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Joshua Kramer is a barrister.

He specialises in human rights and native title cases.

Josh is a Wanyi Kalkadun man,

one of only a handful of First Nation Barristers in Australia.

A few years ago, Josh had the honour of being part of the ceremony where his mum, Sandra Kramer, was also admitted as a lawyer into Queensland's Supreme Court.

Both Josh and his mum have gone through more than most on the way to realise their ambitions.

And a heads-up, Josh's story includes domestic violence and suicide.

It was following a recent family tragedy that Josh knew he himself was close to falling apart.

So he set off to take stock all the way to Mount Everest.

Hi, Josh.

How are you, Sarah?

Very well. It's lovely to have you on the program.

As I say, you're a Wanyi and Kalkadun man.

What part of the country do you belong to?

Kalkadun countries around Mount Isa, and that's where I grew up,

and Wanyi countries around the Gulf of Carpentaria,

and in particular, Lawn Hill near Doolmajee is an important place for my family.

And when you close your eyes and think about what that part of Australia looks like, what does it mean to you?

Those rocky hills around Mount Isa, and sometimes it's quite dry and arid, and there's some really magical waterholes.

There's a little place called Spring Creek where my mother used to take us swimming out past the airport, that's one.

There's Lake Mindar out there, but there's a nice waterhole on the way to Cloncurry too, again, swimming, and I swear the place put a curse on me when I was there, but...

What do you mean?

Oh, it just really imbued some magical feelings in you while you were there, and it's a place that you can't forget.

I still get to travel to Mount Isa quite regularly,

and it's a beautiful country, and it's just a special part of the world.

This is where your mum's people are from.

What do you know about her early life, Josh?

My mother had a really tough life.

She was the youngest of 12, so we have a big family,

and in Mount Isa we are literally related to everybody.

But she was the youngest of 12, and her mother passed away

when my mum would have been about six months old from cancer.

So she was raised by one of her older sisters

and a few of her aunts and uncles and my grandfather.
He was a cook out on stations, cattle stations,
and so he'd be out working, and then the family, the kids,
would look after themselves, and they had the aunts and uncles around,
and that was my mother's life as a young child growing up.
You spent your early life, your early years in Mount Isa.
What are your memories of what things were like at home
when you were a kid there?

It's tough that in a lot of times you can only remember
the really tough and difficult occasions,
and my stepfather and my mother were living in
a domestic and family-violent relationship,
and I was only young.

I was only primary school when I left Mount Isa
at the start of grade eight,
and so the most I remember is really the physical violence.
If you look back today, you'd probably say,
well, there's coercive control and there's other elements to it,
but I remember my mother, she was only small.
She was probably 45 kilos, about half the size of me,
and my stepfather was a big man.

I remember her being up against the wall
and being physically assaulted by him,
and that was tough as a kid.

I also copped it too, I think, as the oldest,
and I got hit a few times,
and that was the circumstance in which we lived under.

It was a tough environment for all of us.

How do you remember about the lead-up
to your mum's decision to leave
and take your kids away from that?

I mean, it must have been really tough for her.

I remember getting married, and I was set up my wedding day.

I'm 30 years old, and my mother was this age,
and she left with three kids in Mount Isa,
and we moved to Yopun in central Queensland.

Yopun's a little town on the coast of central Queensland.

How different was it to Mount Isa?

It couldn't be any more different.

You've got Northwest Queensland, Stockman,
these cattle stations,
all these indigenous young fellows running around,
and then you moved to Yopun,
and when I first got there, I thought,

well, is this a retirement village?
I didn't see any black people, firstly.
Didn't see anyone until 16.
No, exactly, and I was like, what is going on here?
There's that general demographic which is different,
but it's a beautiful coastline,
and that Capricorn Coast part of Australia
is special, and that became our home.
My mother sort of worked our way up.
We met people, we developed friendships,
and that served us really well in those early stages.
What state was your mum in, though,
Josh, in those early months of coming out
of such a damaging relationship?
Look, I think all of us had PTSD,
and to tell you the truth, I think we all still have it
to some level, PTSD from that time,
and I know it took a long time,
I don't know if my mother's ever fully recovered,
but I know it took a number of years,
I heard her even just be able to function on a normal level.
I was the oldest, I was probably about 12 or 13,
and my younger sister was maybe 11 years old,
and then my other brother, he was about eight,
and my other brother was born later.
But I remember we were living in a house together in Yopun,
and we were just like shadows.
I sort of thought out the time,
we were almost like roommates in that,
you know, there's not much of a bond to bring us together.
We barely communicate with each other.
We are individually self-sufficient,
and I think my siblings, the oldest of us,
all felt like we've raised ourselves from an early age.
And, you know, whilst my mother was present
in a physical sense,
we developed our own identities and independence really early,
and that was tough,
and I just remember thinking, you know,
in the group of shadows walking around here in the house,
we're barely existing in a sense,
you know, that sense you feel in your heart,
having a really strong soul and an identity
and just being really emotionally stable and comfortable.

