



After spending a year in an American jail, activist Moana Cole decided to fight the fight as a lawyer

JOHN MCCOMB

From courtroom to prison and back

Moana Cole knows a thing or two about the law – she's not only recently qualified as a barrister and solicitor but she once spent a year in an American jail.

Moana, best known for her part in an attack by peace activists on the Griffiths Air Force base in New York 12 years ago, is perhaps

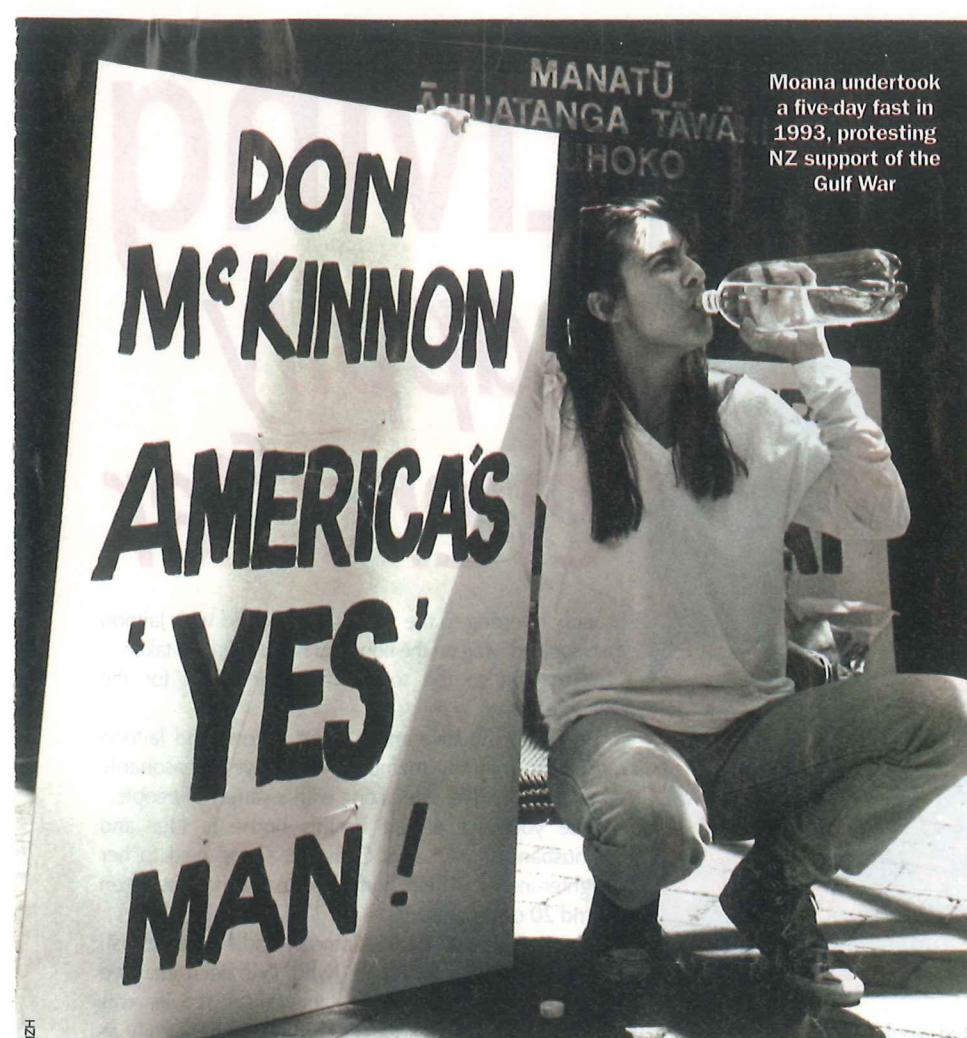
Christchurch's most prominent peace protester. While today, as an officer of the court, she is obliged to carry out her duties in a professional manner, Moana continues her regular anti-war vigils outside the American base in the Christchurch suburb of Harewood.

