

One resident's vision for the city

OUR KIWI HOME

Mark Walton

I was a perfect Christchurch May Day. I walked from the bus interchange to Simone Rowa Pearson's home, which Google put in a 22-minute stroll.

I wasn't rushed as, despite having already interviewed three other people that day, the excellent bus service meant I was early. I had time to soak up that inner-city vibe that's often talked about, but is sometimes slightly elusive.

From the best interchange I crossed Lichfield St, took a shortcut through one of the new shopping arcades and was delighted to observe so many people out and about.

As I turned left into Manchester St, I was relieved to see the empty grey shingle space now filled with new apartments and some upmarket townhouses.

Crossing Ratu Park, I noticed how the Fletcher-built townhouses look as though they've been there longer than they have.

When they were first built, out of curiosity, my wife and I checked them out, and although they were beautifully finished, we were aghast at the asking price.

We both wondered why anyone would want to live in a deserted wasteland looking towards a damaged cityscape.

Turning into Lutimer Square, there was the reassuringly elegant Christchurch Club overlooking the magnificent trees, which have been the same size since it was a little boy.

Gilchrist St, by Lutimer Square, now seems new in everything but name. There are so many neat little white boxes with identical front doors that could surely create serious confusion after a night out celebrating on The Terrace.

The location of these new homes is superb, but could I practise my saxophone, would there be room for all my books and music, and would there still be space for my phone charger?

While I walked, I Googled how much it would cost to live in one of these compact houses, and I found out I could "discover modern city living in the heart of Christchurch", one ad said.

"This stylish apartment offers a perfect balance of comfort, convenience and contemporary design, ideal for professionals, downsizers or investors seeking a central location."

"Made you'll find an open-plan living area with abundant natural light, a sleek kitchen with quality appliances and well-proportioned bedrooms designed for relaxation."

This all sounded too good to be true, especially the bedrooms destined for relaxation. But it didn't mention whether the neighbours would appreciate my dulcet saxophone playing.

Chester St East, on the other hand, made me feel nostalgic, as for a time we owned a townhouse nestled behind Pomeroy's Pub in Kilmore St.

So by the time I arrive at Simone's house, I'm ready to be convinced of the joys of inner-city living.

Simone, three dogs, a friendly cat and her grown-up daughter, Frances, greet me warmly, and I realise I've walked past and admired their house many times.

Simone explains: "When we bought this house, we had Sean, a 2-year-old and Frances was just 1. We were lucky because I saw this house on a Tuesday, and we bought it at auction on Thursday."

"It was as though this house was built for us, and this neighbourhood has become our strangest new place to watch. We were so fortunate to buy a family home, as nobody builds family homes in the city, and we bought before it was cool to live in town."

"We've got lots of lovely neighbours, and we've lived here since 2007, so there are many people here that we've known for a long time and, of course, none of us went through the earthquake together too."

The family left Christchurch immediately after the February 2011 earthquake as they had no power or water, and the school and shops were closed.

They stayed with friends; the Douglas family, in Tuhai Bay, near Wellington, and young Sean became an "earthquake refugee", enrolled in the local primary school for six weeks until power and water were restored at home and school reopened.

"Since then, we've never left," Simone says. "I've got a badge that says 'A Vibrant Stayer'."

Frances and Sean learned to ride their bikes in safety on the city's streets, as except for official vehicles, the roads were empty.

"Our two children have grown up with the city being rebuilt around them, and this has made for an exciting time. We had to get past the immediate aftermath of army vehicles, helicopters, living in a cordon and then the years of deconstruction, demolition, roadworks and repairs to the underground infrastructure," Simone says.

"We live now in a city that's been transformed and continues to develop."

I am curious to hear Simone's thoughts about a recent Press article on the huge number of Airbnb now in the city centre.

The Press reported that the city council's own population data had found the city centre grew in the year to June 2025 by only 50 residents from 9150 to 9200, despite 484 new homes being completed in that period.

