

Leilani's story transcript

Warning message: [\(00:00\)](#)

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Leilani: [\(00:19\)](#)

one of the worst experiences I had with child safety and I think I will never forgive them for it. God help me. I hope that this day and age they don't do it. This one lady came in and she was waking us up and her comments to me were, I must have been in grade two or three at the time, "get up, you need to get dressed, your mum doesn't want you anymore." And I was like, Oh God. And I just, and they wouldn't let us say goodbye to her. And they kind of shuffled us out. And I remember looking down the hallway and I could see my mum on a chair crying like sig, like significantly crying, like really upset. I know now as an adult that she called, she rang them cause she wasn't okay and she needed help. And in fact, she loved us dealy and wanted us to be okay, but couldn't care for us.

Beverley: [\(01:19\)](#)

By any standard Leilani Darwin's childhood was difficult. She dealt with violence, alcoholism, neglect and worse. Yet with fierce strength, empathy and intelligence. She's turned her experience into a force to dramatically reduce youth suicide statistics and help develop groundbreaking aboriginal and Torres Strait islander suicide prevention programs. The joy she gets from her work has also given her a reason to feel hope again.

Leilani: [\(01:48\)](#)

My mum was an alcoholic, um, and she had a lot of, uh, issues that she dealt with on a regular basis. My mum had a habit of pen palling men in jail. I think it was cause she was quite lonely. Um, but what used to happen was that when they'd get out of jail, they'd come and stay with us. Um, we lived in the old kind of supported housing accommodation, so there were particular low socioeconomic background areas. Um, alcoholism and you know, late nights were just part of our life, um, as were different times that we spent in foster homes. So myself and my two sisters, one three years younger and one three years old. I was in the middle. The most significant event was um, when my youngest sister was two years old, my mum had been drinking and there was a lot going on, um, a lot that happened that night.

Leilani: [\(02:51\)](#)

But what did end up happening was my mum stabbed my younger sister. Um,

what I remember because we had already spent time in foster care when mum wasn't coping with us, was sitting on the ground in the lounge room with mum holding and rocking my youngest sister, me and my other sister and we were all just crying and she was apologizing and I was crying more because I knew that we were going into foster care and I didn't know if we're going to be split up or not. Originally went somewhere for a short period and I think mum got sentenced and whatnot. And then we stayed somewhere for a couple of years while she was actually at the park, at Wolston. That was a big, big kind of life changing moment when you spend so much time away from your family group. My grandmother used to come visit regularly and at Christmas time would come over and things like that, which was nice.

Leilani: [\(03:55\)](#)

But I, I started school. Being in that foster care had its pros and cons. Sometimes they're good, sometimes weren't. You know, my sister actually recalled to me not that long ago that um, the mother figure Jackie used to flog my youngest sister who was only three cause she'd wet her nappy when she was younger, which is pretty sad if you asked me. But, so yeah, we were there for a while and then we went back with mum and you know, much of the same, which is where we kind of jump forward to where I was 10. Um, my sister was 13 and my youngest sister was 7, well, not quite seven at that point. And Mum in the House that we were at at Riverview had a lot of issues and had, you know, by that stage she was regularly self-harming.

Leilani: [\(04:47\)](#)

Um, she was drinking a lot. We had another guy from prison who was staying with us. Probably about a month beforehand, she kind of stopped doing things around the house. So she was like, no, you'se do the washing, someone can get out there and mow the lawn, and no I'm not cooking dinner, you'se cook dinner. And we're like, this is very strange. But okay. Like we didn't really have a choice in the matter. My mum wasn't a mum that, you know, let's go to the park, she wasn't one of those mums. She was like, get out there, get out of the house, get out, you know, do your own thing. She loved us. Um, but she wasn't how you see a lot of parents these days. Um, she wasn't like that. Um, I got up, my sisters were getting ready for school. My oldest sister was like, oh, I'm not saying goodbye. And I was like, mum's going to flog you if you didn't say goodbye. Like you don't leave the house without saying goodbye. And so we kind of walked in together and the rest unfolded quite unpleasantly as we realized that my mom had died through the night, she'd taken her own life. Um, we ended up being, um, initially we went to my

