

Module 3: Pacific Engagement Strategies
Understanding Pacific Millennials
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Part One

Introduction: Coming up we're going to talk Pacific millennials, who they are and how to engage with them.

Josiah Tualamali'i is the Chair of the Pacific Youth and Transformation Council or PYLAT in Christchurch. In 2016 he won the Prime Minister's Pacific Youth Award and travelled to Geneva to attend the World Health Organisation Conference. In November 2017 he also won the SunPix Pacific Emerging Leadership Award.

He is studying political science and history at the University of Canterbury and is on the board of Pacific mental health NGO, Le Va. Like a lot of New Zealand born Pacific youth, Josiah spent many years learning about his Pacific and Samoan identity. But it wasn't easy when the family name Tualamali'i was changed to 'Brown' to help his dad fit in.

Josiah: My dad moved to New Zealand from Samoa when he was 17 in the eighties. I guess when my dad had met my mum who was born in Australia, they had no idea that they would have four children who would be Samoan with a little bit of Australian and Kiwi. And that's sort of what started off my interest in my Samoan heritage. When I was young, I sort of had four parents. My mum and dad and my nanna and granddad on my mum's side.

Mum and Dad didn't have a lot of time to talk about some of the differences they had culturally before I was born and so there was a lot of learning as they went. When Dad had come to New Zealand, his name had been changed from Potogi Amosa Tualamali'i to James Brown by his rugby team and my grandma was trying to help him fit in. So there was this kind of.....him trying to find himself and him trying to connect in New Zealand, which he found really hard. In my upbringing, Dad and I didn't really talk a lot about what it was to be Samoan or what it was to be a Pacific person because I guess he was trying to just do and be, which was very different from him back home.

When I was 14, I got to be a part of the Pacific Youth Parliament that was run by the Ministry of Pacific Peoples in Christchurch. It was kind of a first time where I could see other Pacific young people who had an upbringing a little bit like mine, where we didn't necessarily speak the language that our heritage was, or we weren't really sure like, what does our identity even mean. Being afakasi (half-caste) is that, is that even normal? Well we saw that it definitely was and that we were all feeling similar things and so from there, we just kept meeting and we weren't sure what we wanted to do.

The Christchurch earthquakes happened and we saw that we needed to increase Pacific youth leadership in our region. Just so that there was gonna be a voice in helping redesign our city and our wider area. The trust of our community to support us to do that was very unique and that's something that I'd like to unpack as we keep talking. Basically with their support we founded ourselves a charity and we've existed for a couple of years now.

We continue to drive a legacy of that youth parliament that founded us. We're now under the New Zealand Pacific Youth Parliament. We had a hundred Pacific young people in April this year, fifteen from around the country and eighty-five from Christchurch discussing the things that matter to them most and also, we run other activities for Pacific young people to participate in democracy and share their voice.

Iulia: I just want to take a step back, the renaming of your father to James Brown. That's pretty sad that that happened. How much of an influence did his experiences have on the pathways that you've taken?

Josiah: Huge. When I was younger, I didn't understand it. I knew Dad was called James and he was also called Amosa. I didn't really know why and I didn't question it. It wasn't until I started to get a bit older that I realised that there were two groups of people. People who would call Dad 'James' because they didn't know that he had another name or had never asked or there are a couple of people in my life who called Dad 'James' because they refused to use his Samoan first name, Potogi or Amosa.

When I realised that after being a part of that first PYLAT event I could just see injustice everywhere and it made me feel so uncomfortable. I actually managed to be able to connect with my Dad way better seeing what he'd been through and seeing how he couldn't be all of himself. That he wasn't accepted if he was and that meant for me that I didn't want to see any other person, any Pacific young person have to feel that ever again. So that's why I'm passionate about what I am. Our country can be place of belongingness, disconnection doesn't need to exist, but we need to be aware of what the difference is and not just culturally but in terms of gender, sexuality and privilege. We've all got something we can put in to make it better for someone else.

Iulia: So, did you grow up with the name Brown or Tualamali'i?

Josiah: I grew up with the legal last name Tuala. Tualamali'i is the last name that our family had, our grandfather was a matai, a Samoan chief for our village, Lepa in Upolu in Samoa. For some reason, it was never properly formalised and so when grandma did have the records, she changed it for him, but by the time I was old enough to be recorded, they were able to switch it for me. And to this day, we don't have Tualamali'i yet legally written on our New Zealand documents. It is on our Samoan documents, but we just had to pay three or four hundred dollars to do that, our whole family.

Iulia: Because names are really important aren't they and you got to keep your Samoan identity even though your father went through that?

Josiah: Yeah absolutely, so even though Tualamali'i, my legal last name at the moment is Tuala, I always use Tualamali'i because that is the last name of our family, and for reasons of easiness to others that was what was chosen to do. I guess for those who might not be aware in Samoa and many of the Pacific islands, names are connected to pieces of land, names are connected to places of being. The connectedness of the name to the land is in some ways, like for Māori your tūrangawaewae, your place to call your own and reflecting of where you've come from, so important to hold onto and to continue to carry the legacy of those that have been before, like my grandfather.

Iulia: What have you seen with Pacific youth being disconnected from their cultures and who they are in their identity?

Josiah: Most of the literature and most of just the experiences we hear in the Pacific youth space are that belongingness is the number one issue. To Pacific young people born in the islands and who moved to New Zealand, even who in the past and to this day, often they don't feel like New Zealand accepts them as they are. We don't make it easy for them to be all of themselves. They have to assimilate to fit in. For Pacific young people born in New Zealand, often, they're considered or they feel considered by people here to be from somewhere else.

