



PRESS RELEASE

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Biggest Buddy moves on after 15 years as CEO.

STARTS

In 2002, disillusioned after many years in management and corporate IT, Richard Aston jumped ship at 50 to take up the reins of a fledgling social agency with the lofty vision of changing fatherless boys' lives.

Back then, Big Buddy was a paper-based social agency with five matches on its books. But Aston 'got the vision' and devoted the next 15 years into growing it in the Auckland, Wellington and Waikato regions. Over 720 matches later, Big Buddy is now poised for further growth, with significant corporate support.

Confident his 'baby' is in good hands, Aston is stepping down as CEO on August 31, 2017. At 65, it's time to look at what else he wants to do – how he can contribute to New Zealand children's lives in other ways.

"It's been a wild ride," says Aston. "In business, the more you sell the more profit you make. In not-for-profits, the more successful you are the more funding you have to raise to meet the increased demand. Challenging? You bet! Not only did we have to weather the GFC [Global Financial Crisis], which took down some of our big funders, we've also jumped through numerous Government hoops for years with bugger all outcome. Big Buddy still gets only 8% Government funding. That's hard to swallow.

"But the upside is that we are privileged to hear inspirational stories from mothers, boys and mentors every day. That's the life blood that makes all the challenges worthwhile! Mums tell us about the difference having a good man in their boy's life makes. Boys tell us their mentor is their best mate. Mentors tell us their lives are richer for having a Little Buddy in it. Fantastic! Knowing so many boys' lives have changed means a lot to me. I leave contented and confident the team will hold the vision."

Born around a kitchen table in West Auckland in 1997, the Big Buddy programme came under the umbrella of Man Alive - an organisation working with men, many of whom had been through the justice system. It became glaringly obvious that little boys with no fathers were more likely than their peers to end up living a life of crime, and ultimately, be imprisoned. Man Alive had found around 80% of men in prison were functionally fatherless as children.

In collaboration with psychologists and his team, Aston developed a world-leading screening system that has zero tolerance for people he is unafraid of referring to - paedophiles.

“When I took over Big Buddy, I knew if I wanted to sleep at night I had to know the boys were safe,” he says. “I looked around at what screening was available and I was appalled. It was a once over lightly and, unfortunately, still is. Many organisations and agencies still put children very much at risk of abuse.”

“I’m proud to say Big Buddy does more than any other organisation to ensure our boys are safe and I hope other organisations follow our example.”

During Aston’s time, Big Buddy has grown into an entity with offices in Wellington, South Auckland and Hamilton. Where there was only him when he arrived, there are now 10 staff. The team have enjoyed association with rugby legends Grant Fox and Frank Bunce, and decorated veteran Willie Apiata - all keen to help New Zealanders understand the importance of male role-modelling.

Sponsorship has also grown. In the last two years, Kiwi mega-builders GJ Gardner Homes have partnered with them in several ways – the most recent support being the build and auction of two homes. The profits will be handed to Big Buddy once sold on Aston’s last day. This will go towards supporting high needs in both South Auckland and the Waikato.

Moving forward, Aston’s highest hopes for Big Buddy are simple: “Keep the vision alive. Hold fast to the heart of the work. Don’t let it get diluted by bureaucratic or financial imperatives.”

He wishes newcomer and father of three, Paul Burns, well, and says he will stick around for a time to support Big Buddy’s database.

For his part, Mr Burns is well aware of the legacy he looks forward to enhancing. Not unlike Aston, he comes from a corporate background.

“This is a very unique and very rewarding opportunity to make a positive impact on members and their families and our local community. After many years of working hard in the business sector, I feel a genuine sense of privilege to be able to join the Big Buddy team and make a life changing difference in the lives of young boys.”

“I will be focused on engaging, understanding and further empowering the special team of people that make everything happen at Big Buddy and externally across key stakeholders. Children are the most at risk and vulnerable members of society; what a wonderful privilege it is to be able to help them in such a meaningful way.”

Having built up a vast mental archive of working with men and boys, Aston will be imparting his wisdom in a consultancy and speaking capacity, including promoting his and wife Ruth Kerr’s parenting bible, *Our Boys – Raising strong, happy sons from boyhood to manhood*.

ENDS

EDITORS NOTES:

- Since 1997 Big Buddy has created over 700 matches. At 2017 capacity, Big Buddy can create 80 new matches per year. Additional funding through donations and sponsorship is directly focused on increasing these match numbers.
- The first funding for the Big Buddy programme in 1997 came from the Crime Prevention office of the Prime Minister.
- Big Buddy's work is proven to steer young men away from crime. People working at the coal face of crime will attest to the fact that this prevention needs to start early.
- Our statistics show that for every 100 boys we help, 2 of them would otherwise have taken the route leading to a serious criminal action. The NZ Treasury estimates the cost of crime is \$3 million per criminal. Mentoring one boy costs \$8000 in total. By saving 2 boys, Big Buddy potentially saves the country \$5, 992, 000.
- For extensive information visit <https://www.bigbuddy.org.nz/about-bigbuddy/> and for community interaction, visit <https://www.facebook.com/BigbuddyNZ/>
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