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Intro

Welcome to *A World Where LivingWorks*, stories of science and survival bringing together our heads and our hearts to build a suicide safer world, talking openly about suicide is so important but we also recognize that listening to this series may bring up some tough emotions, if so please 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.

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, pronouns she and her.

First of all I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the beautiful lands wherever you're listening, I'm coming to you from Australia and my guest today is in the United States. I'd also like to acknowledge everyone out there who has been impacted by suicide, the pain it brings to our lives and the desire to make positive change for all of us to live well.

Today I am speaking with Sam Brinton. Sam is Vice-President of advocacy and government affairs at the Trevor Project. The Trevor Project is the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ) young people. The Trevor Project offers a suite of 24/7 crisis intervention and suicide prevention programs including Trevor Lifeline, Trevor Text, Trevor Chat, as well as the worlds largest Safe Space social networking site for LGBTQ's Trevor Space. Trevor also operates an education program with resources for youth serving adults and organizations and advocacy department providing for pro LGBTQ legislation and against anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policy positions and a research team to discover the most effective means to help LGBTQ people in crisis and end suicide. Sam works to ensure the Trevor Project is advancing policies and positions that help LGBTQ youth in crisis. They lead Trevor's work on Federal, State and local level and in the executive legislative and judicial branches with a focus on both LGBTQ issues as well as the mental health and suicide prevention space. A very warm welcome to you Sam.

Sam Brinton, guest:

Thank you so much for having me it's always great to have a conversation on a topic so near and dear to my heart.

KB

Fantastic, well I'm really glad that you're joining us today. Now many of our listeners will be familiar with the Trevor Project in particular their confidential counselling service but what we'd love to learn a little bit more today is a bit more about the policy work that you do with them and what structural and societal shifts need to happen in order to better the wellbeing of these diverse communities who are massively overrepresented when it comes to suicide. So perhaps Sam if you could tell us a little bit more about the advocacy work that you've done with the Trevor Project in the past but also what do you think we really need to focus on today.

SB

It's a great question because I think so many of us forget that policy is prevention, we assume intervention is the end all be all and intervention is so important, it's why LivingWorks does great work of making sure that in our suicide prevention training we have these interventions ready to go, so I really appreciate you kind of bringing

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into the room, that yes if you're in crisis we're always there to, you know, talk on the phone, to those millennials who can't talk on the phone, text and chat right, there's always a opportunity to intervene but in order to actually end LGBTQ youth suicide, we need to do policy, we need to do preventative policy.

So I will cover three of the big areas that I have kind of dedicated my life to working on and we have so many others, let's be very clear, I think when talking about a population that is literally up for debate consistently when it comes to politics that weighs on LGBTQ youth and specifically weighs on their mental health, how do you believe that you should keep going when a Senator is saying that you shouldn't exist, like these are hard questions, let's start with the most relevant to my life. As Mary Poppins would say a very good place to start. The work that I do centres around ending conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is a dangerous discredited practice all across the globe, so although most of my youth policy are US centric, conversion therapy is sadly a scourge the entire globe are facing including there in Australia, my friends, so conversion therapy is a dangerous and discredited idea that you can change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity as I said, the reason we work in policies is to stop mental health professionals from practicing conversion therapy is because we know, according to our research that those who have gone through conversion therapy are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide as those who have not and if you are an LGBTQ person you're already four to five times as likely to attempt suicide as a straight person so you could imagine, that's eight to ten times of likely to attempt suicide if you've gone through conversion therapy than a straight peer, that is a public health crisis if I've ever heard of one.

What are we doing in conversion therapy, well legislatively I'm proud to say it's the fastest movement in LGBTQ equality in history, faster than marriage, faster than non-discrimination, we have passed now, 20 laws in states across the country United States and then I think we are now at three to four different nations that are already moving forward to make sure that conversion therapy ends up where it belongs in the dust bin of history. I'm a survivor of conversion therapy, that is why I do what I do is because I know that this is the best way to save as many lives as possible because it clearly helps people understand that suicide is preventable if we stop assuming that a person can just fix everything for themselves if there is just this one click that I can do and all will be well, this is the idea of flipping a switch and turning me straight would make my life better, that's not reality and that's not going to be helpful because when we fail as every major medical organisation has said we will fail then it creates this place of pain for us of our failure.

