

## **Behind the Smile Transcribed Audio**

### **Vira Paky**

*“Kia ora. My name is Vira, and I am a voice of hope. I'm from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa. I came to New Zealand in 2002 with my mother and my sister as asylum seekers. Coming to New Zealand was a really big, big change.*

*I always like to say that my migration story is mainly my mother's. I came only as a 2 year old, and I was really just decided to be on my very first plane ride and to- to experience all these new things, but she was making a very conscious decision to leave behind a world that was very familiar to her. In my culture, there really isn't a way to talk about mental health and well-being in the way there is in English. There isn't a word to describe it that doesn't really end up meaning 'crazy' or that just doesn't have those negative connotations.*

*There's no positive way to describe your mental health. And that brings taboo and stigma around the issue because to identify yourself with your mental health, leads you to being a bit of an outsider or to be ostracized. So that's another reason why I find it so profoundly remarkable that my mother was able to do so on her own with all of that type of cultural conditioning around it.*

*When I think of the refugee and migrant mental health space. There is so much work to be done. I know that, you know, dealing with community stigma and taboo is one pillar of the big issue, but there's a lot to do with having really culturally competent resources available. So that way health practitioners know how to handle patients who I come from refugee and migrant backgrounds, as well as supporting a really diverse clinical workforce. So that way, you're getting people with lived experience who understand what it's like to try to describe something that you may not even have a language for. And finding the ways to do that that really does keep people's mana, that uplifts their dignity, as well as making sure that their identity and their cultural perspective stays intact.*

*Unbeknownst to me, I was kind of dealing with the symptoms of a chronic illness from around 15, 16 years old, and it caused a lot of different emotional distress. So not only was it irritability and anger, but a lot of just depressive episodes and really, really dark dark spaces for me.*

*For the longest time, I didn't really have words to describe my experience, and it led me to believe all sorts of horrible things about myself, that I was lazy, that I didn't really know what was going on, that I was out of control, and I went to a doctor. I kind of just laid out the facts.*

# VOICES *of hope*

*All of these emotions that I was having, the struggles that I was going through not being able to concentrate the anger, the irritability, the depression. And she said, 'Oh, this sounds like you have premenstrual dysphoria.' Three months after that, I was a different person.*

*Having the words to not only name what I was going through, but the support of someone who is able to say, 'This is how we manage it. This is how we look after ourselves. It's not you.' It was so powerful. I was at the point where I was thinking that I was just not doing enough.*

*I don't force myself or push myself to work when my body is saying no, when my mind is saying no. I will sleep, I will rest, and I will try again when I wake up.*

*In going through that process, learning how to take care of myself correctly, I was able to see the ways in which just taking that time, giving myself that grace to understand what I was going through was just essential. It gave me back control.*

*Writing is definitely one of my safe havens. It was also an indication of when I needed the most support. I remember in my teens, I was writing pretty, pretty strongly for a long time, but I was able to tell the moments where I needed a lot more support. Like, looking back on it now, kind of having a really strong support system, having a diagnosis, I see a young woman who needed a lot, a lot of help.*

*Writing, specifically writing poetry, has been, you know, an anchor for me to kind of understand where I am in my life.*

*For me, my number 1 piece of advice is to talk. It- it just has to be to talk to people because people have a lot more to offer than you think.*

*When I was in darker spaces, I couldn't believe that anyone would be able to empathise with me, that people wouldn't be able to help me, and I was completely wrong. So, I always say that you have to speak up, as well as to find community and connection. Because for the most part, you won't be the only person feeling this way. And other people are just waiting for someone else to start the conversation, so that way they can open up as well.*

*I think for things to get better, it requires a lot of different people to be vulnerable and be open. Parents being open with their children, children feeling open with their siblings, with their friends, making those incremental steps, so that way we can at least have small conversations about mental health. You can be scared out of your mind and still tell people you need help. That is a perfectly fine place to start talking.*



*How you feel is how you feel, and that is valid. Your experience matters. It is important that you are here, and how you feel right now is not how you're gonna feel forever."*