

Taranaki is renowned for shipping out natural gas and dairy products, but it exports another product, as well – people. *Live* magazine is tracking some of them down, and in this article we find out:

Whatever happened to Susan Rogers-Allan

It was a moment model agent Lacey Ford probably took years to live down, the day she decided who should win the first New Zealand version of a fashion model quest called Face of the 80s.

It was 1983 in Auckland, and Lacey, daughter of renowned Ford Models owner Eileen Ford of New York, had come to New Zealand to help judge the final contestants.

She picked Kirsty Lay, a young Christchurch woman, who won a Ford contract, went on to become a highly successful international model and later an equally successful model agent in her home city.

But Lacey overlooked someone. A few weeks later, a runner-up in that inaugural contest went on to become New Zealand's first (and only) Miss Universe.

Nobody was more delighted than Susan Rogers-Allan. The former New Plymouth woman (born here in 1950) was a model agent in Auckland at the time. She'd spotted then-schoolgirl Lorraine Downes at a fashion event in Pakuranga and signed her up.

As one of the organisers of the first Face of the 80s (a photo-based competition run through NZ Woman's Weekly), Susan felt constrained from boosting her protégé's chances at the finals show. Lacey had the last say, although her mother later chipped in and offered Downes a contract at Ford.

Such a success boosted Susan Rogers-Allan's then fledgling career as a model agent, in a market dominated by such heavyweights as Maysie Bestall-Cohen, who ran most of the city's big fashion and beauty events.

There was something poignant about her discovery of Downes. At the same age, 17, Susan packed her bags and left New Plymouth to work in a bank in Wellington in 1967, leaving



Top: Susan Rogers-Allan this year at her Auckland home.
Above: Susan in 2011, with Kirsty Lay (left) and Lorraine Downes.



Susan with former NZ cricket captain Geoff Howarth in London in 2014.

behind what she now laughingly recalls was a Spotswood College school career “majoring in sport and bunking.”

The world of money held no great interest then (although bank training probably helped her later management skills), so she went to Auckland and entered the modelling world, starting her own agency in 1981.

Although her business flourished after that first Face of the 80s – which went on to become a televised annual event – a darker side of life, domestic violence, came to dominate her existence, leading to two broken marriages and Susan’s eventual decision to cash up what she had left and embark on an extended trip around the world.

She wound up staying with her sister, who was living in the south of France.

“I was running out of money by then. I’d been bludging off people for long enough, so I went out cleaning houses for nine Euros an hour. You gotta do what you’ve got to do.”

Then she got a job in Monaco as personal assistant to an American property developer. It lasted the next three

years and embedded a passion for real estate that endures to this day. During that time, she met a friend from Auckland, a real estate agent who said if Susan ever returned to New Zealand she should join up with her.

She came back in 2003 for a wedding, with plans to board a plane again straight afterwards to continue trekking. She was thwarted by outbreaks of SARS at places she had booked to visit (Japan and Canada), and the need for an operation to remove a benign cyst “half the size of a soccer ball”. So she stayed, and entered the real estate industry with her friend in 2004.

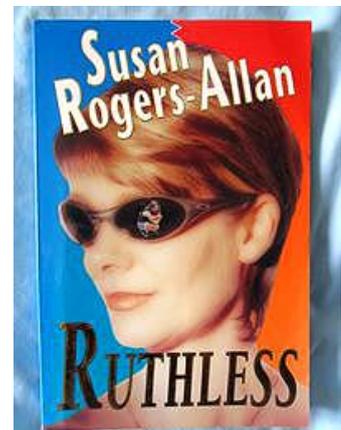
She’s been in the business now for more than a decade, with sporadic breaks to go and live in Australia to be with her ill father before he died. She was estranged from her mother, but returned for her funeral in New Plymouth in 2014.

These days she sells apartments off the plan: “I sell a dream. I sell something that doesn’t exist.” She does it well, by all accounts, and now owns a couple of apartments herself. When we talked to her, she was in the middle of completing a deal to buy another.

Her business is self-generating to a degree. With Auckland having gone through a period of white-hot price inflation, some of the people she first sold to are returning for advice on trading up.

She still dabbles in the glamour world occasionally. In 2007, she was director of the New Zealand Hat and Hair Art Awards, held at Timaru's Theatre Royal.

And the less-than-glamorous world of domestic violence, writ large in three books she published in the form of a two-part autobiography (*Ruthless* in 1996, and *Revelations* in 1998) and the third (*Manipulating the Diamond*, 1998) a novel based on life.



In April 2015 she featured on a panel hosted by NewstalkZB radio star Mike King that had psychotherapist Kyle MacDonald dissecting Susan's gruelling account of what she suffered in two marriages.

It's a brutal listen, and Susan herself hadn't played it back when we first called.

She had done so by the time our interview went ahead and said she was proud of herself for not breaking down as she recounted the physical beatings and mental torture she suffered: "It means I'm fully recovered now."

One of the great joys in her life is grand-daughter Taylor Susan, born to Susan's daughter Abby in the US, where Abby coaches a national soccer team.

Would she ever return "home" to New Plymouth? Unlikely. While she still has life-long friends here, and knows a couple of others coming back to the 'Naki, she sees few opportunities to work in her adopted trade.

The selling of dreams.



Susan and daughter Abby, a soccer coach in the US, in 2014.



Susan takes part in a talk-show session at NewstalkZB's Auckland studio in 2015. Mike King is at right.