

TRANSCRIPT for Series 3, Episode 6: Proudest Moments

Introduction

Welcome to *A World Where LivingWorks*, stories of science and survival. Bringing together our heads and our hearts, to build a suicide safer world.

This podcast is brought to you by LivingWorks, a network of local suicide first aid trainers in your community and communities around the world. Visit livingworks.net to find out how you can play your part in suicide prevention.

Kim Borrowdale, host: You're listening to *A World Where LivingWorks* and I'm your host Kim Borrowdale.

First, I'd like to acknowledge Traditional Owners of the beautiful lands wherever you're listening.

I'd also like to acknowledge everyone out there who has been impacted by suicide, the pain it brings to our lives, but also the desire to make positive change, for all of us to live well.

Today I'm talking again with Richard Ramsay, co-founder of LivingWorks.

This is the sixth and final episode in season three of *A World Where LivingWorks*, a season focused on learning about the history and evolution of their ground-breaking suicide first aid training practices.

We know LivingWorks today as a global leader in suicide intervention. Thousands of trainers in workplaces and communities around the world teaching gold class suicide first aid programs like the two-day ASIST workshop, the half day safeTALK suicide alert helper workshop and now the 90- minute online interactive introduction to suicide first aid, LivingWorks Start. Programs that have been endorsed in more than 50 peer reviewed journals around the world. That have informed international policy and are implemented everywhere from schools to military bases, hospitals to sports clubs and everything in between.

In the last episode we talked about the train the trainer community development model and how trainers around the world work with different environments and cultures while maintaining the fidelity of the LivingWorks model. Today, I'd like to wrap up the series talking about some of Richard's proudest LivingWorks moments.

KB: What have you been most proud of over the...since starting like have you got home and been most buzzed to tell your family about, what really excited you in that time or surprised you?

RR: They don't want to hear any more of it

KB: They're sick of it, they're sick of it, they're like retire already

RR: Yeah, it's the...well I think the big thing from the training side of it is the power of the word of mouth that moved it into all these different kind of places and the ability which still kind of amazes us in many ways that the original scripting of what we saw as important in the training has remained intact, the cultural adaptation, whether it is the filming or building it into i-ASIST or the Inuit one if you dig underneath you will see that it is the same kind of common language that's being expressed and to have that hold for 40 years is really, for me is quite remarkable that we had been able to do that when our vision originally was basically the province of Alberta, that's who we were working for, to have it go anywhere beyond wasn't in our minds at that point, that's the practical application side. The other side is the policy side, and we were quite lucky, especially Brian Tanney and I, to be invited by the United Nations to convene people from around the world to write the National Strategy Suicide Prevention guidelines for the United Nations and it was done in part because in the,

late 80s, early 90s the UN had a habit of convening high level groups of welfare ministers and that sort of thing and then they would write the high level strategy for the next ten years and then a year out they would send a letter to national governments or major NGOs and say this is what we did two or three years ago, can you tell whether it is filtering down to the local community and give us case examples of it working.

Well the particular year I'm referring to they sent the same letter to University presidents and our University president gets this letter he'd never seen before, didn't know what the hell it was all about, he saw social welfare in it, he passed it off to the Dean of Social Work and said, you answer it for the University and the Dean looked at it and saw that it had to do with International sort of social welfare and he knew I was involved in that kind of work, I was his Associate Dean and he handed it to me and said, you write it. I started to look at it and it's 50 questions, each question has to be at least a paragraph long in answer and I started trying to answer it and I couldn't do it, I was like a kid in school with classroom exams and I looked at all the questions and said, I can answer number one but not two or three or four but I can get ten or 12, I'm just going to answer what I know something about and hope I get 50% out of this. Anyway, I quit trying to answer them and said, ok I'm just going to write to a case study to what we've been doing in suicide prevention in Alberta and California at the time and every question that allowed me to say something about this case study then I answered it and finished it and we sent it off to the UN and that was it, it was off my desk. Then we get a letter back from the UN and it's not just thank you very much we'll take whatever you say into consideration, it went on to page two, page three, page four and in page two or three they said, wow you've pointed out an error in our thinking, they actually used the language of, we've sinned and we want to repent and I'm saying, I don't know what you're talking about

KB: What were they referring to?