Simone nods: "If you're buying a house in the city centre, you're not competing with property investors, so, yes, this is having a massive impact on housing affordability."

"If all visitor accommodation was available for permanent residents, we'd have a thriving central city community. To realise the city council's target of 20,000 people permanently living in the centre needs to be supported by action."

Recalling walking through town on a Saturday evening before the quake, and it feeling rather odd — there just weren't enough people.

Simone nods: "Pre-earthquake, there were many people living in central Christchurch, and I agree with you, I don't look back with rose-tinted glasses. There were many good things, but it was also dying."

"We must keep in mind the 2011 earthquake delivered a tragic loss of life and injury for many people and families, the pain and loss is lifelong."

"Before the earthquakes, there were also a lot of old buildings, and many of them were empty and quite derelict. The new Christchurch central city has been rebuilt from the underground up."

"There are so many warm, dry, energy-efficient homes being built, the investment by government in the public realm, and of course private developers are busy building and developing."

"We've seen at pace and scale the redevelopment of a city centre unlike anything experienced in New Zealand since Napier in 1931."

"Napier suffered the loss of 250 lives."

I then ask Simone if she could be such an advocate for inner-city living if she did not personally have such a beautiful home.

Simone thinks for a minute and says: "Well, I guess that's the main thing, isn't it? Between kind of the promise of what the inner city has to offer with all this beautiful infrastructure, beautiful public realm and anchor projects completed, in contrast with what the market is delivering in terms of housing, which is very narrow."

"It's the missed opportunity of the rebuild."

"We want a thriving residential community, and especially more families living in the city centre. We get a lot of babies and very young children living in these small apartments, but when they grow bigger, families move out to the suburbs for space."

"Our kids went to school in the four avenues at Christchurch East Primary School and it was one of the most ethnically

diverse schools in Christchurch at the time.

"I don't know why that's not your goal, families living in central Christchurch, there are various reasons. The houses are too expensive, the type of housing being built isn't family-friendly, and when they need to start going to school, that's when a lot of parents vote with their feet."

"New larger three-storey townhouses are at a price only the wealthy can afford. The decision makers are building for tourists, visitors and investors, but we need a thriving community."

Simone notes that many people in central Christchurch don't have backyards, but her family do have a park down the street, called Chesterfield.

"How we get our park is due to the changes in the District Plan allowing developers to build apartments with smaller gardens. The quiet proviso was that the council would purchase strategic pieces of land in the mid block for community green spaces. So in our case, the council bought strategically to provide a green site between Barlades St and Fitzgerald Avenue."

"Families need these pocket parks for community gatherings, barbecues, children to run around, residents need these spaces to take their dogs, relax or exercise. It's quite Turpian, not everyone needs to have their own green space, if you have shared spaces that are maintained by the council."

Simone feels her neighbourhood is an enclave: "Christchurch is a real community hub where the community comes together, they meet each other, and it is good for community building. This is good for community resilience when disasters happen or when people get sick — you know your neighbours."

I ask Simone she's been to the city's new stadium yet. "Yes, it's very cool. I'm not actually a big fan of rugby, but if I was, it would be a great stadium because you're so close to the action — and of course, it's got a roof, so you won't get wet any more."

"When there's a big event on, the city is absolutely buzzing, that's exciting as we haven't had that for a long time. People are celebrating this new central city, with everything it has to offer."

One thing that has impressed Simone about the central city rebuild is the Avon River Promenade. She was sceptical when it was announced, as she thought it was "just sort of window dressing of something that was already there."

"But they've spent \$120 million, prioritised pedestrians and cyclists, taken away cars, put in beautiful paving, light fittings, planting and created a wonderful unified path. It's one of the best things, I think, that has been done in the central city."

"As residents, we use it all the time, and it's good to get to the other side of town (won't get on the roads, because I know the river promenade is safe and serene, and you never know which neighbour you'll bump into."

