

# STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an edited interview with

**Leon Ruri & Adrian Momber**

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA — ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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### **NOTE TO READER**

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**INTRO:** Death. It's the most inevitable part of life. Some might say it's the only guarantee. But it's also a topic that many people shy away from because it makes us feel uncomfortable, scared or upset. It's often swept under the rug, not acknowledged or talked about, until of course, we come face-to-face with it ourselves. We hope to end this taboo through a series of interviews with many different people from all over Western Australia. We talk to ordinary people about their views on the grief, loss, love and celebration that *is* death and dying. This is a conversation on death.

**RITA:** Can I just start by asking both of you to introduce yourselves and why you are here today? Leon, if I can start with you?

**LEON:** I'm Leon Ruri, I'm the founder of Haka for Life. I've been invited along today to share my story around death and particularly suicide.

**ADRIAN:** And I'm Adrian Momber, I'm actually a volunteer with Lifeline WA, so I'm involved with the phone call service where people are phoning up when they're in some kind of crisis. So, it very much touches on suicide and other crises that people have.

**RITA:** Adrian, can I ask why you volunteered for Lifeline?

**ADRIAN:** Yeah, I've probably got to go a long way back for that one. I grew up in a household where my mother was treated for bipolar and it was quite a hard and difficult period, but I felt that I could cope with it as a child. And it was all really that I knew. I felt when I went into a retail banking career, that when I got the chance, I would actually get into mental health type work, hopefully charity work. So, when the opportunity came about seven years ago, I started volunteering for a couple of organizations. One was actually a mental illness fellowship, and the other was Lifeline. And I guess that's the more relevant one for what we're talking about today. So just went along to the information day, sounded good. Did the training, great training, and I've been there ever since. So mainly [working] on the phones, volunteering and do also some work with a bit of coaching and training of others. I think there's naturally a part of me that I've always wanted to help others and that's an extension of it.

**RITA:** Leon, part of your job with Haka for Life, which is the organisation that you've created because you saw a need [for it], is very much about being able to be there for other people when they really need that. So, tell me a little bit about your backstory and how you came to be where you are now?

**LEON:** Yeah, my story for me growing up involved sexual abuse and physical abuse and traversing through life and making a whole lot of mistakes in relationships and not showing up the way that I wanted to in life as a husband and as a partner, and even at times as a father, as well. I'm a father, I've got four children and a grandson now, too. And just journeying through life where there was a whole lot of backstories for myself and my internal conversation to myself about myself every day was that I wasn't good enough. I was a piece of shit, I wasn't worthy. And that was just something I could not turn it off. I just had no idea how to turn it off. So I'd literally just exist through life each and every day with that, just as a

constant, people wouldn't see it because it's the internal conversation, but it just really had me in life play out and make decisions and choices that would just feed that as well, to prove that I was a failure, to prove that I'm not a good partner or a human being or a friend.

I came to a place in my life about six years ago, which was probably the biggest turnaround for me. I did a self-development course and in that course it just totally transformed the way that I saw myself. I'd never been able to dismantle and unlock and break down my mind and how it all was put together and how we come about thinking the way that we think. And what I saw there was that I'd actually made up a whole lot of the stories that I would walk through life believing. All of a sudden, I realized, hey, that's not actually the case. I can make up another story.

So, what I did was from that day, I changed the narrative about who I was. I set out on a course in life of restoring my integrity with people where I had to and being accountable. Integrity was probably something that I would speak about, but wasn't really powerfully connected to, and [I] certainly was not a man of integrity. What I wanted to be, or to even know myself, was someone who was able to keep their word. So, I just set out on that course of being that man and realising in that moment that I've been connected to my passion, which is men. Again, I've got a real heart for men. I think that there's a story about men that's untold. And so many men struggle in life to be able to express themselves and open up.

That was based upon my breakdown of my marriage and being arrested and going through having a restraining order and being removed from my house unexpectedly and then being in a men's refuge and going through the courts and just the turmoil of that sort of experience in life. And when I was in a men's refuge actually, I saw a whole lot of men that come through there that were some of them [had] come out of prison, quite tough men. One of them in particular, he was a standover man for the bikies and he is as tough as they come. Like super tough. He's not a man that you'd mess with, but what I saw in that house, we got really connected.

