The sixth of a family of 14, he spent every minute he wasn’t at school working in his family’s coconut, coffee and pineapple plantations in the tiny Malaysian village of Senggarang, sharing beds with his siblings. Back then he was familiar with poverty and its close cousins, hardship and limited choice. Many thought it inconceivable that a boy with calloused hands would end up healing so many. "People scoffed at the idea that a poor boy from a plantation could become a doctor. "I didn’t speak English, but my parents believed in me and always encouraged me," says Swee Tan.

His long and winding road to medical acclaim started in Melbourne, where he juggled lectures with rising at 4:00am to clean floors in a supermarket. Prior to that, he had spent a year working in a bookshop in Singapore to save enough money to attend university.

His tenacity and desire for success saw him complete plastic surgery training in Lower Hutt and, following stints in Oxford and Boston, he and his wife and two daughters returned to New Zealand in 1995 and various roles including the Director of Plastic Surgery, Director of Surgery and the Director of the Centre for the Study and Treatment of Vascular Birthmarks (Hutt Valley DHB). In 1998 he founded the Reconstructive Plastic Surgery Research Foundation which established the Gillies McIndoe Research Institute, of which he is the Executive Director.

Since then, the father of three’s mantelpiece has been piled high with accolades including the Royal honour of The New Zealand Order of Merit for Medicine and the Wellingtonian of the Year (Science & Technology Award).

Ask Swee Tan why he brought his considerable talents to New Zealand and he’ll tell you it’s all about people. "New Zealanders are so accepting and interested. And, happily, most appear to be colour blind!"

Swee Tan wanted to become a New Zealand citizen so he could “give back to a country that has adopted me and provided me with so many wonderful opportunities”.

Ironically, he received his citizenship at the New Zealand High Commission in London, where he was living in 1993. "It was a little odd to receive my citizenship in a foreign land thousands of miles away. But I was very excited and proud to be a New Zealander and so happy that day to swear allegiance to this country and the Queen."
So passionate was Somali refugee Khadra Abdille about becoming a New Zealand citizen, she worked two cleaning jobs to pay the citizenship fee for her father, two brothers and herself.

"I've felt like a Kiwi since the day I arrived here five years ago," says Khadra.

"To be able to tell people, 'I am legally a New Zealander' is the most exciting thing in the world."

She's smiling now but life hasn't always been kind to the 25-year-old.

Khadra was born in Mogadishu, the youngest of four. Her Muslim family fled to Yemen when the Somali Civil War was raging in the early 90s. They spent three years in a refugee camp before returning to Mogadishu.

By then, the conflict had largely worn itself out but Khadra says the sound of gunfire was a familiar soundtrack to her early life.

A few years later, they once again packed up their lives and moved to a refugee camp in Nairobi.

"It was better than the previous refugee camp but it wasn't a place we could call home."

Khadra spent two years perfecting her English and recalls helping her father at night as he filled out the paperwork needed to apply for refugee entry to New Zealand. She'd heard of the country through her half-sister, who had earlier moved to Wellington and encouraged the family to join her. It took five years, but they finally made it here.

As a "stranger in a strange land", Khadra says she didn't know what to expect.

"But I've never seen a country where the people are so friendly and helpful. As soon as I arrived, I wanted to become one of these people!"

Khadra spent two years perfecting her English before starting work, first as a housekeeper at a large hotel and then as a cleaner. She currently works from 9am-5pm in an office before going home to cook for her father and two brothers (who also work in the cleaning industry) and then catching the bus to her second 7-11pm cleaning job.

She was so keen to gain New Zealand citizenship, she became well known at the citizenship office where she was politely told she had to wait five years to become a citizen.

"They told me I could start the process four months before my five year anniversary, so exactly four months before that date, I filed my application!"

Khadra, her brothers and her father became New Zealand citizens in 2014 at a citizenship ceremony held at Te Papa Museum of New Zealand in Wellington. She says it was a beautiful ceremony.

"But there were so many people becoming citizens that day I was worried I would be late to my second job!"

It's the first passport Khadra has ever had.

