

The Man in the Blue Jeans

I have a photo on my bedroom shelf of a long-haired man crouched down in his blue jeans, nuzzling up to a black dog with a beautiful, blonde woman. I've never met this man and I never will. You see, he died eight years before I was born. He took his own life on a Wednesday afternoon. This man was to be my uncle Grayson. He was 28 years old and the ending of his life was the beginning of great suffering for those that loved him, especially my own father.

There was no story on my uncle's death back in 2000, no acknowledgement of suicide, just a family notice in the local newspaper describing his death as a result of an accident. These were the words my whanau chose. When I wrote this essay, the headlines in the New Zealand Herald sharply turned from the glow of our record medal haul to the dark side of life for professional athletes, with the death of Olympic hopeful Oliva Podmore.[i] The photo shows a young, pretty, healthy woman. The clues to describe her loss was by suicide lay within the words "sudden death" and the roll call of help organisations listed at the end of the story from "1737 Need to talk" to "Lifeline", "Youthline" and "Suicide Crisis Helpline".

Is this the more sensitive way to address the death of a person whose life was so much more than their end? I think so. It turns out there are reporting guidelines for media regarding suicide because research has demonstrated certain kinds of reporting can increase suicidal behaviours in vulnerable people. [ii]

I'm 12 (well nearly 13) years old but detect a definite squirm from adults with the subject I have selected, especially the references to suicide. I get the feeling everyone would feel a lot more comfortable if I talked about my latest hockey game, or the pair of Vans I am saving up for. But it's now part of my history or tuhinga o mua, the story of my life.

In the last reported provisional statistics from 2020, six kids in my age bracket of 10-14 took their lives[iii]. One of the statistics for the year ending 2021, will be 13-year-old Blake Dalley who passed away last December in a suspected suicide. [iv] His photos show a freckled face, one of those light-up-the-room smiles and awesome shots of him flinging himself around a skate ramp on his board. He could be any one of the boys in my class. In one of his last photos he is looking smart dressed for his school leaver's dinner, exactly like the one I'm looking forward to in a few months' time. Now he has gone. His parents have chosen social media and

online crowdfunding platform Givealittle to raise much needed funds for Gumboot Friday, a charity providing counselling for youth. They've also featured in a woman's magazine to tell their story in the hope others won't have to live it. On the flip side they've learned of the role social media played in diminishing their much-loved son's self-esteem.

And that's the guts of it. Social media can often form a big dark part of the complex reasons contributing to youth suicide and depression. Yet, it can also bring positives too, because the same platforms are responsible for raising the profile of organisations such as I AM HOPE and their Gumboot Friday campaign. The symbolism of the gumboot is that having depression is like walking through mud every day. Mike King who fronts the organisation in the media knows how exhausting that trudge can be as he has experienced his own struggles with mental illness and addictions. [v] I can't help but admire a person that gives out his phone number to the kids he speaks to on his New Zealand school tours, in case they need someone to talk to. [vi]

Getting our youth fast and easy access to counselling sessions has been a bumpy road for Mike. He won New Zealander of the Year in 2019 for his efforts to help those suffering from mental illness. He has been awarded (and returned) the NZ Order of Merit. [vii] All of this covered in the media bringing much needed awareness to the issues of youth depression and suicide.

There's no doubting the I AM HOPE campaign and Gumboot Friday are heavily reliant on the power of social media. In 2019, it looked like they had hit the jackpot, when Kiwibank ran a promotion whereby they would donate \$1 to Gumboot Friday for every person who put an I AM HOPE frame around their Facebook profile picture. The frame also featured the bank's logo. The post went viral and Kiwibank twice increased their donation cap.[viii] But the \$100,000 generated for the organisation is only a drop in a leaking bucket though, when the organisation can churn through nearly \$1,000,000 in funding in three months. While the support generated on social media is essential for the organisation when their profile increases the demand on their services does too.

In fact, Mike King was so disappointed with the money raised from Gumboot Friday, where do you think he headed? Well, straight back onto Facebook. He told Kiwis it wasn't enough and they would consider doing a second Gumboot Friday in November, if his post could get 50,000 shares to show that Kiwis were willing to get behind the cause. [ix] When I looked at the original post it appeared the target had fallen short at 41,000 shares. It wasn't all bad news

though as scrolling through the posts, I could see corporates doing their own fundraising challenges, kids donating pocket money, or in one case an anonymous donation of \$248,000, all being celebrated on social media.

Even with the help of mainstream and social media, bringing these services to our youth can't be achieved by just one man. In the words of Helen Keller, "alone we can do so little, together we can do so much". [x] I can't deny the social good that media can contribute to the fight against youth depression and suicide. I also can't deny many of the platforms are also contributing to our youth depression. While these services MUST continue, maybe it is time to think less about the gumboots and sharing of posts, and more about being kinder to others. Maybe it's time to look up from our screens and into people's eyes. To be present. To be mindful. That's what I can do. That's what you can do too. In memory of the Olivias, the Blakes and the man in the blue jeans.

References

[i] "New Zealand Olympic hopeful Olivia Podmore dies aged 24, New Zealand Herald, 9/8/2021

[ii] <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/media/reporting-and-portrayal-of-suicide>

[iii] <https://coronialservices/Justice.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Publications?2020-Annual-Provisional-Suicide-Statistics.pdf>

[iv] "Kiwi parent's nightmare: 'our son should still be here', Annemarie Quill, Woman's Day, 3/9/2021

[v] <https://www.iamhope.org.nz/>

[vi] "What's going on in Mike King's head", Greg Bruce, New Zealand Herald, 21/08/2021

[vii] "Editorial: Mike King's battle to tackle youth suicide", New Zealand Herald, 23/06/2021

[viii] "Facebook campaign 'Bargain advertising' for Kiwibank", Susan Edmunds,

<https://www.stuff.co.nz>, 22/02/2019

[ix] <http://www.facebook.com/Mike King>, 8/7/2021

[x] <http://www.keepinspiring.me>