

EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
AMANDA
SA HEALTH
2020



Hello folks. Welcome to Roses Radio and today I've got the pleasure of being able to talk to Amanda. Amanda welcome to Roses Radio.

Thanks Layne.

You didn't talk about your story for a very long time and then all of a sudden you talk about it all the time and you've written a book about your experience. What shifted for you?

Well, yes you are correct on all counts there. So I hadn't shared or really spoken about my lived experience or my story ever. And what changed is a few years back I was just walking around a local regional field days pavilion and I saw this site if you like or this stand that had the word suicide on this banner and it said, "Stamp out Suicide." And I was actually taken back. I thought, "What are they doing? What's going on here?" and I immediately was drawn to say 'help me understand what is your team, how are you doing this?' I'd never really understood that it's okay to a) to talk about it but secondly, to even have any sort of community group that would be openly, publicly talking about suicide. And they had these little packets there of Lifesavers and they were actually gifting them to people saying, "This is just a little something for you to remember if times are tough. There are people here to help you to talk." And I was totally drawn to this group of lovely people. So from there I went to a meeting. And I still remember that first meeting. It was in a hotel in the country and we were sitting around at lunch and it was like a group where we could've been talking about what were we growing in our garden or what had we learnt to cook recently. The word 'suicide' was flowing and I was just sitting back thinking, 'this is really quite overwhelming'. Well, I left that meeting. They hadn't been working together too long. I think it was about 12 months they'd been running this group. I left the meeting and I came out as Treasurer which is always what happens when you're the new guy that goes into a meeting. But they learned of my banking experience. And from that I was introduced to Roses in the Ocean and I went to a number of sessions with Roses in the Ocean, one of them being a national summit. But one of the most valuable things that I did was I was given the opportunity, not to just learn how to share my story, but I think more importantly it was to write my story down and actually use those words that had been inside me all of my life.

You'd always had an intent to write a book, hadn't you? It had been something that had been in the background for you but you'd never quite known what to do with that?

I'm not sure if I thought I could write a book. But I knew that there was a lot more that I wanted to be able to do but I didn't know what it was. I knew there was something inside me that was, perhaps, not explored or unfinished and so here I was - then I would've been about 45 years old, losing dad at nine. So I'd gone pretty well, 36 years, without ever really sharing my story as such. People that were friends and family, of course, had some understanding of circumstance and might've seen some of the way you behaved or probably saw a lot of the outside of who Amanda was. But at no point had anybody really probably seen what I was feeling on the inside and that was part of me spending a couple of days, literally, writing my story. And that in itself was quite an experience.

Was it hard to start, do you remember?

No.



So you actually just intuitively knew what this needed to be?

Yeah, yeah. Look, I've still got really strong memory of – we broke up into little quiet places and I was sitting outside and there's tables and chairs and I remember looking across and seeing people tapping their pen thinking, 'where do I start here?' And I think facilitators like yourself would move around and say, "Are you okay here? Do you need a hand?" Well my pen didn't stop. It just literally – I remember getting that sore writer's cramp where your wrist was just like, I needed a break. And it went pages and pages and pages and I've still got that book and I still refer to that. That's my story and that's my notes and I still...I read it sometimes, not to share it with anyone but just to remind myself that that's what my journey has been and that's what I can use to help others.

In your story you describe your dad as your hero. Help me understand how that tag became associated with him in your mind?

My dad was a hero in a number of levels. So I was the youngest, or I still am the youngest of three girls. And we lived in the Adelaide Hills. And my dad was my hero. Mum and dad – we were in the Adelaide Hills and at that time it was a really small community. And he had gone there as the local detective and started up a new CIB, if you like.

So he was a long term police officer, yes?

Yes. With SA Police. And so he had gone from being pretty well a metro city bloke in uniform to having this promotion of being the local detective and the local detective had this, I suppose, status, and still does in a lot of particularly country towns. He's the detective. And so I was really proud. Dad would come to my school and he would present awards or he would give talks and it didn't sort of matter where we went in the community, he was respected and people would stop and talk to him. So from that perspective, he was a hero. And I've since learned. I've learned a lot about my dad in capturing my story and writing my book.

Because you spoke to a lot of people about your dad? Your recollections of your dad are from zero to nine years of age so much of the research must have come from others who knew him?