"It makes me feel strong and proud to be a New Zealander and to have this passport. I don't know what life will bring but I'll always have this passport."

She's about to get good use from it too – Khadra and her brother have a year's travel planned to the US, Europe and Africa.
Mark Du Plessis didn’t clap eyes on a horse until he was eight years old. But that didn’t stop the Zimbabwean from becoming one of New Zealand’s top jockeys.

“I grew up in Kariba, north of Harare, which is famous for having the world’s third biggest freshwater lake,” says Mark. “The nearest horse was probably 300km away.”

His parents – who owned a boat marina – were also not from a racing background. When a family friend suggested Mark had the right height and build to be a jockey, he visited his first race course. The rest, as they say, is history.

At 14, he started an apprenticeship with the Zimbabwe Jockey Academy, graduating five years later with the top apprenticeship title. At the time there were only two racecourses in Zimbabwe and after 18 months, Mark was keen for more overseas experience.

“But travelling on a third-world passport meant it was difficult getting a work visa.”

Fortunately, a contact helped him to come to New Zealand when he was 22.

“I’d never been overseas before, but as soon as I arrived in Cambridge, I loved it. There was no future for me in Zimbabwe and I’m so grateful to New Zealand for giving me the opportunity to develop my career.”

That includes wins in prestigious races such as the Auckland Cup, NZ Oaks and New Zealand’s richest race, the Karaka Million, which he won in 2014. It also opened the door for a five-year stint in Singapore, where a career highlight was winning the Singapore Gold Cup on a New Zealand horse owned by, ironically, the contact who had brought him to New Zealand (“It was a great way to pay him back”).

Since then, the 38-year-old has clocked up numerous frequent flier miles riding in Hong Kong, Dubai and Melbourne.

The latter is where he achieved something he never imagined as a child growing up in the Zimbabwean bush: riding in the Melbourne Cup in 2004, 2009 and 2010.

Mark says it was a long process to gain New Zealand citizenship.

“The issue was that I was riding overseas so much, I was never able to accumulate the continuous time needed to qualify for citizenship. But a friend helped me work through the paperwork and I finally realised I did qualify!”

That was in mid-2013 and by November, Mark had joined his parents who immigrated to New Zealand in 2005 and had already become citizens. His citizenship ceremony was in Papakura, close to the rural Karaka lifestyle block where Mark and Vicki, his Kiwi partner, live with their three children – Isabella (13), Daniel (12) and 18-month-old son Cruze.

“There were about 300 people becoming citizens that day and I was overwhelmed by the whole experience. To be able to say ‘I’m a New Zealand citizen’ was pretty emotional.”
Imad Ballo
Originally from Syria

Imad Ballo flings the word ‘peaceful’ around a lot. But that’s as it should be for a man who has seen his homeland ripped apart by war.

“New Zealand is such a beautiful, peaceful country,” says Imad. “Coming here changed my life and there’s nowhere else in the world I’d rather live.”

Born in Aleppo, one of six children, Imad left Syria when he was one.

“My father was an Imam (religious leader) and he was sent to Malta as the Head of the Islamic Mission there.” Four years later his father’s job moved the family again – this time to Cyprus.

School, however, wasn’t for him. “I love cars and motorbikes and spent most of my time working on them.”

Or he was out on the water, where Imad taught water sports to tourists, including a group of Kiwis who impressed him with talk of their country.

It was also where the 40-year-old met his first wife, a Wellingtonian, whom he followed to New Zealand in 1994. Imad spent a year working as a mechanic but returned to Syria when the marriage ended.

Five years later Imad says the political situation in Syria saw him longing for the peaceful suburbs of New Zealand.

“Tensions were starting to build and I thought things might turn bad there.”

Imad returned to Wellington in 2000 and although it was 19 months before his second wife Hamida and his children (daughter Widad, now 16, and son Mohammed, now 13) were allowed to join him, he was determined to work hard and build a future for his family.

“I didn’t have any formal qualifications and very little money but I went to a garage and told them I’d work two days for free to show that I could work as well as a Kiwi.”

