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# LOUISE NICHOLAS

Whistleblower's new chapter

**THE PRESS**



# A NEW CHAPTER

Louise Nicholas shocked New Zealand with her allegations of rape and abuse by serving police officers. After slogging through years of trials and inquiries, she has become an advocate for rape survivors – and even an adviser to senior police. **Tom Fitzsimons** reports ahead of the release of the new edition of her bestseller, *My Story*.



Last year, when the Roast Busters teen sex scandal was at its height, Louise Nicholas rang Police Commissioner Peter Marshall.

She was talking publicly about the case a lot; she had asked him to keep her in the loop about the investigation.

But before he could update her, he had to deal with a pressing problem.

"I'm in a bit of a pickle," he told her. He'd gone home to wash his shirts and found he had bought front-loader washing powder for a top-loading machine. The question was: could he use it?

"Yes, you can," Nicholas replied. "But if you ever find that you have top-loader washing powder and a front-loading washing machine, never under any circumstances use that powder. Otherwise you will have soap suds from arseholes to breakfast time."

"Louise, thank you so much," Marshall responded, presumably in stitches, before moving on to the reason for the phone call.

Nicholas tells the anecdote in the updated version of her book, *My Story*, which is published next week.

It's a perfect little moment, which illuminates plenty about Nicholas and her extraordinary journey over the past decade. There's the candour and the humour and the straight-shooting, which jump off the pages of her book – and have always been a part of her character.

As Phil Kitchin – investigation's editor for *The Press's* sister paper *The Dominion Post*, who first brought Nicholas' story to light – says, "Louise is still Louise. There's no airs or graces about her . . . She's still the same person she was, which I think is a pretty difficult thing for most people when they get that amount of media attention."

Then there's the unlikely fact that she's having this surreal domestic conversation with the police commissioner, only a handful of years after her allegations shook the police force to its foundations.

It's a mark of the rapport the pair

developed – it was an "absolute pleasure" to work with Marshall, she writes – and of senior police officers' willingness to make some progress on the institution's bleak history with rape and sexual abuse victims.

It's also a mark of how far Nicholas herself has come, from someone for whom the sight of the blue uniform was a visceral emblem of terror, to a person able to work with, advise and even joke with police officers.

"Who would ever have thought?"

says Kitchin, who worked with Nicholas for years as he reported her story. "I didn't think it would come to that either."

For anyone out of the country in 2004, Nicholas became a household name that year when she publicly accused three police officers, including then-assistant commissioner Clint Rickards, of raping her when she was a teenager.

In the resulting fallout, both a Commission of Inquiry and a massive criminal investigation were announced, the men faced trial, and other women came forward to make similar allegations against serving and former police officers.

Not everything went Nicholas' way – after a lengthy trial, the three officers were found not guilty of all 20 charges against them.

Yet two of the men, Brad Shipton and Bob Schollum, were convicted of another, similar, historic rape. Rickards resigned from the police ahead of internal disciplinary hearings. And the officer who first investigated Nicholas' claims of abuse by police officers, John Dewar, was found guilty of four charges of attempting to obstruct or defeat the course of justice, and was sentenced to more than four years in prison.

The Commission of Inquiry culminated in wide-ranging criticism of police behaviour, procedures and handling of sex offences.

The police fully accepted the report's 47 recommendations, which have to be implemented by 2017.



The Dewar trial marked the end of an exhausting, endless period for Nicholas – a time of huge public exposure and repeated court appearances, of constantly retelling her shocking, traumatic story.

At the end of it all, Kitchin wondered if she might want to take a break. “When things were dying down, and it [Nicholas working to prevent sexual abuse or assault] was being mooted by people working in that field, I remember cautioning her against it, and saying, ‘Louise, you’ve been through a hell of an ordeal, so’s your family – don’t you want to just take some time to chill?’ ”

He knew that the news media could turn on people, especially those in the public eye frequently. He thought she might become a “rent-a-quote” figure, but he was wrong, he says.

“I think she’s handled it very adroitly. She’s got a very good understanding of when [to talk publicly] . . . I think she’s been very, very good at working quietly in the background.”

In the book, Nicholas explains how her new role developed in the years after she made her allegations public. Her profile saw a torrent of other women contacting her to share their own stories of surviving rape and sexual abuse.