Absolutely. So I had two goals in writing my book, two purposes, if you like. One was to meet my dad. Because I realised I didn't have my own memories. And I'm not sure that anybody has a lot of clear, actual relationships with anyone when you were younger than nine. You have little snippets. I've got little visuals of – dad would cross his legs and I would sit on his foot and he would bounce. Or even mum reminds me that I would meet dad at the door when he got home late at night and I would have his slippers and I would put both of his feet in his slippers. They're not really my memories. So I thought, 'whoa, hell, dad would've been 76 this year.' And a lot of his peers and his friends and his mates are rather, perhaps, not long for this world, or they've passed. So if I didn't meet them, I would lose that opportunity to meet my dad. So I interviewed probably 20 or more. Maybe 25 and a lot of them feature in my book. From both the funny stories to the criminal investigations to the stress, to what sort of bloke was he. And one of the things, going back to your question about why was he a hero, a lot of them said he was tagged or branded to be the next Commissioner of Police. He's still one of the few youngest Commissioned Officers in this state. He was made a Commissioned Officer at 36 and that's a pretty young age to be what they term as a boss. So there was a lot of things that I was really proud of. I was really proud of my dad in the fact that he loved us and cared for us and everything he did was for his girls. But



it was also that status of what he had, the respect, I believe, from the SA Police force, right through the point, the day of his funeral, all the traffic was stopped in Adelaide Metro and we had police on each intersection in uniform saluting us. I knew that he was respected so I couldn't help but feel that he was somewhat of a hero.

What did you learn about him from his counterparts in the police force? What's the thing that stands out from those 20 interviews?

Everyone's mate. And when I say that - and mum very much has always given me the same impression, if you ask dad who his best mate was he didn't have one but he was everyone's best mate. He was a social absolute butterfly. Right from - if he wasn't in the lunch room cracking people up with practical jokes and caring about people and helping them sand their floors on a weekend or just a really empathetic, caring bloke, he would be in the pub of an evening supposedly gathering all of his intel because that's what 'D's', detectives, did...networking. I have great memories of that. That's one thing I do remember. We sort of grew up in the pub and I'd say we were pub kids in the right way. I'd be tired so I'd sleep under the pool table. And the local publicans, they were really, really good people and it was sort of like a family connection that we had in a small community. So people, if they described him in words, and I've been asked this before, he had integrity, he was honest, very caring and full of humour. That's how he, I think, from what I understand now, that's how he coped.

You were nine years old when your dad took his life. Take us back to nine year old self and what that experience, from a memory perspective, feels like for you.

So we had just literally, two weeks before we lost dad, we had moved into a new home. Four bedroom brick home that had just been built on the outskirts of Mount Barker in the Adelaide Hills. 14 acres. We had a horse, the tractor, the full bit and that was dad's dream, really. We'd put a dam in. We had yabbies in the dam. We used to go yabbing in the dam. It was our own little oasis, I suppose. We had the shed with a dart board. Beautiful, brand new home. We still had sheets in the windows and cement floors. But dad was adamant that we had to move in. Those things could come later. This was our home and we were going to move. So we'd moved into the house and what I was so excited about, we were only 1.6 kilometers from the town but I got to get on a bus and that was exciting for me. So the journey would be you would get on the bus where we lived and instead of going 1.6 kilometers in, I got to do the whole round trip to all the farm properties and get off at the other end. So I had this 40 minute bus trip where, in fact, mum could run me into town in three minutes. So I got off the bus this day. And we had a bit of a dirt road up to our gate, to the entrance of our property. And I remember getting off the bus with my sister, Kerry and...

This is about four o'clock in the afternoon?