A second area that I love that we work on is in schools, again speaking from a US perspective and knowing it's international as well, one third of schools in the United States don't even mention the word suicide, it's terrifyingly bad because that means teachers are googling suicide when they hear these words, not knowing what to do, and let's be clear it's not a fault of the teacher who is already, especially in the age of COVID solving so many of the world's problems but the problem is there is no process. I like to connect it to 911, if I see a car accident, I know in the United States to call 911, that's what I do, if I have skills in first aid maybe I can apply them, if I have superhuman strength maybe I could pull a person out of a burning car but regardless of those skills, I know who to call, that's the process, most schools don't even have that level and we need to work together to make sure that every school and every student is in a place where they can access this kind of care, why doesn't LGBTQ organization care so much about it, because again if LGBTQ's are four to five times more likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers, we understand that where you are spending a third of your day matters, we have got to make sure you are protected and supported as you are where you are.

Last but not least in terms of our advocacy and I know we have a lot of other things to get to but it's really, these are things that excite me, the last part is about data, data collection, it is, I just answered a question today a young person in Kansas who there's this new poll coming out to their local school or city and they don't know how to ask about these question but if you don't ask about sexual orientation or gender identity or let's say past suicidal thoughts or about all these different areas you are kind of creating a lack of information which could

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lead to a lack of policy, which could lead to really bad outcomes and so this is why we think data collection is so important. I wish there were more nations and more states around the country that were really diving into investigating every single suicide death, I know that is post intervention, that is actually, you know, the aftereffects but the important part for me is, if we're not asking questions, we're not getting answers and if we're not getting answers we're not going to be able to prevent the next suicide, that is our goals, all of our goals.

They are some of the big advocacy things that I have found have been really effective at lowering rates of suicide or finding ways to address suicide in my community, the numbers are kind of awesome, I love that I get to work for an organisation that measures it's years in lives saved and I can say that to come back to where it all began just in the past couple of years, we have protected more than 10,000 LGBTQ youth from ever experiencing the harms of conversion therapy that I did, which if you think about that, that is 10,000 young people will have half the likely rate of suicide because of the work we are doing in advocacy, it's really exciting that you're having this conversation, it's not just about intervention, it's also about policy as prevention.

(9:53)

KB

Wow, that's an amazing result and I think people need to hear that conversion therapy is still happening around the world but it's fantastic that you've made such strides and those numbers speak for themselves and not numbers, young people, who you said have a better chance at living well.

And what can the everyday person do to support these advocacy goals, how can they find out more about the work that you've been doing and how can they take action in their community?

SB

Absolutely, so it's easy if you're in the US, so if you're in the United States a really great way is to just to text the word Trevor T R E V O R to the number 40649, I'll make sure to repeat that one more time which is T R E V O R to the number 40649 and I get that, that sounds like what am I going to do on my phone, in actuality you can do a lot on your phone, we need to remember that the power of the people is a great a mighty power, what can we do, we can ask our local school boards do you have a suicide prevention policy, we can ask our local city council why in the world do we allow conversion therapy in our city limits, we could make sure that when we have elections for our coroner, we are asking the coroner are you going to ask about suicide experiences, are you going to ask demographic data that we all need in order to prevent future deaths, these are things that people can do, no matter where you are, I think that's really important for us to remember that, I live in Washington DC which is a city going through a lot of turmoil right now but I am not in the only place of power, every single school district has the power to save lives, every single city has the power to save lives and you live in them, right, you live in those places, so the ability to ask the right questions is important. The first one again, let's make sure that we have conversion therapy not allowed in our state, if you want to learn more about ending conversion therapy you can go to the [trevorproject.org/50B50S](https://www.trevorproject.org/50B50S), as in 50 Bills 50 States, because we are working to end conversion therapy in every state again, sorry for the US centric but that is where we are and then if you're wanting to do school district work again ask your local teacher or we're even partnering right now with the PTA, the Parent Teacher Association to say, every parent should be asking the question, how are you protecting my young person from suicide and how are we working together to bring that into reality, I think that we all have a role to play, it's really important for us to remember that social media can be a great educational tool, you can have great movie nights, I'll recommend a good movie cause I get to walk the red carpet at the Oscar's with this space, which was Boy Erased an amazing film about a survivor of conversion therapy from the south who just like me experienced these harms and is trying to get their story out there to make sure that people realize what just happened. We made Nicole Kidman cry, that isn't a great way to you know to celebrate your work I think, I don't know what else would be so...

