

FINAL TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW  
**SANDY**  
SA HEALTH  
2020

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*Welcome, Sandy Lovall. Thank you for being here and being open to talk about your story.*

No problem.

*On that, why don't we go back a little bit and let's find out more about you as a person. Why don't you tell us a little bit about you, Sandy and who you are? We can way back if you want.*

Right back? That's a long time.

*Way back. Are you from – because you're in Port Lincoln?*

Port Lincoln now but no, I was originally Sydney, Northern Beaches type thing. Grew up there.

Until I was about 23 or 24 and then I moved to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. Most of my life's been spent in Sunshine Coast in Queensland. I've got two kids there now still and one daughter in Alice Springs...I still go back to the Sunshine Coast a fair bit...but then I virtually ventured up to Tennant Creek for a couple of years to work there in mental health and then now I'm in Port Lincoln.

*What was the decision to go to Port Lincoln?*

I met someone online.

That's how I ended up there. I didn't agree to it for a while. I was up in Tennant Creek and I decided after a few years stint up there that if we're still talking and it works out, I'll move to Port Lincoln. I live on a farm there now.

*Wow.*

1700 acres. I don't know the arse end of a sheep too but I'm learning.

*Let's talk about your family. You have...?*

Three children. A boy and two girls. They are 26, 24 and 22 now.

*Amazing. If you're okay let's talk about your daughter that's gone through the suicidal ideation?*

Yeah. When I look back now suicidal ideation was probably from age 13 on. Probably was until right up now, maybe to the present day even although she's fine now. She lives in Alice Springs, a couple of kids now. She's a lot better which is great. It did go on for – probably the stress of that and probably 10 years at least. I was a single mother, broken marriage. Virtually it was just struggling with school. She had a very high IQ, very, very high IQ. Probably from 16 onwards there was attempts on her life. Probably the last one being at about age 24, something like that – no, probably 22 would have been the last one, that was actually when I was in Tennant Creek. It's virtually just been a struggle. So many presentations to the ED department over those years, that sort of thing, cries for help. She would describe it as her brain wouldn't turn off and she was just so tired from – she virtually couldn't stop thinking and she was tired from that and wanted out. There was obviously a lot of other things happen along the way. Lots of presentations to emergency department at different hospitals, then ended up getting addicted to her prescription drugs, that sort of thing as well. It was a merry-go-round there, for quite a few years. That's basically the overview. It's been a long struggle for her, still is. She ended up getting diagnosed with borderline personality disorder over those years and then now they've actually changed that to some other diagnosis but anyway that's...



*It sounds like that she's in a better place now though.*

Yeah, definitely... I think it took a long time. It wasn't an instant thing. Obviously presenting to emergency departments over those years wasn't really the answer, I don't think. It just kept a circle really presenting like some sort of prescription drugs and then back out again and then it would happen again.

*Can we talk about her early teenage years and those initial conversations that you might have had with her and how you think those went?*

Looking back probably in those early teenage years, like 13, 14, 15, etc. there was signs definitely of this suicidal ideation. As I said she had a very IQ so she's in special class at school, in high school as well, talented kids, so called. Then, there was just a lot of things and then, I think, also mixing with the wrong crowd as she got older because she was always looking for something. The signs was that she was always – nothing was ever enough type thing in her life. I think because her brain would never switch off, she always felt like she was searching all the time for the next thing or the next thing. Then, I think she just grew so tired of it in her own mind that that's where the suicide ideation and attempts on her life...

*How did you cope with this information?*

It was very stressful because obviously on a daily basis you're worrying, "Could this be the day? Or what if I'm not around or something like that." Then, as she got older even over those 17, 18, 19, 20s there's just so many phone calls in the night, cries for help. Just saying, "I'm so tired, mum. I want out now. I'm done." Then, it was a matter of I'd either get her to get emergency herself or someone else would or I would. It was just a long hard road and I could see for her she didn't want to be like that at all.

*She wanted help?*

Yeah she did want help but she was just so tired of it all.

