

PODCAST



Season 2 — Episode 3

First Nations Resilience and Strength

RACHEL HOCKING

Hello and welcome to a special podcast series from The Healing Foundation, Healing Our Way. This is the second season of the Healing Our Way podcast, and in this series young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share their thoughts about intergenerational trauma, healing, and the concept of truth telling.

We are with The Healing Foundations Youth Reference Group members and their special guests to talk about their journeys and thoughts on how we can continue to heal our communities.

To begin, we'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Lands and Waters across this beautiful continent, and we acknowledge and pay our respects to Elders and to Stolen Generation survivors of the Dreaming and of the here and now. We recognise the ongoing nature of trauma experiences for First Nations peoples. And we commit each day to survivor lead intergenerational healing.

Before listening, please take note that this podcast may touch on sensitive topics related to trauma. So take care while listening, and if you feel the need to speak with anyone, you can contact 13 YARN on 13 92 76 and talk with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander crisis support worker, or your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Centre, or, of course, your preferred support services.

My name is Rachel Hocking and I'm gonna be your host for the second season of the Healing Our Way podcast. In this episode, we yarn to Blake Tatafu and Jye Cordona about First Nations strength and resilience.

Thank you both for joining me. So youse have some deadly bios and I never like reading out bios because they sound so much better when they come from your own mouths. So, I thought to kick us off, Jye, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

JYE CORDONA

Yep, so my name is Jye Cordona, I'm a Kungarakana, Bradi and Bunarugumm man, based on Larrakia Country.

RACHEL HOCKING

Thats deadly and, Larrakia Country is all the way at the top end, but you've come down here on beautiful Gadigal Land to join us, so thank you for travelling brother.

JYE CORDONA

Nah, it's a privilege. Very cold.

RACHEL HOCKING

Hey! Getting used to it hey? Us NT [Northern Territory] folk, we're not made for this. Blake you're probably familiar to our listeners who've been hearing the first two episodes of this series. But for anyone who's joining us for the first time, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

BLAKE TATAFU

Yeah, if this is the first episode you're listening to, welcome, and listen to the others. My name is Blake Tatafu. I'm a Wiradjuri Dunghutti man born and raised in Western Sydney in Darug Country. My family comes from Trangie and Kempsey on my mum's side. And I'm also equally as proud to be a Tongan man on my dad's side, and I am too part of the Youth Reference Group.

RACHEL HOCKING

Amazing, Blake, I'm going to start with you, because I was listening to all the episodes from the first series of Healing Our Way and you make some powerful statements across all of them. You share some beautiful yarns, but there was this one line that you used which I just thought was a really nice thing to reflect on, you said 'meet this challenge with something that would make my nan proud'. I want to know if you could tell us a bit more about what does that mean to you? What does meeting the challenge with something your Nan would be proud of mean for you?

BLAKE TATAFU

I think that my nan is probably the strongest person I know and the strongest person I'll ever meet. Through the way that she's raised her daughters, my mum being one of them and then raising us. I don't think I've ever seen anyone with this much, fierce pride in her family. Someone with as much tenacity and strong will, and also no one is stubborn as my nan. She's taught me a lot and I feel like through her strength and through everything she's overcome to support my entire family, I think how can I do something or how can I respond to a situation or challenge myself that is at least a little bit like my nan's strength and power?

Do I think I'll match it? I'm not sure, I hope I do someday to my own. But she's just one person that I look at and I think, wow. I think of everything you've gone through, and I'm so lucky that I don't have to do that. And so, I need to make sure that I continue everything that you've created which is a legacy.

RACHEL HOCKING

A legacy that you're living and breathing. Thank you for sharing so much about her. I want to pick your brain a bit more about her throughout this podcast, cause she does sound pretty deadly. Jye, you're joining us for the first time on Healing Our Way. And as we mentioned, you travelled a long way from Larrakia Country. You actually started a program up there in 2019, as a voluntary program called Brother To Another. I wanted to know if you could tell us what drove you to create Brother To Another and what does the program do?