Leilani: [\(05:58\)](#)

aunties place, then we ended up at my grandmother's place. Then an uncle, Ken, who I had met a couple of times, offered to take me and only me to

Sydney. Um, and I was very much had learned over the years to be a people pleaser and not wanting to be a burden to people. So I said, okay, I'll go straight away. Not really realizing the significance of leaving all you've known. Um, and so my sisters stayed with my grandmother. Um, I went to Sydney, which was tumultuous to say the least. My uncle was awesome and he had his, you know, my cousins that were growing up and he had young babies as well. Um, but it was just, it was too hard being away from my family group. After a year and a little running away incident in King's Cross for me. Um, I managed to get myself back to Brisbane, which I really, I think I just needed, it was too much being separated from my sisters and everything.

Leilani: [\(07:02\)](#)

Um, and I was living with my sister and my grandparents. Yeah. When I was away, my Nan used to write my letters all the time, she's like crochet cards and do artwork and things like that. And I used to talk to her all the time. When we were growing up and even with all our cousins and everything and go over like my Nan's place was the safe place. It was that one place where you got to go. And every year she took us all to the show. Like we might not have, you know, we might've been living off just bread and butter or like right, like not had a lot for the week. But when we got those chances to go over to our grandmothers place, it was feasting, like keep like, you know, breakfast morning tea, lunch afternoon tea, dinner, supper, dessert. Like we just ate so much good food.

Leilani: [\(07:52\)](#)

And we had good memories with, you know, sitting down together as a family and watching videos and they had a pool and so they'd have parties and my Nan was a cook. She would cook everything from scratch. And that goes back to her days when she used to work out on cattle stations and cook for everyone. I was 12. My Nan passed away. Yeah. So it wasn't that long really after I'd lost my mum. So she had had health issues for years. Um, a lot of health issues I think brought on just from being an aboriginal person. She had kidney failure, angina, diabetes, like the whole lot. She had an accident, dropped a casserole dish on her foot, never healed and lots of things accumulated to her passing away. Um, the day before her birthday, which happened to be Christmas Day. So it was a really terrible Christmas for all of us.

Leilani: [\(08:52\)](#)

Um, so my sister and I ended up moving in with my auntie, who had three of her own teenage kids, which was, as you can imagine, not a very easy dynamic for anyone to transition into, particularly for them having their, the two, two girls who were teenagers, my cousins having their life turned upside down, having to accommodate, you know, moods and all that kind of stuff. And My,

my older cousin. Um, and I don't think I coped very well with that transition and everything that had gone on. Um, there was a lot that had happened and I think it just kind of bit me in the bum. So I was 13 the first time I tried to end my life. It was a range of things that led up to that incident. Um, and I don't think it was necessarily any individual. I just think it was everything together had taken its toll on me and I was like, I'm out, I'm done.

Leilani: [\(09:55\)](#)

So I spent most of the two months school holidays in the children's hospital. Following my time in hospital and going back to school and um, going and seeing someone, you know, that in itself was difficult. And what I didn't realize until later in life that I also was a system child, meaning that I'd had many interview with psychologists and other people and child safety department and you told them the minimum. It wasn't a good thing to tell them everything that went on at home. It wasn't a good thing to really be honest with them, or to let them in around what was going on. Because in the past when I was younger, that might've meant that we would go on from our mother or all that we were separated because there wasn't a foster family that could take three of us in, and that happened at different times.

Leilani: [\(10:49\)](#)

So I think that that probably led to me being a bit of a closed book and giving the minimum and not necessarily sharing my deepest darkest thoughts. I didn't have that trust in the system that was trying to help me. Oh, what happened then was being 15, I think. Um, I think it was, again, dealing with life, dealing with the complexities of understanding relationships and significant people in your life. The issues within school, like I had massive issues in school and fighting and people wanting to bash me and just feeling really isolated but still having to go to school every day with that anxiety and fear, you know, there's the dynamics of fighting, you know, with my sister at the time. But you know, the cousins were there, like it was just, it's a lot, it's a lot to deal with developmentally and growing. But I think obviously because of the things that have happened in my life as well, it was a lot. And um, that time

