

The Quiet Powerhouse

How Corina Sommerville found her life's vocation in community housing

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At 32, and no longer feeling at home in Auckland, Corina Sommerville got in her car and drove south, despite having never, she admits somewhat sheepishly, set foot in the South Island.

“As soon as I arrived in Central Otago, I was just blown away,” she says. “It spoke to my heart and I knew that I needed to come back.”

With fifteen years in retail banking behind her, she arranged a meeting with the Queenstown National Bank manager, and left her number. A month later something came up, she transferred to the Wakatipu, and hasn't looked back.

The Queenstown Lakes Community Housing Trust (QLCHT) exists because this district, for all its jaw-dropping beauty, has a housing problem that won't quit. The median house price sits at over \$1.6m, and the Trust's waiting list continues its upwards trajectory with over 1,550 eligible households – teachers, retail workers, nurses, tradies, hospitality staff and more – all seeking affordable, secure tenure housing. In the 2025 financial year, the Trust delivered 45 new homes, with dozens more under construction and in the consenting and design phases across multiple Wakatipu and Upper Clutha sites. Behind the numbers, behind the building sites and policy documents, sits a team of ten. In the heart of that team, looking after 230 households across the district, is Corina.

She describes herself, with characteristic understatement, as “the quiet one in the background.” Anyone who has dealt with QLCHT over the past decade would beg to differ.

Corina's route into community housing wound through a few unexpected places – retail banking, HR management, and a stint running administration teams across both mountains for NZSki. It was during maternity leave with her second child that Julie Scott, QLCHT's Chief Executive, came calling. The two had known each other from the ski fields, where they both worked.

“She approached me when I was on maternity leave, and initially I wasn't interested,” Corina recalls. “But she came around for a cup of tea, we talked about it, and were able to make it work in a way that I could put my family first.” That is, after all, the QLCHT way.

She started with ten hours a week in October 2015, when her eldest had just started school and her youngest was almost two. “We were the dynamic duo for quite a while,” she says of her early years alongside Julie.

“I cannot believe I have been here just over ten years now,” she says. “I'd never stayed in a role for longer than two or three years because I'm always looking for progression and challenge. But QLCHT offers me this and I love my work as much as I did the day I started.”

The people who walk through the Trust's door arrive with all kinds of circumstances, from retail workers who've heard about QLCHT from colleagues at the water cooler, to teachers who can't afford to live in the same town as the school where they work, and older residents whose housing has become precarious. Corina talks about

how word spreads through workplaces – one person gets housed, and five calls come in from their colleagues the next week. Some of the bigger retailers now invite QLCHT along for information sessions, so staff can listen and ask personalised questions.

“It’s amazing how many people come to us thinking assisted ownership is not within their reach,” she says. “We spend a lot of time helping people see what is possible. If someone’s unable to buy right now, we help them understand what they need to do to get there. It’s not a straight no. It’s a ‘not right now, but here’s how we’re going to get there.’”

Her banking background, it turns out, is a quiet superpower in these conversations. She understands how lenders think, what the numbers mean, and where the gaps lie. QLCHT’s programmes – from Social Housing through to Affordable Rentals and to the innovative Secure Home assisted ownership model – are designed so people can progress through them as their circumstances allow, and Corina is often the person helping them work out which door to try first.

“Our waiting list is not a fixed queue,” she says. “There are other considerations such as need, financial capacity and suitability. We match people with the right homes and the right programmes, so it doesn’t put them under additional stress. And of course they need to fit in with the community around them.”

Ask Corina about the difficult side and the lightness in her voice shifts. “There’s been many times where I’ve wanted to invite people to stay at my house. My husband would definitely have an opinion on that! But it’s hard to hear those stories and know that we don’t have an immediate solution, particularly where there’s kids involved.”

What about the positives? She pauses. “There are two ‘best parts’. There’s the response when you tell someone they’ve secured a home. Then there’s hearing firsthand the impact this home has had on them. It allows people to make plans – get married, start a family, have family visit from overseas, plant a vege garden. But behind that are all the people still waiting for their opportunity, because we simply can’t keep up with demand.”

The stories that keep her going are the long ones. She talks about a woman who came to the Trust a decade ago, on her own with two children, after her life had fallen apart. QLCHT provided housing, and from that stable base she requalified, returned to work, and built up her KiwiSaver. She’s now purchasing her own home through the Secure Home programme. “When she entered housing with us, her world had fallen apart,” Corina says. “That housing was the springboard for her to rebuild a life for herself.”

It’s a pattern QLCHT sees again and again, where stable housing changes everything else for the person, for their kids, and even for the wider whanau who no longer lie awake worrying. “We often talk to families who are worried about their loved ones,” Corina says. “And we hear from parents and siblings revealing how grateful they are that their loved ones are now doing okay.”

The Trust now has ten kaimahi, and Corina, who went full-time last year, is now focusing on building out two specialised units – one team focused on tenancy management and caring for QLCHT’s households, and the other on asset management for QLCHT’s growing portfolio of properties.

Outside of work, Corina’s instinct for organising has led her somewhere unexpected. When a women’s choir born out of COVID lost its leader, she stepped in. “I became an accidental choir leader. It was supposed to be temporary, but it turned into almost four years.” She led Songbirds choir, comprising 25 to 30 women singing pop songs from across the decades, in three or four-part harmonies. She would select songs ranging from Queen to Imagine Dragons, Abba to Lady Gaga, sourcing music, creating learning tracks, teaching the parts and

arranging performances. A highlight was in 2025 when Songbirds were invited to sing the New Zealand and Australian national anthems to the visiting Prime Ministers, at a private ANZAC memorial service.

She stepped back from Songbirds last year in order to go full time with the Trust, though she's still involved in community music. "It's my creative outlet," she says. "it's good for the soul and connects me to the community in other ways."

Her husband Mark, who she met on at Coronet Peak during her NZSki days, still works on the mountain; although no longer as a lift operator. These days he's the Assistant Ski Area Manager at The Remarkables. Classic Queenstown: everyone knows someone up the hill.

Community housing, at its best, works because the people behind it give a damn. Corina has spent a decade in a role that asks her to hold financial rigour and human compassion in the same hand, and she does it with the kind of quiet competence that doesn't seek out the spotlight.

"More than anything, I get a deeper sense of connection with my community," she says. "These aren't passing meetings. I become a part of their lives in some way. And it's just so lovely. It's a genuine privilege."

For more information about QLCHT housing programmes, visit qlcht.org.nz or call 03 450 1702.



Corina making the most of Queenstown life with her family.