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From hippy commune, to prestigious political university in France

Kelley Tantau • 09:27, May 23 2019



SUPPLIED

Former Whitianga man Manaia Matafeo has been selected to study in France.

In the crowds of Coromandel anti-drilling and anti-oil protests was a young Manaia Matafeo.

He was introduced to protests from a young age and believes these early memories played a part in leading him to pursue an education in politics.

The former Whitianga man has been selected to study at one of the world's top political universities – Sciences Po, in Reims, France.

The school was founded in 1872 to promote a new class of French politicians and has since educated seven of the past eight French presidents.

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Current French President Emmanuel Macron attended Sciences Po.

"My parents have always pushed the importance of being involved in politics and the things that affect us.

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"Seeing people so passionate about something that they were willing to fight for it, showed me that the issues were important and that, without those people out there expressing their passion and pushing a movement forward, you'd never get anywhere."

But Matafeo, 19, has no interest in leading a country. It's grassroots governance that really motivates him.

"I don't know if the current system is something that actually serves everyone in the best way possible, and I don't know if me becoming a politician would help anyone in any way," he said.

"I'm more interested in working on a community level, because that's where I think you can make the most change."

For the first three years of his life, Matafeo lived on Wilderland, a farm in rural Coromandel.

As a highschooler, he studied overseas at a United World College in Armenia, where he had his first taste of creating change at a community level.

"That sort of stuff was really cool for me because it was so face-to-face, and I could really connect with people, and when you connect with people, you can see that you're helping them," he said.

Closer to home, Matafeo said issues New Zealand could do a lot better with issues such as inequality and poverty.

"I think we can create a society where everyone is taken care of.

"Armenia is a third world country. We stayed in a little town with poverty everywhere – on a different level to New Zealand – but even here we should hold ourselves to a high standard in regards to that sort of thing.

"Children going to school hungry without proper clothes... people living in damp, cold homes, these sorts of things we need to work on," he said.

Matafeo has estimated his French living and academia costs to be at least \$33,260 a year for three years.

He said studying at Sciences Po was dependent on how much money he could fundraise.

"I've dedicated most of my life so far to do the best that I can academically, and it's been unforgettable... so it would be cool for people to invest in someone who is going to gain world-class knowledge and come back and use it in our country and use it for good."

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