

DOUG the DIGGER



A national role model, and a local hero!



Emma Jelsma talks to Northland hero Alistair McIntyre about how an accident changed the path of his life ...

IT'S 1986, and 25-year old Alistair McIntyre, an early school-leaver (and self-confessed non-academic), has succeeded in building a thriving local contracting business with a number of employees. His future looked set – build up the business, get married, have kids, retire comfortably... The problem with the future, however, is that it never quite works out the way you expect.

For Alistair, the roadmap of his life took such a massive detour that he had to completely re-evaluate his goals – as one morning, in 1986, while going about his business, a single moment left lasting scars that would forever change his life.

'In 1986 I had an accident,' explains Alistair.

'The short version is this: my arm was crushed

between a building and the roof of a refrigerated truck while I was at work, leaving me pretty much unable to do anything. To hold a toothbrush, to hold a pen – the pain was shocking. I had to stop everything – that was a pretty low time. It took a long time to get to a place where I could think of a future for myself; in the end it was my

passion for trucks and diggers that pushed me forward – I needed a focus, and that's how the first Doug the Digger book was started.'

For Alistair – known to many of his young fans as 'Mr Mac' – the decision to write and publish his own children's picture book included many personal hurdles: he would have to go back to school in order to relearn the basics, right down to writing and reading. He would have to overcome his fear of public reading, and he would have to apply his damaged body and mind to something completely new and completely out of his comfort zone.

Why then, would Alistair choose writing as his rehabilitation project?

'For me, it was just about following my passion,' He explains. 'From a young age, I could remember going with my dad to his work. My dad was a civil engineer, and when we finished surveying, I was given an opportunity to go for a ride on earth moving machines. Basically, it was 'listen, look and learn' – if you couldn't listen, then you were off. But if you could listen, then we could do something... so

when I was allowed to sit on a machine, and didn't touch or tutu with anything, then I would be allowed to pull a lever – and once I'd progressed to pulling a lever, and watched what happened; well that's when I fell in love with machines! I couldn't contract anymore; but I could still have machines in my life, so that's where the idea started.'

Needless to say, Alistair's inspiring journey attracted a fair amount of attention. It was during a promotional school visit for his newly-published book that Alistair's talent for connecting with children was spotted – and it wasn't long before he was contacted by The Alan Duff Foundation (better known as Duffy Books in Homes). In 2001, Alistair visited his first

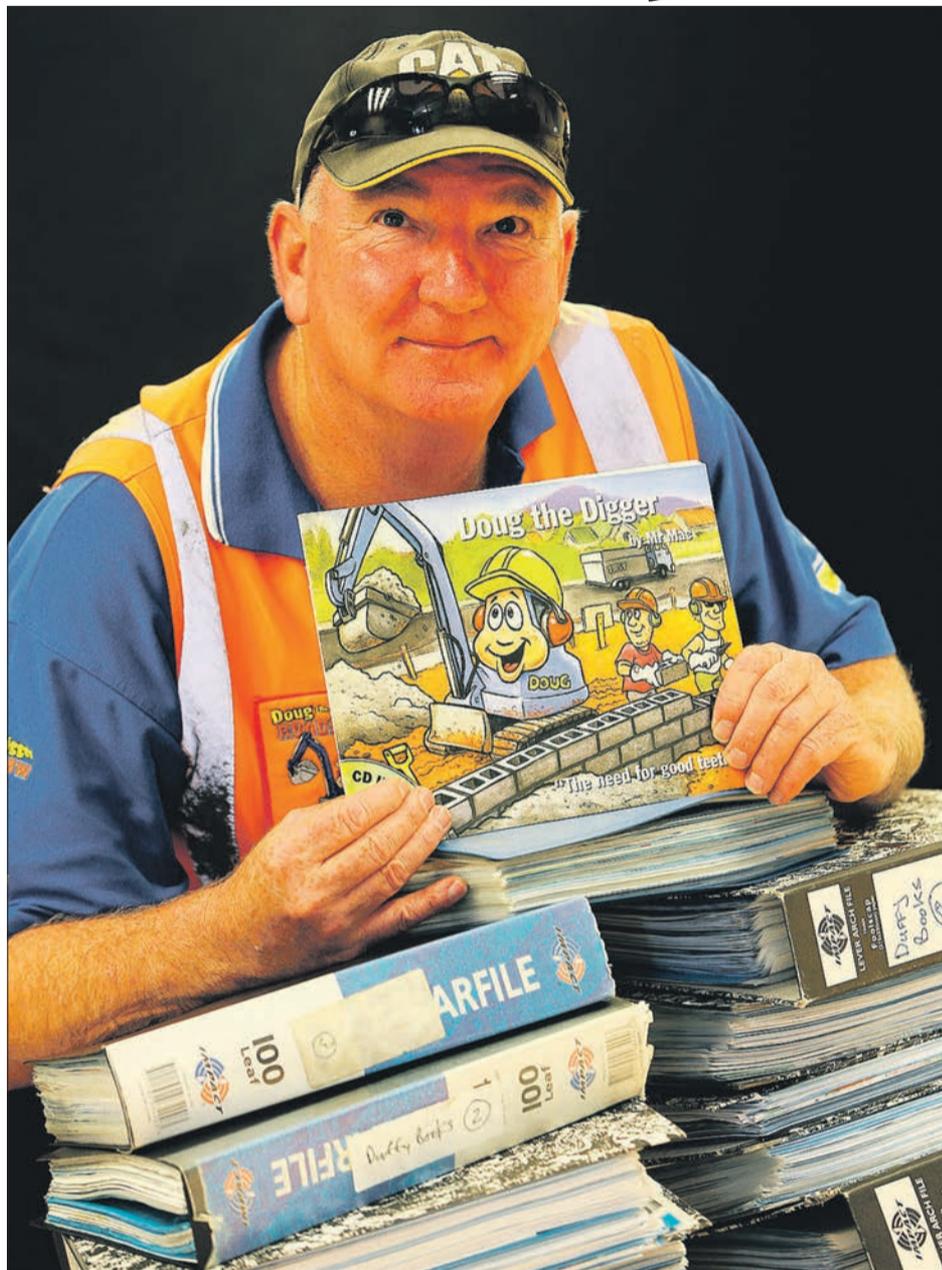
"Learning in life is also about having fun and laughing"
— Alistair McIntyre

school as a Duffy Role Model – and 13 years later, he is still going strong.

Duffy Books in Homes currently have 519 schools and 254 Duffy Role Models involved with their programme, which is not only celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, but has also recently reached another milestone: their 10 millionth book was presented at Parliament in July this year. That's 10 million free books placed into the hands of students from lower-decile schools throughout our country, in a bid to increase the rate of literacy in New Zealand. And it's working. Results from government researchers showed a 35% improvement in reading and writing skills; with more and more Duffy children going on to tertiary education.

With over 700 Duffy school assemblies under his belt, Alistair has attended more assemblies than any other Duffy Role Model – speaking to over 119,000 students and giving away more than 238,000 books. Starting in September Alistair has over 30 schools to visit, mostly in the Northland area.

For someone who found school more than a little challenging; for someone who had to overcome not only a fear of reading and writing, but who also had to come to terms with a life-changing accident, Alistair McIntyre hasn't



done too badly for himself – and to the Duffy children, he brings his unique sense of humour, teaching that if they can listen and look, well then; they can learn.

Well done Mr Mac; you're a true inspiration to us all.