

SHARING THE HEALING



“WE’VE GOT
TO BE BRAVE
ENOUGH TO
SPEAK ABOUT IT.”

Just shy of sixty, Uncle Anthony feels “reborn” through acceptance, slowing down and embracing his culture.

Uncle Anthony’s life has been an epic journey, one where he has plunged into deep valleys and reached high peaks. This has given the Bunurong/Trawlwoolway man a quiet determination to speak out about the “deep trauma” he sees in society and how we all, as a community, need to “be on suicide watch for each other”.

WARNING: This story contains themes of suicide. If this raises issues for you, call Lifeline on 13 11 14

‘Wellbeing’ is the term Uncle Anthony prefers to use when talking about mental health – he believes it removes some of the stigma and encourages us all to actively support everyone in tackling the challenges of anxiety, depression and more.

“We need to build real relationships with anyone who is feeling the strain of life and to share the understanding that mental health is no different than physical health – if you get a get a toothache, you go to the dentist. We must understand that to be able to break down the barriers.”

This understanding comes from personal experience – he has been there; both with friends and in his own life. “What people in community don’t realise is that in order to get to the stage of being suicidal, you are driven to a low level of mental health – and that is a very dark headspace to be in.”

He recalls years ago, when one of his friends took his own life and how, from the outside, his friend had appeared happy – always enjoying a few drinks with everyone else. He now wishes he had spent more time to ask him how he was really feeling.

“When you get to the point of suicide, and I’m speaking from experience, you don’t understand anything around you, nothing matters at all. You have no feelings about anything except the trauma that you’re dealing with at that time – what’s in your head. You have to be in a traumatic state where you wish to no longer live.”

The fact that suicide is not spoken about more deeply saddens him. “For decades everyone has just closed ranks on the subject, often it’s thought of as family business, and people don’t talk about it. I speak from the point of view where I’ve lost friends and I understand the depths of that heavy headspace that is so dark and treacherous – a place where no glass of scotch or drug can bring you back from. I can tell you this because I have suffered it.”

In his own personal experience decades ago, he was driven to making an attempt on his own life and ended up in hospital. Three days later, he was back at work and didn’t talk about it with anyone. He now advocates for what he

calls bravery – for having the courage to speak out about such experiences in the hope of helping yourself and others – to share the healing.

“Sometimes people think that their mentorship or reputation is more important than their pride. I went through a trauma that took me to that dark place and I died in hospital on a table in surgery. We’ve got to be brave enough to speak about it.”

His own lived experience of suicide provided him with clarity. “I came out of it in a good way and became a

successful businessman and a good individual to others. I was fortunate to have had support around me, I just wasn’t recognising it because of my trauma – you see nothing, feel nothing and it’s a terrible space to be in.”

Uncle Anthony admits he has met his personal demons head-on. His lived experiences have left him fearing nothing, and with a fierce determination to never go to that dark place again. “Identifying there is a problem, understanding what that person is going through and getting professional help is what we must do for each other. It cannot be ignored – we