JYE CORDONA

Yeah. So Brother To Another is a First Nations led and governed charity. So, you know, really proud to have this, you know, to set something up that showcases the strength of men, particularly First Nations men, and particularly in a society where we've kind of, we get shown as either footballers, carpenters... and then also all the negative stuff as well. So to show a positive light on that. I probably should explain Brother To Another shouldn't I?

RACHEL HOCKING

Thank you. That was a beautiful intro.

JYE CORDONA

So Brother To Another was born... I guess just out of a need by talking with my own family, my own experiences, those of my uncles, my... grandfathers, my cousins, about us taking lead and particularly in systems which are affecting us the most. And in this case, it's the youth justice and the criminal systems as well. So Brother To Another works with families and young people who are at risk of the NT [Northern Territory] youth justice and policing systems. I find 'at risk' like a really weird word to use because then as you're Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, you are at risk, unfortunately. So what we aim to do is working our own ways, so outside of the case management, Monday to Friday, nine to five style and also outside of the criminogenic needs, you know, mode which... everything seems to be based around and we always say First Nations families don't sit around a table and ask what their criminogenic needs are.

We ask what our well-being and family needs are and that's what we need services to go back to. So, with Brother To Another that's what we do, we're philanthropically funded. Really proud to be a couple of years in and still not receiving any money from the Territory Government, particularly the Youth Justice Department of Territory Government, they do need to come to the table with us. And that will happen.

But what we're doing right now is that we're building momentum and we're slowly infiltrating the system to break it down. And that's really exciting. So we work with schools, we work with family units. So not just the youth that we work with, siblings and parents and grandparents and also peer groups, so that's been really exciting. It started off as a voluntary program in Don Dale. I used to go in there with about seven or eight different activities in the backpack and the young mob would tell me what they wanted to do, and we would just adapt to it.

Even the name Brother To Another came from a couple of the young people in B Block up in Darwin, which is really cool. So everything we're trying to do is youth led. Even down to our space and what our space looks like, the young people tell us. And the young people also tell us what type of service they want. So, we adapt to that as well. And we basically what we say is, you know we prioritise and value First Nations families and that's something that the system still doesn't.

RACHEL HOCKING

That's just remarkable hearing this you know, because I've spoken to your mob, your families up there, I've heard about the impact of Brother To Another. How much you were doing on a shoestring. And it's just, it's galling that you haven't got that backing and so yeah, call out that government, you know. They do need to come to the table because if you're doing this already without that support, imagine, imagine what could happen with more support.

JYE CORDONA

Yeah. And it's really... it's really beautiful. And yeah, I always reflect to my inner child and me being that 15 year old Aboriginal boy, that you know, I wasn't too sure who I was, but one thing I knew which was really sad was that we were the bottom feeders in Australia and that was really saddening.

I remember riding my bike to school and sometimes my mate would be there or he wouldn't, and we knew that if he wasn't there for a few weeks or a month or two, he'd be at youth detention. We knew that if it was four thirty in the afternoon or five and we're still riding our bikes around, that police are probably going to question us, what we're doing. It grew a lot of anger and hate. And I started believing the negative, you know, of what it means to be an Aboriginal person, but also, I guess, a male and what, you know, Indigenous masculinity means to me and things like that. And that's something that I'm really proud with the team that we have. That we can give access to these young people to have those positive role models and be themselves and take their time through it.

RACHEL HOCKING

I'm going to ask you in a little bit to talk more about the healing aspects of your program, and to talk about just what you do see in the boys and men that you work with.

Blake, how does the strength that you draw from your Nan extend to strength from Country as well for you? Because we're talking about strength and resilience today. And I do notice there are these threads about, not just the people we surround ourselves by, but the living, breathing Land that we're all so deeply connected to.

BLAKE TATAFU

Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of people who... from the Water and I guess as well, as the Land as well get a sense of cleansing, get a sense of refresh, get a sense of a reset when you are on Country, or when you're in the Water. For me, a lot of my strength does come from the Water. I feel attuned to it, not just because of my ancestors, and my people, and from where I come from. But I've got a personal connection to the Land. I feel like it holds me in a way that I know that my Nan would in exactly the same way. So, I see their kinship between Land, Water and the love from my Nan.