Leilani: [\(11:54\)](#)

in particular, there was, uh, a series again of events and situations that had happened that had just really brought me down and I was like, well, I just don't want to be here anymore. Like I wouldn't say it seemed like the easier option, but it seemed like the best option again, like, okay, I just need to be out. And I don't think that there was a whole heap that happened after that with regards to getting support. Uh, I think you just again, move on with life and keep going and progressing. Yeah. So when I was 22, I had a relationship breakdown. Um, but at that stage too, afterwards, I had also been diagnosed with major depressive illness. I'd gone to my doctor who I'd been seeing since

I was 16, and I was like, I think I got a brain tumor or something. Cause I was, I couldn't remember anything at work.

Leilani: ([12:57](#))

Like I said, when memory issues, like there was a lots going on and at the end are you guys, well, good news and bad news. He goes you don't have a brain tumor. I was like awesome. The bad news is you've got depression. I was like, what? He goes you're suffering from major depression. I was like, oh, he said so, but we can, we can work on that. I was like, okay. Not really thinking much of it, but going all right. That's a thing. And he said, and that's why he said it's at the point with you where your memory doesn't work, where you can't function every day where, you know, I was at the point, you know, if we don't eat for five hours, our stomach growls and says you need to eat. I never had that for months. I never had that. Um, I couldn't really function at work.

Leilani: ([13:44](#))

So yeah, it just kind of kept spiraling down. I was living on my own. I had my cat at the time. Um, I could no longer, I think for a long time I was really good. And I still am now putting on a real happy face for people and you know, for not letting people know. But at that stage there was no happy face. There was no makeup, there was no dressing up. It was monotone. It was just doing the bare minimum of what I could to function. Um, I'd already been to the, um, women's health service in Logan, um, and got on a waiting list to see a counselor cause I knew that things weren't okay. Something had to happen. Following that attempt, I had to go back there and I was like, I really need to see a counselor. Like, well, you're on the waiting list is nothing we can do. It was quite a shameful thing, but I just felt I had no choice in it. I was like, I tried to take my life on the weekend. I need to see someone.

Lifelin message: ([14:43](#))

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Beverley: ([14:58](#))

The support Leilani got from her counselor was the start of a new direction. Not only did it, help her deal with her emotions. It inspired her to return to study so she could get the qualifications she needed to help other aboriginal people.

Leilani: ([15:12](#))

My journey with her was significant in understanding all of these things that I had never been diagnosed. All of the experiences that I'd had in my childhood and how that was still impacting on me as an adult, but I'd never correlated that. Um, and part of that was, is because, oh, whatever happened, happened,

you move on. And I still believe it to this day, everything happens for a reason and I can't imagine what kind of life I would have had if I'd stayed in, you know, if my mum was still alive. And that's the truth. Um, but understanding, you know, the hyper vigilance and the anxiety and the things like that from being a kid on call when your mum was getting bashed and having to ring the police and the ambulance and, you know, never knowing if someone was going to wake you up in the middle of the night.

Leilani: [\(16:01\)](#)

Um, you know, that stuff you put to the back and you move on. That's what I say about, oh, everything happens for a reason. You just kind of keep going. But that stuff sticks with you until you learn to unpack it and to understand the different things that happened to you and how they do impact on you in that day and age. So feeling normal with how I was feeling that I was actually normal, that I wasn't weird. Um, was a big thing from the counseling. I think it didn't matter what had happened to me. I always thought genuinely knew and felt that there was people out there had it so much worse than me. So you don't acknowledge that how the things that you had were bad because you know, like say for example, I know my mum had it worse in so many ways.

Leilani: [\(16:55\)](#)

I know she experienced some really frigging terrible things in different ways to what we did. But yeah, actually being told that what happened in your childhood wasn't normal and it wasn't okay. Was significant for me to go well, it's okay to acknowledge that. I was just lucky that I was able to challenge what could have been our projected life and outcomes and go "well no, I don't want that for my life". I don't want to live the same life that my mother had and we don't have to do that. That's our choice. Um, it's not easy to do that and it's takes a lot of courage to grow up in environments. But I think we were also lucky because we were shown different ways of life and you know, my Auntie gave me the best work ethic ever and really worked hard with me and to set me up, and the years that I spent with her about working and working hard and not having time off sick and you know, taught me to set goals and to want to achieve. And I really, I, I've always been a bit of a sponge, so it always really like soak up, the good stuff that I can out of people and, and listen and, and value what they bring. And so, you know, yeah, I made shit decisions and choices as a younger person. But somewhere along the line I made some good decisions that led me down a pathway to have a career and to learn and to, to have opportunities.