We didn't have that as kids.
I'm imagining you would have carried a lot of that fear with you too,
although you weren't living with this violent man.
That's what you'd grown up expecting.
It must have not been easy to get used to the fact
that you weren't under threat in the same way.
There was that, but I think the hardest thing
was actually being thrust into the role
as we're thinking you're a father at 12 and 13 years old,
and I think back now, and I'm...
You know, and I tried to play that role
and, you know, to be supportive of my mother
and help my younger siblings,
and I would have made so many mistakes.
I did make so many mistakes,
but that is the toughest thing, I think,
actually being thrust into that position
and then having that responsibility,
and that's something I had as a 12, 13-year-old.
How tough were things financially at that point?
Oh, look, we didn't have any money.
My mother still hasn't really ever had much interest
in money and accumulating wealth or property.
You know, there'd be a struggle to keep the electricity on.
The phone would be turned off a few times.
I remember going down to the phone box
that must have been a teenager
and trying to get the phone hooked up in my name,
so, I mean, that was just part and parcel of it.
It's...you didn't really need money to do things,
and that was really the circumstance.
It was tough on my mother, but, you know, it was tough on us kids,
but it was what it is.
When you were a teenager,
your brother, Robson, was born.
How did the house change once this little baby arrived?
Yeah, Robson was really special,
so he was born in...he was born in New Pune.
I was 15 years old, so I was in grade 10,
actually, at the time, getting close to grade 11.
And he came along, and I think for the first time,
we were allowed to have some emotion.
We were actually allowed to love something
and care for something, and we did.

You know, I know my sister and I,
something we talk about really fondly,
and, you know, I was like a father to him.
My sister was like a mother to him
from those teenage years,
and that was just something really special.
I think it took us out of that space
we had been for a number of years,
and for the first time,
we'd had some warmth and emotion and caring in the house,
and that's not something that is familiar or common for us,
and that's what he brought.
He brought a real ray of sunshine to our lives.
What about life outside of the family, Josh?
What was school like for you?
Look, I was really lucky.
Mum was always insistent on getting us a good education,
and Christian brothers in New Pune let me go to school there,
and she was able to pay it off,
and I don't think it's difficult
because, you know, you go to these high schools,
and teachers really never understand your history
and the experience you're going through,
and they expect you to sit there and conform
and to do all those things,
and for the most part I did,
but I never had much of a focus on academia
and those things,
and I was grade 10,
I started working after school in a butcher shop,
and that was really a big change for me, actually,
because first they gave me a little bit of money,
which I could help out at home,
gave me some additional responsibility,
but it also gave me an identity outside of the family
and outside of being a school kid,
and so, you know, instead of dressing up in a school uniform
or being at home and having the expectations on you,
I was working with a group of men in a butcher shop,
and I was just doing my own thing.
It was actually really a fundamental change
in sort of my early years as a young kid.
And did you think back then that might be your future,
that you'd finish your apprenticeship as a butcher

and take that on as a job?

Certainly, the school asked me to leave in grade 10.

I'm glad I didn't.

Can you tell me why?

Well, they said you've got a job at the butcher shop

you should leave and not come back,

and it wasn't like I was in trouble all the time,

I just think they thought it was a better fit for me

being an Indigenous boy,

but, you know, I did think I'd go on and complete apprenticeship,

and after three years working there,

grade 10, 11 and 12 after school,

I did start an apprenticeship after that,

and I always say it's one of those jobs

where the job was available for six weeks

while the apprentice was at TAFE in Brisbane,

and six years later I left the place.

Are you still in charge of the barbecues

and meat cutting at your home?

I can still pick a good steak, I can say that.

So how did you go from working in a butcher shop

in your poot to studying law?

It's interesting when you grow up in a regional area,

and there's very few opportunities,

and I always think that the ones who get ahead

are the people who take whatever opportunities that came up.

I didn't think I'd be a butcher forever,

but I knew there was a job when I was young

and that \$62.50 I was earning a week

would make a big difference at home.

And then after I finished,

and I understood that apprenticeship was available

and something I wanted to do, I agreed to do it,

and if I make a commitment I'll stick to it.

But I knew early on in my apprenticeship

I wouldn't stay there forever, and I was looking at...

I always had this interest in politics

and social justice and law,

and all these issues which my mates going to school

were more concerned about footy and those types of things,

so there was a whole world out there I wanted to explore,

and I knew once I got through my trade I'd go out and do that.

And actually I wanted to go and work in the mines

because Century Zinc was one of the biggest zinc mines

in the world out on one country,
and I thought I'd go and work in the mines
because all my family had worked in the mines,
and I actually wrote a letter to the diggers employer out there
but I didn't hear back from them.
My girlfriend at the time was going to uni on the Gold Coast
and I thought, yeah, I'll give it a go, so that's where I ended up.
You did take some time off to go and work out in the mines.
What was that like?
Yeah, well, I've got mining in the blood
and I did want to give it a try, Sarah,
that it's something, you know, I grew up with it
and being in Mount Isa, it is a mining town.
Well, I guess it's a mine with a small town next to it,
but I went out and I worked underground in the coal mines
for about six months and it was,
I thought about it in the context,
if I never finished uni,
then this is probably the best highest paying job I could get.
And I went out there and I realised pretty quickly,
get me back on the books.
What's a bit easier is studying more than working underground.
Look, I end up working by myself on the belts
and you're literally underground by yourself,
10, 12 hours a day, you don't see anyone,
but there's also, I like the intellectual challenge, you know,
and that really, I wasn't getting that,
but also the work wasn't particularly personally rewarding
and I had had a glimpse of law school
and I had had a glimpse of what the legal profession looked like
and I thought I'm probably a better fit than I am a coal miner.
When did you first become aware of Kara,
the woman who would become your wife eventually?
Yeah, well, that was back in your poon as well,
so I was doing my apprenticeship then
and at various times in my life I've had a photographic memory,
but now I've sort of read too much stuff on the news
and I just clocks up my brain,
but I remember reading an article about Kara
and your poon is a bit like the old sea change show,
beautiful little coastal town, you know,
Mayor Bob Jelley, all this sort of stuff,
and your poon would have a pineapple fest every year.
So, oh, look, it's big because we have our parades