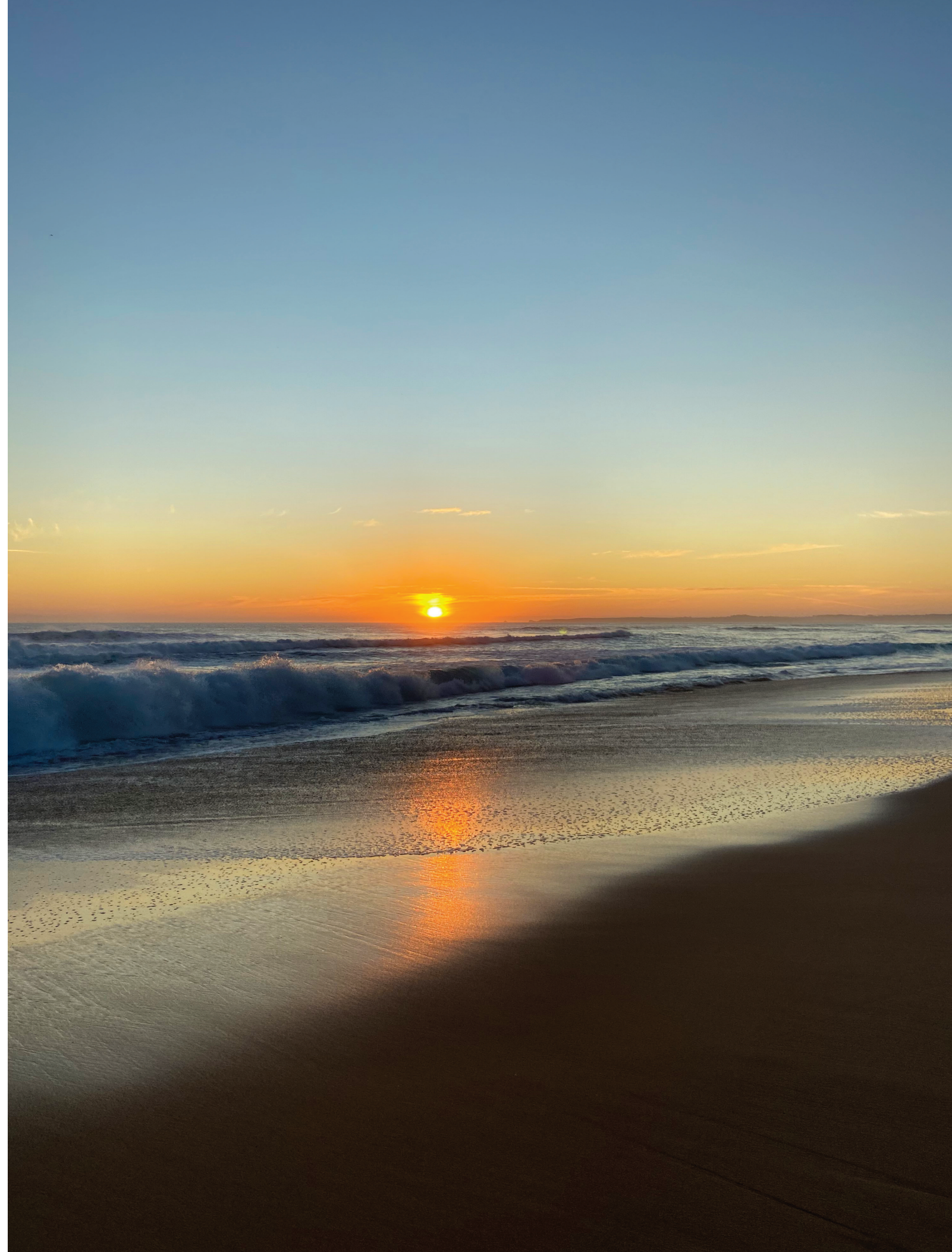
can’t think that they will be okay because they are strong.”

Intervention and advocacy are the key. “When someone is suffering, they are in a numbing space and unless they get real mental health advocacy – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocacy or Wellways advocacy, there may never be a change. When a person is in that state of mind, they’re not thinking about anything but the pain and struggle – understanding that is what help and support are all about.”

Uncle Anthony believes that, as a community, we can all extend our understanding and support around mental health and offer mentorship for each other. Taking the time to build relationships also helps us to notice changes in people and to be able to intervene in a loving and safe way.

“If we’re sharing our journey with someone, we need to know that they’re alright. You have to make a judgement call – is that person’s wellbeing, their mental health okay? Truly okay? Can I be more persistent? It’s about understanding and connectivity. It’s a delicate thing.”

WE ALL, AS A COMMUNITY, NEED TO “BE ON SUICIDE WATCH FOR EACH OTHER”.



He is an advocate for people of all cultures, especially those, like he, who identify as Aboriginal. "You have got that to deal with on top of everything else. Comments made to me years ago haven't left me. The person who said it isn't a bad person, they just don't understand how racist something can be. I've got to turn the negatives into positives and help to call out unintended responses of ignorance – where people have actually insulted another person and don't know it."

Culture is now his saviour. Living on his Mother's Country, he has left the darkness of past traumas behind and is focussed on helping others to heal and just going with the flow. His Aboriginality grounds him to Mother Earth and a single creator. "Bunjil is my creator, to others it may be God."

He is determined to do as much as he can in this phase of his life. "This COVID virus is a huge turning point for humanity and where we all realise the frailness of our lives.

I now need to get things done, I'm finally in my Dreaming."

Uncle Anthony's Key Messages

- Seek out a best friend. Find a confidante who is going to encourage you to talk and who understands you.
- There's no shame in feeling the way you do. Check your gauge regularly, you take your car to the mechanics and you need to take yourself to a doctor. Your GP knows how to refer you to the right person for assistance.
- It's okay to feel pain. But it's better to do something about helping you feel enlightened and wanting to get the spark back in your life again.

#storiesstrong

WHO TO CONTACT

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue www.beyondblue.org.au

Headspace www.headspace.org.au

Mens Line www.mensline.org.au
1300 789 978

Well Mob www.wellmob.org.au

– Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing online resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc.
www.vaccho.org.au

Yarning SafeNStrong 1800 95 9563
Emergency 000

This article is part of the #storiesstrong suicide prevention campaign which highlights a series of twenty articles developed by a diverse range of people with lived experience of suicide and experts in the field.

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For more information visit www.gphn.org.au

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Gippsland PHN acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their elders past and present. We also recognise, respect and affirm the central role played in our work by people with lived experience, their families and/or carers. Gippsland PHN is committed to providing inclusive services and work environments where people of all backgrounds, sexualities, genders, cultures, spiritual beliefs, age, bodies and abilities are valued, supported and celebrated.

