The Living Stories – Hannah’s Story [Video Transcript]

[Text on slide] Yarra Ranges Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nations as the Traditional Owners of these lands. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, as well as Young Leaders, who have been and always will be integral to the story of this region.

I also would like to recognise the immense importance of storytelling within First Nations communities as a way of healing and connection.

[Hannah] I've always felt that my family was rather unique. Many probably would call us dysfunctional by definition something that doesn't work right, which sounds about right.

[Text on slide] The Living Stories

A Carer, A Daughter, A Creator

[Hannah] Most of my life I have cared for my mother. I never saw it as a job, just something we did for each other.

I didn't find out my mother had a mental illness until I was 13. Without that label, I was left trying to make sense of her frequent hospital stays, long weeks of her being in bed all the time and often being called to the office every day after school to be told which number plate my sister and I had to look out for to know who was picking us up today.

This lack of understanding was confusing as a child, but mental illness is hard to explain to a kid.

Over time, Mum and I had lots of conversations about her illness, eventually giving it a name. Bipolar. This label didn't exactly change the way I cared for her, but it gave clarity to why my family was so different to the families that I saw at friends' houses or school events.

It never occurred to me until much later in my teenage years that we were a society that was made to fear mental illness. Because Mum never shied away from emotions, especially those that our society tends to shame. She accepted us as we were. She told us it was okay to hurt and to cry and to be afraid. Through her acceptance and voice of understanding, my understanding of mental illness and its impact were destigmatized at a very young age.

My role as a carer varies as mental health is fluid. I think my brain's way of processing Mum being unwell was to try and step into this extra role because I wanted to take some of the stress off her. I began to internalise this responsibility that no one ever asked of me. It was an instinct to want to hold everyone up.

This internal shift led me to growing up much quicker than other kids my age. Instead of having sleepovers and watching movies at friend’s houses, I was cooking dinners and helping my sister do her homework.

I didn't know how to process this anger of watching my mother struggle through hospital admissions where the doctors wouldn't listen, just spurting shallow mindfulness strategies and referring her on.

I watched all of this from the backseat. Not mature enough to have a voice. Too mature to be a kid. Nobody listens to the kid. They don't even notice us.

Mum listened. She saw the struggles I was facing and connected me with carer communities, with other kids who shared these experiences.

I began to see myself as someone with compassion and someone who will give their whole self. I learnt that my voice had held more than perceived childish emotion, instead a strong will to do good and give love. I felt confident in who I was and what I strived for.

At 14 years old, I was in a car accident. Now, instead of spending my nights cooking dinners and helping my sister do her homework, I was spending my nights in hospitals, being told by doctors that my experience of pain was all in my head and there is nothing they can do to help. That a simple mindfulness exercise will cure the searing pain. My reality ignored because nobody listens to the kid.

That wilful ignorance of my experience put me in a dark place. I couldn't finish high school and lost confidence in who I was.

My mum was told that if she let me leave high school in year nine, I would spend the rest of my life sleeping on her couch. She told them confidently, not my Hannah.

We cared for each other over five years. When all my friends had left and her family had given up on her, we still had each other.

People see Bipolar as a label of incapability. I have had many look at me with concern when I tell them that my mum has Bipolar. I have had family members who have tried to push my mum away from my siblings and I because she was a damaging role model. But she has had the strongest impact on my life. If it weren't for my mum, I would not be in this room.

She saw beyond a dramatic teenage girl. Understood the pain of doctors turning you away. A system that failed both her mental health and my physical health. Because nobody listens to the mentally ill and nobody listens to the kid.

Over the past six years, I have gone through processes of grieving, going from an A grade student in Accelerated Learning to dropping out of high school in Year 10. It felt like all the purpose and meaning in my life had been washed away because I was meant to be the golden child, the child that finished high school, went to university and became a design engineer.

I was meant to be the child that caused the least problems, who cared for my siblings and helped my mum do all the shopping and cleaning. Without these things, who was I?

Eventually, my recovery started in a place of acceptance. I spent so much of my life trying to actively push the bad parts out because to me, they were unhelpful. A barrier. Something that took away opportunities to learn and achieve goals. So I didn't want to think about those bad things. I didn't want to deal with and process them.

They were imperfections that I would compare with the old me, problems that I needed to solve to get back to the perfect image I had created in my head. But as I begin to reflect on those challenges, I start to see their significance.

The night I cried waiting for Mum to come home was the night I truly realised how much I loved her. Not finishing high school meant I could break down who I was beyond the perfect student. Telling Mum I was afraid of the thoughts in my head meant she could hold me tight and tell me it would be okay. That thoughts can just be thoughts.

The thoughts haven't gone away. I still get flashes of a mind's desperation for peace. But I've come to use art as a way of coping. My creativity is something I've always held close, melding into its own form over years of exploration.

In the past, I caged my creativity, locked inside the perfection I craved. I think I broke that cage when I began to walk away from that belief that to be enough meant I had to be in service of others. Now it takes form in colour and shapes. Creation's purest form.

I often write when I am trying to make sense of the thoughts in my head. I find myself using analogies that involve nature. And I think that is because nature comes with such complexity. And yet it can be so simple. A plant needs water and sunlight to grow. Simple, right? But some plants need more sunlight or more water. Maybe too much water hurts them.

Mental health is also complex, yet it is simple in that it is personal. When we reconnect with ourselves, when we explore who we are at our core and discover things that strengthen us and help us grow, that is when we can begin to heal. For me, caring will always be at my core.

I've become a product of the compassion that I give and the resilience that I hold. And I am proud of that. I am also a creator and that creation brings me joy. It brings me hope that things that may seem dark and difficult can be supported if given the right care.

I have come to understand that being a carer is a spectrum. Each of our stories are going to be different and I can only speak for my own. I know that my experience is my expertise and my age doesn't define how reliable my story is.

I am a person outside of this identity with passions and goals. I'm not contained to a role, but I'm still proud of that role. When a role is put onto us, a carer, a parent, a child, it can feel like our whole identity has to encompass that role. That to be a good child, I had to be perfect. That to be a good parent, Mum needed to fix her mental illness. That's what people told her.

But they are just labels. Over generalised and simplified labels. Because yes, I am a child and Mum is a parent, but she cares for me and I care for her. Yes, I am a carer for my mum and for my siblings, but most importantly, I am a carer for me.

[Text on slide]

If you or anyone you know is struggling, you can reach out to one of the helplines below. There's always help available.

Lifeline 13 11 14  
Beyond Blue 1300 224 636   
Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467  
Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800  
QLife 1800 184 527  
13YARN 13 92 76  
MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78

A final thank you to

[Inspiro Health logo] [Yarra Ranges Council logo] [Eastern Health logo]

for helping to create spaces for stories about Mental Health experiences to be heard