KB

I was just going to say a great US Australian combination there, I remember going to see it with my step-mother and the conversations afterwards were chats that we have never actually had before so I hope that people all around the world have a similar experience and have opened up that conversation.

SB

Absolutely, absolutely.

KB

Thank you Sam, that's an amazing three advocacy priorities we can all focus on, we can all play our part. In terms of playing our part, what advice can you offer to workplaces and communities when it comes to creating safe spaces for LGBTIQ communities to talk openly about suicide and it's prevention.

SB

It's so important that we remember that everyone has a role to play and as you just said, it's important to bring that back into the workplace, that this is not just a policy question this is a, you know, everyday around the water cooler question. In terms of LGBTIQ identity, let's talk about that first, and then we'll talk a little bit about suicide, the first part is, our research found that LGBTIQ youth reported having at least one affirming space, had 35% reduced odds at reporting a suicide attempt in the last year, whether that's a workplace, a school place, a home place, like all of these different opportunities are places where they can say, I am not alone, and that there is one place that I can at least go to feel safe as I am, that's why we are trying to actively create these places, whether it be a school that has an inclusive policy, whether it's a workplace that says, you know what, we're going to respect each other's pronouns, whether that be a church that says, we're going to stop with the debate around these kind of opportunities and instead we're going to talk about what we all do agree on, we want people to live happy productive lives, these are all things we can agree on and let's lean into the agreement right. I really have to highlight because you asked about workplace and communities the power of pronouns, when you're talking about me, as I think I've mentioned to you my friend is I use the pronouns they and them, so if you were describing me you could either say, Sam had this great conversation about conversion therapy or they had a great conversation about conversion therapy, some people say, oh it's so hard to remember these pronouns, I understand it, I'm not going to negate the struggle, struggle is real friends, and as a person who understands that I think it's important that I have the quote, unquote, luxury of living in a world where I am not going to be immediately mental health harmed if a person doesn't respect my pronouns, why because I have a ton of these affirming spaces but notice I say that LGBTIQ youth are looking for one affirming space, they just need one place, that's because they don't have access to the same resources that I do, I hope that people will use they and them as my pronouns but I also want people to remember that there is like a life being saved by doing this, when we talk about how hard it is to remember a pronoun we're forgetting that those people who have their pronouns respected are half as likely to attempt suicide as those who have not, so it is not a foreign concept, this is a suicide prevention issue when we respect each other's pronouns and I get it, it will be tough, what I like to remind everyone is we do this all the time when we see a baby. When we see a baby in a stroller walking by, we're like oh my gosh they're so cute, we don't assume the baby's gender and when corrected we would say he is so cute and the mother is actually it's a girl because they don't have any hair...

KB

That is so true, that is so true.

SB

Right this response is easy, oh silly me and we go on but why do we doubt this when a person who can openly

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speak tells you their truth, why are we doubting it, so this is something that in the workplace and communities, it's the first easy step, let's just ask each other.

KB

You say that some people find it difficult but it is one thing that every single human being can put into place and it takes a simple point of care and it makes such a big difference, it would be such a small thing to the person trying to actually use the right pronoun but a massive thing for the receiver of that.