Beverley: [\(18:30\)](#)

Another thing that brings Leilani joy these days is friends and work colleagues. Like Sue Muller.

Sue: ([18:36](#))

Oh look, I just stand in awe of, you know, to have to have survived what she is survived and to have come out of it in, in a way that in a way that's got hope and in a way that is all centered around, not only her own recovery or, but also around how she can make things better for other people. Like how after everything that's happened to her, her primary focus, you know, generally seems to be, how can I still keep fighting to make it better for other people? It's such a, she's just a real phenomenon.

Leilani: ([19:17](#))

I'd had my daughter and I started studying a diploma of counseling and I finished the job that I was in because I thought, Oh, if I had to keep doing this part time, I'd be going forever. Started that was doing other things, found myself working at a correctional center. Um, lots of circumstances to that, but ended up in the cultural center running programs with aboriginal and Torres Strait islander males and other, um, people from other multicultural backgrounds, um, about ending offending. The biggest thing in there was: "Oh you're all textbook. You don't know what you're talking about, like you're, it's great. You've gone and studied, you're just so fancy". So I learned pretty quickly, um, how to work with the guys in there. And part of that was by showing vulnerability and being real with them, which to be honest, was the opposite of what you're taught in training.

Leilani: ([20:17](#))

You want someone to sit there and tell you the deepest, darkest, but that, and I think about you berm berm, that that's not how you get the best result, best outcomes. So I would, when we were doing our introductions, I'd usually kick off and I'd start with, yeah, I've done a bit of study, you know, but I've also had this, and I talk a little bit about my life experiences, about suicide, about, you know, depression, about how I'd got to where I was and why I was doing it. That, um, had quite a profound effect, um, often around that table with guys I'd just met breaking down, sharing significant stories of loss and grief and trauma, um, that they could clearly attribute to why they were there. Um, and that was a big thing that really started to change my mindset of what was I doing, how was I helping my people?

Leilani: ([21:19](#))

Was I at the right place where I needed to. But that was the first point where I realized that sharing my vulnerability and what I considered my weaknesses actually helped others to open up and to share their stories. Um, fast forward through my interesting time there, found myself having an opportunity to work in the local community at a headspace center in partnership with elders and others and some work that had been done already around suicide prevention with young people. Part of that involved developing a social

emotional wellbeing programs. So really looking at all of the things as indigenous people that make us, well, not just eating healthy, but our spiritual, you know, our cultural connections, understanding our connections to land and country, but also the physical side of things and nutrition. So it was quite holistic in, in approach.

Sue: ([22:18](#))

I think Leilani has found joy and strength in her work because partially because when so much has been out of her control, this is her story and she owns it and she can use it in a way that makes a really, really big difference. So she knows that that by doing that she can actually change outcomes for people, other people, and stop them from having the same, hopefully stop them having the same experience.

Leilani: ([22:51](#))

I've always had hope and I've always wanted a brighter future, um, for me and for my daughter and my family. But more, more so I've, from my experiences that I've had with my mob who have only ever known grief and loss and trauma and never been shown how their life could possibly be different if they were able to make some hard but different choices. Um, along the way if they took the hand that was offered to them, if they did a few things that they didn't have, that that didn't have to be their outcome, that they didn't have to die because that was all they saw, that they didn't have to be incarcerated because that was how they grew up. I just still to this day just want my people to keep living, which is why I keep doing what I'm doing and sharing my story and hoping that people can find something that they relate to and know that there's some really terrible circumstances that happen in life. And even with that, you can come through it and be better and stronger for it and have more skills underneath your belt and be more resilient to be able to help yourself first. Cause that's most important. We always forget about ourselves, especially when you're a natural helper and you want to help people, but also to be able to pay it forward and to help other people and to show them and get them support and that there are people who care about them

Sue: ([24:35](#))

and it's very easy to see how, how, how that hopelessness would come in and feeling really hopeless. Leilani just has this strength of character, this really this really calm determination about her. And uh, yeah, for somebody who has, has lived through so much, to be able to find that hope and to find that strength and to really use it to propel her further, uh, I think it's, it's exceptional. And I, I look at her daughter and I think what a lucky young woman to have, have that as a role model in her life.