Yes. So it was October 22 1981. It would've been just after 4:00 PM and there was a lot of cars parked between the gate and the house which was quite unusual for any time of the day but particularly a school day. And so we got off the bus, and as we went to walk, we had one of the family friends meet us at the bus and they walked us up the road. And just chatted, as normal. When we went inside the house, I could see the back of mum and then I could see the back of one of dad's mates who was a fellow police officer. And I refer to him as my Uncle Norm because he was very much - they were very close to our family. He had been a detective with Dad at Mount Barker but Dad was now in that commissioned role in the city. And we were quite concerned like, "What's going on?" because there was a lot of police there. There was probably half a dozen



uniformed police plus bosses in our dining room, outside on the phone. Well it would've been the radio, actually, because I don't think there would've been mobiles then. And I went inside and we've said to mum, "What's happening?" and Uncle Norm turned around and said, "Nothing for you to worry about, love. It's just we're not sure where your Dad is at the moment. He hasn't showed up where he's supposed to be today so people are out looking for him." And I said, "I thought maybe we're having a barbecue for tea," and he said, "Well, pretty sure we will, love, as soon as we find dad."

That's a very clear memory, that conversation. So clear after 37 odd years. That conversation's left an indelible impression on you. Why do you think that it is?

Very clear. It's just that uncertainty. It's those things that people think that they're protecting you but in fact I think in life I don't deal well now with uncertainty because I want transparency. And I remember mum didn't turn around and I felt there was something wrong. Mum couldn't turn around.

She couldn't look at you.

She couldn't look at me. In hindsight she was upset, right. Uncle Norm was doing the right thing in trying to keep us in the dark and trying to stop the anxiety or the worry or the fear. But, in fact, it probably actually exacerbates it to a degree. I can tell you we watched Home and Away. I can tell you we had takeaway chicken and chips. I can tell you exactly what box they came in. I've got some really strong vision of that night. In preference to, perhaps, the next few days are much more of a blur. So from that night we were then sort of, again I say it with respect, but we were whisked away. I was taken to a friend's house, my friend from school, to stay with her as a sleepover on a school night which, oh my God wow, that was never allowed. So I sort of just took it as it was in the moment. This is a bit of fun, staying with a friend on a school night and they'll find dad.

And the next morning?

Yes, that's when it all turned a little bit...I suppose that's when everything changed. So I'm guessing it was just daylight, so let's say 5:30 AM, 6:00 AM in the morning. I was still in my pyjamas and I got woken by my friend's dad and said that one of dad's family friends called George was here to pick me up and that I needed to go home. And I got into the car and my sister Kerry was already in the backseat because she too had stayed with a friend and not a word was spoken. The three of us just in this car. We drove home. We didn't ask anything. George didn't say anything. And when we got to the driveway, there was a heap of media there. So there was TV cameras.

About six o'clock in the morning?

Yes and they were around the gate and they basically had to be moved by the police out the way for us to come in. I still didn't really know what that meant. And so we walked quietly into the lounge room and I can still remember my sister, Julie, was lying with her boyfriend, Steven, in a bean bag just, I don't really know, crying or upset. And then mum had her head buried in someone's shoulder that had their arm around her. I can't tell you who that was. And the neighbour that lived in the property up the road was also a policeman, Mr Gamble, who went on to become an Assistant Commissioner. We walked into the lounge room that would've maybe been 10 people in there with the three seater and the two loungers and then bean bags. And there was



silence and you could feel that everyone was looking at us and Mr Gamble just looked at us and said, "Sorry lovies but they found dad and he's not coming home. He's passed on or passed away." And yeah, I don't really remember, I think, just the normal reaction, I'm assuming, would've been people would've grabbed us because I know I was sitting down pretty quickly. And I said something like, "What do you mean he's not coming home?" And he said, "He's suicided," or words to that effect. And I didn't know what that meant and I didn't ask. I didn't want to feel silly and I don't think I knew to ask. It all just got thrown at us. From the time I left the night before to the time I arrived back, we had the record player that had double cassettes and then the record player on the top and then the big speakers. And mum was playing over and over and over and over, Hooked on Classics. And it's really interesting because I'd never listened to Hooked on Classics since. Very clever music and I only saw the other day, Hooked on Classics coming to do a tour around Australia and I thought, 'wow', and I hadn't ever listened to it since and I actually listened to it the other day. And that was quite a different feeling to hear that music that had repetitively played for three, four days in the house. There was no telly on, we just had – and the telly was on but that got switched off because all the coverage was around dad and the beach where he was found and I don't think they wanted us kids to see that so...

So the word 'suicide' was mentioned. You didn't quite understand what all that meant. Do you remember when you first did understand what that word meant and, therefore, what it was that had happened to your father?