I ask Simone how often she uses her car.

"Not often, except when we go to the supermarkets over on Moorhouse Avenue."

I reply, that's great, but what a shame there isn't a supermarket closer. My apartment in Sydney is right beside a train station and has a supermarket on the ground floor.

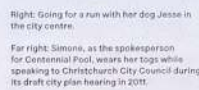
I feel the lack of a supermarket on her side of town is a shortcoming in the new emerging Christchurch, Simone agrees, and says it ties in with the central city shuttle — something the city had before the quake.

It opened for 14 years on a skim loop with 21 stops, arriving every 10 minutes. It was free, so it was easy to hop on and off, and was like a "mying hospital", carrying a million passengers a year, including tourists, shoppers, residents and office workers.

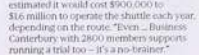
"A group of central city resident groups are lobbying for the return of the shuttle, so that would mean less congestion in the CBD, support foot traffic, and economic activity. Not everyone can use scooters, and not everyone can walk... It's great to see Christchurch City Council recently supported the return of the shuttle and, subject



Simone Rowa Pearson, with partner Joe Toomey, says her central city home is a neighbourhood she is stung to own.



Right: Going for a run with her dog Jesse in the city centre.



Far right: Simone, as the spokesperson for Centennial Pool, wears her togs while speaking to Christchurch City Council during its draft city plan hearing in 2011.

to public consultation, [in offering the possibility of full funding support].

Simone cites a recent study that estimated it would cost \$900,000 to \$1.6 million to operate the shuttle each year, depending on the route. "Even... Business Canterbury with 2800 members supports running a trial too — it's a no-brainer."

I say to Simone that she's such a convincing advocate for inner-city living, has she thought about going into politics?

She smiles: "I focus my energy on the difference I can make from outside the tent and in our own immediate neighbourhood — that's 100% fulfilling."

"How does she think the inner city will be in 20 years?"

"Well, hopefully, with a lot more residents living here. It's just going from strength to strength. We've been through such bleak times, and the new city has risen. It's the most livable city in New Zealand, it's a beautiful city, and I think the rest of the country are realising that now."

"The development I'm excited to see next is what I call 'the Catholic Quarter', as it's the worst site of the city centre with a river frontage, north-facing opposite the Edmunds Band Rotunda. I think this is the site to watch. New Regent St is going to spill out onto the river, and I expect there will be bars and cafes — it will be so good."

Simone and I could have talked for much longer, but I need to get my No.27 bus back to Bishopdale for my next interview. Our lively conversation continues as Simone kindly walks me to the Kilmore St bus stop.

On my 30-minute trip back to the suburbs, I confess I did check out what real estate was on the market in central Christchurch, as Simone had convinced me that our city centre is going to get better and better.

It might be wise to get in early, as central Christchurch is just beginning to blossom.



Simone and daughter Frances, then 6, at a protest against the government's Christchurch schools shake-up in September 2016.



Not long after the family's return to Christchurch from their post-quake stay in Wellington in 2011, Frances meets army personnel round the corner from the family's home.



In April 2016, just over a year after the February 2011 earthquake, Frances and Sean ride their bikes with mum Simone on an empty Madras St.



Not long after the family's return to Christchurch from their post-quake stay in Wellington in 2011, Frances meets army personnel round the corner from the family's home.

Our Kiwi Home: A long-time resident's vision for a thriving central Christchurch

Mark Walton | THE PRESS

July 4, 2026

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Simone Rewa Pearson and partner Joe Tonner outside their central Christchurch home.

ALDEN WILLIAMS / THE PRESS

It was a perfect Christchurch May day as I walked from the bus interchange to Simone Rewa Pearson's house, which according to Google was a 22-minute stroll.

I wasn't rushed, as despite the fact I'd already interviewed three other people that day, the excellent bus service meant I was early. I had time to soak up that inner city vibe that's often talked about, but sometimes slightly elusive.