SB

Exactly, exactly and I love that you just mentioned it because it's something that we can all do, I think the biggest problem has been people know to ask me my pronouns because I am androgynous so there are times that I will wear more feminine typical attire or more masculine typical attire, so people know oh maybe I should ask but if we make it something for everyone we all have a pronoun right, this is the important part, you don't need to assume based on a stereotype, you can just say, hi my name is Sam Brinton, I use they and them as my pronouns and I am really excited to be here in this meeting today, that is like world changing for a person to not be the only one to say their pronouns, so yeah I love that you brought it into something that we can all do.

KB

That's a great idea and I should actually immediately amend my introduction to the podcast, so that I am stating my pronouns.

SB

Love that, oh my god, see we even supported changing a podcast today.

KB

A change already, see how easy it is people, see how easy it is.

SB

Love it!

KB

What else can people do in their workplaces and communities to create those safe environments because it really concerns me and so many other listeners where just even imagining where there is one young person who can't find that one safe environment and that one place where they can ask for help or be safe as they are, what can we do, what can every person do in their workplace and community to make it a little safer.

SB

Right, so we talked about pronouns as a really great first step, let's talk about the second which is I love the idea of what is called safe spaces right, like the idea of creating a safe space. Now we need to be clear just because you think you created, this is probably a little bit on the nose but I like to give your podcast a little spice, so here you go, just because you think you've created a safe space does not mean it is a safe space, why because you don't get to control the environment, just because you say to a person that I can trust with this information the person standing next to us at the water cooler may not be that level of person and I may now have put myself in danger or put myself in a place of ridicule by people who may not have the same understanding so know that the information shared with you is personal unless the person has said that I share with other people and I want you to be also able to share it with other people right, this is a big space.

What is the second thing we can do, we can create safe spaces by educating ourselves, I am so, again another on the nose moment, I am so tired of teaching what LGBTQ stands for, I support you in your power to Google

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my friends, like we can all do this, we all have pronouns, I hope we all have access to Google, it doesn't mean that you're an expert, this is the thing about safe spaces is that we have created the idea that I am not an expert in all of the terminology I can not be a helper, we know that difference when it comes to first aid, I am not a doctor but I can give CPR to get a person ready and like as a bridge to the paramedics as they arrive, I would never not do CPR just because I'm not a doctor right, that's not the level of what I need at that moment, so what you need in a moment of crisis or even pre-crisis, like just be a good workplace, is saying, you know what, when you hear a bad joke it's always hard to call our friends out, you know you can't see me because we're in a podcast, I like wave my hand like, I also have a problem with it but it signals to others hey I'm trying, I'm not doing this for the glory clearly because I am probably going to take a social hit for it but I want you to know I'm trying to make this world a little bit better in this kind of way, and it also doesn't need to be attacking it can also be, I really don't find that joke as funny because what if we have a LGBTQ person in the workplace here with us, we don't all wear rainbows, this is the easy thing for us to remember about safe spaces, is that you may create it and never know how many people you're impacting because we are not always out, in fact more than half of LGBTQ youths are not out to a single adult in their school, most people will not come out because it is dangerous, we die. The public health crisis if you're trans person, like myself, the public health crisis and the likelihood you will die before age 35 is extremely high and so we are looking for places where we can potentially be open but do not expect that safe spaces means that all of a sudden it's a pride parade in your office every day, what it may be is you've created a place where they can say, in a moment of crisis I know maybe I can go and talk to them and that is a lifesaver in and of itself.

KB

That is a great suggestion and I really appreciate that insight about the poster on the door doesn't make it a safe space, with all the best intentions. It's interesting some of the LivingWorks trainers we were talking about unintended consequences of conversation and I've now really become conscious of that and they were saying to me, you should actually enter a room which sounds a bit depressing but it is true, is enter a room assuming that someone in there is currently vulnerable to suicide, so that you're thinking about what you're saying all the time and offering help seeking and how you respond to a joke is a great way of explaining that as well and saying there maybe someone, an LGBTQ person in this room and that may have a negative impact that joke, so why don't we walk into every room assuming there is an LGBTQ person and it doesn't matter who they are, whether they identify themselves or not someone is there and someone is listening.