You try to explain this to my mates that are not First Nations, and they get it, they try to get it, but they don't. And that's ok. But I know that my brothers and sisters out there know exactly what I'm talking about. And it's one of the easiest things, yet we don't make the most time for, that makes me whole. We're so busy, you know, as young adults living our lives, starting careers, starting families, doing whatever it takes. Sometimes we don't take that moment to really reconnect ourselves with where we come from. But I know when I do, I feel whole again.

RACHEL HOCKING

It's like that medicine, you know?

BLAKE TATAFU

Yeah, 100%. There's a power even as a young kid, like my family would be worried because I had no fear of the water, I had no fear of the depth, and I would go far. Lifeguards would scream and shout and I wouldn't listen to them, and I'm going to be ok. I don't have a fear of the water. In fact like, it calls me more than I need it.

RACHEL HOCKING

Well, Jye, for you, I mean Country is kind of built in to Brother To Another, right?

JYE CORDONA

Yeah. So with Brother To Another we acknowledge the truth, which is that, you know we are Country, basically. And we need to connect back to it and for us to be an organisation which actually truly reflects that, we need to drop out of this corporate or big NGO ways of working and that's for our staff, and that's for the family and the youth as well. So, we really prioritise going out on Country but also learning. And the different ways of which we continue on with our own journeys as people, but also how we can allow young people to learn as well.

Because we work with the youth that are involved with the youth justice prison systems and also out of home care unfortunately. We started on a cultural sensory level, so we've got a Larrakia man on our team and we've got a program that we call I Spy on Country so it uses all the five senses, and we have like a worksheet, which is like a bingo.

And that's how we start that learning about, you know, appreciating Country learning, becoming I guess, present and at one with it. And it is... it's so powerful because it gets the young mob, you know away from their phones, away from the distractions and actually thinking, feeling, finding bush tucker, finding... you know, tools, with the tool making. It's absolutely incredible. And then even with our, you know, Water is cleansing for us too, we're fresh water people and again feeling hugged by Country. It's you know, someone said it feels like you're in the womb, which I used to think was a bit, you know, lame. But it's honestly that safety that you feel, and we actually use that, when we talk to young people. And they usually get a bit shamed and oh, yeah, like I don't know about that. But the great thing is when we're on Country, we get these really rich conversations from young people.

And we're saying from eight years old up until twenty-one and it's a chance for them to... I love when they're on Country and we let them just walk forward sometimes. And there's a walk, which we call the Cascade Walk on Kungarakana Country and it's a big uphill walk but it opens up to an escarpment. And we purposely stopped talking and these are with youth that often have a lot of neurodiversity and they're fidgety and they gotta talk. And when you see them go quiet and touch a paperbark tree and then look over the planes, you know, that they're starting to get it. But you know that, even my ancestors are looking after them as well.

So, it's incredible even bringing young people along with those journeys, but them telling us how they feel safe on Country. And this is another reason why youth detention, youth prisons will never work because you can never be on Country. You never can have that safety. You can never have that hug. You can never... I mean, you can probably feel that spirituality, but there's a mixture of it as well. So yeah, everything we do is based around that and it's connection to Country, connection to ancestors, connection to their families and where they might not have that connection physically to the families.

They connect to our families because we all belong together in that way. So that's the really, that's the stuff that we're really proud about. The caseworkers from large NGOs don't really get it. You know, they wanna shut this case meaning like, nah. We'd rather take the young person and their friends or cousins out and do that.

So, we're really lucky in Darwin in, in terms of... we've got so much diverse culture in Country. There's just different learnings to take from everywhere. Recently, we went out to Galiwin'ku Island and worked with an organisation called Yalu Aboriginal Org. And we worked with some young boys and men, but mainly youth workers who are under 30 and it is incredible seeing these young people walking up and down this twenty kilometre stretch of beach with us from essentially from the city.

And just learning and being present, eating turtle eggs, having mangrove worms, hunting for crab. It was just incredible and it's such a... to see the smiles and the exuberance on those young fullas compared to... you know, unfortunately sometimes we get to know them in youth prisons. And if that's not proof of seeing them on Country and how much they flourish and how much they learn and grow, then I don't know what is- isn't - sorry.