(6:28)

RR: I had to read further and what they were saying was that, in these social policy side of the United Nations we always thought that suicide was a mental health problem and that WHO was looking after it but you wrote it in such a way that it's not only a mental health problem, it's a social welfare problem, it's an injury-prevention problem, it's a multi-sector problem and we want to amend our sins and the offer was, will you put together 12 or 15 people, bring them to Alberta or Canada, use Canadian money that we know you've got lots of and use our template that says you've got seven days to write a national strategy guideline

KB: Not asking a lot

RR: No, and they said you can use our good name and our logo but we don't have any money so don't ask us. Brian and I spent the better part of a year trying raise \$50,000 so we can bring 15 people from 12 different countries and we brought them to Calgary in 1993 and we had them here in the city for 2 days and all of them had to give a state of the art paper on suicide in their country and then we took them up to Banff in the beautiful summer weather, locked them into a building and said, you can look at the mountains but you can't go out

KB: You've got work to do

RR: Until you've finished this and we had four or five days left to write it and we did it and sent it back to the UN, they published it and now it's the guideline for many countries around the world to use to develop their national strategy and the US did it quite deliberately through a survivor family, Scotland followed it, I think Australia followed it to a certain extent. That's another for me a huge sort of feather in the cap of being able to have a practical impact and also to have a high level policy impact

KB: That's amazing, I knew about the gathering and the resulting papers that came out of that and the strategies that followed but I didn't realize it started with just this letter bouncing around your University and you looking at those elements and thinking how can I actually answer this, why don't I give them a case study example, that's amazing link through and it shows actually that people can do that and do stuff on the ground that can inform international policy

RR: Yeah, and it was really, how can I get this thing off my desk

KB: Well, it comes back to your earlier point when you said, what you're doing now you may not realize the impact of it in decades to come because at that time you were just getting it off your desk but then look at how much it's influenced policies in different countries

RR: Yeah, and it was, I mean again, it's amazing how many times Australia comes back into this history. When we were in Australia for those three weeks in 1996, I had met the father of a young physician daughter who had died by suicide several years earlier and he was going to support groups, him and his wife and other members of the family but it still wasn't working for him and two of the Americans who had been to our Calgary meetings they went back with the draft that we had prepared and somehow the draft got into the hands of this man in Atlanta, Georgia and he spent the next year going to the American Association of Suicidology and he'd corner the leaders and say, do you know anything about this and what do you think of the recommendations and is it possible and who is going to do it and they all said, yeah they know something about it and yes it's feasible but we haven't the slightest idea who is going to do it to make it happen. The survivor father said, ok then the only people that I think that are going to be able to make this move are the ones who are affected by it, I'm going to organize all of the survivor families around the United States and we're going to march on Capitol Hill a year from now, I met him the following year at a conference in Phoenix and he was a lone man standing at a table all by himself with a banner that looked like a bridge and the title was S.P.A.N and I introduced myself and I said, like who are you and he was doing likewise and he started telling me what he was up to and as he was telling me, I looked down on this empty table except for a piece of paper that was there and I looked at it again and said, that's our draft, I tried to be funny with him and said, what's that and he said, that's what I'm telling you about and I said, well you can't, he says why not and I said, because that's mine and you can't talk about something that I own and his immediate response was oh my god, he said, you're one of those Canadians and then he went on a few months later we met again and he told me his vision, his dream about organizing all these people marching on Capitol Hill and getting this strategy going in the United States which academics and policy makers before had tried and failed.