Leilani: ([25:19](#))

If I could give advice to my younger self, it would be to not be ashamed of asking for help. And it would be to not just ask them once and not just try once. Cause I know it's real easy. Um, I mean I go back to different, like I've been in a domestic violence relationship in there, um, as well. And I remember having to go to the police station for the first time going into the police station for our mob is hard at the best of times. It's like, oh, we only get go there when you're in trouble. But I had to stand there in front of everyone and talk to a guy who really by the way was quite hopeless and say, yeah, my partner said he is going to kill me. Oh, but does he actually mean he's going to kill you? Or is he just saying it? Like, are you kidding me?

Leilani: [\(26:14\)](#)

That's really intimidating in, you know, I'm going to ask for help. I'm using this analogy as something that's not necessarily about talking about suicide, but understanding the importance of not necessarily taking no for an answer and what that looks like. And I had this like, no, he's very clear, He's very clear. He wants to, he's not just saying it. I've got all the messages and everything. Oh, well someone else, somebody blah de blah. I walked away from there with no help, but I didn't take no as an answer for that. And I actually went down different option. I rang the court house and I found a service who specifically helped with domestic violence, who helped me write all my statements up, you know, get the domestic violence order. Like I didn't as a young person just take no for an answer or just take a really terrible situation, which would have seen me potentially just leave it and not do anything.

Leilani: [\(27:02\)](#)

Um, I as a young person realized that it took several times over several years of having to ask for help. And whilst I never ever would've thought anyone else was showing weakness or that it was shameful, I always felt that for myself, that it was a sense of weakness and shame. And, and if I was to say to my younger self now, I would say it, it's not, it's actually, it's actually incredibly brave to put yourself out there and to ask for help and to be, to, to sit with that and to know that it's okay. And we have a lot of problems in communities "ah see that womba, some wrong with that one, A nah, don't worry about them or they just say this or they just say that". And it's not about that. You might ask someone and you might not get the right response, but don't just ask one person because you never know.

Leilani: [\(27:59\)](#)

If you bring something up to the right person, if they're going to be able to help you. Talk to your teachers, talk to your support staff at school, wherever someone is that you trust, whether it be an Auntie and uncle, a cousin. Start to talk about it. Start to know that it's okay to when you're sick, you go and get help. You get antibiotics, you get a doctor you might get an xray depending on

what kind of sickness you are. Well, it's the same thing with your wellbeing. There's options out there to get help. There's people who can help you and sometimes your first try is not going to be the right person. Sometimes it might take two or three times before you find that right person who has the right things to offer you to help you. So I would say don't just stop once. Try again.

Leilani: [\(28:44\)](#)

Try again, try someone else and don't feel shameful about it. Know in yourself, that actually it's really hard and you've shown a lot of strength and courage and being able to do that. And think about the younger people in your family and your life. By you doing that, you're role modeling something to them and showing them that as they come up and they get older, if they're not coping, that they know that they've got people that they can go to to help because that's what's going to make a difference for our people in the future.

Sue: [\(29:12\)](#)

Look, I love any moment of time that I can get with Leilani. I've loved working with her. I love just spending time with her. I could sit and listen to her talk all day. Like I just find her incredible, it really, recharges. Time with Leilani. Uh, it recharges me as well. And I think that that is, that it's, it's hard to explain. It's kind of a sense of solidarity. It's, it's a sense of, of knowing that story of knowing each other's story and having that collective hope, that collective kind of shared, a shared kind of feeling that there, that there is a way forward and that there's potential to do a lot in this space and and to make a difference. I think you know, when you get like minded people together who, who know each other, warts and all, and just keep going anyway, I think that that's a, that's a really rare and precious thing.

Beverley: [\(30:23\)](#)

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