We actually saved his life. He tried to take his life and we were able to [save him] on a phone call, I met him through a phone call when he had a gun in his mouth. And you know, you talk about Adrian with Lifeline, that's why I'm actually an ambassador for Lifeline as well too. And it's so important, the work that they do.

What I saw though, was that they just didn't have this ability to be able to talk and express themselves. I really grew my heart and my passion for them. And so, when I was on the self-development course and discovering, hey, what are my passions? It was men, and we are losing so many men. I've been suicidal myself so many times, just overwhelmed, couldn't cope. And so, I just set my heart on wanting to be this man that makes a difference and send an example to others to share my story.

**RITA:** While you were speaking, I was thinking about that person on the other end of the line. And I just wanted to check in with you Adrian, and just find out, is that the kind of experience which is relatively common for people who are manning the lines?

**ADRIAN:** Well, yeah, I mean we can take any kind of call. You just don't know what you're going to get on the phone, but clearly there's a lot of men out there who maybe haven't spoken ever and asked for help before. And they could be in that situation where they're ready to take their life.

**RITA:** What is it that triggers people at that point, even though they're kind of saying, I want to take my life, I'm going to die, this is what I want, but they *do* pick that phone up – so what is that? Is that an instinct for life?

**ADRIAN:** Maybe it is. I like to think it is, just that one little glimmer of hope, or sometimes it's fear, fear of what they might be about to do, fear that maybe they haven't tried everything and it's not instant. It's not that they suddenly change during the phone call from wanting to kill themselves to suddenly wanting to save themselves.

**RITA:** And what's your role then at the end of the phone line, is it about, as Leon talks so graphically, about saying to them, hang on, there's help around the corner, we can get you that help? What is it?

**ADRIAN:** Well, we really approach it from a different direction. It's really about listening to them and trying to get the person on the line actually talking about what's happening, what's their experience. And sometimes within the first few minutes of a call, you hear a change in their voice where there's just a hint that that desperation is disappearing, or not disappearing, but changing. So, it's about them feeling that actually someone is listening. Someone does care. It could be that in their life, they've never experienced that before, or they just can't talk to people. They may have got to the point with relatives or friends that they won't talk to them. They're fed up with it. So, we're at a safe place where they can actually talk and we can explore what is happening for them. And sometimes it's just that [which] is enough to get them to change the way they're thinking.

**RITA:** So, do you think that that distance helps, that you are just a disembodied voice? You don't have an identity as such, apart from the fact that you are there to help, and that allows people perhaps to be able to be a bit more honest?

**ADRIAN:** Yeah, it can help. And it is a completely confidential service. It could be that they're even seeing counsellors or psychiatrist or whatever it happens to be, and that they don't feel always that that's working, and they feel able to express that to us.

**RITA:** Do you have callers call back on more than one occasion?

**ADRIAN:** Yeah. There are actually a lot of regular callers. We get quite different types of callers, but there would be a, I'm not sure cohort's quite the right word, but there would be a group of people who use us to help with the loneliness in their life. And we may be one of the few services which is actually helping them to keep living, to keep living independently.

**RITA:** The last couple of years, especially with the pandemic worldwide, and many people even in relatively safe WA, have had to deal with the consequences of losing family overseas or even in another state, and they haven't been able to go and see them. Do you

think, Adrian, that the pressure that that has put on individuals in our society is going to be something that is going to be reflected in the phone calls that you get over the next few years?

**ADRIAN:** Well, certainly the number of phone calls that we're getting has gone up. I mean, a lot of people are in isolation or they're cut off from their loved ones or are away from them, like you say, they could be overseas, [in] different states. So yeah, I would say there's a lot more loneliness out there and there's a lot more people not imagining that there are places they can go to seek help.

I guess another thing that may not have helped over the years is that, and we talk about cultural and societal trends and so on, maybe the part breakdown of the family unit, where we're all in our own little boxes. We've got older couples living on their own or [who are] single, [and] maybe that concept of being in the same town or locality with your family isn't the same as it was. So, there are other ways aren't there, that people maybe need to be supported and to realize that there are other places they can go. But certainly the COVID pandemic has [had] a very big effect [on people] and also aspects of being told what to do and where to go. It's changed everybody's lives and it's unsettled a lot of people.