BLAKE TATAFU

I love that so much cause like... I think of any experiences related to the general justice system or anywhere in our jails, our people are constantly being dehumanised, disempowered and displaced. Your program is something that I wish that my brother and my cousins could have.

JYE CORDONA

I wish I had it!

BLAKE TATAFU

To feel like they've got that sense of belonging whilst, you know things are rough. But maintaining not just their culture but their connection to... what it feels like to belong. What it feels like to feel safe, feel secure.

JYE CORDONA

Yeah. And, you know, the topic is resiliency and just the resiliency of our Country, despite the beating that it takes and the resilience of our people. That we continue on, we continue our learnings. We adapt we evolved, you know, we talk about, you know, our back burning processes with fire and that really showcases the resilience of our Country. So we'll keep showing up and we'll keep really reinvigorating and reenergising and that's us as people. I mean it's proof in this room right now that we still do that across it. You know the Nations, so that's pretty cool.

RACHEL HOCKING

It's as beautiful every time I hear you talk about it, you know. Had some yarns over the phone in the last year. You've been telling me about, taking these men out on Country and the changes you do see, quite obvious, you know, and that's your measure right? It's those physical, mental, social, emotional shifts in a person when they're held by Country and told by Country, they belong. And allowed to have stillness. Because I think the justice system really doesn't allow for that stillness.

JYE CORDONA

The education system don't allow it either.

RACHEL HOCKING

That's a really good point. Like you said, you know a lot of our young mob, they don't, they fidget and they've got that neurodivergence and a lot of... It's very common in the mob that we have in our juvenile detention centres and our prisons and so to, give them space to connect... when a lot of that's taken away from them, that's powerful. Why do you think it's so innate for us, as Blackfullas to centre the collective in healing? In strength and resilience, but particularly when we do come together? Why do we... why is it so natural for us to centre the collective and not the individual?

BLAKE TATAFU

Because we've never been about just being individual. I think in all our different... complexities and diversities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we've thought about all of us, you know, not just one of us. We see it all the time. We're natural caretakers and natural caregivers, and we're not just doing it to ourselves. We do it for our family, our community, our friends, people we love. Our Country.

I don't think... ever, I don't think I've ever experienced a way in which when we're thinking about healing, and resilience, and strength, that has ever been about an individual noumenal feeling like, I can't... I don't think for myself and a lot of people that I know really well. I don't think we can be well if no one else is well. Let me rephrase that. It's that saying you know, 'if you eat well, I'm eating well', so I know that I can't be well taken care of and feel well in myself if you aren't as well. So, I don't know.

I know nothing besides the communal way, on both sides of my family. Being Tongan it's exactly the same concept of the importance of family. No one should ever go without. You should consider everyone. If you've got it, it's everybody's. And I don't know any other way, so I'm really grateful that that that is one of the thing that threads us all together as First Nations peoples is that we are always thinking about each other.

RACHEL HOCKING

And I even see a little bit of it, a little bit, a bit more than a little bit of it, in my Step-Italian family.

BLAKE TATAFU

Oh of course.

RACHEL HOCKING

And I think that's it. It just strikes me because yeah. I just see it in so many of us young mob, like we just pick each other up and like you said, like if I'm fed, you're fed, and that... how you know, people make jokes about payday and give me a loan and all that, but it's kind of just to, Blackfulla thing to care about whether your brothers and sisters have enough money to put food on the table.

I speak to some of my Kartiya friends and they're like, why do you give so many loans to your family? Ya know, I don't even call them loans anymore. Like, if I've got a bit more than my brother over there, I'll give it to them, because I know that they'll look after me. But it's also we live in this capitalist society and I guess that's our way of functioning, you know, and surviving at the moment, but we get so much more from each other than just that.

It's not you go back home and... the generosity of welcoming you back after, oh gosh, you know, I'll get growled if I haven't been back for a year. The generosity of still like sitting me down and telling me what's happened while I've been away and still taking me out the Parnta outstation. And you know, that's... that giving.

But I do want to go back to you Jye before we wrap up. Because I didn't get to ask you about who you draw strength from in your life. You seem to me like somebody that a lot of mob draw strength from. But I want to know who you get your strength from? And it might be more than one person, but if one person comes to mind.