They took him up on his offer and as well as proving himself, Imad completed the four year automotive technician apprenticeship in just two years.

Fast forward to 2014 and Imad now owns a house and his own garage, ISpeed Motors, in Wellington’s Hopper Street. He and Hamida also have two “Kiwi kids” – Imran (11) and Hannah (15 months).

He became a New Zealand citizen in 2011, not only for passport reasons (“Although the New Zealand passport is the best passport in the world. I never get stopped at airports now!”) but because he is a proud Kiwi.

“New Zealand has given me so much and let me work hard to get a nice house and a good business. I never imagined my life could be this good.”

“Coming here changed my life and there’s nowhere else in the world I’d rather live.”

Photo: Simon Woolf
Inge Woolf
Originally from Austria

One of Inge Woolf’s earliest memories is of her neighbours hanging swastikas from their windows in Vienna’s Jewish district.

“I was three years old and can remember peeking over the balcony to see these people we thought were our friends turning against us,” says the matriarch of the well-known Woolf photography family.

Thanks to her father’s Czech passport, Inge and her parents were able to flee to Prague in 1938 where they spent a year getting their papers together to emigrate to England. As an additional precaution, they also underwent a ‘conversion ceremony’ to renounce Judaism before they moved to London, where Inge’s mother made and sold children’s clothing at Portobello Road Market and Inge did clerical work for a Bond Street department store.

“Of course we were only pretending to give up our Jewish religion but we did what we had to do to survive. So many Jewish people ended up in the camps and were killed. We were really lucky.”

When Inge speaks to visitors at the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand, where she is the Director, she always tells them, “Something good came out of all the bad – I became a New Zealander”.

Inge and her mother arrived in Auckland when she was 23, shortly after her father died. Two of her uncles were already living here.

“They said New Zealand was a great country, it was peaceful and people didn’t really know what a Jew was”!

Not long after, Inge moved to Wellington to take up a job at a department store and met her husband, the late photographer Ronald Woolf, who had immigrated to New Zealand from London when he was seven.

“Ron gave me a 35mm camera as a wedding present and I joined him in the business. He would do the studio shots and darkroom work and I would do all the informal wedding photography as well as the administration and sales.”

Inge juggled work with raising two children – daughter Deborah and son Simon, who now runs Photography by Woolf – but gradually eased out of the business when her husband was killed in a helicopter crash in 1987. Long active in the voluntary sector, she took up the role of Director of the Holocaust Centre when it was founded in 2007.

“I wanted to find something I’m as passionate about as photography.”

The 80-year old grandmother says she will always be grateful to New Zealand for giving her a new life, husband, family and career.

Citizenship seemed like the “natural thing to do” and she became a New Zealand citizen in 1960 at a ceremony presided over by then Mayor, Frank Kitts.

“I didn’t become a citizen for a passport but because I felt secure and wanted to show my commitment to New Zealand.”

“I didn’t become a citizen for a passport but because I felt secure and wanted to show my commitment to New Zealand.”

Photo: Simon Woolf

“I didn’t become a citizen for a passport but because I felt secure and wanted to show my commitment to New Zealand.”

Photo: Simon Woolf
Candy Wu Zhang
Originally from China

Were it not for a work trip to New Zealand in 1998, Candy Wu Zhang would probably still be living in China.

When Candy Wu Zhang was in her 20s she was, she admits, “living the dream”.

“I was the entertainment journalist and producer for a major Chinese TV station in Guangzhou and got to travel around China and Hong Kong to interview stars such as Jackie Chan. It was a great life!”

The 42-year-old beat thousands of others to land the job straight out of university.

“NZ Trade & Enterprise invited us to New Zealand to film stories to attract Chinese students to study here. It was my first time out of China and I came here for ten days.”

Now resident in Christchurch, Candy says it was a defining experience.

“It was as though a door had opened in front of me. New Zealand is a beautiful country and everyone was so friendly. I immediately felt comfortable here.”

Roll forward two years and Candy was back.

“I couldn’t cope with the fast pace of China anymore. I knew I wanted to live in New Zealand, so I took six months leave from my job, got a student visa and came back to Christchurch to learn English.”