and we have the pineapple queens
and Kara was an entrant.
So she was about 17 or 18 years old
and she was an entrant, I think she might have been 17,
and I was sitting in the butcher shop,
I remember sitting out the chair on this big stainless steel table
and reading the local free paper, which was the mirror at the time,
and Kara was being profiled as an entrant,
and what stuck in my mind was she wanted to be a lawyer in the Navy,
and by that time I obviously thought I wanted to study law as well.
So that was my exposure to her.
Was that the only thing that stuck in your mind, Josh?
Oh, yeah, look, it really was, actually.
I mean, Kara was going to, I think, the old girls' school at the time,
but it just stuck out,
and I remember having a conversation with my boss about it,
about her wanting to be a lawyer in the Navy,
and fast forward four years,
so I don't see this girl talk to her fast forward four years,
I'm back in your poon and I see her out one night
and I go and talk to her and I say,
you still want to be a lawyer in the Navy.
Get out.
And I'm studying law by then, so...
Oh, it's smooth creamer.
That's how it all happened, Troy.
Was she taken aback?
She was.
She probably thought a range of things,
but coincidentally then she gets home that night
and says, yeah, I do want to be a lawyer in the Navy to herself,
enrolls in law school and starts at JCU a couple of weeks later.
Wow.
So it might have felt like it was fated to be the two of you, do you think?
Well, we've been together 20 years now,
so there's something that, yeah, it was pretty special,
and growing up in a small town again,
I mean, she's a superstar
and to have met a woman like her in your poon
and seeing what she's achieved is pretty special.
Did she win Miss Pineapple?
No.
A little bit of controversy around that.
She was robbed.

Yeah, yeah, she was robbed.
She was the youngest entrant,
but I think she was the fundraising queen
instead of the actual Pineapple Queen.
Look, I think that still has a few issues.
So maybe when they do a golden oldies one in ten years time,
she can run for that.
You have three young kids together.
How does that, the responsibilities of that
fit in with your life as a lawyer?
I'm busy as a lawyer and I travel across the country
working on the stolen wages and stolen generation
and the Palm Island case and all these big cases,
but my life, I think, and my busyness
is really nowhere near Kara.
She's done extraordinary things.
She worked at Women's Legal Service.
She started the first domestic violence law firm in Australia.
She's been a local politician for five or six years
and now she started working in a not-for-profit legal centre,
but we've both been busy
and I think one of the things is
we both make a contribution at home.
And at the moment, we don't do it with any nannies
or anything like that either.
So when you really find a good partner in life,
you understand it's those values that keep you together,
bring you together and keep you together
and family is important for both of us
and also trying to ensure that both of us
can achieve our career aspirations
and so we contribute where we can at home to make it happen.
What are you teaching your kids, Josh,
about their Aboriginal heritage?
Well, it's funny.
I mean, I not only have to teach my kids,
I go under the date care and I teach them
and I go to the schools and I teach them.
Now, I think the one defining factor
that really helped me along
was having a strong sense of your own identity.
And, you know, there's a lot of cultural mix in our house.
Kara's mother's Lebanese
and now my father's from the West Indies

and back on the Aboriginal side,
we've got the Chinese that come in from the Gold Rush as well,
but certainly being Indigenous is front and centre
and I talk to my kids about things like stolen generations,
just in a child-focused way.
So they understand the history
and my daughter, Eden, who's the oldest,
has really picked up on that.
But it's important for them, I think, to know their history
and have a strong sense of their identity
and that's what we're trying to do.
You know, I think about what you described
about what life was like at home for you growing up.
You didn't have a dad that you can take as a role model.
How have you created the kind of father
that you want to be to your own kids
and that you didn't have a firsthand experience of that?
Yeah, I know that when I was in the early stages of my career,
I did look for people who'd be good role models
and even as a butcher, I think my boss, Peter Morton,
was a great role model and he was a father figure
and I started working for him when I was 13, 14 years old,
so he was really important.
And as I started in law, people like Chris and I,
I was able to work for Chris and I did look for that.
But Kara's mother and father,
they've been together for a long time and they've got three kids
and I think her father's, he's probably been the one rock
out of everybody who's always been there and reliable
and he never gets worried about things.
He's got a really, really great temperament actually
and I probably spent more time with him
than any other male over the last two decades.
So, you know, that's something, but it's a challenge.
It's not, you know, I don't find it easy being a father.
I don't have a lot of tolerance for kids screaming
and jumping around and fighting all the time
and you do have to take a step back.
I certainly do have to take a step back every now and then
and it's a hard journey, but I always think kids are born perfect
and their parents stuff them up.
And so, you know, I just don't want to do that to my kids.
You've mentioned that a lot of the work that you do
as a barista was on stolen wages.