*Did you find it hard to get in contact with the appropriate people to talk to outside of the emergency department and around the school?*

I did and I think once she left school then it was trying to navigate the mental health system of what is out there and what's available to people which I still do that on a daily basis now with my work. It still is navigating the system, but I think it is improving. I can see now that it has improved other the years. I think back then it probably wasn't even talked about as much even though it was not that long ago as it is now. I'm hoping that it's getting more and more out there, and people are more willing to talk about it and look at what's out there and try and get help.

*Fast forward now to today, how's yourself and your family been able to have a good conversation around mental illness and this suicidal ideation?*

Yeah, I think so definitely. I probably talk to my daughter now like four times a day or FaceTime with the grandkids.

She still struggles to this day, I've got to be honest, she probably will always struggle. I don't know. Definitely, the suicidal ideation isn't there as much and I'm not as worried, you know attempts on her life. I still think she does struggle but we just communicate all the time and make sure and she does get help too. She's got a psychologist, in the mental health system. I think as far as communication all around we've tried to keep it



where it is open and honest, and it is out there that this is struggles people can have. I think she wants to help people now too.

So, she'd really like to get into that as well because she understood what that mental health merry-go-round was like at that time but not really getting any answers or any real help, but I think it's definitely improving.

*Obviously with the lack of support that you and your family had early on, even up until fairly recently, this is what's led you to seek out to volunteer and to give aid and support yourself, is that right?*

Yeah, definitely. I think I was a bit lost being a single mum and probably didn't know the system and things very well, so I ended up – I became, just out of interest for it and wanting to know to help her mainly and others, I became a lifeline suicide crisis person on the telephone lines at night.

*So, it was the first step for you?*

Yeah, that was my first step just into volunteering with that, doing nightshifts.

... I think I got a lot out of it because I was like, I know I wanted that for my daughter, for her to have people to just talk to, first of all as well. Sometimes just family is not enough. Then, I got so much out of that. I loved it, to be honest. I just loved doing that and then that led me to go up to Tennant Creek and I was in what was called Partners in Recovery then, which was a mental health thing going out to the Aboriginal Communities etc. so I did that for a couple of years. Then, I got into Port Lincoln and I was manager of Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation. That was working in mental health as well for the ex-prisoners etc. Now, I'm Senior Practice Leader of a mob called Neami National in Port Lincoln and they're a mental health and suicide prevention etc. crisis work as well. It's flowed on from that first step of going to be a lifeline telephone thingy.

*What a journey.*

Yeah and I've just got a passionate for it. I really want to get it out now to more rural remote areas because I think they're really struggling and especially talking about it. I think the only way to get it out there is to probably empower their own little communities in places like that, to talk within themselves and to reach out.

*What was the decision or the thought to go, "Tennant Creek?"*

Back then I think it was the kids were grown up and it was at the stage where, should you leave them to fend for themselves a bit because they're only fairly young teenagers, but they did have a father that was Maroochydore also. I thought that will be a good opportunity for him to connect a bit more with them as well. I actually applied for a job up there as an Aboriginal Support Worker in the beginning. I didn't really think I'd get it, but I got it.

So, then I started in that and I just loved it, going out, all the Aboriginal communities and doing things out there in Tennant Creek itself. Then, I volunteered – no, I didn't volunteer. I did nightshifts and weekend work at the Mandatory Drug and Alcohol Treatment Centre which then turned into a kids sniffing centre, petrol etc. I did the mental health work during the day but then I also did –because there wasn't much nightlife or anything in Tennant Creek, not much to do. Virtually I just – weekends and night times I did the Mandatory Alcohol and Drug Treatment centre.



*Have you seen a lot of difference in how the isolated Aboriginal community deals with mental illnesses and mental health and suicidal ideation? Do you find there much difference?*

Yeah, I do think there's a big difference and I think the rates of suicide in those Aboriginal communities and still are, I don't mean just in the past I mean now as well, are just way too high, huge. It's a daily basis thing up there. I think, there's much more help needed out there. There's obviously lots of reasons, same as everywhere whether it be cities or that sort of thing. Yes, you can definitely see a difference, but I think if we can just get it out there to more people everywhere it doesn't matter whether it be city, Aboriginal communities, country, towns, farmers, fisherman, all that. I think it needs to be out there more with everyone because you see it's still happening way too much.