Anyway we're in Australia the next year and this march he was going to do was on mother's day in May and May was the month that we were in Australia, we're in Wollongong and on Wednesday morning or maybe Thursday morning I'm having breakfast with the participants and happen to be sitting beside this one guy and he's telling everybody about what happened to him the night before, he said, I'm so overwhelmed with this suicide talk and it's so intense that I went home last night, in terms of self-care and I was just going to turn on a sitcom and just maybe sit in the hot tub or something, I turn on ABC and a news story out of Washington about a march on Capitol Hill about suicide prevention, he was going on in the morning about, I couldn't even get away from it last night

KB: Couldn't escape

RR: And then he turned to me and he said, do you know anything about this, and I said, to myself, first of all I said, yeah I do actually and I doubted that he could pull off what he said to me the September before, I sent a plea for forgiveness you know as fast as I could to Washington and then I said, yeah as a matter of fact I do know something about it, this is what this guy said he was going to do last year and he's done it

KB: He's done it

RR: And I got word of his success almost immediately sitting in a hotel in Wollongong, Australia

KB: That is amazing, and that march resulted in the federal strategy, the national strategy in the States

RR: Yeah, it was a big start and then I found out later that all these people that were in this crowd and the story had to do with marching on Capitol Hill for suicide prevention because they were delivering petitions to the Senators and so forth, later on I'm talking with one of our trainers, who was there, he said, you know the funny thing is, is that there weren't that many of us there, but there was another big march of people angry or whatever about something and the cameras caught that crowd and made it look like it was our crowd

KB: Brilliant and that got beamed all over the world

RR: Yeah

KB: It worked, it worked

(14:40)

RR: Those are the two things that I will always take away from this whole experience and then what they did in the US then was, he then organized a consensus conference and he got money from a pharmacy company and he got the federal people involved and he organized a conference in Reno, Nevada which happens to be the state where the Senate majority leader at the time was from and he had revealed a personal tragedy in his life, where his dad died by suicide when he was a freshman in University or something and the family just shut it down, they wouldn't talk about it and then he heard another national figure, broadcast figure talk about his depression in an open way and so this Senator said, well if he can talk about that, then I guess I should talk about what happened to my family and he did and he became a really strong supporter.

This conference that they organized was a long weekend, from Thursday to Sunday and instead of having 15 people like we had in Calgary and Banff they had 450 people and they had to write a recommendation strategy to be delivered to the Surgeon General of the United States who was coming from Atlanta, Georgia all the way out to Reno for one purpose only, to get this document and Brian Tanney and I were there as observers but we were also being supporters to the leaders because especially the Americans they had supported us when we thought there was no way we were going to get this finished in Banff and they kept sort of nudging us on and saying let's keep going, keep going, we were doing the same thing to them.

Now I had a meeting with the lead writer at midnight on Saturday, we had agreed to have coffee breaks every once in a while, he came out of the room and he said, I can't have a coffee break with you right now, I've got 15 people in this room and it's like herding cats, there is no consensus in this room about the recommendations, I have no idea what we're going to have something for the Surgeon General in the morning or not and he left, the next morning I'm sitting with another one of the Calgary people from the US and we're biting our nails because the Surgeon General comes in, he's in full military uniform and his entourage of people and he is escorted up to the front of the hall, all these people there and we're sitting here saying, where's Mort the leader and then he finally, we see him come into the room and he has a piece of paper and it's like, I don't know what's on that paper but at least it's something, it sounds like it's better than what he was looking at midnight

KB: The night before

RR: And I don't know when they agreed on it but there he was. He had these recommendations, they were delivered to the Surgeon General, the Surgeon General thanked him, and he actually thanked the United Nations strategy people in Alberta. He had taken a position before that where he was doing major reform of the mental health policies for the country and he'd been petitioned to have a separate national strategy and he kept saying, no way, you're not going to get a...it will be inside the mental health strategy but not independent and everybody was worried because it's not the same saying, we're going to reform the healthcare system and mental health is going to be inside it, so we're going to give it attention and everybody knows no you're not, mental health is going to be put in the back room like it's always been.