JYE CORDONA

Jeez. Well, yeah. I think with all of us, you know we say our family, which is you know, so, so true. But recently, it's more so through... it's kind of a weird way of putting it I'm trying to think. It's more so like I've connected with my inner child a lot more, and when I feel my inner child happy or like... 'shit yeah, Jye that's what you needed to do' or you know, something like that. I draw strength from that. So then in a weird way- it's not a weird way at all but when young people start thriving and they're strong, my inner child sees that and like 'Jye you were just that person to support them in that moment' or seeing the other lads that we work with do that. I see... I draw a lot of strength when I see... you know, we do a bit of work with some men and other fathers and uncles of these young people, but also more broadly those in rehabilitation centres. And you know, I've been very fortunate in a lot of ways. I've got a lot of trauma as well, but I acknowledge where I have my privileges, and to sit down with some of these men and see them actually let walls down. I draw strength out of that because I... these men haven't been afforded some of the privileges that I have. And they're able to say 'Jesus actually makes me feel like shit' or like, 'I'm uncomfortable being in a relationship.' 'I don't know how to do it.' 'I don't know how to be a dad.'

And I draw strengths on that vulnerability. So yeah, as of late, that's where I've drawn strength. I guess the people who you can see have been beaten down, but they still can laugh, have a joke, but also be vulnerable and say like shit this scares me. And that's where I get stronger as well because I say I need to be to be better or you know, this is fine, where I'm at now.

Because I grew up as a kid with, you know, I've got complex PTSD, but that's just the title. There's a lot of strength to it and you know, I'm pretty sure I have ADHD as well cause I can't sit still. But you know, I draw strength out of knowing that, you know, we bounce back and you know these titles and diagnoses... It's not a negative thing. We've got so many strengths. So yeah, it's a long, long winded one, but it's not just family. It's seeing other people succeed, especially our mob push through.

RACHEL HOCKING

I think it is important to go back to that, to the people who we're often helping, which I don't like that word but you know, the people who often come to us for our services or the mob that we're in community groups with... god, they are strong. God, they are strong. To come into that space in the first place and...

JYE CORDONA

You can never think you're above anybody. Otherwise it doesn't work and like you know, I don't know if this will make podcast probably not. But I was gonna get a job at PwC, so Price Waterhouse Coopers and we were in Brisbane at that moment, I was talking to the state manager, who was also a First Nations person. And we went to this massive building and she was saying, you know, talking the talk, 'oh, this is pretty cool. You know, we've got a cafe upstairs and all this' and, uh, this is cool I've never been at a place with a cafe and stuff and then we went upstairs, met all the other Blackfellas, was couple of them there.

And then as we're walking out, she said, 'If you want to work here, we're all the big fish, we're not the small fish down there.' And I just said, you know, 'as soon as we start thinking we're the big fish we lose track of where we are, or what we're a part of,' and again, that collectiveness is that you know we're not the big fish we're a part of something important, but as soon as you start saying we're the big fish, it's yeah.

RACHEL HOCKING

Red flag, yeah.

JYE CORDONA

Yeah. So that's random story, but.

BLAKE TATAFU

No no, I totally respond to that though, because I feel like that collectiveness and caring for each other. To me anyway, it's something that I don't feel like we've learned. It's just it is who we are. But to become, like to become centred on yourself and individualising anything, is something that you learn or you unlearn that collectiveness to learn that. And I'm glad that you'll never be that way. Because I feel you, brother. And no I will never be like.

RACHEL HOCKING

And it just made me think like, that when you see people, you can always tell a lot by a person by how they treat people who work in service roles. You know how they treat that person at the cafe or Maccas at the drive through or our garbos who come and pick up our rubbish you know?

I'll do a proper wrap up, I just wanna say it means a lot to be in these spaces, to be vulnerable with each other, but to feel safe with each other and yeah, you all gave so much just then. And I hope that lots of people listen to this because I know they'll learn a lot from all of you. So thank you.

Thank you everyone for listening. For more information head to The Healing Foundation website at www.healingfoundation.org.au. If you need a yarn after listening to this episode, we encourage you to connect with 13YARN on 13 92 76 and you can talk with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander support worker.

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