Yes, it would've been sometime between then and – my memory goes a bit funny on this one. I think I asked before the service, but it might've been in some days after that. But I just said to one of the family friends, "What's suicide?" I just asked, "What's suicide?" and they then told me the definition of somebody taking their life, if you like and then they talked a little bit about how that happened. And that's when – I don't think I really analysed it then. I think I just didn't understand it and I didn't get it and I didn't want to understand it or get it. It's one of those things. It was shut down. I'd asked it and I was told it and that was about as far as that conversation went.

So on reflection, you talk a little bit about the family for a long period of time wondering were there signs that they should've noticed, were there things that they should've seen, were there clear symptoms that something was wrong? What's your thoughts around that now on reflection?

There was definitely a lot of signs and there's a lot of accountability where people try and own that. So mum's always tried to own, "I should've known this but I don't get that. And I should've picked up on that but that didn't make sense." So she's gone from self-blame to blame others to blame dad to – and that's what I lived with, was growing up. Because being the youngest of three I was at home the longest, right? So I grew up pretty quick. So mum had recalled to ask things like – I remember the night before dad went missing because I think he went missing on a Tuesday or thereabouts. And on the Monday night, I had a form that I needed to fill out and to pay money for, for a school camp and I was late. And being in Grade 4, I was pretty stressed about that. That maybe I would miss out on going on the school camp with my friends. It was the aquatics camp. I was really excited but I hadn't paid my \$30 odd to go on this camp. It's probably cheaper than that then. And I remember saying something to dad like – he'd come in the lounge room, late from work, and I've said, "Dad, I haven't paid for my camp." He's like, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, don't worry about that now. We'll get to that," and I sat there quite upset. And he got to the – we had the round arches then, that was the trend. And he got to the arch to go through to the dining area and he stopped and he came back. And I remember him getting down on his knee and apologising and saying, "How much do you need? Where's your form?" and gave me this hug. In hindsight I think that that was a way of him – he was in this state and he had just completely not



acknowledged what I was feeling or said and then he just took that moment. And I look at that as was that one of the last interactions that he wanted to have, that he got right, instead of leaving me with that? One of the things that I know my older sister she's really struggled with, was – I don't really remember this but mum's told us - the morning that dad left to go to work, the day that he went missing, he came around the kitchen table and there was mum and my sister Kerry and myself. My older sister Julie was on night shift. She was a nurse. So she would've been on her way home and so she wasn't there. Dad went around and kissed us each and said goodbye instead of using the words similar to 'see you' or 'catch you tonight' or 'have a good day'. It was "goodbye." Filled up his car at the local servo that also was a car dealer who was a good mate of his. He shook his hand and said, "Goodbye, Peter," because then they'd come and fill your car for you. So all of those people have pulled those pieces together afterwards. Even to the fact that dad had said to mum some days before, "If ever I was to die, can you please make sure that you don't give me a police funeral? I don't want to be buried to those bastards. I want to be buried with my mate Cole," which is dad's cousin who had tragically passed in a car accident, who was buried at Enfield where dad was buried, next to his mate Cole. So if that's not a hint. That's a pretty big sign. But at that those times to say to your partner, whether you look at that he was in a risky job and they're always thinking about their wellbeing or whether he was just having a conversation about, 'if something was to happen to me'... because maybe they'd never talked about that. But a lot of those things were said and I learnt a lot of those little clues, if you like, about how quiet dad had got in weeks before. Mum said he'd lost weight. He wasn't sleeping well. There was a bit of paranoia had set in where he wouldn't use the home phone, he was using the phone box. He even was sleeping with a firearm by his bed. So one would think all that came with that job but whether a lot of that was to do with his thought processes or where he was at...

So you think it was a deterioration in mental health over an extended period of time or were there things that were happening for him that were causing him to feel completely overwhelmed and out of control in that moment?

I think it's the latter of the two. Definitely. I don't think from what I've learned and from all of the information that I've gathered that he was mentally unstable where he'd had a breakdown and he was not completely well. I don't see it as that. I think that there was a lot of pressure on him and his role on a lot of the things that he knew and he was exposed to. And I think that there was a lot of influence coming from different directions that his life got too tough. And if you want to talk about clues, he left letters and he left three letters. He wrote letters to his boss about – he quotes exhibit numbers in one of the letters, evidence that needs to be referred to and there was some planning involved here. So to me I don't see it as just in that moment anyone could've said, "Visualise and talk about it and I'll snap you out of it." I believe that he had a plan and that this was something that he felt there was no other option and this was a right solution for the position he was in and/or his family.