**LEON:** I've noticed a lot of fatigue on the different sites and people are getting tired with the COVID restrictions, and all of those demands, let alone their life demands, let alone their work demands, let alone their family demands, their personal stuff that they're dealing with. And again, like I say, when society's constructed in a particular way where we must act like we've got it together all the time, every time, people are being overwhelmed and they're just caving in. So, there's a lot more people that are in danger and that'll call Lifeline. They've got record phone calls. I mean, they're taking a phone call less than every 30 seconds now I believe, it's phenomenal, and that's just going to continue and continue. I think it will continue regardless of whether we've got COVID now, because there's, as Adrian was saying a cohort, if we use that description, that realise that there's a service and people available to talk to. So, the positive out of it though, is that we've got a whole lot more people that are talking, which is something that we should really celebrate as well too, that those are people traditionally [who] probably wouldn't have talked, but they get to a point where: "I've got to talk". And there's many people that are on the edge of death that actually their cry for help or their ability to reach out to Lifeline and to other services is actually a communication that's saying, I don't want to die.

**RITA:** You talked a little bit just earlier about why it's so important to be able to connect to that loneliness that perhaps men feel. How does haka help that?

**LEON:** The whole construct of haka and the way that we actually perform haka and share haka and do haka is that explosive, energetic release of expression. And every single time that I fully express myself through haka, I feel so good afterwards.

It was interesting, I went to America a couple of years ago, and we taught a whole lot of men the haka over there in America. And one of the things that struck me is that they all thanked us and we met the Indigenous people there in Southern California. And they said, thank you for bringing your medicine to our land. They actually saw that haka was a medicine. I never

fully looked at it like that. I created Haka for Life, and I knew that haka, when you do that it's to save life, and we're expressing ourselves powerfully, but they said that it's a medicine and they're right. That's what I've seen in the creation of Haka for Life is having men and women and children be able to connect to that expression of communication. It's just another form communication that we have as human beings. It is so powerfully expressive and so healing as well. It is like a medicine for people.

**RITA:** Do you think, as a society, we are able to deal with suicide, the buildup to suicide, suicide itself, and the fallout from a family member or a loved one who does commit suicide? Do you think as a society we are able to deal with that well, are we geared up?

**ADRIAN:** I guess it's all degrees, it's a balance. There are a lot of great services which do assist. And I mean, in WA for example, there's services which are excellent at dealing with the stuff that happens after for people who are left behind. But we can never quite do enough, can we? So, we're always striving to do more. I mean, one person in WA a day is killing themselves, which is a shocking statistic really; sometimes it gets overlooked when we think about road deaths and stuff like that, it's considerably more. There is so much more we can do to prevent it, to deal with it. Obviously, that's what health services try to do, isn't it?

I love Leon using the word medicine for haka, because there's so much medicine out there which isn't necessarily in the health sphere. I was thinking about a choir that I sing in, and that's an expression, isn't it? Just to be able to sing as loud as you like, and no one to tell you to stop, but it could be anything that comes of it.

**RITA:** How did Haka for Life – which is something that you really are passionate about, Leon – how did that come about?

**LEON:** Part of my journey in when I'd done the initial self-development course and was discovering things about myself, I had all of these ideas of how I can contribute to men and [reduce] these rates of suicide, make an impact to men. And I've got a very creative mind. One of the things that I love is ANZAC Day. That's the most special day being a New Zealander living in Australia. Both my great-grandfathers fought in World War I, so I'm immensely proud and I get emotional even talking about it. I think it's an opportunity for me as a New Zealander and as a Māori to express my thanks for living in Australia. Because I've lived most of my life here in Australia and I thought, wow, I could do the haka there on ANZAC Day to express myself.

When I was doing this course I thought, we're in a war again. I mean, we're not in a war as such like we're in World War I and in World War II and other conflicts that they've had, but there's a war being waged on the minds of men, where we are losing our men, like many did in those times where we lost a lot of the male population due to war. It's another war, it's the war of the mind. I thought I can use a haka up at King's Park on ANZAC Day to not only share my expression of thanks and acknowledgement for those that had fallen, but as an opportunity for those that are still in the war of the mind to be able to come there and express themselves. And so, I came up with that idea.