Her father, a doctor and university lecturer in China, couldn’t believe what she’d done.

“He didn’t understand how I could give up a good job and salary. But I was tired of working 24/7 and I wasn’t happy.”

Ironically, Candy’s elderly parents have now joined her, husband Regan and their two children Sean (5) and Ellise (3) in Christchurch.

“They saw how much I loved New Zealand and how we have made a home here.”

Candy, who gave up journalism to become a public servant, became a New Zealand citizen in 2004, a decision prompted by a desire to be “more secure than those people I see going back and forth between New Zealand and China”.

“I didn’t want to have a foot in both countries, I wanted to have a permanent base here and to feel as though I belonged. It was hard giving up my Chinese passport and I’m still proud of my ethnicity, but becoming a citizen was about committing to this country which has given me so much.”
Flashback to 1974: Tolufale (Fara) Leasuasu has just moved to Wellington from her native Samoa and tags along with her foster mother who is applying for New Zealand citizenship.

“The fee back then was only $10,” recalls Fara. “My adopted mother encouraged me to apply but in those days you had to give up your passport if you became a New Zealand citizen, so I refused.”

Eighteen years later, when Fara eventually got around to becoming a citizen, it cost close to $400! “I should have done it when my adopted mother did it. It would have saved me a lot of money,” laughs the 62-year-old.

“It’s not overstating it to suggest that moving from a remote village of less than 1,500 to Wellington in 1972 was something of a culture shock. “For an 18-year-old, coming to a new country and a new home and getting used to the cold was very hard. But I knew that I’d have a better future in New Zealand, so I just got on with it.”

Having worked in administration for a Samoan hotel, Fara was keen to land an office job. When she couldn’t, she found work in the Feltex carpet factory. “The pay was good and I was able to send money back to my siblings in Samoa.”

She did so well at her next job, a rest home, that the nurses there suggested she follow their lead. And so Fara did, moving into Wellington Hospital’s nursing quarters where she spent two years working towards her enrolled nursing qualifications. Not long after, she met husband Taamilo through the Samoan Congregational Church and the couple moved to Lower Hutt.

Five children followed – now aged between 30 and 40 – and these days there are also five grandchildren.

Fara has nursed everywhere from the Lower Hutt Public Hospital to Hutt Primary Health and, for the last five years, has worked as the Pacific Health Facilitator and Adviser at the Hutt Valley DHB.

The decision to become a New Zealand citizen followed her realisation that she was the only one in her family without a New Zealand passport.

“All my children are New Zealanders and my husband became a citizen when I was away on holiday in Samoa. It was a bit of a hassle applying for a re-entry permit every time I flew back into New Zealand, so I decided it was time to become a citizen.”

Fara remembers leaving the Lower Hutt Mayor’s Chamber, where her citizenship ceremony was hosted by then Mayor John Terris, with a “greater sense of belonging”.

“Getting that bit of paper made me feel more secure. Before, it felt like I had a foot in both countries but after becoming a New Zealand citizen, I really felt like I belonged here.”
Federico Monsalve
Originally from Colombia

Federico Monsalve is no stranger to being pulled over at airports and having his luggage searched.

“...You can do a lot more with a lot less in New Zealand. Compared with every country I’ve ever been to, it’s easily one of the best places to live.”

But that’s what happens when you travel on a Colombian passport, says the Auckland magazine editor.

“I once flew into Australia and was the only one who got pulled out of the arrivals line. When I rolled my eyes, the immigration officer told me I should get a new passport!”

And so the 38-year-old did – becoming a New Zealand citizen in 2004, five years after following a former girlfriend to Wellington.

It was, says Federico, “love at first sight”.

“Kiwis are so incredibly nice and the standard of living is amazing. You can do a lot more with a lot less in New Zealand. Compared with every country I’ve ever been to, it’s easily one of the best places to live.”

That's a bold claim, given Federico has more stamps in his New Zealand passport than most.

Born in Medellin and raised in Bogota, Federico was 15 when his accountant father moved the family to Los Angeles. Despite not knowing a word of English, he picked up the language quickly and ended up at Boston University where he studied literature and philosophy.