SB

That is excellent, that is excellent connection to the work. I watch my language when I'm talking about death because of the work that you and I do each and every day right.

KB

Yeah remember who is in the seat in the plane next to you.

SB

Yes, exactly, yes, yes exactly on the planes everywhere. It's really important to remember if I do that same level of caution of my words, recognizing the power of my words and others can do the same, when it comes to a community, that is already at greater risk because of cultural rejection, I need to make it very clear, excessively clear that LGBTQ people are not predisposed to suicide, it is a variety of cultural risk factors that generally lead to family rejection and all these other spaces that can increase the risk of suicide, I just think it's really important we're talking about workplace and communities, let's not treat me like I am broken porcelain doll, no I am strong resilient individual who just because of like culture voting on my rights on a every single day basis am predisposed to have higher risks that does not predestine me to suicidal ideation, so I love the idea of let's like have the caution for the words when we're talking about suicide, let's have caution for the words when we're talking about a community, love that, great connection there, I love that!

(24:38)

KB

Fantastic. Now look people listening it's an upsetting situation, it's devastating situation, it's the numbers that you talk about, you know, half of young people not out to their teachers and people around them in a space where you, you said before they're spending a third of their time, their lives there in that environment, so I guess with this sort of information I'd love to hear what you're most hopeful about in suicide prevention in these communities, what keeps you going every day in an environment that has a lot of challenges and a lot of stigma and cultural pressure and the word advocacy that you're doing as well. I'd love to hear from you what you think on a wider scale are you most hopeful about and personally how do you take care of yourself in this environment.

SB

That's my favourite question, I am in the field actually with some of your co-workers probably known as a little bit too bubbly, I am energetic and happy and it's not fake, it's coming from places of my hope is built entirely on the idea that I can actually solve this problem, this is not unsolvable because suicide is preventable, it doesn't say that I will save everyone from suicide, I'm not a saviour, I'm not a religious cult leader in that kind of space, I am a person of faith, it doesn't make me a saviour right and I also get to know that with the right amount of education with the right amount of conversation, not just education but true back and forth conversation that I can help save lives, that is so powerful when you think of other issues, I'm going to bring in the idea of like cancer right, I can't cure cancer yet, I have not been able to do that and there will be people who may die of cancer that I will never be able to, no matter how hard I try, help them live a longer healthier more productive life but I can do that with suicide and so the statistic that gives me hope and I love numbers right, it is one supportive adult can reduce the risk of a suicide attempt among LGBTQ young people by more than 40%, so we talk about that one affirming place, you don't even need a whole place, you need one person.

KB

Just one person, wow!

SB

One person can reduce that suicidal ideation by half, think of how many other world problems would be obliterated if they were as directly connected to issues like we are with suicide, I am not going to lie it is hard, I am a survivor of conversion therapy and when a Bill in advocacy is voted down and not passed that end the harm of conversion therapy it is a devastating moment because my body and brain say, how do you not see this, where in the world do you think this could be ok and the hope that returns is, in states like Utah that are extremely conservative we're still passing laws ending conversion therapy, in states like Kentucky we have more and more folks join our coalition each and every day, it is so powerful to know that I am not alone in this help although even though I might be, I was going to say cute and bubbly, that's probably inappropriate but although I may be the you know bubbly personality who shows up to a conference ready to save lives, I'm not alone in that right, I like to think of the Avengers symbol, kind of line, the hope is that I'm not the only supportive adult that will reduce suicide among LGBTQ youth, I am one of many and that is pretty powerful especially in the days of politics when everything is up for debate and everything is us v them, suicide prevention in general has not been that. I will give you a final story on this because it is probably one of my proudest moments in my entire life.