Yeah, I've worked on the stolen wages in Queensland.
I'm still working on stolen wages, WA in Northern Territory,
but across all jurisdictions, so all states and territories,
there was laws in place from the early 1900s
right up to the 1970s.
Aboriginal people worked.
In Queensland, they worked.
They were sent down to different private employers
on cattle stations or women as domestics.
And rather than the wage being paid to them directly,
their wages paid to government.
And government kept those wages.
In the territory in WA, it's more akin to slavery.
People just would walk out of the desert in the 60s and 70s
and before that and they'd go and work on a cattle station
for 10 years for rations, salt, flour, sugar, tea, tobacco.
But I've had a real privilege over the last seven years,
I think, working on those matters.
And I just say my job is always, I just travel around Australia
and I get to talk to elders.
And I've learned so much of our history that it's,
I hope as this country moves to truth telling that everybody
starts to understand, but there's so many powerful stories
and identities and just a strength and resilience
that comes from our history that even young Indigenous kids
running around today don't know.
And I've probably met with thousands,
but I know I've conducted hundreds of interviews
that I've recorded, whether it's people up in the Kimberleys
or people around Alice Springs out in that area
or people up in the Gulf here in Queensland.
I've sat down, I've understood their experiences.
What are some of the stories that have really struck you
when you've sat down with elders in those settings?
The brutality of the regime and there was an incident
in Western Australia on one of the government-run missions
where as part of the treatment of people,
they rigged up a battery and they electrocuted the men
on the gentles after they'd dressed them up in dresses
as part of the punishment.
And they knew all about it and you read all the documents
and say, yeah, we know, but we need to have the mechanic there
so we're not going to remove him.
But the other part too, I think, which really affected me

was the way that women are treated.

You know, a lot of assaults, a lot of rape, sexual assaults.

And I just, through my own sort of interviews and understanding,

had thought during that period that probably 100 years,

maybe 80% of women would have been affected

by that type of conduct.

And so that always sticks with you

because you're sitting down with someone

and it just comes out of the blue, they just mention it.

And it's tough.

But I think the other part of it is

is understanding that Aboriginal people worked.

They worked 14 hours a day,

sometimes 52 weeks a year,

and they contributed to the development of this country

in our nation and the pastoral industry.

They supported non-Indigenous women in their homes

as domestic cleaners and nursemaids and things.

And all that history out there

is just it's been forgotten or chosen to be ignored.

And that's the challenge for us going forward.

As an Indigenous barrister,

and there is still only a handful of First Nations barristers
in this country,

how heavy does the responsibility of telling those stories

and seeking justice, how heavily does it sit on your shoulders?

Yeah, I think about my role and my generation in this context

and understanding the law

and how it's affected Aboriginal people

and Torres Strait Islander people as well,

those first generations were really powerless.

They lacked any control over their circumstances

and then all they could do was strike.

And so the 50s, 60s and 70s,

and even before that, you had people,

they had no influence over their circumstances,

but to sit down.

That's it.

The next generation, I think, about their children
are probably the marchers.

They're the ones marching here through the streets
in the 80s against the Pioapeas and others.

And my generation, I think, were the influences.

So the ultimate thing is trying to influence the people

that make the decisions about us.
And because of my role,
not only do I learn the stories of the people who've experienced it
and get to share that,
but I get access to the politicians and the judges
and the CEOs and the people who make decisions.
And I want to influence their decision-making
and I see that as my contribution
to tell those stories, to share those stories.
And the next generation, my children's generation,
I don't know if they are the decision-makers,
so you don't need the influences then.
How strange a contrast can it be
going from meeting people out in communities
in different parts of remote WA
or Northern Territory or Queensland
and then coming back to your home and your family set up?
Sometimes I'm away for a long time
and you've got to understand that
sometimes you're interviewing people who are living in a shed.
They might have worked for 20 years on a station
and never a cent.
They live in a shed with no running water,
not much bigger than the studio we're in
and actually sometimes half this studio.
No running water, no electricity.
And they don't know where their next meal's coming from.
And I come back to Brisbane
and I'm living close to the city
in a beautiful house that my wife and I built a few years ago.
In a world which is so far removed from that,
it's hard to really reconcile the two.
And I come home and I'm taking my kids to school or sport
and I'm talking to the other parents and I'm just like,
is this my reality?
Or is my reality out on the road,
up at Fitzroy Crossing or up at Yondamu
or all these remote places that people,
particularly the Aboriginal communities,
that people don't get to?
You sort of think,
how can those two worlds exist at the same time?
And for most of us, we never get exposed to that
and we judge others by our own circumstances

but I see all of it
and I see the struggles of people
and I've seen what they've done.
They've made a really significant contribution
but we've just left them out there to...
I call them the forgotten Australians to be forgotten.
There are very few Indigenous barristers
doing the kind of work you do
and even fewer First Nation women.
How are you and Kara trying to change that?
So it's a Joshua Cramer and Kara Cook Excellence
and Law Award
and we've partnered with Griffith University to do it
and it's for Indigenous female lawyers
towards the end of their law degree
with an aspiration of going to the bar.
And we set that up about two years ago now
when I turned 40
and we committed to give financial support.
We also mentor and support them into the workplace.
It came about because I was working on these matters
thinking I need an Indigenous woman sitting here next to me.
A Indigenous barrister equal to me, if not better,
to be able to interview women
and to play a lead role in these cases.
I saw the need for it on the front line
and I wanted to do something about it.
There's only about 20 or so,
maybe even a bit less Indigenous barristers out there.
It's such a small pool.
And so in that short period of time
we've had two amazing participants come through that program
who I know are going to go and change the world
and we're sort of looking forward to what they achieve.
Broadcast.
Podcast.
This is Conversations with Sarah Konoski.
Josh is one of only a handful of Indigenous barristers in Australia
and he also made history by formally moving the admission of his mother,
Sandra, as a lawyer to the Supreme Court in Queensland.
What was that day like, Josh?
Laws got really religious overtones.
It's got its own language, its own culture
and I don't get nervous and caught.

