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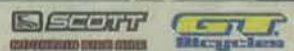
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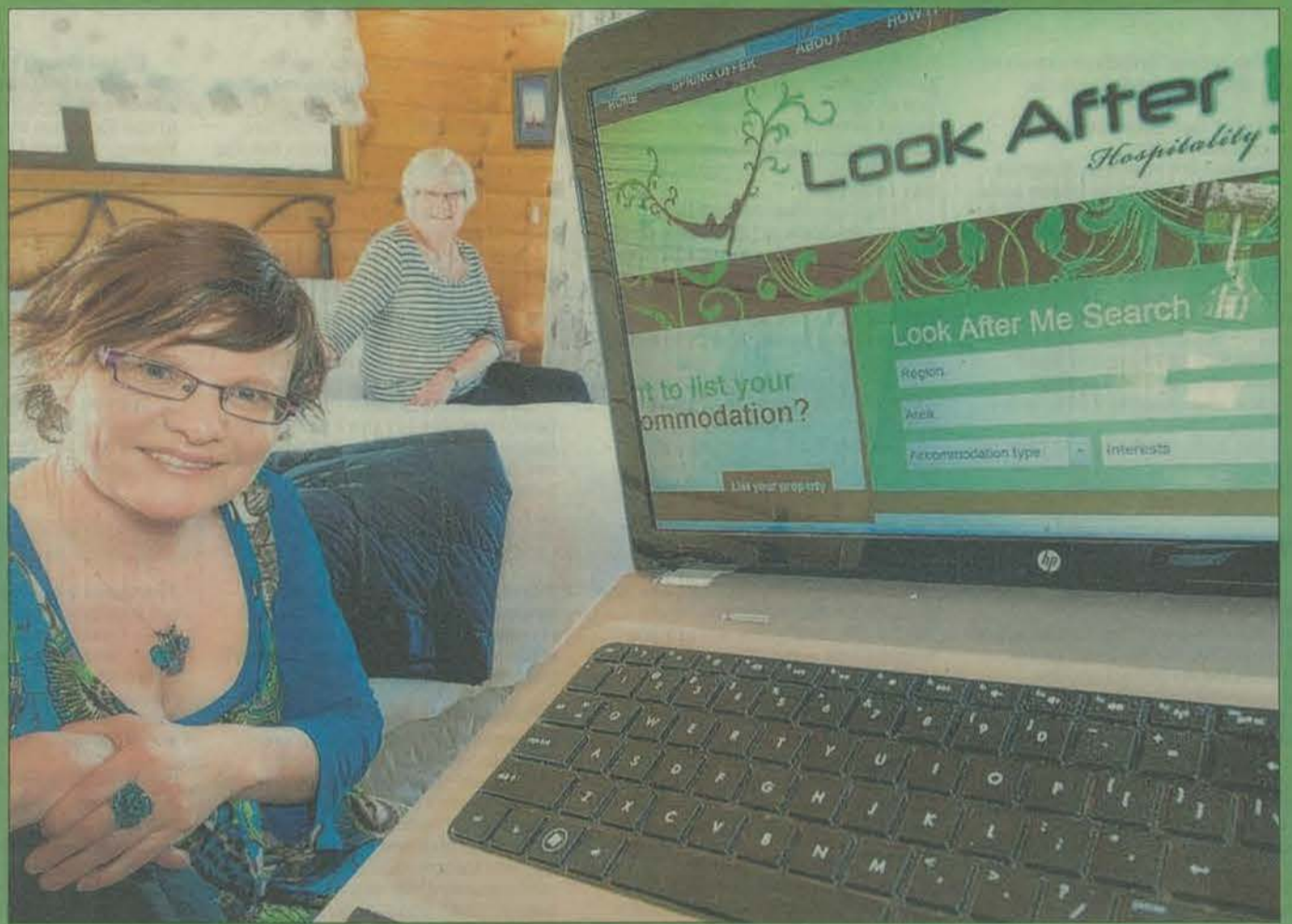


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HOST SITE: Rotorua Look After Me website founder Julia Charity (foreground) with Rotorua host Alison Struthers.

PICTURE: STEPHEN PARKER

Charity concept

By Cherie Taylor

Charity begins at home for Rotorua's Julia Charity who has set up a website linking international travellers with Kiwi hosts who open their homes and hearts to travellers — many donating their fees to charity.

The Rotorua scientist, writer and single mother of 5-year-old Alice, launched www.lookafterme.co.nz in Rotorua during the lead up to the Rugby World Cup 2011.

Many of the hosts who have signed up are giving the fees for guests staying in their homes to charities of their choice, Julia says.

"Charity definitely does begin at home," she says.

While people from Rotorua, Wellington, Christchurch, Auckland and Napier have signed up as hosts so far, she hopes members from charities like Rotorua's Rotary, Zonta and Quota clubs will open their homes to make money for their projects.

"They are just the type of people

we want to have open their homes and being hospitable to guests while making money for their clubs and charities at the same time," she says.

Women make perfect hosts, Julia says.

"Kiwi women have so much to offer," she says.

"This is a new concept in hospitality for Rotorua. It's the heart of tourism in New Zealand."

JULIA CHARITY
Look After Me website founder

"They have the energy to make beautiful homes.

"They appreciate what women like... [travelling] women get ideas for their own homes by staying in homes they like."

Women travelling alone will find it enjoyable staying with families who know the culture and area they live

in, Julia says.

Visitors can eat with families or make their own arrangements.

"It can be isolating staying in a hotel for some people," she says.

"This is a new concept in hospitality for Rotorua.

"It's the heart of tourism in New Zealand... this is a one on one connection with people... it's like home stays and farm stays with a much more personal touch."

She can see the concept taking off around New Zealand in the future.

"Sam Morgan started TradeMe with 20 items to sell. I believe there is a lot of interest in people opening up their homes and taking people in," she says.

"We are a match making service — we profile the hosts so there is no mismatching."

All hosts are vetted.

Rotorua's Alison Struthers and husband Tom are the first Rotorua couple to have signed up to open their home and hearts to international visitors.

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Looking after visitors boosts family

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Alison says it is fitting for them to take in international travellers — their family is international as their children have married foreign nationals.

"For us, it's about connecting with others.

"We have an international family and this extends our family," she says.

International visitors are always popping in to stay with the family.

Alison met a Swiss family and invited them to visit and three weeks later they turned up, she says.

Following the Japanese earthquake they took in a family they knew for six weeks.

They have also taken in Japanese visitors previously.

The couple are eager for foreign visitors to arrive at their home.

They have a special room set up for them.

"I was keen to become a host with Look After Me because Tom and I love meeting people.

"We see it as a way of passing a little bit of old-fashioned hospitality and local knowledge to travellers," she says.

Meanwhile, Julia is planning on setting up a similar website for the gay community.

■ For more information about hosting go to www.lookafterme.co.nz.