

Behind the Smile Transcribed Audio

Peleti Oli

“Talofa lava, my name is Peleti Oli and I am a voice of hope, manuia. I was born in my dad’s village, and my mum’s family had already moved over to Hastings, New Zealand. And my dad worked in the plantation, in the taro plantation.

We moved here to New Zealand when I was about three years old. And we all moved to Hastings to work in the orchards. But would have uncles and aunties, all the time, moving in and living with us, majority of them coming straight from Samoa. They were mainly the ones who were abusing us, sexually, but we couldn’t speak about it because you’d be disowned for bringing shame upon your family name.

Mental health was never- we’d never even heard of that term growing up. I became aware of that when my brother took his own life. Pride is- is priority in the Samoan culture and they say pride is poison. And pride is what killed my brother because to have a brother take his own life than to turn around and ask one of his nine siblings, ‘Hey, can I just have a chat? I’m feeling sad.’ I felt like I failed him as an older brother. I felt like I didn’t do my part, the way I was taught by my parents, to be, you know, a protector and, you know, my brother’s keeper.

I took it upon myself to do as much as I can and reach out to as many youths who might be going through similar, and I wanted to do that through the barbershop. And the barbershop became my vehicle to be able to create a space for youth to open up and feel like they were seen, they were heard, and they were safe, for anyone the way I wish I could have been there for my brothers.

So I named the shop ‘Somehz Touch.’ I named the barbershop in honour of my brother. I was determined to give my brother his name back, give my brother his story back, but also continue to keep his legacy alive through the barbershop and give him his mana back. It just broke my heart when I heard people that I respected and looked up to in the church saying that my brother was a coward because he ‘gave up.’ So each haircut that I was going to do, that was my goal, was to give my brother his life back.

I just try and normalise that every single day. That, you know, men don’t have to be these hard, mask-wearing, you know, bravado-showing, you know, males. You don’t have to act like you’ve got it figured out, you just be yourself and do the best that you can with what you have. And that should be good.

I want the mat to be removed, the fala, or the carpet, you know, because for too long, people have been sweeping these dark secrets under the rug. I want to remove the fala, and what I

VOICES *of hope*

would like to see is more, you know, more therapy. Therapy is not talked about in our Samoan culture enough. For me, so, yeah, I see a therapist every two weeks. So I just try to raise that awareness as much as I possibly can, and normalise it because if I can do it, you can do it.

And I know there's so many of our younger generations who still haven't had the opportunity to acknowledge their, you know, their trauma and- and get help. Like our brothers who are locked up in jail, the gang members who are hiding behind the patch, hiding behind the mask. It's gotten so deep, they can't see the light. So, from me to- to them, you're worth it. You're worth it. You are valued and it's worth, you know, turning your life around for that peace, to find that peace within yourself. True love is finding peace within yourself."