I feel like, well, that's my job, but I got nervous that day.
I don't think I even dressed myself properly.
I had my wig on and my robes.
Wig on backwards.
Yeah, my jabbo was sticking out and I was like, oh, anyway.
And it was during COVID
and I think it was the first time that I had a face-to-face swearing in
for admission for a while.
And it wasn't easy to get admitted
and in much like a religious ceremony,
you have to tell them all your sins
and ultimately the judges agree with on what you should be forgiven.
That's the religious overtone of it
and Mum had written lots of affidavits
and talked about her experience and all this
and so it took her a while actually to get approved to be admitted.
And then I remember saying to her,
I was like, Mum, if you don't get it this time,
we probably have to think about that set
and maybe do something else.
So to go through all that study and not be a lawyer
would be pretty heartbreaking.
But we were there in the ceremony
and I must have been one of the first up
and I get up and I say, oh, Sandra Creme and my mother,
she's done all the right things.
She complied with all the obligations
and the three judges, they turn and look at each other
and they say, let her be admitted.
Very much like your sins being forgiven
and I sat down and I was relieved
and I was proud but also to understand
what she's endured, the hardships.
My mother didn't have a lot of wins in her life
to actually have got to that achievement
and to now be able to say you're a lawyer and to practice.
Very special moment for her and for the family,
my immediate family but my whole family as well,
her siblings and aunties and uncles too.
So they've been, you know, with your story
and your mum's story, these really positive outcomes
for your family but that's not the whole story.
As you got older, what was your relationship like
with your youngest brother, with Robson?

Did you stay close?

Yeah, well it was tough because my mother and his father were in a domestic violence relationship as well, right?

So the two main relationships which probably took 25 years of her life were a lot of domestic violence

and I still don't think I know all of it but that relationship came to an end.

But Robson and I mean we had a, people thought he was my son, right?

I'm 15 years older than him.

As he's four or five years old, I'm 20, I'm a butcher, I'm working in your poon, I'm walking around, this kid's always there next to me and my girlfriend at the time and so he was my son in a lot of ways.

You know, I had that connection with him and it was tough, you know, as he grew older and I think I guess in some ways I started to drift away.

I started my own family and I was doing things down here and I didn't have that same level of connection

and time for him, unfortunately, but it was hard too because he,

I think he saw me, he saw my mother, he saw Kara and he felt a lot of pressure to go out and be something and to do something that probably wasn't a right fit for him and so I saw how that relationship changed and how he changed over his life,

but probably around the age of 15, he started to have some mental health issues being subject to the trauma from the DV

and the mental health and I remember he was 15 years old and the school sent him down, he was at boarding school

in Cairns and he got sent down to me on Suicide Watch and I just said to the school at times like,

well, could you have told us beforehand?

I mean, he had to come down and he's better off in Brisbane with me.

It was only a short time, but I just remember the school hadn't said anything beforehand and then I get this call, he's coming down and subsequent discussions with the school and I'm like, well, you should have probably told us this, but it's a real challenge mental health

and if anyone who's close to it and you've got a family member, you feel, and I still feel very powerless about it

because as a mental health patient,
you've got all the confidentiality attached to it
and I remember asking his doctor at 15,
it's like, well, what's going on?
I can't tell you.
And the sort of thing, well, what can I actually do?
Unless they're going to sit down and tell you
what is happening with them, which Robson never did.
All the mental health campaigns, I think,
are focused on people who are experiencing it,
but there's a lot of us sitting there observing it saying,
how can we help, but I often feel pretty powerless.
And it came in at certain points,
but even up until the end of last year,
Robson became a barber and if he walked into his barber shop
and he's got a beautiful son and he was living his life,
he wouldn't know.
But sometimes a switch would just turn on him
and he'd be completely different.
And for us as a family, I guess that was a sight
I got to see a bit more towards the end.
What happened at Christmas time just last year,
Josh, when you went back up to spend time with your family,
your poon?
So there'd probably been a build-up, a 12-month build-up,
actually, because the Christmas of prior,
his partner didn't come around to my mother's house,
him and his partner.
And that was really strange,
because Rebecca's an amazing young girl,
she's studying law as well,
and she's the mother of his child who's three years old.
And she didn't come around and I just thought,
this is really strange.
I ended up contacting her and she said,
look, we had a big argument, I had to call the police
and I've left and I've gone down to my mother's house.
And I think that was another,
that was, I guess, a trigger in some way for me,
that having seen what my mother went through,
the fact that someone, you know,
my brother could put his wife through some sort of level of misery,
whatever that was, really sort of turned me away from him
and turned me more towards her.