Anyway, he went back and a year later he wrote a new document and then this new document he said the US is going to have its independent strategy that I realize now that I was wrong and that it should have its own strategy and that was 1999 and two years later the US announced its first national strategy, ten year national strategy and it all traced back to this one survivor family member and his family which then traced back to the UN document that we wrote in Banff and he had a draft of

KB: Wow, see that is a powerful chain of events but also shows the passion of personal experience once motivated and mobilized nothing can stop them from getting to that result and then backed by evidence, policy, practice what a beautiful combination

RR: Yeah, yeah it was really quite remarkable and he developed what was called S.P.A.N which was the Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network and that was all tied together with the national strategy, once that was done then they changed the name to, well they didn't change the name, they kept S.P.A.N but they changed A from

Advocacy to Action, now they're pressed on with all kinds of survivor type of support and so forth and that's still active and alive in the US, for me, although I've been involved in international social work and it's at a fairly senior levels internationally, but you still have that small town, rural village mentality that I grew up in and there are some days where you pinch yourself and say, how could a kid from Timbuktu village have the kind of experiences that I've been privileged to have and be part of over these years, it's humbling kind of reflection but it's also motivating to say well it doesn't matter what size of town or village you come from, you take on something that really means something and you might do thing you thought you could do

KB: Exactly and come across people and places you never thought you'd be or could really imagine.

So, Richard, a final thought we ask everyone on A World Where LivingWorks, is what gives you hope for the future when it comes to suicide and its prevention. Now whenever I've asked you that question off the air in between recordings, you've always come back to individual interactions with Livingworks trainers over the years - and the connection you've shared with so many and what you've learned from each other.

Listeners let me give you a bit of context on the story we're going to share with you to round out the episode and series. Unsure of the source, Richard's been telling this story for years now about a nurse helping a young Norwegian sailor. Their ship was docked in the harbor, and he was having some sort of mental health difficulty and she ended up being the community nurse that was called. She did a ASIST type of intervention and they were able to get in touch with his doctor back in Norway and just as she started talking the doctor through her assessment and why she thought the young man might be at risk of suicide, he cut into the conversation and said, oh you've been trained and she thought it was sort of a talk down from a doctor to a nurse and even though he couldn't see her, he could feel the bristles on the back of her neck but he caught it right away and said, 'no, no, no, I don't mean that, I mean that you've been ASIST trained and so have I' and from there it was instant rapport between the two of them working together to help this young man.

(22:26)

RR: Well, I actually heard the story from some source, I don't even remember when but it is probably a good 10 or maybe even 15 years old and so I was at the New Finland conference, I think it was three years ago and I was telling this story because I didn't know who this nurse was, it was just a phantom nurse and Sheryl when she started to hear the story, she stuck up her hand up that's me, that was me and so that was the first time I actually realized who had actually been the nurse involved in that helping incident

KB: Great example of the story, can you imagine how she was feeling as she was listening, hang on that sounds familiar, wait that's me, he's talking about me

KB: And then a few years on you were just telling me how you caught up recently and received the package in the mail, tell us about that?

RR: Well that's a, Sheryl and I have been in discussion ever since the last face to face meeting in New Finland in 2019 and we got to talking about our common interest in Bucky Fuller and geometric thinking and that sort of thing and we've carried our discussion every so often for most of the last year and a half and she's an artistic person, so she's also drawing graphs and different kinds of graphic ideas around what we were discussing and so it was a couple of months ago, she said, I'm going to send you something, I have a parcel for you and I said fine, and then shortly after that she wrote another note saying, oh my gosh, somethings happened, I can't send it to you right away, there will be a delay, and I had no idea what that was of course and then a week and a half ago, she sent me a note ok it's on it's way, it's coming snail mail and the tracking says that it will be here on September 3rd but on Monday it arrived and she had told me by email that there was going to be an envelope in the package and that I needed to open the actual package first and then look at the envelope and when I got the parcel there was also a note on the card with the same instruction

KB: Saying do not read the card first

RR: Do not read the card first

So that's what we did and she had it really tightly wrapped, securely wrapped, so it took us a while to sort of find our way into it, and when we finally opened it up, we actually opened up the back, the back told me the story of the idea of possession that Bucky Fuller talked about a lot and I always talk about it as being the important part of being in sync in the PAL model because it's that relationship between the helper and the person at risk that once they get in sync and they create emotion that is perpendicular 90° to their axis, it actually goes from problem to solution or from focus on death to focus on living and as soon as I saw that, I thought well I understood what might be in the picture but it didn't dawn on me as to what that might be.

