver; Susie Munro and Chrissie Sidwell manage the hall bookings.

The club plans a review, but no one seems to be looking forward to it. Auckland Emergency Management and Fire and Emergency NZ will also have roles.

Is it best just to move on? "I think this is a pretty robust country," says David. "Everyone pitches in to the best of their understanding and capacity."

But he also identifies some things he hopes will change. Lessons for communities everywhere, perhaps.

One is that places like Karekare need fully functional mobile phone coverage; another that emergency services need strong lines of communication.

When David Sidwell placed his ill call, the request for help was routed to Karel, who rang his granddaughter Jess. It seems nobody else was advised.

But a third issue: evacuation plans don't need to treat new houses built to resist floods as if they're old beaches sitting on a swamp.

Fourth: plans are valuable but so is flexibility. It was still daylight when houses started falling on to the road, but it didn't prompt a rethink. Perhaps the Sidwells could have been evacuated on the Monday evening.

There's one more thing. He chooses his words carefully.

"I think the leadership in an emergency can't be the people undertaking the response. You need calm, clear heads." Choosing wisely and being brave are not the same.

THE WRECKAGE of Amber Rhodes' house has been cleared away. Some people have left the valley and not all of them will return. But no one lives here by accident. They're here because they want to be.

"This is paradise," says David. "It's the most beautiful part of New Zealand. Even on the busiest day, you can still go down to that beach and feel like you're the only person in the world."

At the Munros' house, Gareth Abraham fits cigarettes to say hello. Fortified by the ginger crunch, he eyes the infinity swing. It gives the rope a really good pull. It creaks, but it holds, so he sits and pushes himself out over the precipice. He looks anxious.

David talks about fundraising. Get your photo taken on the swing, hanging above the devastation, with paradise all around.

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