But that was really the lead-up in the 12 months.
And then we just hadn't had much conversation
or talk, but I would check in with Rebecca
to see how everyone's going and occasionally Robson and I
would have a chat to each other.
And you got a contrast with that, you know, us growing up.
But then Christmas 2022,
my mother got us all together.
And it was interesting in that it wasn't really a,
it wasn't a nice Christmas,
usually we all get together and we have a nice time,
but it just felt really strained.
And, you know, I remember the last thing we sort of did that day,
was the kids had a big water fight and we got into it
when we were doing that as well.
The four of us there and my sister's a foster mother,
so she's got seven kids and I've got three kids
and we usually make a big event of it.
But it just wasn't a normal Christmas,
that'll be a bit strained.
But next morning I wake up and it's Boxing Day,
so I take the kids to the cinema in New Poon.
I'm in the cinema and I went and seen that little crocodile.
I'll never forget that.
And we walk out and I have a, it's 1.30 when I walk out
and I look and I have three missed calls from Rebecca
and it's just saying help.
I just remember feeling this sort of rush of emotion.
I've never received a text like that.
Like I say, Kara's worked in domestic violence
and I remember her getting calls at 9, 10 o'clock at night
that women were fleeing their homes.
But I certainly hadn't experienced that.
But Robson and Rebecca had been in an argument.
But my sister was there, which was good
because she's probably the most calm and coolest
and sensible out of all of us, she always has been.
And she was talking to Robson in the car
and Rebecca was inside with my sister Tamara
and her partner Katie was inside with Rebecca.
And I just stormed in.
I parked the car so the kids couldn't see what was going on.
I didn't want them to see that.
But I stormed in and I was like, that's it.

This relationship's over.
And I started packing up Rebecca's stuff
and I just said, I hate the way you treat this girl.
And I said to myself, you ever touch her, I'll kill you.
And I guess in that instance,
I felt like I was probably protecting my mum.
You know, as a little boy, you grow up, you see these things.
There's not much you can do.
But when you're an adult and you're in that situation,
it's like, well, you know what, no one's going to hurt this woman.
I don't care who it is.
And so I pack up the stuff and I take her to my place
because I had a place in your poon.
It's literally right behind my mother's house.
So kids are at mum's, car is home.
She's talking to Rebecca and she's making a plan, right?
I mean, you know, women have these plans.
You want to leave a relationship,
car is putting a plan together on the spot.
And my sister's like, no, I'm going to stay with him.
I'm a bit worried about him.
I'm like, yeah, okay.
And when I'm sitting at my mother's,
or 10 or 15 minutes,
I'm sitting at my mother's and my mother gets a call.
And I just remember, like, I looked at her face
and it just shattered into a thousand pieces.
And she couldn't actually say the words,
but she said, Robson's dead.
Like, I could just hear a slight sound,
but I couldn't see her face, her lips moving.
So I knew exactly what she said.
And I just, we had all the kids at mum's and I was like,
I'm like, get out here, kids.
Come on, come on.
Like, Cara, take all these kids because there was just,
there's lots of them, all these little cousins,
you know, under the age of five or six.
And she takes the kids and I just hammer,
I just get in the car and I hammer out to where they are,
which is about 10 minutes away from my mother's place
on the Capricorn Coast Highway.
And you get there and, you know, this is a two-story house.
And I remember seeing, so there was one ambulance bus there,

but my sister's just leaning up against one of the,
the sort of pylons or the,
and she's just like, she is just crying howly.
Like, you never forget that image, right?
She's just sitting there.
She's out.
And I walk over because it's actually just behind the fence
where she found him, right?
So she finds him.
She has to keep, try and keep him going for the ambulance
until the ambulance arrive.
And I walk over and there's these two Ambo's there
and it's just behind the front fence.
So you can't really see what's going on,
which is good from the street.
And I say, I think I said,
what's going on?
What's happening?
Or how is he?
And the Ambo's, oh, who are you?
I said, I'm his oldest brother.
And they said, I think they said,
he's in cardiac arrest or going cardiac arrest,
but the words and the way that I said it,
they said it and probably from what my mother had said to me,
I had thought he was dead.
I didn't think, I didn't think there's any possibility
right from the start.
I never thought there's any possibility he's coming back.
So we're there and it's just me and my sister, right?
Because you're not having your mother come out
and see that stuff.
And it's something you do not want to happen.
Another ambulance bus comes along
and there's four of them and then there's another Ambo.
I think there's five or more senior person.
He goes and talks to my sister.
I said, mate, look, I'm the oldest.
I'm a lawyer.
You talk to me and so he starts directing things to me.
And there were a couple of police as well.
And so the police get there and, you know,
they start questioning and I just went into lawyer mode.
You know, it's funny how you can be so well trained, right?

And I'm just walking through this.

Okay.

So what happened?

I start walking through the facts.

Well, at 115, I got this text.

I didn't see it till 130 at 145.

I was at my mother's, you know,
just walking through the day this happened.

And then in a very chronological and factual way
in the same way you put a statement together.

And I remember the police officer, I went through this
and I remember him saying, oh, that was good.

Can you go through it again?

And I looked at him and I was like,
and I looked at his body camera and I thought,
maybe he's doing it as a distraction or keeping me calm
or whatever, but I did.

I went through it again.

And at the same time, every now and then,
Danbo, the more senior one is coming up
and letting me know what's happening.

And he would have come up and I think he'd come up twice.

And then the third time he might have said,
look, we're just going to, we've got,
basically, look, we've done the best we can.

We'll give it a bit more of a shot,
but there's not much else we can do.

And then a short time later, he comes up and he says,
look, you know, we've done our best.

But I'd had this belief that it wasn't, things weren't,
you know, he was dead and that's what I had thought
and that's what happened.

And I remember when the ambulance called it,
they came up to me.

The two who were there from the start,
they were only young guys and they come up
and they were so apologetic and sympathetic
and just so comforting in that moment.