When I flipped it over and I saw the bumble bee and the flower and I thought oh my gosh I know exactly what this is all about and then we went to the envelope and of course that really was an emotional read, to read the words of her granddaughter who had been working with her nanny in her art studio and on that particular occasion I guess Sheryl had left it in the studio and of course went to bed that particular night and her granddaughter

KB: All ready to send to you

RR: All ready to send and her granddaughter was there visiting, and she got up early in the morning and went in and added a few things, stars, and butterflies I think is what she said

(26:39)

KB: You can just...anyone with kids and grandkids can absolutely picture that

RR: Oh yeah

KB: Kids going up, I'm going to help nanny

RR: And being so proud of it and of course you can visualize the shock in nanny's face when she saw what happened and then of course a mortified mother, is a real vision you can experience like oh my gosh

KB: And then looking down at the child who is so happy with themselves, you can see the whole scene playing out

RR: Yeah, and she certainly had the right expression for a grandmother saying, oh you love it don't you grandma. What kind of response could you give to that other than saying yes?

KB: Beautiful collaboration

RR: But yeah, it was really a beautiful message and as I said, back to her I immediately thought I had to frame that reply and we went to a framing store right away that afternoon and it will be a little frame that will go with the bubble bee picture

KB: *That message, inspired by Bucky Fuller, read:*

"Seemingly inadvertently, the honeybee goes about his business of gathering honey. At ninety degrees to his body and his flight path, his legs gather pollen from one flower and 'accidentally' take this pollen to the next flowers, resulting in cross pollination.

The outcome of this seemingly inadvertent accident is that the bee contributes enormously to life on earth. We get pollination, the growth of crops, the sustaining of life for humans and animals.

Richard, thank you for being our honeybee and pollination of wisdom. Cheryl."

RR: Well, I think so and in so many ways, we're talking about the hope, but the hope is really that current trainers and new trainers and future trainers will continue to be sort of the bumble bee pollinator of something new and a focus on living

KB: I think it's perfect

RR: And it fits too with the idea of the being in sync is the importance of the relationship and right now so often we try and turn the notion of a relationship into a thing, rather than the dynamic of the relationship itself and so that is really another big hope on my part that people will become more comfortable with the idea that the tension, inner connection between people that really is going to open the spaces for new opportunities, recovery from things like trauma and growth through the experience of suicide if that's part of somebody's life experience, it's really the importance of treating the relationship as part of the stretch and fold of living well

KB: Thank you so much for joining us, Richard since this is our last episode in this series together I really just wanted to thank you so much for your time and insights and on behalf of the trainers that are listening as well, the hope that you inspire, so thank you very much, I wish we could keep talking for another six episodes, maybe on the 40th Anniversary we'll meet up again and have some more chats but thank you so much for everything that you've shared across this series

(30:06)

RR: Well it's been such a pleasure and welcome opportunity to spend these sessions with you and to share the journey and the story of LivingWorks from the time that we first thought about it, what we might be able to do back in the early 1980's and all the way through all of the trainers that have been part of that journey, those that have retired, those that are no longer with us, those that are veterans and continue to be active trainers and those who will become part of that training journey in the future, it's been such a pleasure to spend some time with you

Outro

Well, that's a wrap on a very special series of A World Where LivingWorks with co-founder Richard Ramsay.

I hope all of you listening, especially staff, trainers, and fans of LivingWorks programs around the world have enjoyed hearing some of Richard's stories to learn more about the evolution of LivingWorks and the training methodologies used in so many countries, workplaces and communities today.

Thanks for listening. See you again soon for the next season of A World Where LivingWorks!

If you've enjoyed this episode, we'd love you to subscribe on the usual channels, write a 5-star review and, most importantly, share it with your family, friends, and colleagues on social media tagging LivingWorks.

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A reminder that if this episode has brought up tough emotions for you talk to a trusted family member, friend, or local support service about how you are feeling. Visit livingworks.net and click on Find Safety for international crisis services we are there to help you.