But the lure of journalism proved too much and after a couple of years Federico was back on the west coast, working on the Los Angeles Magazine and La Opinion, a Spanish-language newspaper.

He met his former Kiwi partner in Los Angeles and came to New Zealand in 1999 for a “short visit”.

“I never went home! As well as the great lifestyle, I was attracted by what New Zealand was doing politically and its liberal ways. Our anti-nuclear stance, our welfare and health systems ... in many ways, we are a moral beacon in the world.”

Since then, he’s worked, variously, as an apple picker and waiter, studied English literature at Victoria University and publishing at Whitireia Polytechnic, edited the capital’s now defunct City Voice newspaper, written for publications such as North & South magazine, the New Zealand Listener and the New Zealand Herald, and recently became editor of Interior magazine.

He's also squeezed in two stints overseas: one working for the New Zealand Embassy in Buenos Aires and three years in Mexico where he completed a film degree.

Now married to Kate, a Kiwi, and living in Auckland’s North Shore with their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Sofia, Federico says he’s happy he “put down roots” in New Zealand.

His decision to become a New Zealand citizen was borne of a desire to become “part of a larger family”, and he describes his citizenship ceremony, held at Auckland’s Aotea Centre, as “incredibly touching”, particularly the Māori waiata.

“When you become a citizen, you feel more a part of the community. I’m from a totally different place but at that moment, getting my citizenship, New Zealand truly felt like home. Now, whenever I’m overseas, I’m proud to mention where I live and to show my New Zealand passport. My family and friends back in Colombia are jealous of me and the freedom I have to travel without hassle. I certainly never get stopped at airports now!”
When Chuni Vallabh arrived in New Zealand in 1972, he had $8 in his pocket and a desire to make this foreign land his home.

Forty-two years later, the telecommunications engineer admits it’s the best thing he’s ever done. “I’ve lived in New Zealand for longer than I lived in India,” says Chuni. “This country has offered me great opportunities to get ahead in life. Both my children have tertiary qualifications, good jobs and are well settled here, and I feel like I belong to this country more than to my country of birth.”

In fact, when the 64-year-old goes back to India to visit family and friends, he admits he “feels like a foreigner” and no longer has the emotional attachment to his birthplace he once had.

It’s a long way from Varad, a small village in the state of Gujarat, where Chuni was born, the second of four children.

While completing a Bachelor of Science degree in physics and mathematics, Chuni met his Indian-born wife Lili, who had moved to New Zealand when she was 10 months old. Like so many Indian marriages of the time, it was an arranged marriage. “My best friend’s wife lived in the same village as Lili, so a meeting was arranged by our respective relatives. After about a month we got engaged and then married.”

Arriving in Wellington shortly afterwards, it didn’t take Chuni long to sign up to the New Zealand fan club. “I fell in love with the natural beauty, peaceful environment and small population of this beautiful country. New Zealand is safe and friendly and doesn’t have the corruption that other countries have; plus it offers everything that large countries offer in terms of education, medical system and employment.”

Buying a house and gaining permanent employment (at the then Post Office) cemented the keen cricketer’s desire to become a citizen, as did an impending visit to India. “I was going back to see my grandfather who wasn’t well and thought I might have issues travelling via the US and UK with my Indian passport. So I applied for citizenship and got a New Zealand passport which, of course, is highly respected throughout the world and means fewer hassles when travelling internationally.”

Chuni became a New Zealand citizen in 1978 at a ceremony presided over by Wellington’s then Mayor, Sir Michael Fowler. He remembers the feeling of joy when he received his certificate. “The Mayor gave a speech about the responsibilities and duties new citizens have to their country of residence and I was reminded of how much this country had given me and how I was determined to pay that back. I came to New Zealand with nothing, and was so proud that day to become a Kiwi. Citizenship is viewed as a great achievement in the Indian community and I’m pleased that I was given that chance.”
Becoming a winemaker wasn’t high on Darragh Hughes’ to-do list. But growing up in Sligo, on Ireland’s west coast, didn’t expose him to many vineyards.