What does a young teenage girl do to cope with the loss of her father at such an important and vulnerable age?

I grew up pretty quick. I still remember one night, keeping in mind as I said earlier on, we didn't have mobiles. Mum wouldn't sleep in their bed. She couldn't do that. So I moved out of my bedroom and mum slept in my room and mum was a mess. They'd met at school. They'd left notes on each other's bike at primary school and they were dating and then married at 19 and that's all she knew, that was her only love and mum wasn't



eating, she was smoking a lot and I'd wake up in the morning and the bed would be empty and she'd gone for walks.

That was really scary, really, really frightening when you'd lost one parent and another parent's not home, you didn't know where they'd gone and turned out she would walk through the three paddocks and down the gate and talk to the cows and take the dog and she might've been doing that at six in the morning and I'm getting up at ten to seven or whatever and mum's not there.

...so this one night mum had a meltdown and she said to my sister and I, "I don't know if I can do this anymore," and she just took off in the car and we didn't know where she'd gone but we felt that she was potentially going to end things herself and that was a really scary night for us. We were two kids at home and in hindsight, I didn't know I was doing this but I became the fixer, that's how I describe myself now. I remember mum would cry a lot or mum couldn't find something or she'd smashed a glass and she would cry and I would go "Oh, okay I got it. It's okay mum." I'd become a bit compulsive where I didn't want to ever see her cry again and I tried to prevent anything going wrong in life. I hated confrontation and the place I felt safe was my sport where you're in a team and there was a group of friends that I had around me, they are still my lifelong friends, all been in each other's weddings and I've got my son's 21st coming up and I can't believe that there's all my besties from high school and my sporting years, they're all coming to party with me on the dancefloor on our kids 21st like that's just gold, but they become family. And we would play basketball three times a week and then we'd train for our state tournaments all day Saturday, all day Sunday and we'd sleepover Saturday night and we would watch Grease on video and eat rubbish and that's how I actually...that became my life, was sport and pretty well becoming part of other people's families as well. And mum was on a police pension and for those that don't understand how that works, it was pretty much 50% of what dad would've earned was basically how that ran so straight away there was a financial impact as well. So when I needed to go to a tournament, that all cost money, it wasn't provided by any funding or any state government. So myself with mum and other families, we would run a car wash to get Amanda on a trip. And at the time I didn't really think – I look right now I think goodness, I must've been a charity case, but at the time that's what we did. I remember going around to different places and asking could they sponsor me, would they support me and I door knocked myself to different businesses and that's just all I knew is you had to earn it and work for it and I think I built resilience, that's where I ended up.

When you finished high school, you decided on a career, what was the career you decided on?

For a really short time, my very first thing is I did do a traineeship with a bank and I didn't love it and I can't even tell you what happened but I'd always wanted to be a teacher or join the police force. You know when people ask kids when they're 12, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" They were my two things. Well, I was a bit of socialiser in high school, let's be honest. I didn't get the score that I wanted to be able to go to uni and it was more so that I could've actually done teaching, I don't think we could've afforded it. For mum, with me to go to uni. So I went to the bank did the traineeship and then I joined the police force.

What was that like to put the uniform on that first time?

Very emotional. So the same person that told me, Mr Gamble, that dad wasn't coming home, he presented me with the Dux award at Fort Largs Police Academy when he was then Assistant Commissioner of Police. So, he's presented me my award and given me my medal and leaned across and said, "Your dad's proud right now."

What a great moment.



Absolutely.

What a great moment for him as well, what a special time. How long did you stay in the police force?

About 14 years.

What was it like?