From the bus interchange I crossed Lichfield St, took a short cut through one of the new shopping arcades and was delighted to see so many people out and about. As I turned left onto Manchester St, I was relieved to see the empty grey shingle space has now been filled with new apartments and some upmarket town houses.



Simone goes for a run with her dog Jesse in the central city.

ALDEN WILLIAMS / THE PRESS

Crossing Rauora Park I noticed how the Fletcher-built town houses look as though they've been there longer than they have. When they were first built, out of curiosity my wife and I checked them out, and although they were beautifully finished, we were aghast at the asking price. We both wondered why anyone would want to live in a deserted wasteland looking towards a damaged cityscape.

Turning into Latimer Square there was the reassuringly elegant Christchurch Club overlooking the magnificent trees, which have been the same size since I was a little boy.

Gloucester St, by Latimer Square, now seems new in everything but name. There are so many neat little white boxes with identical front doors that could surely create serious confusion after a night out celebrating on [The Terrace](#). The location of these new homes is superb, but could I practise my saxophone, would there be room for all my books and music and would there still be space for my phone charger?

While I walked, I Googled how much it would cost me to live in one of these compact houses, and I found out I could “discover modern city living in the heart of Christchurch”.



Simone says her central Christchurch home and neighbourhood have become her tūrangawaewae.

ALDEN WILLIAMS / THE PRESS

“This stylish apartment offers a perfect balance of comfort, convenience and contemporary design, ideal for professionals, downsizers or investors seeking a central location,” one ad said. “Inside, you’ll find an open-plan living area with abundant natural light, a sleek kitchen with quality appliances, and well-proportioned bedrooms designed for relaxation...”

This all sounded too good to be true, especially the bedrooms designed for relaxation, but it didn’t mention whether the neighbours would appreciate my dulcet saxophone playing.

Chester St East, on the other hand, made me feel nostalgic, as for a time we owned a town house nestled behind [Pomeroy’s Pub](#) on Kilmore St, so by the time I arrived at Simone’s house, I was ready to be convinced about the joys of inner city living.

Simone, three dogs, a friendly cat, and her grown-up daughter, Frances, greeted me warmly, and I realised I’d walked past and admired their house many times.



One month after the February 2011 earthquake, Simone's daughter Frances, then 4, meets army personnel round the corner from their house.
SUPPLIED / THE PRESS

Simone explained: “When we bought this house, we had Sean, a 2-year-old, and Frances was just 1. We were lucky because I saw this house on a Tuesday, and we bought it at auction on Thursday. It was as though this house was built for us and this neighbourhood has become our tūrangawaewae (place to stand).

“We were so fortunate to buy a family home, as nobody builds family homes in the city, and we bought before it was cool to live in town.

“We’ve got lots of lovely neighbours, and we’ve lived here since 2007, so there are many people here that we’ve known for a long time, and of course some of us went through the earthquakes together too.”

The family left Christchurch immediately after the February 2011 earthquake as they had no power or water, school and shops were closed. They stayed with friends, the Douglas family, in Titahi Bay and young Sean became an “earthquake refugee”, enrolled in the local primary school for six weeks until power and water were restored properly at home and school reopened.



In April 2012, taken just over a year after the February 2011 earthquake, Frances, then 5, and Sean, 8, ride their bikes with mum Simone on an empty Madras St.

SUPPLIED / THE PRESS

“Since then, we’ve never left,” Simone said. “I’ve got a badge that says, ‘A Vibrant Stayer.’”

Frances and Sean learned to ride their bikes in safety on the city’s streets as except for official vehicles, the roads were empty.

“Our two children have grown up with the city being rebuilt around them, and this has made for an exciting time. We had to get past the immediate aftermath of army vehicles, helicopters, living in a cordon and then the years of destruction, demolition, roadworks and repairs to the underground infrastructure,” Simone said.

“We live now in a city that’s been transformed and continues to develop.”