“I knew about wine but it wasn’t a big thing in Ireland back then,” says Darragh. Instead, the middle of five children whose father ran a crystal glass business, he channelled his energies into studying business and accounting in Dublin. And travel. In fact, the ink on Darragh’s diploma was barely dry when he bought a ticket to the United States.

“I went to New York and Florida for a year, working in bars and playing Gaelic football at a state level.”

Back in Ireland, Darragh worked in finance for a couple of years before scratching his itchy feet again with a one-way ticket to the Antipodes.

“I planned to spend a year in New Zealand and a year in Australia, but felt so at home in New Zealand I never even made it to Australia!”

That was in 2003, and Darragh then spent five years working his way up the hospitality food chain, managing bars and restaurants and fine-tuning his wine palate. It’s also where he met several winemakers and decided to move from the selling side and have a go at the ‘creating’ end of the spectrum.

“It was a good opportunity to change my whole life, so I spent a year at Tairawhiti Polytech in Gisborne studying winemaking.” Jobs at Nobilo Wines in Auckland, and Kim Crawford and Drylands Wines in Marlborough followed, as well as a four-month stint in California’s Napa Valley. Between marrying his Kiwi girlfriend, Charlotte, relocating to Hawke’s Bay to take up an assistant winemaker’s role and having his first child (son Digby), Darragh also found time to study for a post-graduate wine science qualification through Auckland University.

And despite his deep Irish roots, Darragh says New Zealand is home.

“This country has been good to me. It’s given me a wife and child and work opportunities that I would never have had if I’d stayed in Ireland. I plan to be here for the rest of my life.”

Becoming a New Zealand citizen, then, was something of a no-brainer.

Photo courtesy of Hawke’s Bay Wine Company, where Darragh now works.
Victoria Miller

Originally from Canada

Victoria Miller had never even heard of New Zealand when she decided to go travelling in 1998.

“My friend and I had plans to go to Australia on a working holiday,” explains the 42-year-old.

“But while researching our trip, we discovered this magical place called New Zealand. We figured we’d give it a go and if we didn’t like it, we could always head to Australia.”

As it turns out, the pair preferred New Zealand to Australia and, 13 years later, both are still here.

“Maybe it’s because New Zealand has a lot in common with Canada, but we slotted into life here easily. For the first few years we were on temporary work visas and working in the hospitality industry, which was a great way to see the country because we worked everywhere from the West Coast to the Bay of Islands.”

Born and raised on Vancouver Island, Victoria planned to return home to study veterinary science. Instead, she ended up in Christchurch where she now works for a government agency. But the keen runner has always lived by the mantra ‘act first, plan later’.

“I prefer to take each day as it comes because you never know what’s just around the corner.”

As a result, Victoria has probably been around more corners than most – including rafting on the Zambezi River, skydiving in Hawaii and being chased by elephants at Victoria Falls.

New Zealand, however, felt like home from the moment she arrived. “I feel really privileged to live here. I absolutely love being a Can-Iwi!”

Victoria became a New Zealand citizen in 2011.

“It was after the Christchurch earthquakes and my family was keen for me to return home. But I was committed to my life in Christchurch and didn’t want to leave. I was also really impressed with the sense of community that came out of the earthquakes. A Scottish friend from work had been talking about getting his citizenship so I suggested we do it together.”

It helped that Victoria didn’t have to relinquish her Canadian citizenship; making the decision might have been harder if she’d had to.

“I was surprised at how emotional I felt at the citizenship ceremony. It was really cool to watch the Kapahaka group and sing the national anthem as a Kiwi.”

There was only one hitch – the Council miscalculated the number of new citizens and ran out of the trees they presented to each person.

“They were really apologetic and said they would deliver one to my house the next week, which they kindly did. However, the tree got blown into the garden and was too damaged to save.”

Three months later, Victoria was given a second tree at a friend’s citizenship ceremony – but also managed to kill that one!

“It’s a good thing the citizenship requirements don’t include having a green thumb or I may have been in trouble,” she laughs.