There was pros and cons. So I came in and developed my own family starting with - you had 12 months at the academy with say 20 course members and you get pretty tight. They become really good, good people and I wasn't a runner and I'd be right at the back. Another girlfriend and I, we'd be running last and a little bloke called Peter. He was so quick, he'd do the 2.5 km run in under 10 minutes and we'd be lucky to do it in 14 and he'd run that last lap with us. They had your back. The job as they call it or the 'Boys in Blue,' majority all had each other's back and it is a really tight knit group, to the point of it's almost this kind of silence and nobody talks outside and it's all - because it was so strong, there was a lot that didn't talk about dad. So people might actually say, "Are you Geoff's daughter?" or "Are you Whit's daughter?" and I'd say, "Yeah." "I heard you'd joined," and I'd say, "Yep, did you know dad?" "Ah, yeah, I knew him a bit," and that might be about all you'd get. Others would like to tell worries and there was some that would say, "One day when you're not in this job, I'll tell you a few things about your dad." So I think I parked a lot of that because that's not why I was there, I was there to be a fixer. I look at it a little bit, there was a bit of a legacy there too, so if you look at...

Were you trying to fix that legacy in some form?

Yeah, I think it's more of the AFL player, his son can play, he gets picked up in the draft. I think it was more of I wasn't looking for anything special but I've had dad and dad's cousin and his brother, so they'd already been three Whitford's in the job that were immediately related to me and I was quite proud of being a Whitford working in the police force in South Australia. And I think in a way, I can't put it to words, but I think I had a point to prove that I'm going to finish what dad started.

How has it shaped you? How has it influenced your life?

There was a lot of years where things didn't feel great. Anxiety, depression, particularly postnatal. I hated my dad when I brought my eldest baby home from hospital.

... I saw things completely differently when I became a parent and I thought 'what sort of parent were you?' And I was angry. And I still remember sitting on that step and I had tears rolling and I couldn't understand it, that he had three children and we were his girls, he called us his girls and we were his world. And mum had said to him for years, "If that job gets too tough, you know what you're calling is, chuck it in and we'll run a pub." That was their plan and it all just - I was 26, my first child. I'd known what it was like to be a cop, I didn't get it and in some ways, I don't think I was a good mum for those first few months because it really played with my head. So that really impacted me.

How long did it take for you to reconcile that or is it unreconciled still?

It's reconciled now because I learned how to share my story so that I can bring some positive to what my dad



did. So I love him now because I've met him through writing my book.

That's lovely.

And I forgive him and I'm trying to turn my grief and my anger now into positive feelings and gratitude if I can go that far to say that what I've been through, I can help use now to try and deter or educate others and what that impact can look like.

So what would you say to others? What's the wisdom that comes from your experience that you think is really import for you to pass on?

Suicide is real. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed to talk about it if you're comfortable to do that. It's your choice and I remind myself that they didn't mean to hurt us, that was never their intention and we can't change what's happened but we can try and influence or help reduce stigma, but reduce these types of outcomes. I felt this huge sense of relief to be able to finally have these types of conversations like you and I are having now Layne, where we can just talk about what's happened and how I felt. And I've talked about this in a number of formats and every time it feels different and I come away sometimes exhausted, sometimes upset and sometimes feeling that I've really achieved something and that's just helped me – I'm allowed to be who I am now. I'm actually allowed to be that person that I've tried to hide.

So you found an identity?

Yeah. I was always trying to be who I think others wanted me to be and what I was trying to meet expectations in who I was perceiving. The ironic thing there is I do see, feel my dad in me and that's scary because a lot of what I've learned is my dad's highest, highest self-value was his integrity and how others perceived him. And there's a really strong argument that's what took his life, was that he wasn't going to live up to the expectation of others and I've got so much of that in me and I'm trying to say, "It's okay to just be Amanda." I'm still learning that and I'm still learning to try not to fix everyone else's problems but this journey in sharing my story is helping me to put some relevance into what is worth worrying about in life.

I'm happy that you've taken the opportunity to share it with our listeners wherever they are. A story not told is just an internal dialogue, isn't it? And the moment you found the courage to be able to express your story and the wisdom and the knowledge that comes from that story is now able to help others and I'm sure there are many, many others out there who are going to listen to this podcast and are going to really resonate with your courage and your message of finding your dad. I just love that whole concept of you got to know him through your research and how that's shaped you and everything that you do and how you parent and how you live your life. So that you so much for being so open and honest. And you gifted me the book today so I'm going to read that and I'm going to read it and I'm going to really enjoy it and I thank you so much for being a part of Roses Radio today.

Thank Layne, thank you for the opportunity.