Simone and Frances, then 6, at a protest against the Government's Christchurch schools shake-up in September 2012.

PHOTO SUPPLIED / THE PRESS

I was curious to hear Simone's thoughts about a recent *Press* article regarding the huge number of Airbnbs now in the centre of Christchurch. *The Press* reported the city council's [own population data found the city centre grew in the year to June 2025 by only 50 people](#) (from 9150 to 9200), despite 484 new homes being completed in the same period.

Simone nodded her head and said, "If you're buying a house in the city centre, you're now competing with property investors, so yes, this is having a massive impact on housing affordability. If all visitor accommodation was available for permanent residents, we'd have a thriving central city community. To realise the [city council's target of 20,000 people permanently living in the centre](#) needs to be supported by action."

I recalled walking through town on a Saturday evening before the earthquakes, and it just felt rather sad – there just weren't enough people. Simone nodded and said, "Pre- earthquake there were about 7500 people living in central Christchurch, and I agree with you. I don't look back with rose tinted glasses on how things used to be. There were many good things, but it was also dying. We must keep in mind the 2011 earthquake delivered a tragic loss of life, and injury. For many people and families, the pain and loss is lifelong.

"Before the earthquakes there were also a lot of old buildings, and many of them were empty and quite derelict. The new Christchurch central city has been rebuilt from the underground up. There are so many warm dry energy efficient homes being built, the investment by Government in the public realm, and of course private developers are busy building and developing. We've seen at pace and scale the redevelopment of a city centre unlike anything experienced in New Zealand since Napier in 1931. Napier suffered the loss of 256 lives."



While the city was being rebuilt Simone and her family worked on improving their community park, Chesterfields. Sean, 9, and Frances, 6, paint the fence with neighbour Robert in November 2013.

I then asked Simone if she could be such an advocate for inner city living if she didn't personally have such a beautiful home. Simone thought for a minute and said, "Well I guess that's the mismatch, isn't it, between kind of the promise of what the inner city has to offer with all this beautiful infrastructure, beautiful public realm and anchor projects completed, in contrast with what the market is delivering in terms of housing, which is very narrow.

"It's the missed opportunity of the rebuild. We want a thriving residential community, and especially more families living in the city centre. We get a lot of babies and very young children living in these new small apartments, but when they grow bigger families move out to the suburbs for space. Our kids went to school in the four avenues at Christchurch East Primary School and it was one of the most ethnically diverse schools in Christchurch at the time.

"When you ask why don't you get families living in central Christchurch, there are various reasons. The houses are too expensive, the type of housing being built isn't family friendly, and when they need to start going to school that's when a lot of parents vote with their feet. New larger three-storey town houses are at a price that only the wealthy can afford. The decision makers are building for tourists, visitors and investors, but we need a thriving community."

Simone noted many people in central Christchurch don't have backyards, but her family does have a park down the street, called Chesterfields.



Frances, 10, and Sean, 13, lobby for the return of the yellow central city shuttle in 2017.

“How we got our park is due to the changes in the District Plan allowing developers to build apartments with smaller gardens. The quid pro quo was that the council would purchase strategic pieces of land in the mid-block for community green spaces. So in our case, the council bought strategically to provide a green site between Barbadoes St and Fitzgerald Ave.

“Families need these pocket parks for community gatherings, barbecues, children to run around, residents need these spaces to take their dogs, relax or exercise. It’s quite European; not everyone needs to have their own green space, if you have shared spaces that are maintained by the council.”

Simone feels her neighbourhood is an exemplar. “Chesterfields is a real community hub where the community comes together, they meet each other, and it is good for community building. This is good for community resilience when disasters happen or when people get sick – you know your neighbours.”

I asked Simone if she’d been to the city’s [new stadium](#) yet and she replied, “Yes, it’s very cool. I’m not actually a big fan of rugby, but if I was, it would be a great stadium because you’re so close to the action. Even though it seats up to 30,000, you can really see the people on the opposite side of the stadium, and of course it’s got a roof, so you won’t get wet any more.