*How did the suicidal ideation for your daughter affect her school life and also the family dynamic?*

I think right back in the school life it changed things because – even now she'll say – she, as I said, was a very smart girl, had so much potential but because of all this other stuff that was going on for her it virtually put a hold on the education and then getting into the wrong crowds. As she grew it was prescription drugs that kept getting prescribed and that was a vicious circle, so it did definitely affect the growing up and schooling and working and everything from that as a young teenager into adulthood. As far as family life it definitely – obviously it has effects on her brother and sister and things too.

*Yeah, so how have they been with her?*

Look, they're good and they're supportive of her too now which is great. They're fairly close now...

*How do you feel like your conversation has changed with your daughter now?*

I spoke with her even just before I came in here today. She's so open and honest but yet, it's not she's ashamed of it, but she doesn't really want to think back to that period of her life. Even though it's not that long ago, right now she's – on the phone with her today she's going, "I don't really want to think about that mum." Because it's painful to her to think back that caused pain, she thinks to the family too, things like that, of worrying constantly about her and obviously the attempts on her life. As far as talking to each other, I think that's the best way, just keep talking about it and it's okay. Make sure that it is okay to talk about it. Now, as I said she wants to help others too.

Which I hope she does go onto to do because she'd be great at it, that lived experience of herself.

*How have you been?*

Good. As I said, I'm at a place now that with her is okay too so that's good. So that worry is not as bad as it was over all those years. Also, I just love being out and helping other people now that have suicidal ideation or mental health wellbeing problems, anything really.

*Is there something different that we can do, do you think to help the society and help the smaller communities or even bigger communities?*

My personal take on it is that things like when people are going through suicidal ideation etc. and a lot of people might have numerous presentations to EDs, I think there should be an alternative to ED which I know they are looking into at Adelaide now, they're just looking at starting on which I think is fantastic.

*It is.*



I think having alternatives and really – not so much drop-in centres etc. but somewhere where people can go where's there's someone willing, non-judgemental listening to them. Maybe that might take months and months of that person going there to be heard, to be listened to with no judgement. The other way I think is virtually – especially I look at it from the rural communities, is that it's so important to get out there and actually – obviously you can't have workers and things out there in all those communities all the time. So, I think the only way about that is to empower those small communities themselves. Whether that takes some training for themselves or just getting out there saying, "Hey it's alright," having someone go out there saying it's alright, talk about this, going to football clubs, pubs and sporting venues and things where they might be. I think actually getting into the farmers, you know going out and meeting them on the farm because they're so proud, proud people. A lot of them might not venture into town very often and they're certainly not going to go into the bigger towns where there's mental health...

...service providers and things like that. They're just so proud. If they feel their fathers coped with the farms or whatever it be in the years before, they feel they should. Maybe it's not going so well, it might be financially or martial spilt ups but yet they're so proud they probably feel they're failing whereas why didn't their father fail through the generations. Whether it be the local news agency or the fuel guy that delivers fuel out there. That's why I think just empowering the community, the members of the community to help each other is probably the most important and the best way to go about it, being realistic.

*What would you say to a farmer right now or someone right now, what would you say to them if they were going through suicidal (ideation), what would you say to them right now?*

Talk to me. I'd say talk to me and to keep talking to them. It wouldn't matter. It might take months and months and months and be there for them. You might not be able to solve problems etc. but you can listen and make sure that they're heard that they feel validated and important, their life's worth living.

*Do think the conversation's getting better and improving or are we just talking more?*

I do definitely think it is improving. I think we are talking about it more but it's also the actual getting out there and helping people and making...

*The groundwork?*

...yeah, the groundwork happen. That's where I'm saying I think there's no point just talking about it. We also need to get out there and make alternatives for people than ED and things like that because it's over crowding those systems, the hospital beds and the ED departments and things. So, if we can work another way if that's not working so good, maybe if we look at other things. ...we need to have alternatives and it might be coffee shop or actually going out, outreach work, going out and talking to people. Then, training everyone else in the community about, "It's okay to talk about it," and how to help people and how to get help themselves, all that sort of thing as well.