I named the haka ANZAC Day Haka for Life. But what happened was, it just went viral on the internet, it took off. And Haka for Life has continued to grow from that moment and that time where it went viral in 2017 and 2018. I created the world's first haka and corroboree, the corroboree is the Aboriginal dance, and that was done up at Kings Park again in 2018. That's the first of any service that ANZAC Day had [with] a haka and a corroboree. And we did it in 2019 and 2020. We were so grateful to have ABC allow us to do it online with them. Then in 2021, I went over to Sydney. I was invited over there to put together the first haka and corroboree at the coloured diggers service in Redfern. Then this year for ANZAC, they created the first indigenous ANZAC Day service at the Supreme Court Gardens, which I'm putting together right now.

**RITA:** In modern society, we're so busy living younger, longer, stronger, that we can kind of push the inevitability of death to one side, and death then just becomes something that happens with professionals in an environment which isn't home, which isn't maybe surrounded by family. Do you think we've lost our way Adrian?

**ADRIAN:** Oh, I don't know whether we've lost our way, but death is something that has to be talked about, isn't it? On the phone we're prepared to talk about that and go into real dark places if necessary. Some people do respond to that. It's something that is needed. It's inevitable, isn't it, we're all going to die. But it's when and if and how; but the more, I suppose, that we can bring it out into discussion and remove that taboo, maybe the better.

**RITA:** Leon, you've got four children. Is death something that you are able to talk about with them?

**LEON:** Yes, I've got no issues in talking about death with my children. I even remind them they're fortunate enough to have my mum and dad that quite often come out over home. And my dad's a builder and he's been in my shed creating lots and lots of dust. My kids the other day were saying, Poppies put dust everywhere in the shed. I said, you want to be grateful that you have the opportunity for your grandfather to be here creating dust. One day, they're not going to be here, you know? And they said, oh, there goes Dad again, saying all of this stuff. But they're in their early twenties, my two oldest, and my two youngest are in their late teens. And they don't know and comprehend these experiences of death and what life has got to come and teach them. In our Indigenous culture and Māori culture, we're brought up around death. So, as much as I don't like it in the sense that it's final in the physical realm, it's final, they move on; we've been around that through our cultural protocols and we have our loved ones when they pass away, we have them in the house with us. So that's not uncomfortable for me or anything like that. I'm always up for talking about it.

My daughter rang me the other morning and she lost a friend to suicide just a couple of days ago. And she just called to check in and said, Dad, this boy here has taken his life. I just want you to know that Isaac, my youngest son, was close to him and you might want to check in with him. And so, we had a conversation, "Are you okay? How you feeling?" "Yeah, good". And you know, we are processing things. They know the work that I do. I'm not afraid to have these conversations.



I think in relation to the question about what you're asking Adrian, has society lost our way, I think we have in a sense that we steer away from conversations that are so vitally important. Today, our society has constructed so much from a commercial sense and a marketing sense that they're conditioning human beings to look a particular way and that we should always look happy. We should always have it together. Especially in Australia in this Western world, we must be a particular way. And what I can see is that it's overloading the minds of human beings and they can't sustain it.

We do have to move the focus and talk about things like death, because it doesn't fit the narrative about wanting to keep everybody happy. You know, the construct of these companies in the world, and the big business and that, is to sell products, to sell things. You don't sell sadness and death. A lot of people won't even buy life insurance because that means that I'm going to die.

**RITA:** Do you think that suicide is trauma driven?

**ADRIAN:** A lot of it is deep seated and been there for years. The volunteers on the phones at Lifeline, a lot of them have lived experience and some of them have been suicidal in the past. Some of them are survivors and it really does indicate how it is possible to turn your life around. I mean, you've commented yourself on that, Leon. So, all types of people [at] all different bits of life, at all different jobs, stages of life, young, old, what have you, but [have] mental illness, there's so much that is there that is experienced in there. We really try on the phone to have unconditional positive regard for that caller. It's something we talk about a lot, where they can talk about anything and it may be inappropriate even, some of it, but they can let stuff out, let stuff off their chest and just [talk], then explore what maybe they can do, what resources they might have and what ideas they might have, and encouraging them. I guess that's what it's all about.

**RITA:** So is part of that encouragement, Adrian, to say to them, "Phone back anytime, phone back, and there will always be someone here to listen".

**ADRIAN:** Yeah. I think it's something that we probably are not *telling* them that they must do that, but that's definitely an offer, the offer is there. They can call back anytime, as many times as they want. More [so] it's about, what would they do if those feelings get to this point again? We could ask that question and often they will say, we'll phone you back. That's certainly really encouraging to us too, to know that that we're a service that will keep them out of that darkest of places at one point.