And I didn't, I didn't feel like they owed me that at all.

They didn't even have to say anything to me,
but they, I know they would have done the best they could
and, you know, they were there.

They were pumping away for 45 minutes
trying to get this kid going, you know.

And they came up and I was just so grateful for the way they had respected me and him and my sister and, you know, what they were showing us. And I was grateful to the police. The police officer, I'm a fairly big guy, I'm probably six-two and fair size and he was a bit bigger and stronger. And, you know, he was like, if I needed a, I didn't, I wasn't crying then, but if I needed a shoulder to cry on, this guy was the right guy for me at the time and as were the Ambos. I'm so sorry about the loss of your brother. You say how you went almost automatically into that lawyer mode, which was practically, I'm sure, really useful at that time. How long did it take till that crumpled a bit and the emotion of what had happened hit you as a brother, not as a lawyer? So, he's there. My brother's there for the next four hours on the ground and my sister's there. My sister is always just so staunch and determined. She's like, I'm not leaving. I said, I want to go, so I'm not leaving him. So I'm not leaving until they take him. And I was like, oh man. And so I jumped in the car. I think I'd go and tell my other brother or anyway. And I was coming back to where we were and I had a friend who was staying close, a really good friend who I'd been in this school with since we were grade 10 and just done a lot of stuff over the years and I knew he was staying down the road for Christmas. And I called him, Joel Ryan, he is. And the Ryan family is always in my family. You know, there's a lot of kids and we've got a few kids and so we're really close as two families, I think the kids are. And he's, you know, he's out of the mines now. He's probably been out of the mines 20 years. He's a big guy. They're all big, these miners.

And I called him and I told him what happened.
He said, mate, I'm coming.
I'll come down to you.
And we were so close we could walk to each other.
And I remember I was walking towards him
and I just, I was a few meters out and I just, that was it.
I just, the emotion came on and he put his arms out.
He's a massive guy, put his arms out around me
and he just gave me this huge hug.
And, you know, I just cried in his shoulders.
I think that was probably the first time I did.
And he was just there, right?
He just sat there with me and my sister.
He ended up taking my car and running my brother around
and came back and he then, you know, he stayed with us
until, because you have, you know, the initial incident
and then you have forensics come out
and then you have the coroner come out.
And all the, you know, they come and pick up the body,
the funeral home, they come out.
And so it's not until the funeral home comes out
and gets his body that they can take him away.
So, you know, Joel sat with us there for a couple of hours
and until his body was taken away.
It's still only such a recent thing
that's happened in your family, Josh.
But how's your mum doing so far?
Oh, look, it's devastated all of us.
It's had a huge consequence.
My mother was at the point now where over the last 20 years
she's probably spent three to six months of the year
travelling around the world doing international human rights
matters.
And my friend of mine went over to the UN with her
and said that they actually call her Mrs UN over there.
Because when the Indigenous Permanent Forum's sitting,
she knows everybody and she's been to all parts of the world.
But I remember going, I remember,
so the police give us his stuff.
He had some thongs on and a phone.
And I had his phone.
I was taking it back to my mum's.
This is after we all finished.
And she's calling the phone, right?

She knows he's gone.
I think maybe she just wants to hear his voice
or she wants to check he's still alive.
And you know that Aboriginal women,
when they're really emotional, they do that whaling.
It's really deep.
It gets you in your soul.
As I pulled up at her house, I could just hear that.
And I couldn't say anything.
I just walked in.
I dropped his things on the table and I just walked out.
And like I say, I got a house down the back
and the next street over and I could hear her crying
through the night.
But it's had a fundamental shift on her
and me, actually.
Cara and I, we've got this approach.
We're not just getting out of bed
and throwing our arms over and going to work.
We're getting out of bed
and we want to make a difference in the world.
We want to contribute.
And that's how we've lived our life for a long time.
And I was just, I was shattered.
I remember that night.
It was almost like this nuclear bomb had gone off in my brain.
The senses, I can never describe it.
This huge amount of energy was just rushing through my head.
And I didn't sleep that night.
But all these, you know, my brain was tingling.
All these things happening and this bomb.
And it was just earth-shattering.
And so for my mother, I mean,
I think she still goes to his grave every day.
That's sort of where she goes out.
It's hard for her to let go.
And she will always blame herself.
And I said to her in the days that followed,
it might have been even the next day,
I just said, it's not your fault.
I didn't want her to feel any blame,
but she will always blame herself.
And I think that will be the challenge for her.
What about you, Josh?

Do you feel a sense of guilt even if logically,
you know, that's not the case?
You know, it's, it's, I look, I certainly do.
And I wouldn't deny that.
And I've been through grief and I look,
I had an auntie die recently in the last couple of weeks.
And that was actually comforting to experience grief
in its normal form.
And, and there are some instances like this
where unless you've ever experienced,
it's really hard to explain.
It just, it can sink a ship.
It can sink the Titanic.
It feels so great.
And Cara said to me that, you know,
people can live with grief,
but it's the guilt and that sense of responsibility,
which can really drag you down.
And certainly for the first few months of this year,
that's how it felt for me.
What did your wife say to you?
Well, I was just, I was on autopilot for a bit.
And like I say, you know, you come from a position
where you're getting up every day
and you want to change the world.
And it's really how we get out of bed.
And I wasn't anywhere near that.
I don't know if I was even in survival mode.
I was just, you know, get up, get the kids to school,
do what I need to do and then pick them up and go home.
But we went to the Gold Coast over the school holidays.
It was the Easter school holidays.
And we got back and Cara said, you can't, we can't keep doing this.
You need to do something.
You can't live your life like this.
We can't live like this as a family.
And I was, I just wasn't in a good place during that trip.
And I just popped in my head that I wanted to challenge myself
physically and mentally.
We're having this discussion.
I said, I'm going to go and do Everest Base Camp.
I'd never had any aspiration of doing it.
I don't even know where it came up.
Josh, like it's one thing to think I'm going to go and climb the mountain

that's, you know, an hour away from my home or go camping.

