Wairarapa Times-Age: **Former army officer receives recognition for mentoring 25 businesses**

April 22, 2026

When Dean Di Bona left the Australian army in 1998, he "lacked aspiration".

After a brief stint in corporate Auckland, a move to Martinborough sparked a transformation from accountant to hammer hand, eventually leading to the founding of a successful property development and construction company.

Now, having spent more than 10 years as a volunteer mentor, the 57-year-old was awarded a pin of recognition for his service to the regional business community.

The ceremony, held on March 19 at the Claremont Motel, acknowledged his work guiding 25 startups and small businesses across the North Island.

Di Bona was born and grew u p in Sydney, he said.

"Straight out of university, I was working as an accountant, and then I very quickly swapped into officer school in the military."

Being an "outdoorsy person", he spent seven years in the army, based in Queensland and New South Wales, Di Bona said.

"It just gave me a great sense of purpose."

When he moved to New Zealand, being made redundant from an office job drove him to a change in life.

"Every day I was driving past builders, and I just thought, I'd really rather be doing something hands-on," he said.

"I started as a hammer hand, got an apprenticeship, and then slowly worked up, started doing my own jobs."

Once he had established his construction company in Martinborough, he sought help from Business Mentors New Zealand and then became a business mentor himself.

"Our job is to be there to help and not take the lead. It is about motivating and getting people to aspire and believe in their own business," Di Bona said.

Today, the Martinborough businessman manages a property development company and two retail shops along with his wife.

He has worked with businesses in the agriculture, hospitality, retail, civil engineering and importing sectors.

One success story he remembered involved a carpenter who wanted to import tools from Germany, he said.

"We worked together with him and his wife, and they've set up their own business, and they are now importing and selling boutique hand tools."

However, not every venture succeeded, he said, as many businesses failed in the first two years after opening up shop.

His belief proposition was: "Can you do everything required to reach your aspiration?"

"Belief is so critical for any business to succeed, because if you don't believe in it you're not going t o d o the necessary work in the areas where you don't have the skill set."

Business Mentors New Zealand chief executive Sarah Trotman, ONZM, said Di Bona was one of more than 1500 volunteer mentors across the country.

"Dean helps people who are open to listening to new ideas, systems and experiences, and then enabling them to take what they think will work for them."