So this year when there were barely 100 laws passed by congress, US context again, the lowest amount of legislation ever passed by a congress because we are the most divided we have ever been, I'm really proud to say that the law I have worked really hard on for years called the National Suicide Hotline Designation Act passed unanimously in both houses of congress and was signed by the President, it is the first unanimous vote

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of a Bill that mentions LGBTQ people in history, in history across the globe, that, that gives me hope, that gives me the idea of no matter who you are, where you are, what you believe, you understand that saving lives knows no difference, knows no division, knows no separation, it is all about working together, that's when you know you're not working alone right, if I can in the most divided congress, in the most polarized country, literally months before an insurrection right, pass a law that says every young person, every person in the United States deserves a simple easy to access suicide prevention and suicide intervention system then I know it's going to be okay. I know that it's probably bad to end with politics again but I bring us back to that first question of, policy is prevention and the power of policy to single handily in one Bill unanimously unite a country to say everyone deserves the resources to live, everyone deserves the opportunity to fight back on suicide, that is just a remarkable way to build hope, I will probably be riding that moment for the rest of my life, my children will dial 988 and know that their parent fought tooth and nail to pass this law which made them less likely to die by suicide that is going to be a legacy of hope that I will always, always cherish.

(31:10)

KB

Oh my goodness I'm nearly crying here, I just know how much you and others have fought and fought and fought for this and even though people groan at the thought of politics and constantly beating your head against a brick wall in a lot of avenues, suicide touches everyone's lives and the fact that it was unanimously put through is amazing and as you say that number and that access will change and save lives over many years to come so I think that is a perfect culmination of our conversation Sam because I think anyone listening to this who might be tired, you know exhausted when I first dialed in today you said you were exhausted and that not an uncommon feeling at the moment and particularly people working in suicide prevention, I think that is an amazing story of hope and action.

SB

Yes.

KB

And something that makes a real tangible difference to people's lives, amazing.

SB

Thank you friend, it's definitely something that makes you smile, it was my anniversary yesterday and an anniversary in COVID is kind of weird, like another dinner inside, but...

KB

And another special occasion dampened...

SB

And my husband and I looked at each other and recapped a year of love and a year of how we had cared for each other and to know that he was there and hugged me when this passed saying that like, the love that I have for suicide prevention and I mean that in a true, true form is because I am able to be loved and I have found a support system that has given me that opportunity so I'm really grateful for the conversation because again it's another moment through LivingWorks and the Trevor Project, you know collaborating and working together to save lives, we always make the line of love wins, but love wins is not just about LGBTQ equality, it's about loving a person so much to say, I will sit here and help you dial the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, I will as a teacher use the pronouns you have given me so that way we can do this together and as you know, in a workplace I will make sure that I create the opportunity for a person to feel that they don't have to hide something so intrinsic and so, so important to their lives, so I'm really grateful for the conversation and thank you for making it easy and accessible and a place where we can actually have, you know talk about the hard

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things, I think you're right, you said it perfectly there at the end, which is politics is not the most exciting conversation for people, it's very exciting, but maybe it's not very enjoyable, and this has been an opportunity for us to talk about policy as a powerful tool in the suicide prevention toolbox.

KB

Thank you very much it makes it easy talking to you to, I think sometimes it can be a little inaccessible when people mention words like policy and legislation and so I really appreciate the work that you and the Trevor Project have done to make it more easily understood but most importantly the space where people can actually join you in taking action, so it's been such a pleasure talking to you today Sam, I really appreciate your time and insights and I think I'm not alone in this conversation is encouraging me to think more about what I can do and what others can do in their workplaces, communities, any place that they are to support LGBTQ young people and each other generally, thank you Sam.

(34:41)

SB

Thank you friend, already looking forward to the next conversation.

KB

That's so good thank you.

Ending

If you've enjoyed this episode, we'd love you to subscribe on the usual channels, write a five star review and most importantly share it with your family, friends and colleagues on social media, tagging LivingWorks. This podcast is brought to you by Living Works 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.

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