But Everest Base Camp.

Yeah.

I guess I wanted the biggest challenge I could think of.

And.

Are you a mountain climber?

No, look, and I hadn't, I did it in the, in the five days lead up that I'd give myself from the time I set it and time I was jumping on the plane.

I took the dog for a walk up Elmoril Hill a couple of times, but no, no fitness.

You're trading five days.

You're telling me you booked it and five days later you were on a plane.

So I set it Easter Thursday or Friday.

I think I went down, you know, there's a public holidays, but anyway,

I think I paid for it on the Saturday.

And I was probably on the plane on the Wednesday or Thursday out.

And was she thinking this wasn't what I had in mind?

Beloved husband, it was.

She said, she's like, she's typical.

You always have to go to biggest.

I was thinking Tasmania for four days.

Bit late now.

I booked it.

Paid.

So very quickly you find yourself in the Himalayas.

What was it to be in that extraordinary environment?

What impression?

It is magical up there.

You know, the mountains, it's like they're their own gods, their own spirits.

They've all got their own identity.

And the people, you know, they've been doing their thing for probably thousands of years.

There's no motors up there.

Right.

There's no cars or anything.

You're all on foot.

It's like something I've never experienced.

The beauty of it.

I remember flying into Nepal or Kathmandu.

And our plane must have went past one of the peaks.

And I look out and I just see we're on level with these peaks.

I remember looking out the plane window and just going, wow.

And also, what have I got myself into?

And about two minutes later, my Apple Watch starts beeping saying your heart rate's risen.

I'm like, yeah, welcome to this.

Get used to that for the next few weeks.

So I had those couple of dog walks up Balmoral Hill prepared you for trekking in the Himalayas?
Probably not as good as it should have been.

But it's more of a mental challenge than a physical.

And to tell you the truth, I was there to beat myself up, Sarah.

If I wanted to go and sit at a resort and drink mocktails next to the pool, then I could do that.

But I wanted to punish myself.

I wanted to make myself feel something I wanted to hurt.

And that's what I was there for.

That's what I did physically and mentally.

And then did that bring its own kind of release?

Pushing yourself, punishing yourself that way?

Look, it did.

I remember making it to Basecamp.

And before I left, I didn't do any research, right?

So I didn't know what was at Basecamp.

But I thought there's going to be something to signify Basecamp.

I threw the Aboriginal flag in my bag.

And I was like, when I get to Basecamp, I'm going to hold this flag up and get a photo around whatever it was.

And just turns out there's this 10, 15 ton rock there.

Basecamp sprayed on it.

But I get this photo and I didn't realize how emotional it would be getting there.

And I was there for my brother, right?

I was there for my loss or what I've gone through.

It wasn't anything else.

I was there to try and overcome the emotions I'd had over the first four or five months of the year.

And I get there and I get my photo and then I just sit down next to the rock and I start crying.

And I watch everyone else lining up and getting their photos.

But I'm like, that's it.

All I wanted to do was to get there and to achieve that.

And, you know, hopefully it shifted where I was from.

I was in such a bad place.

I needed a seismic shift and that was the biggest thing I could get.

And it did give me that.

How has the trip stayed with you in the month since you've come back?

Look, it's a bit of a U-turn, I guess, from where I was.

I'm not back to where I probably would have been.

But I came back and I said to Karl.

And Karl was stuck in the mode where I was before I left.

And I said, look, babe, I've changed.

I'm not going to put the family through that.

I'll put myself through that and come back and be the same.

I'm turning things around and I have.

I've emotionally turned things around.

I've been back into work a lot better.

I've just been there, you know, more present as a father.

And look, don't get me wrong.

I'm still having my challenges and I don't want anyone to think that, you know, this is going to be a short journey.

But it put me onto a very different path as to where I was heading prior to it.

Are there more mountains you want to climb?

Is that where did you appetite for more of that sort of adventure?

It did.

And I'm actually going back in March.

And what is a good thing is I said to my friends,

I'm going in four days if you want to come.

But obviously none of them could come, although one came very close.

So for the ones who said they put up their hand, all right,

well, I'm going to go back in March.

And I want to do that with a group of friends, have that experience.

Hopefully there's a couple of us that will come along.

But yeah, it really gave me just an emotional high and intensity.

And I'm a person who likes challenges, you know,

I've had so many in my life and I've got challenges often keep me motivated.

So to go and do that again with a group of friends and to achieve that challenge, something monumental will be really special.

Josh, thank you so much for sharing the story.

I think you do deserve a few mocktails by the pool as well, though.

Well, the weather's starting to warm up, so hopefully I can get a few soon.

Thank you for being my guest on Conversations.

Thank you, Sarah.

If you need to talk with someone, remember that lifeline is always there.

You can phone them on 13 11 14.

I'm Sarah Konoski.

Thanks so much for listening.

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