

Singing a new song

By RUTH HILL

In another life, Mikal Nielsen was a computer programmer with a Danish bank; but he always dreamed of singing.

Just five years ago, he realised his dream and now he is teaching others to find their "true voices".

"We are all born with a beautiful natural voice," he says. But it gets stifled by things that happen to us.

"Criticism from others, fear of making 'fools' of our selves, all dampen the voice. But we can re-discover our own voice."

Now based in Haumoana, Mikal runs singing courses for adults and children all over New Zealand and overseas.

For many years, Mikal did not believe he could sing.

Like many teenagers, he set out to emulate his rock music idols.

"I bought a guitar but I was too shy to go to a teacher. So I struggled on, plucking away by myself for a few months. I got to the stage I thought I was pretty OK and decided to let my friends hear me.

"They told me to shut up, and I did — for the next 20 years."

Being denied musical expression caused him intense frustration, he says.

"I never lost my desire to sing."

He abandoned his banking career to travel, and ended up in New Zealand seven years ago, where he taught fire-walking and meditation.

Five years ago, Mikal picked up a brochure on the street about a "learn to sing" course in Wellington.

"I was incredibly nervous but I went along — and that weekend changed my life."

It was not that he suddenly learned to sing like an angel, says Mikal hurriedly.

But he learned that he could learn to sing.

He was so inspired, he went to Australia to study with renowned voice teacher, Chris James, and then began his own teaching career.

A lack of confidence is the most crippling thing for most people wanting to sing, he says.

"I have many women coming to my courses who used to sing, until their teenage children asked them to shut up!

"It's not that their voices were bad, that's just children being children..."

"The voice is such a vulnerable part of your being, it's easily closed down.

"When you're feeling stressed, it causes your voice to catch in your throat.

"That's the problem for 90 percent of people who think they can't sing."



Many people joining the class for the first time introduce themselves with the words, "I'm tone deaf."

But Mikal says the odds of someone actually being tone deaf are a million to one.

"Tone deafness is a physical disability that only affects one person in a million."

Singing in tune is another matter, he says.

"Well, what does it actually mean to be 'in tune'?"

"You may be completely in tune with yourself — that's the important thing."

Not only can opening up your own voice be a healing experience mentally and emotionally, it can also be the means of bringing physical healing to yourself and others, he says.

Mikal runs a special course, "Healing with Your Voice", on the healing properties of this marvellous instrument.

"The voice can be used to bring health and power to your whole being, create calmness, reduce stress and bring balance.

"It's like giving ourselves a massage with our voices."

The technique uses sound meditation, "toning" and "resonances" to affect different parts of the body.

"The basic technique is so simple, I can teach it to my one-year-old. You can learn it in a minute, but it will take the rest of your life to master it."

Music is an "incredibly powerful" force, says Mikal

"Look at how world religions make use of music and singing, and how filmmakers use it to reflect people's emotions.

"Music has been an integral part of most cultures since the dawn of time.

"But in 'Western' culture, we don't sing together.

"Maori sing together, but the only songs other New Zealanders have in common are Happy Birthday and Amazing Grace.

"It's my aim to get New Zealanders to sing together."