

Jess Collins

A young wahine toa

Like too many of the children of Aotearoa, I grew up in survival mode. Just trying to make it through each day.

By the age of 12 I had taken drugs, smoked cigarettes and drunk, a lot. I started running away from home just get away. My circumstances, choices and the abuse that I had endured was leading me down a destructive path.

At age 13, just before I was chosen for Project K, the police got involved and I took my step-mother to court, this would have been one of the lowest and hardest times in my life. I was very depressed, suicidal and had been self-harming for over 3 years at this point. Because of the court processes I was sent back to live with my mother.

The first time I tried to commit suicide I was 13 and I stayed home from school one day and swallowed a bottle of pills. When someone asked me years later if that was a cry for help I said no, you see I didn't tell anyone and when my mother returned home I just lay in bed in wait for it to be all over.

At that time in my life, I did not believe there was any help that was going to be given to me, there was nobody to cry to. Project K honestly has saved my life and it gave me that help, resilience and support when I needed it most.

Something happened the moment I even got chosen for Project K- it was like I felt actually important, that out of all the students in my school, I got picked. That someone saw potential in me that I didn't even see in myself.

Before Project K my goals were to make it to my 18th birthday and not be barefoot and pregnant. I moved out of "home" and went on the youth benefit at 15 and stayed in school and passed year 13.

Every single aspect of project gave me the ability to do this, I remember not being too scared about it because I knew I wasn't truly alone, that Dan and my mentor and the other supports were there and they would help me.

This programme isn't just a year long- It's a lifetime, it has changed my life. I am now 19, studying at Massey University and enjoying life. I honestly with my whole heart don't think I would be alive today if it wasn't for Project K. Project K saved me.



Since taking part in Project K, Jess has gone on to do amazing mahi within her community and around the country. She is passionate about supporting Māori mental health and preventing suicide within her community.

As a young person, she experienced adversity and challenging conditions. She was selected for Project K in 2012 and fully embraced the opportunity to grow and learn new skills.

In 2018, she created and led the Mana Whenua Hikoi where she walked 668km over 21 days to honour the 668 people who died by suicide in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2017.

Through this initiative, Jess raised \$2,500 for Lifeline and heightened awareness of a mana whenua approach to suicide prevention.

She continues to contribute many hours as a volunteer in her community, alongside undertaking full-time study and part-time work.

This year she received the Prime Minister's Exemplar Award at this years New Zealand Youth Awards. This award recognises a young person who has overcome adversity to succeed both personally and in their contributions to their community.

Receiving this award, Jess was celebrated for her outstanding character and resilience, and as an inspiration to her peers; Jess is passionate about supporting Māori mental health and preventing suicide within her community. As a young person, she experienced adversity and challenging conditions. She was selected for Project K in 2012 and fully embraced the opportunity to grow and learn new skills.

We want every child to know: What they have inside is greater than any obstacle.