

Unsung heroes of the rebuild

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At this time of year, we celebrate our heroes, the great and the good, who have surpassed even their own high standards during the past 12 months.

And rightly so. Can we heap enough praise on Richie McCaw or Ron Fenwick and the host of others for their contribution to the country and its international reputation?

However, my hero for 2015 is not one of the big names or notable achievers.

I don't even know his name. He works for a company that doesn't appear to figure (according to my perusal) on the internet.

I only know him because of the Christchurch rebuild which has turned the central city into one enormous construction zone in which people drive their cars, do their shopping and work.

As a keen observer of other people working, I am blessed with a wealth of opportunity.

Gone are the days when construction workers did more standing around smoking and chewing the fat than actually working. The Christchurch construction work force is a diverse bunch who – and I think this is the Filipino influence –

seem to be actually, cheerfully engaged in labour.

Even on the road you don't see people standing around looking at a hole very much. This used to be par for the course although the perception of loafing was probably grossly unfair. People working on the road are the most exposed workers. Their every action is in public view. If office workers sat at their desks out in the open, exposed to the judgmental gaze of every passing motorist or pedestrian, they might also be regarded with less esteem (than they already are, I mean).

Having been on the end of a shovel, I am not one to judge when seeing a worker leaning on their implement.

Yes, the Christchurch rebuild has many unsung heroes and my choice is due to the fact I have regularly seen my hero on my walk from the Bus Interchange to *The Press* building. It's only about 400m but encompasses just about every aspect of a city five years after devastation.

The footpath has for a long time been either inaccessible, non-existent or just stretches of shingle. Recently, over several months, a wonderful new paved footpath has been installed.

A thing of beauty it is, as only a Christchurch resident would appreciate.

Pedestrians can enjoy a wide expanse of rectangular paving stones, interspersed with seats and small trees. A saunter on the footpath's cool, flat, unobstructed

surface is a small but profound pleasure.

It was done in record time and I watched every step of the way. First the ground preparation – compacting of a base layer and the spreading of the sand on which the pavers were laid.

Then the positioning of the pavers. You can't have people stepping on loose pavers. They need to be firm to the foot, so they have to put into position just so. Some of the pavers obviously have to be cut to go around posts and other impediments.

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My hero was integral to the process. I know this might seem a bit weird but I observed him like a birder might watch the first godwit of spring.

I never saw him talk, I never say him stand still. He was in perpetual motion, completely focussed and concentrated on the job. It wouldn't surprise me if he forewent smokos just because it would mean having to stop and then restart the well-oiled machinery of his body.

If a construction company had a hundred men and women like him, it could rebuild the city in a year.

We live in an age where everyone is supposed to have specialised technical skills that will lead us into some sort of economic nirvana.

What is often forgotten, and something you won't hear from career advisers, is that the qualities of honesty, reliability, trustworthiness and hard work will put you immediately into the top quarter of the desirable work force.

I hope I don't sound patronising. We get enough of that noble worker crap. But as a representative of the paper-shuffling, pen-pushing and desk-jockeying brigade, I sometimes wonder whether I'm making any real contribution to a rebuilding city.

No-one will be walking on any pavers I have laid or use a public building where I installed the air-conditioning or did the steel work.

Most people just want a nice cushy office job. And who can blame them.

There's a lot to be said for air-conditioned work environments, water coolers, inside toilets and ergonomic chairs and desk arrangements. But someone must do the real work. The hard yakka.

So today, I tip my hat to one of the hardest working New Zealanders and others like him. If a knighthood existed for consistent output and productivity, he would deserve one and richly so.