One NZ Stadium at Te Kaha now dominates the central Christchurch skyline.

ALDEN WILLIAMS / THE PRESS

“When there’s a big event on, the city is absolutely buzzing, and that’s exciting for Christchurch people, as we haven’t had that for a long time. People are celebrating this new central city with everything that it has to offer.”

One thing that has really impressed Simone about the central city rebuild is the [Avon River Promenade](#). She was very sceptical when it was announced, as she thought it was “just sort of window dressing of something that was already there”.

“But they’ve spent \$120 million, prioritised pedestrians and cyclists, taken away cars, put in beautiful paving, light fittings, planting and created a wonderful unified flat path. It’s one of the best things I think that has been done in the central city. As residents, we use it all the time, and if I need to get across to the other side of town I won’t go on the roads, because I know the river promenade is safe and serene and you never know which neighbours you’ll bump into along the way.”

I asked Simone how often she uses her car and she replied, “Not often, except when we go to the supermarkets over on Moorhouse Ave.” I replied that’s great, but what a shame that there isn’t a supermarket closer. My apartment in Sydney is right beside a train station and has a supermarket on the ground floor. I don’t do big shops, but only buy when I need something, which makes day-to-day life very easy. I feel that at this stage the lack of a supermarket on her side of town is a shortcoming in the new emerging Christchurch.



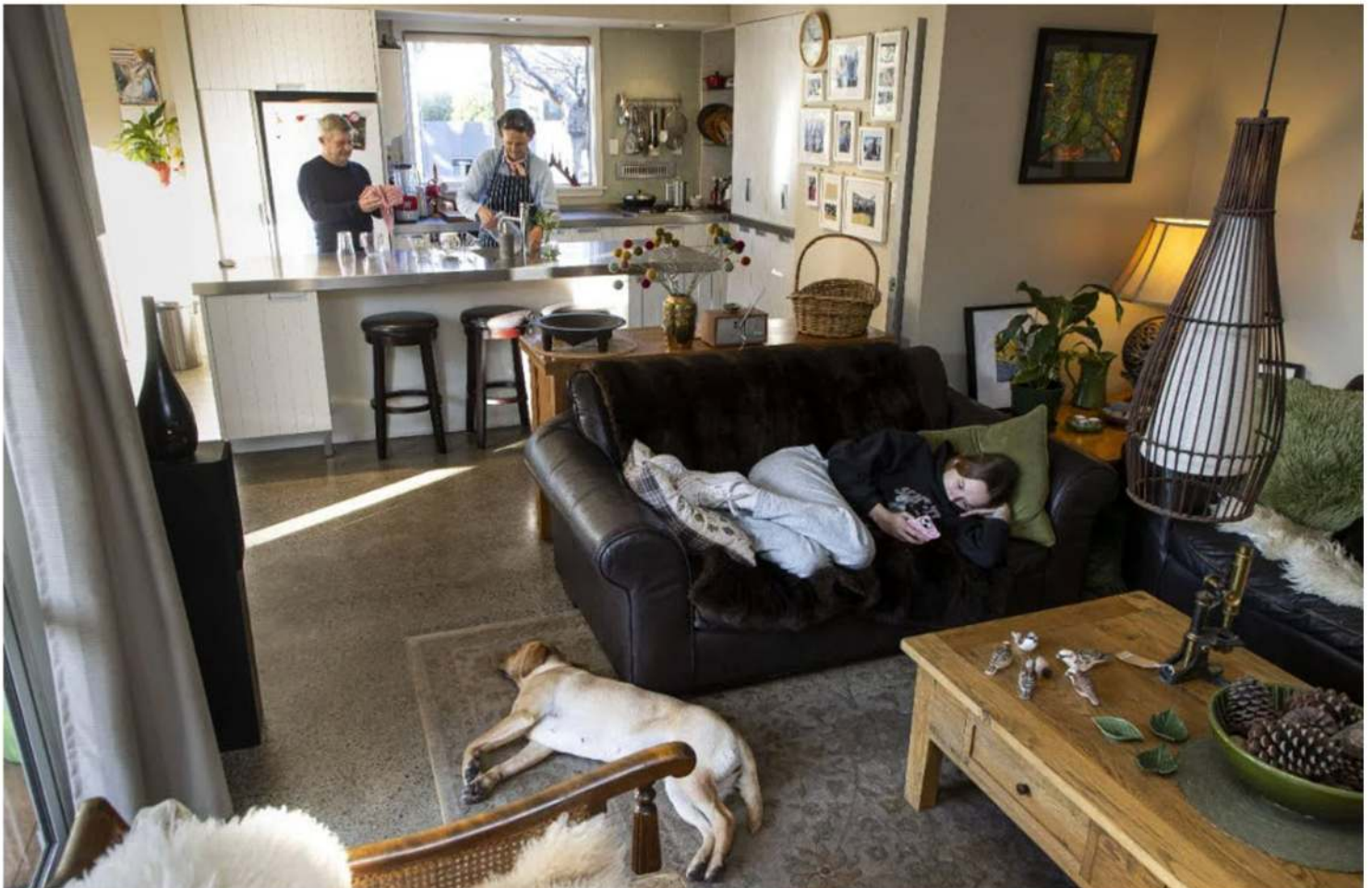
Simone, as spokesperson for Centennial Pool, wears her pool attire while speaking to the city council during a draft city plan hearing in 2011. Simone says she has no plans to go into politics herself.