Unwilling to ignore them, and angered by the difficulties of the justice system for rape victims, she became a de facto advocate for many women, sometimes paying her own way to travel to different parts of the country and support them.

After months of that, she writes, Rape Prevention Education executive director Kim Gregory told her she couldn’t keep up such a volume of work without any pay.

“She was right,” Nicholas writes. “We were on the bones of our arse, but, my goodness, it was so hard not to try to help those who felt they had nowhere else to go. People had been holding on to stuff for years, and with my stuff being so public, it was like I became the door they could open to allow their healing to begin.”

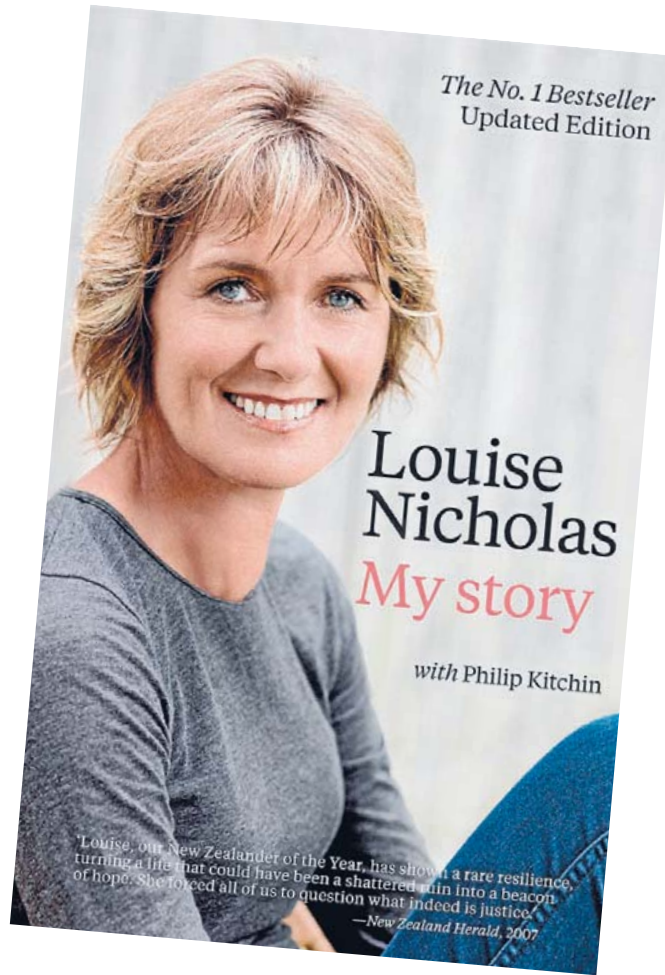
After months of scrabbling around for funding, Nicholas eventually landed a job as a survivor advocate.

“Does that mean we gotta shift to Auckland, ‘cause I’m not,” her husband Ross told her. No, she said – she’d only have to go up there from Rotorua some of the time.

His doubts had some merit – Nicholas found Auckland a gulp, with its maddening traffic and culinary novelties. “I had never heard of

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PHILIP KITCHIN,  
 co-author of *My Story*





avocados let alone tasted them, never heard of hummus which they use like butter, and salads with funny things in them appear to be the main dietary thing going."

But the job was a revelation, and Nicholas has taken to it with gusto, supporting victims around the country. As trials loom, she is always asked two questions: "Will he go to jail?" and "Will the jury believe me or him?"

She responds by saying that the process can be brutal, but it can also be healing – "putting the person who harmed you in that room and making him listen to how he has harmed you".

Once they're in the courtroom, she tells victims, you have a 50:50 chance. And besides, "regardless of the outcome, you will walk away knowing you have done the best you can, you have spoken your truth, you have held your head high and you have made your abuser accountable in a public arena".

Nicholas has also taken her advocacy role into the public sphere, speaking at national sexual violence conferences, giving her views on trial processes to the Law Commission, sparring with Cabinet ministers. (Michael Cullen and Nick Smith both earn her ire in the book – former attorney-general Cullen for ruling Nicholas and Judith Garrett out of the Commission of Inquiry because their cases were again being investigated by police; and Smith for presiding over tough new ACC criteria [later reversed] for sexual abuse victims to be able to receive counselling.) She's even helped train senior police detectives.