*Was there any specific that you wanted to say or was there anything specific that you wanted to broach because you've put a lot of thought into this?*

Me, personally I just want to keep going, doing...

*Advocating the positive message?*

Yeah, that's right. I can say I'm very proud of my daughter.



That's probably number one to me. Very proud of so many people that I've met probably the last 10 years getting through those struggles and people out there that are helping others to do it as well. That's about it, I think.

*So, when your daughter was going through her early stages of teenage years of her suicidal ideation and you had frequent visits to the emergency department, what do you think was the catalyst or what do you think was the overriding presiding factor that got her to the good stage that she's at now and breaking that cycle?*

Persistence with probably – it took a long time, so I won't make out that that just happened, and it was easy because as I said, she still struggles today probably in certain ways.

... I think we were really lucky that probably – I'm not going to say it was 100% because you don't know teenagers what they keep from you and what they don't. They're not going to tell you anything but we're probably lucky that we did have fairly open communication along those years and especially as it went along. We were very lucky I'd say that that communication was quite open between mother and daughter even though there was a lot of ups and downs.

...to be honest, I think in her mind what helped was for so long it was presenting at EDs etc. They'd go, "Maybe bipolar," things like this and try and give – and then when they actually put a diagnosis on it of borderline personality disorder, I think something in her was like, "At least I know what I've got. They've given me a name to it because I don't know what I've got." She didn't even understand herself. As I said, it was just her mind wouldn't ever stop and she was just so tired out from that. That was her words of, she didn't want to do it anymore, was all the time, three o' clock in the morning a phone call, "I don't want to do it anymore. I'm done."

*Do you think it gave her something to focus on to help her get better?*

I think it gave her something like there might be a light at the end of the tunnel if they can – because she didn't understand it herself so if that was the diagnosis. Now, they've said that might not be the diagnosis anyway, but it was - it sort of meant something to her that, "Maybe, it's not just me. It might be this or it might be that and there might be some help out there." Whereas before that because no one understood it was like there's no help available. "Is she going to ever get through this or not?" I wouldn't know if that's really the turning point. To be honest, I think now that she's got two little kids, one and two.

Now, I think that's the turning point probably as well.

*Yeah because her focus is shifting.*

Yes, that focus on those two children. I think that's probably the main turning point, but I think being heard and listened to too along the way. It just took a long time.

*And you being patient and persistent.*

I don't really think it had anything to do with me probably. It shows her strength that she did get through it but to be honest there was times where we weren't sure.

*It was tough?*

Yeah, whether she would or not, but she did it.



*She's here.*

That's the main thing.

*And you're here to tell that story which is amazing. How did your relationship change with your daughter to before she had the suicidal ideation to when she started presenting with those?*

I think before it was that this perfect child, top of the class, sweet gorgeous which she still is but, yes it became a different rollercoaster. It went from that to a downhill spiral and then it even went further downhill with the addiction to prescription drugs etc. as well. Yes, it was what you think as a young child, perfect life ahead and it didn't turn out that way for her. It was years of struggle rather than that perfect life than what you as a parent you thought was going to be the way it was going to go.

*Onto the message, because this is something that you're promoting quite heavily, you're really into the smaller communities with what you do at the moment. Is there something that you want to say now on this platform? In regards to putting out is there something you want to say specifically in the message to people?*

Reach out, be there for your neighbour, I think especially in rural communities, be there for each other because you're sort of all you've got, is each other often in those smaller, more rural communities. It's really important if you see the signs that someone's struggling just say, "How are you going?" if they say fine that time ask again next time. Just try and be there for each other.

*I want to thank you so much Sandy Lovall for coming in and sharing you're experience with us. It takes a lot so I'm very grateful and I'm glad things are good and working out and are better. The world is grateful for the work that you do as well in the smaller communities. I'm sure out there there's plenty people that are quite thankful to have you in their lives.*

Thank you very much and thanks for having me today. That's great.