She's so dedicated that on the afternoon of her admission as a lawyer she was at Hare-

wood standing up for what she believes in.

How Moana moved from one side of the law to the other is a story of determination and idealism.

Moana, born in Christchurch but raised in Queensland, is from a political family. Her mother was an activist in the Australian Labour Party and campaigned for greater Aboriginal



rights. "My parents always had strong social justice consciences," she recalls.

"They were very active and both members of Amnesty International. We used to have our phone tapped, while my mother used to regularly get abusive phone calls. As a result I grew up going to meetings and rallies. It was all part of my formulation as a person. I never found it strange – it was all very normal for me."

Moana became active in the peace movement in the last year of her first stint of university study, when she protested against nuclear ship visits.

Her activism increased when she travelled to America in the late 1980s and spent three years with the Catholic Workers' Movement, an organisation that promotes living in communities, co-operative work and pacifism.

Moana also became involved in the Ploughshare's Movement, an organisation started 23 years ago when eight people broke into a manufacturing plant in America and damaged a warhead. The organisation is based on Christian principles and believes people will only be able to live in peace together when states have been disarmed of weapons.

Hence on the eve of the first Gulf War, Moana and three others entered Griffiths Air

Force base on the basis that they had a responsibility to put their bodies between weapons and their intended targets.

"Two of my colleagues went to one end of the runway, where the B52 was," Moana recalls. "They cut through the fences and walked very openly to the plane that was on five-minute status, with its engine going. They were able to pour blood on the plane, which was symbolic of the damage it was going to do. Meanwhile a colleague and I went to the other end of the runway, in a symbolic attempt to prove that what the plane was doing wouldn't end here but end with the death of a lot of men, women and children. We also sprayed a political and religious message on the runway."

Moana and her colleagues were arrested after two hours by the military police and eventually charged with conspiracy and destruction of government property. After a high-profile trial the protesters were each sentenced to one year's imprisonment.

It was in jail in Pennsylvania that Moana

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became motivated to study law. "It was a great eye-opener for me. I stayed in a county jail that was designed for stays of no longer than 48 hours.

"I saw some incredibly sad things in jail. There was a lack of legal representation for so many prisoners. There weren't a lot of lawyers hanging around to make sure that civil liberties of people were looked after. I believed then and believe now that everyone is entitled to quality legal representation."

Although Moana's desire to study law grew during her time in jail, she says the seeds were sown much earlier.

"I think studying law was at the back of my mind since high school," she recalls. "My heroes were people like Gandhi and Nelson Mandela and they had both been lawyers so I thought that law by its nature attracted passionate people who were interested in justice."

"What law meant to me really struck home when I went to court for the first time. When the judge sentenced me, I said something like, 'That's just not just.' And the judge said to me, 'This court is not about justice Ms Cole; it is about the law.'"

After being released from jail, Moana returned to Christchurch and started up a Catholic Workers' House, practising her Christian and political beliefs more than ever.

Now a mother of one, she admits the study of law has not come naturally to her. "It's been a real challenge and while in some ways it's gone hand-in-hand with my peace work, it's sometimes been difficult combing the two."

"During the latest Iraqi War, I went on a five-day fast and that made studying difficult!"

Moana says being admitted as a barrister and solicitor last month was, for her, a great achievement.

"It was an important thing for me to achieve in an academic sense. It's nice to now have that kind of path open for me to follow and to achieve the dream I'd had for so long which really inspired me during my time in jail."

Now studying for a Master's, Moana says her motivation remains the same as it was when she was wallowing in her prison cell – to be an advocate.

"I think there are very few people who have done law who have had some prison experience. Once you have that kind of experience, you have an insight and an understanding of how isolated prisoners are."

"I just hope I can continue to help people and make a difference. For me it's important to have day-to-day contact with the less privileged in society. That's a meaningful place for me to be."

Todd Nicholls