



Dr Tupa'ilevaililigi Ridvan Firestone.
Photo: Cameron Burnell/Fairfax NZ

Riz to the rescue

She's an academic, a fitness instructor and a busy mother who has just won a public health award. **Beck Eleven** finds out how Dr Tupa'ilevaililigi Ridvan Firestone plans to reverse obesity levels in young Pacific people.

There's no shying away from obesity statistics. Last year a government survey showed 68 per cent of Pacific people were obese. It is a terrifying prospect for Dr Tupa'ilevaililigi Ridvan Firestone ("just Riz" to her friends), so as the recipient of a new award, she plans to find out why and then reverse the trend.

Last month, Firestone won a Pacific career development award worth \$300,000 from the Health Research Council of New Zealand. She will use the money to look at obesity in Pacific youth aged 16 to 24 and she feels like every bit of life experience has led her here.

"My parents are a typical 1970s migration story. They came from Samoa (where Firestone was born) to New Zealand so their children could take advantage of better education."

It was a successful plan. All three of their children have done or are about to do some form of tertiary study.

"So the award, it's not just for myself but I think of it as for them too – as part of the sacrifice they made."

So, are they proud?

"Well, I hope so. They hide it well. Ha ha! They're very humble and they don't let too much away so I suppose we really want to impress them."

Firestone's doctorate was in sleep science, focusing on obstructive sleep apnoea. As part of her research she looked at shift workers and taxi drivers. As it happens, her parents were both taxi drivers.

Working under the umbrella of public health, the award will help her develop a programme targeting Pacific youth aged 16 to 24. The reasoning behind those ages is that

16 is not too late to develop new habits while by age 24, it would be unusual to have weight-related illness such as cardiovascular disease or Type 2 diabetes.

The award will allow Firestone to turn herself into an expert in Pacific youth obesity, building on research and developing new ideas. She will also be networking and forming relationships with other emerging Pacific health researchers – for example, one of her mentors is from a Hawaiian university.

Firestone has had a health journey of her own. She hasn't told her mum yet so she's not really looking forward to this interview being published but she started smoking before she'd even turned 10.

"Later, I was always fairly sporty so I didn't think it impacted on my fitness. I used it to de-stress and as a way to keep my weight down but before we got married, my husband gave me the ultimatum, I had to quit."

"I wanted to go to the gym and be healthy at the same time but I wanted to be paid to get fit so I did an instructor course. I ended up teaching group fitness so I could get a free gym subscription."

"Life is pretty busy but I'm living my dream now. I've got my family, my hobby job and my career. They're not things in three different silos, it's the whole lifestyle."

While she says the award is for her parents' sacrifice, Firestone says it is also for her children and the future Pacific generation who have important roles to play in the world.

She and her husband, James, have three children aged four, seven

and 11. They live near a park and she certainly practises what she preaches, sending the kids out for a lap of the park and educating them about the difference between treat foods and food as fuel.

As a passionate student of obesity, she's keen to emphasise why obesity rates are so high.

"People think weight is just a simple matter of energy in, energy out, but the reality is wicked and complex."

"The kind of weight we are seeing is actually a normal response to an abnormal environment. Current thoughts are moving away from individual responsibility to environmental responsibility. There are social and cultural factors that inhibit healthy lifestyles."

"Pacific youth are still active and independent but brought up in a different environment to the older generation. They are often New Zealand-born and of mixed ethnicity. We need to look at policy, housing, social income, deprivation and realise that the food industry plays a massive role in this."

As an example, she uses a fast food franchise selling products with "big food, big salt, big sugar" wanting to set up 200 metres away from an Auckland high school.

"A responsible adult wrote a letter explaining it would be bad for the children. They just said the spin-off was jobs for those young people."

"There are lots of issues. We live in an obesogenic environment and it can't be solved just like that."

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