**RITA:** Do you think our social leaders, our governments, our people in power, [the] people who make grant making decisions about what project to fund and what not project to fund. Do you think that those people are responsible enough or open enough to understanding that support is maybe key?

**ADRIAN:** Oh, prevention rather than cure.

**LEON:** I think they've taken a huge clinical approach to dealing with suicide and mental illness. Traditionally the government's [processes] are criteria driven. As long as

organisations are ticking boxes that set out a particular criterion, and a lot of those organisations ensure that they do that, [then they're doing their job]. They're finding that it's not necessarily the most effective approach because people are still dying at record numbers.

I think too, they've seen the effectiveness of organisations like Haka for Life and our approach to using indigenous dance and different ways of healing people, that there are different approaches that they're becoming more and more open to. But I'd like to see that expanded even more and made even quicker and reviewed as well to the true effectiveness of some of those outcomes for grants being funded.

**ADRIAN:** It makes me think too, I'm not working on the project, but there's something you might have heard of called 13Yarn? What we're trying to do is to get a phone service actually organised by Indigenous Aboriginal people, so that they can actually phone in on that line and get somebody that is culturally more aware of what they might be going through.

**RITA:** Do we have enough people from culturally diverse backgrounds who are in those roles at Lifeline, in those roles with some of the organizations that you work with, where as the saying goes, you are what you see? So, if you don't see those people there, why would I go to a psychologist who I think will never understand my baggage, because I come from a totally different place to that other person?

**ADRIAN:** I think the short answer is probably no, unfortunately, but we're always trying to encourage and find out how can we actually encourage more diverse categories [of people] to actually apply, to come and join.

**RITA:** So earlier, Adrian, you talked about how society has in some ways kind of like broken down, we're a lot more atomized. The family structure has changed significantly from what it might have been a hundred years ago. How important do you think the social media community is in creating what we might have lost through the physicality of relationships? So, by that I mean, support groups that are online, for example, that may actually reach hundreds, thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people.

**ADRIAN:** I mean, I suppose I'm thinking a lot from a Lifeline angle, just because of my involvement [there], but yeah, a lot of people won't phone, so it could be that it's text or it could be that it's chat, [an] online chat. So again, we do cater for that, it's available. I think that's a case of all of us who are trying to support, [we] need to branch out. We need to think about how is it that other people communicate.

**LEON:** It has its place, you're right. I mean, for me, if we didn't have social media with Haka for Life, it wouldn't have got out there. I use it in a particular way that we do promote things in the positive sense.

**ADRIAN:** That's another thing that's noticeable is that some people have real difficulty communicating. They might phone up and the phone line will go quiet. Our volunteers have

a lot of skill at trying to draw out what they're really feeling and trying to draw out a conversation, get that going.

**LEON:** Yeah. I love that example, Adrian, because essentially that's what we are trying to get those people to do, is to communicate.

**RITA:** And the shirt that you're wearing today, Leon, says: "It's okay not to be okay". Is that the message that you want to end with, perhaps?

**LEON:** Yeah, it is the message. It is okay not to be okay. Not every day is a happy day and not every day is a sad day, but I've learned in life that when life is good to enjoy it and there will be other times when life is not what we want it to be, but it doesn't mean that it's going to remain that way. I've seen it in my own life, that it doesn't stay rainy all the time. It might be a season we go through, where things are just overwhelming and tough. It's important to reach out to support services, it's important for you to express yourself around people that you trust and that allow you to be able to share exactly how you're feeling. These are the things that'll keep us alive. And then to realize that, as I did, there's greater days that [will] come. You know, there's experiences in life ahead of you that you cannot see now. [I thought] that's an impossibility, that a conversation like this [would be] happening in my life. I would observe that happens to everybody else, but not me, even though I wanted to do it. So, there's still lots in life. Lots in life for us that is unseen, that is yet to come, for each and every person.

**OUTRO:** Thanks for listening. This interview was recorded on the lands of the Whadjuk Nyungar people, and we pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging. This oral history collection was commissioned by the State Library of Western Australia and produced by Luisa Mitchell from the Centre for Stories. Narration by Luisa Mitchell, editing by Mason Vellios and special thanks to executive producer and interviewer, Rita Alfred-Saggar.

**END**