Simone agreed and said it ties in with the [central city shuttle](#) - something the city had before the quakes. It operated for 14 years on a 4km loop with 21 stops, arriving every 10 minutes. It was free, so it was easy to hop on and off, and was like a “moving footpath”, carrying 1 million passengers a year, including tourists, shoppers, residents and office workers.

“A group of central city resident groups are lobbying for the return of the shuttle, as that would mean less congestion in the CBD, support foot traffic and economic activity, and the mass movement of people. Not everyone can use scooters, and not everyone can walk... It’s great to see the Christchurch City Council recently supported the return of the shuttle and, subject to public consultation, offering the possibility of full funding support.”

Simone cited a recent study that estimated it would cost \$900,000 to \$1.6 million to operate the shuttle each year, depending on the route. “Even ... Business Canterbury with 2800 members support running a trial too – it’s a no brainer,” she said.

I said to Simone that she’s such a convincing advocate for inner city living, had she thought about going into politics? Simone smiled, and said, “I focus my energy on the difference I can make from outside the tent and in our own immediate neighbourhood - that’s 100% fulfilling.”



Simone at home with Joe, Frances and dog Nala.

I asked Simone how she thought the inner city would be in 20 years' time? Simone thought for a few seconds and said, "Well hopefully with a lot more residents living here. It's just going from strength to strength. We've been through such bleak times, and the new city has risen. It's the most liveable city in New Zealand, it's a beautiful city, and I think the rest of the country are realising that now.

"The development I'm excited to see next is what I call '[the Catholic Quarter](#)', as it's the wow site of the city centre with a river frontage, north facing opposite the [Edmonds Band Rotunda](#) - I think this is the site to watch. [New Regent St is going to spill out onto the river](#), and I expect there will be bars and cafés – it will be so good."

Simone and I could have talked for much longer, but I needed to get my number 27 bus back to Bishopdale for my next interview. Our lively conversation continued as Simone kindly walked me to the bus stop on Kilmore St. On my 30-minute trip back to the suburbs I confess I did check out what real estate was on the market in central Christchurch, as Simone had totally convinced me that our city centre is just going to get better and better. It really might be wise to get in early, as central Christchurch is just beginning to blossom.

Enthusiastic Simone will be one of my guests at The Piano on Sunday, July 12 at 11am. Bookings essential.