The last task involved talking for an hour at the police college to about 20 police officers. Even though she'd agreed to do it, the idea had her "totally crapping myself".

But it worked out well, she writes. "The one thing that I wanted those coppers to know, which was my own biggest lesson, was that it wasn't the New Zealand police who hurt me all those years ago, it was individuals within it. All I asked for was for all the good coppers out there to not tolerate any bad behaviour from their colleagues – to stand up, step up and help make a difference."

**Y**et even as Nicholas' life took on a new trajectory, it was filled with new hardships. Just before the Dewar trial, her brother, Kevin, died suddenly. Her mother, Barbara, died of cancer in 2008 and her best friend, Angela, died of an asthma attack in 2011. She honours each of them in the book.

She's also faced a small amount of suspicion and anger in the community. During one talk at Otago University, for



**Bob Schollum, top, and Brad Shipton, above, were found not guilty of Nicholas' rape, but they were later convicted of another historic rape.**



**John Dewar – the officer who first investigated Nicholas' claims of abuse by police officers – was found guilty of attempting to obstruct or defeat the course of justice.**



**Clint Rickards – then assistant commissioner – was found not guilty of raping Nicholas.**

instance, a young man put up his hand and said "You're a liar!" It turned out to be Dewar's son, she writes.

"I felt so sorry for the poor little bugger, I really did. He pretty well got slammed by the audience but I stood my ground and told him that he was entitled to his thoughts and I accepted that he was standing by his father."

Mostly, Kitchin says, it feels like doubts about Nicholas have subsided. The whole case has a different sort of a feel to it now than it did in 2004, or 2007.

"At the time, there were still a lot of pent-up feelings and emotions . . . There were more doubts back then than what there probably are now.

"It was such an enormous series of events and such an enormous media story . . . For anyone in the midst of it, you just got caught up in something that at times felt out of control."

Kitchin, who won a raft of awards for his reporting on the case, said it was probably the biggest story of his career. "There were so many twists and turns to it. I always had the feeling that more people would come forward, but I had no idea of the scale of it."

He's kept up a firm friendship with Nicholas, although he doesn't have the day-to-day contact he had with her during the years he worked on the story.

Despite the publicity and the inquiries, Kitchin says not nearly enough has changed in the justice system for rape and sexual abuse victims. Most people report serious crime, he says, but that's just not true of rape victims.

"It's still very difficult to get people who have been sexually abused or raped to come forward and make a claim – and that in itself speaks volumes."

Politicians have paid lip service to pursuing big reforms, but haven't followed them through, he says. "At the time, there was probably a lot more hope that there would be those changes."

Nicholas, for her part, calls Kitchin a "scruffy bugger" and acknowledges him at the end of her book by saying she's not sure "whether I want to thank Phil Kitchin or shoot him". (In seriousness, she also says she'll be forever grateful to him for helping her to seek justice.)

Nicholas agrees that the work for rape survivors is far from finished.

There's a moment in her book that happened soon after the trial of Rickards, Shipton and Schollum, when the "not guilty" verdicts were still weighing heavily on her. Her letterbox was overflowing with cards and letters of support. Among them was one from an 86-year-old woman who had been raped as a 16-year-old. She told Nicholas



Louise Nicholas and husband Ross in 2004, the year she publicly accused three police officers – Clint Rickards, Brad Shipton and Bob Schollum – of raping her when she was a teenager. Photo: MAARTEN HOLL/FAIRFAX NZ

**'The one thing that I wanted those coppers to know, which was my own biggest lesson, was that it wasn't the New Zealand police who hurt me all those years ago, it was individuals within it. All I asked for was for all the good coppers out there to not tolerate any bad behaviour from their colleagues.'**

LOUISE NICHOLAS

that her testimony had given her the strength to tell her own family what had happened to her.

"This was when I suddenly saw the reason I was put on this earth," Nicholas writes. "I'd been to hell and back for a reason. My fight for personal justice had now become a fight for all who found themselves in my situation, and I was now more determined than ever to see that changes are made within our legal and justice systems."

The updated edition of Louise Nicholas' *My Story* (Random House, \$39.99) is available from July 4.