

CONNOR FERGUSON

HE/HIM

APPLYING FOR GENERAL BOARD MEMBER

Born and raised in Auckland's North Shore, Connor moved to Wellington where he is currently in his third year of my Visual Communication Design degree at Massey University. Growing up, his passions were for music and art as well as water polo and CrossFit. Leaving high school in 2015, Connor entered into an engineering degree with the motivation being an inherent need to help people. He soon realised that he needed to do something creative to achieve this, as design is what he truly enjoys. Connor took the year and a half following to work and travel around Europe while he figured out his next move. This gave him the opportunity to work for a sales and marketing company, SalesStar. He began working in client services and event management, and progressed into a 3 and a half year relationship with the company focusing on redesigning their brand and website. He now works as a freelance designer whilst he finishes up his studies.

What made you want to join the RY board?

I first became aware of Rainbow Youth during high school where I had a number of friends who went to the after school hang out spaces. In hindsight, I realise how vital these spaces were for my friends and their journey's towards self-acceptance and wish it was a space that I used at the time as well. I feel like I've seen examples of some of the ways Rainbow Youth has supported queer youth and want to take part in providing and improving facilities, spaces and education for the next generations of queer youth. Beyond education and understanding of queer lives, simply providing a space where teenagers can hang out with people to understand them and they can relate to is incredibly important.

My biggest purpose and motivator in my career/life goals is to do my part to help other people, especially those who need it most. I feel that with my personal experience of growing up queer, I find myself with a strong sense of empathy and an urge to critique the world and structures around me. Naturally, having the opportunity to help queer youth is particularly important and relatable to me. I hope that Rainbow Youth could be a platform for me to understand ways in which I can help and give back to my community. Similarly, I hope it would give me direction and better understanding of where I want to go with my design degree. While going into marketing and advertising would be an easy option, I am highly politically engaged and want explore where visual design can take me with a career where I can continue to push for change. Rainbow Youth would be an amazing opportunity to network, to see what my peers are doing and to make me feel like I'm doing my part (beyond reaching the age-limit for Rainbow Youth).

I think it is very easy for queer people to reflect on childhood and entertain the

conversation of what they wish could've been done differently. I would love to understand what kind of work Rainbow Youth does in this area and how it can inform things such as curriculum to provide education and resources not only for teenagers who are questioning their own normative definitions of gender and sexuality, but also in normalising that in the wider social community. I'm at a point where I have gathered enough knowledge and understanding of my community and where we stand that I feel a passion to advocate for those who cannot.

In my eyes, lack of compassion surrounding intersectionality in the queer community (racism etc) is one of its biggest downfalls. I feel Rainbow Youth would provide the opportunity for me to push for a more inclusive and compassionate community and learn more about what I can do to help and make way for those voices to be heard.

RainbowYOUTH is on a journey to proactively and respectfully uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi. How would you contribute to this journey?

My degree at Massey attempts to seat itself in Tikanga Māori and have had specific lectures on navigating Te Tiriti o Waitangi and using it as a guideline in which to practice design. This has allowed me to reconsider my morals and ethics in all aspects of my life to be more respectful and beneficial to those around me, those I work with and the wider community. This idea of partnership and participation as aligns with Te Tiriti o Waitangi is incredibly important as it pushes for the value and validation of others, especially Māori voices and knowledge. I know that it is important to seek Māori perspective and approval when navigating change or ideas that involve them, ultimately giving them equity and a place at the table. In a queer space, I understand that I may never understand concepts such as Takatāpui and it is important to seek counsel when it comes to establishing systems that will best support them.

To be a representative of Rainbow Youth would mean that you get asked questions in areas in which you perhaps shouldn't speak to. I believe it is an important skill to know when to speak and provide information and when to point someone to a person or resource that would better speak to it. Further, educating others on how to respect and navigate a space which isn't theirs.

Lastly, I hope to invest in having a more comprehensive understanding of Maori values and knowledge systems and to be able to use Te Reo Māori in conversation in a way that is respectful and correct.

What particular skills do you think you have that would make you suitable for the RY board?

My role with SalesStar provided me with opportunity to learn valuable skills surrounding event management and building rapport with clients. This included: time management, how to organise an event, communications surrounding events, how to build relationships and talk comfortably/confidently with CEOs, and how to manage customer expectations.

SalesStar was actually a sales effectiveness, high performance, sales & leadership training/transformation company (for lack of a better definition). I completed their 'Think Like a Customer' and 'STAR Consultative Selling' Programmes. The 'Think Like a Customer' programme not only taught me how to deal with external customer services, but also how to treat co-workers and the importance of being a cohesive team. They were a strong value driven company in which gave them the foundation and motivation to do things for the right reasons, put the team first, be a product of the product and to solve the customers

problems. I aspire to work for/with people who are lead by strong values and with an internal culture that I resonate with, which I believe Rainbow Youth has.

In the past I have sought out and enjoyed roles in which I can support and create spaces for youth. For the two years after leaving high school I coached my school's junior water polo team. I also have a CrossFit coaching certification with an extra certification in how to coach kids and teens. As a prefect in my high school, I chose to be a part of both the arts portfolio as well as the leadership development portfolio; This was designed to involve junior students in the going-ons at school, include them in discussions surrounding decisions that would effect them and provide leadership opportunities. From these examples, I hope to articulate my experience in creating spaces for young people to feel heard, and supported, while also being able to educate and advocate for them.

With my previously mentioned jobs/roles of creating spaces for young people I also believe I have acquired leadership skills that would be beneficial for Rainbow Youth. I desire to create safe spaces to stretch and grow others to be

better versions of themselves or in general, spaces where they can explore who they are. In saying this, I also enjoy putting myself in situations where I will be able to learn and grow as well. These are skills I hope to improve and refine by being a role that I am passionate about.

With my last job being in Auckland, I was required to predominantly work distance. This became difficult as my employer was not accustomed to the type of communication that would support me or hold me accountable. Because of this, I had to form a solid work ethic, with time management and the ability to hold myself accountable to the quality of my work and deadlines. I understand majority of the board members are Auckland based, however, I believe I have learnt the skills to make cross-country connections and continue to be a valued member of the team from afar.

As a design student, I am constantly learning about the importance of understanding the people you are trying to target. People assume that pursuing a degree in design will lead to a career in marketing or advertising. I don't see myself in those industries. Instead, I believe that my strong passion to create positive change in the world motivates me to make meaningful and thought-provoking work which I hope to apply in a meaningful way, whatever that turns out to be. I have always twisted the brief on my university assignments to practice creating such work where I can either advocate or educate in areas that I believe in such as inequality. In applying design to my past employments I also understand the importance of a cohesive and consistent brand image/communication in order to make your values and ideas impactful. I feel like this has taught me to be adaptable and empathetic when approaching or

speaking to others, whether in a business sense, or in other aspects of my life. In this, I am also able to concisely and effectively communicate my beliefs in a way that resonate with other people.

Would also be more than happy to lend a hand with any design work if you wish!

Further from this, I have used university as an opportunity to explore, teach myself and understand queer theory, history and politics. Because of this, I believe I approach activism and discussions in a way where I like to look at all aspects/perspectives in order to approach the conversation from a more informed position. It is important to always push for empathy and understanding when presented with a polarising topic or discussion in order to reach the most ideal result. While being strong in your beliefs is important when advocating for change, it is just important to listen and learn from all perspectives. LGBT+ history tells important stories that need to be passed on to future generations as they

allow us to learn, as well as motivate us to critique the structures we live within and drive for further change.