

I imagine standing on a stage in fifteen years, speaking about things that need to be spoken about, writing about things that need to be written about, telling people stories that need to be told. Making my opinions heard and, most importantly, helping people.

I imagine I am speaking my truth. People surround me on all sides. I have a mic in my hand and I'm speaking. I'm confident. I'm calm. My voice is clear and strong. I'm speaking about the world. People are hooked, on the edge of their seats. Excited. Intrigued. Listening to my every word. Watching my every move until I deliver the final line. Applause. Cheering. I step off stage as the crowd claps one last time.

I imagine writing books about adventures. Journeys. Struggles. People, their problems, and the way they overcome them. Issues people have to face, sad things, and happy things. The past and the present. Good endings and bad endings.

I imagine teaching a classroom of twelve year olds what bearings are and how the order of operations works. Being patient and calm. Supporting their decisions and beliefs. Nourishing their talents and encouraging them to do their best.

I imagine mirroring the strength, persistence, and extraordinary courage of Grace Tame.

Grace Tame. A name that means nothing to some, and everything to others. She has broken down barriers and opened peoples' eyes to the inconsistencies in sexual assault laws. She shares her own painful story of abuse and advocates for positive change in Australia.

She is regularly a guest speaker for high-profile events and TV programs. She uses her voice and media platform to advocate for legal reform and to raise awareness about the impacts of sexual abuse. She sparked a national conversation about the rights of victims and helped overturn a Tasmanian law that stopped survivors from speaking up about their experiences.

27 years ago, September 1994, in Hobart, Australia, an adorable baby girl named Grace Tame was born. Her story begins here.

Her parents split up when she was two years old and she moved around a lot. She was a gifted and outgoing kid who loved sport and never spent more than a week in the same house. "Until I was 15, I had not lived in the same place for more than a week at a time," she says. "I mostly lived out of a school bag." (Grace and ABC news).

When she was around 13, she began to struggle with the traumatic memories of an older boy sexually abusing her at the age of six. When she started at a girls-only high school, the realisation hit her that people focus a lot more on women's looks than she had thought. She went from being a happy and carefree kid to depressed and anorexic. She was hospitalised for about six weeks in April 2009 due to her declining mental health. That's when she began to slip away and things became exceedingly difficult for her and her family.

At the age of 15, her 58-year-old math teacher sexually abused, raped, and groomed her. He gave her a key to his office and slowly undermined her relationship with her parents. By using her instability, caused by her parents splitting up, against her, he successfully isolated her from support. He raped her somewhere between 20 - 30 times until she reported him to the authorities. Police sentenced Nicolaas Bester to jail for two years and six months for his crimes against Grace. Police then sentenced him to an additional four months in prison for possession of child pornography. In March 2013, police released him early after a mere 18 months, and he was allowed to enrol into a Ph.D. program at the University of Tasmania. During his study, he was caught producing child pornography and found to be bragging online about the abuse of Grace Tame and how 'awesome' it was. Four months in prison was seen as a suitable sentence for this.

Nina Funnell launched the #LetHerSpeak campaign in November 2018 to try and fight the sexual abuse gag laws in Australia. The initial intention of the laws was to protect survivors from media exploitation, but it had quite a few unintended consequences. It silenced survivors who wished to speak out about it, adding to their feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. It also increased the stigma around sexual abuse online and protected abusers. By silencing victims, the laws also don't allow society to properly understand and learn from survivors about the causes and effects of sexual abuse. Grace sharing her story and educating people around Australia about the impact of sexual assault is helping people empathise with survivors. This is further evidence that gag-laws cause mostly harm, and getting rid of them will have a beneficial impact on society. As a result of this, in April 2019, Elise Archer, Tasmania's Attorney General, agreed to review the gag-law and called for public submissions. People submitted over fifty submissions, five times the average! The government planned to overhaul sexual assault victim laws. They also considered changing the charge of 'maintaining a sexual relationship with a person under the age of 17'.

Four months later, Grace spoke out about her story of sexual assault after the #LetHerSpeak campaign helped her obtain a court order through the Supreme Court of Tasmania. It won Grace an exemption from the gag-law. This was a massive step forward for Grace and her fight.

In 2021 Grace won the Australian of the Year Award. 'Grace has demonstrated extraordinary courage – using her voice to push for legal reform and raise public awareness about the impacts of sexual violence' (australianoftheyear.org). Since then she has been giving speeches at schools and big events, talking on TV, and she even visited her old school, St Michael's Collegiate. "We all know why I'm uneasy," she said, looking out at a sea of girls much the same age as she was when the abuse had occurred. "And it has nothing to do with anybody in this room. He's been in here, though, in this very hall" (ABC News and Grace).

Though it is painful to talk about, Grace has mastered being able to speak about her trauma while still healing from it. She is an excellent speaker, who uses words and expressions to move an audience. "She's so fiercely strong while being incredibly vulnerable at the same time, and I think that's why so many people can connect with her." (Maddison Cutler, close friend).

Grace, at 27 years old, has made a huge mark on Australia, and I hope she continues to sow the seeds of an Australia where people can speak up about their experiences. Words can't capture how hard she has fought and how much she has helped to shape the future of her home by sharing her story. By educating others. By touching the hearts of thousands. By being part of the #LetHerSpeak movement. By refusing to be silenced. By refusing to be defined by her past and instead by the person she has become.

I imagine being as brave as Grace Tame.

Sources

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