Being asked, "Oh when are going to go home next?" or "Do you miss home?", when their home in their minds is here because they've been born here or they've grown up here. You know even those smalls things making them not feel like that they have a place to stand in. Tusiata Avia, a Pacific poet, often talks about, some days I feel Samoan some days I feel Palagi, some days I feel like I'm nowhere because I don't feel accepted in either world. That's the challenge that Pacific youth are often walking, this tight-rope between the two cultures, where they may not feel accepted by either one.

For me it wasn't until I was fourteen where I could say, I was interested and wanted to know more about the culture because I felt like going to a mono-ethnic school, mono-ethnic church. Pacific is in such a minority down here in the South Island. I just didn't understand or I felt like it wasn't something I should be interested in. I guess that's the opportunity when we come to work with Pacific young people being careful to not assume things, ask questions, let them tell their stories and just be there to listen.

Iulia: It is important, as you say not to assume things about our young people. Pacific is a label that gets put on us all, but within that we have to break it down, so can you do that for our listeners?

Josiah: Yeah of course. So, in the Pacific, Pacific peoples does not exist, there's no such thing. In Tonga, you're Tongan, in Niue, you're Niuean, in Fiji, you're Fijian. Purely for ease of government or business work, we have this label in New Zealand, 'Pacific peoples'. But in New Zealand, Pacific is not homogenous. We each have different communities, have different needs and different approaches. For Tongans, there's often matriarchy, very strong women who are very important role models in the family and key leaders. And so sometimes,

knowing different things like that it could be that, you know when working with a Pacific young person, it's actually not appropriate or it's easier if you work with a particular part of the family to best support that young one.

Those kinds of nuances can be really important in whether you can connect or not. Particularly down here, sometimes a group of young people will be together and might go to an event or something. And someone from the front might notice one of them and recognise one of the ethnicities like maybe they say, "Oh awesome we've got some Samoan young people here" when really the others just felt like they've just been grouped in with the rest for ease, when they're starting to feel a bit cut up because their identity's not being recognised as well.

Iulia: What other differences are there between New Zealand born and Pacific born, those who speak their languages and those who don't, those who live in the city or in the rural area?

Josiah: There's often this talk, I've seen this video on Youtube called the 'Si'i's and the Sa'i's', so the South Auckland islanders and the South Island islanders. There's this Samoan guy who sees this real distinction, so he made this humorous video to show that, in the South Island there's less opportunity for you to connect with others. Eighty plus percent of the Pacific community live up in the North Island and so can be very isolating trying to find someone like you. I mean in my school, in my year group, in my final year of school in 2013, there were only three Pacific young people in my year group.

Whereas you know in some of the schools in the North Island, there'll be a handful more and there were only maybe ten families. So it's really tight knit and that's actually one of the distinctions that I hear people talk about in the South Island in working with Pacific youth. Often it's quite trans-Pacific so even though there is real emphasis on each of the young people's identity, so whether they be Niuean or Samoan, island born or New Zealand born, it's very pan-Pacific when working with them. Samoans, Tongans, Niueans, they're very together.

Whereas in the North Island, some communities it's more focused on Samoan to Samoan or Tongan to Tongan. Some of the other differences we've heard from Pacific young people born in New Zealand and those versus born overseas, like the appreciation of the health care and other services that we have here. We had this discussion on poverty a couple of months ago and the young people born here said not enough is being done. The government hasn't worked hard enough on trying to meet the needs of those who don't have what they need. Where as those in the islands are saying how grateful they are for the opportunity to be here, how grateful they are for the access to that operation which is absolutely life changing and not offered in the Pacific.

One other thing would be around voice. In New Zealand there's often more abilities for a young person to share what matters to them and it's growing in New Zealand for Pacific young people to be able to say what matters to them or what they're thinking, and that not be of any disrespect to matua or other important elders. If anything it's about our Pacific community going forward and

thriving, but having as many people doing the work that we need over just particular individuals.

Iulia: And what about the role or the place of LGBTQI Pacific youth?

Josiah: There's some research being done at the moment and lots of discussion about this. In different Pacific islands like in Samoa we have fa'afafine, in Tonga we have fakaleiti, so we've got two different understandings of gender that Samoa and Tonga contextualise where there's a third gender. So there's male, females and then fa'afafine, and that's quite accepted and universally pretty much supported in the islands. Whereas homosexuality is something which in Samoa isn't currently legal and many of the other Pacific countries as well.

So there's a tension and that comes through because of the strong religious background that many of our families have and homosexuality conflicting with their faith or their beliefs. For a young Pacific person who is queer or trans or questioning their sexuality, it can be very tough. We're hearing more and more, particularly for those who are wanting to come out or those who are of a different religion to their parents that it can almost just feel too much or not possible to talk to their parents. So easier to just hide it or just keep their parents outside that part of their life. Some of the stuff they talked about, the most important ways to protect Pacific youth or our community through difficult times, is connecting with family.

This kind of connects with some other stuff we've been hearing. After the earthquakes in Christchurch, Pacific young people were the most connected out of every ethnic group than anyone else. They have the most connections to family, to the community but less able to talk about what was really going on for them. Across these different areas we're starting to see a picture where Pacific young people don't always feel like they can talk about what's going on. It's part of why there is significant mental health issues for Pacific young people in New Zealand.