Breakfast with Minster Ah Kit

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 **Sarah Skopellos**
I would like to start with the all important acknowledgement. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of which we meet the Larrakia people. I would like to pay my respects to elders, past, present and emerging, as well as pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Thank you for your continued culture community, land and sea.

So like I mentioned my name is Sarah, I'm not going to go on for too long. I just like to spend a few minutes talking about my leadership journey. I'm a disability advocate and I'm on a number of disability related committees, including the Minister's Disability Advisory Committee. I'm also active in the community and I'd like to speak a little bit about my journey starting with employment. If I'm a leader, it's because I have a purpose. Because I have been lucky. I've been lucky with employment.
My first job was washing dishes at a cafe. Just out of interest, hands up here if your first job was a casual job at McDonald's or retail outlet or something after school?
Yeah. So that that's quite a few of us that's pretty standard. Anyway, I'll fast forward a few years, a traineeship and various other things, and I got a job with the Chief Minister's office when I was twenty-one. About a year into my employment, I was diagnosed with a disease that left me with various disabilities. But again, I was lucky.

By the time my disabilities became apparent, I was already in the system. People knew me. My supervisors and colleagues were supportive.
We had open communication and we worked it out together. In this environment,

my disabilities were not a barrier and everyone benefited.
I worked for the NTPS for twenty years and I received all the flow on benefits from being employed such as financial security, inclusion and participation and a chance to develop my skills and capabilities.

I actually enjoyed my twenty years in the public service, so yeah, but at this point I would just like to stop and ask you to consider a few questions.

If I was visibly disabled at the time, what I have gotten the after school job?

If I was visibly disabled at the job interview for the Chief Minister's Office, would I have been selected over the other candidates?
And if I was Aboriginal and disabled, what would my chances be?

Unconscious biases, affinity biases, fear and low expectations probably would have gotten in the way.
I probably wouldn't be the person I am in front of you and that is what drives me.
If I'm a leader, it's because I feel a responsibility and a purpose.
A responsibility to use the advantages that I have been given to break down barriers and advocate for people who have not had the same opportunities.
That is why I'm here today.
Of course, I couldn't refuse an offer from the Minister and I wanted to be with you wonderful women.
But it was an opportunity to bring home a small inclusion message, especially because I know many of you in the room are leaders, are often in a position where you can help break down some of these barriers. So thank you so much for listening to me.
I'll wrap it up and I'd like to introduce the honourable Ngaire Ah Kit, MLA to the stage.

**Minister Ngaree Ah Kit**

Thank you very much for saying yes.
I think it's really important to note I did dob Sarah in and I said from the start that I'm really looking for diversity and true inclusion across all of the work that I do.
So I have a couple of ministerial advisory councils. I have one for disabilities and I have one for young people. The youth round table.

I've got the Senior Territorians Council and I've also got Multicultural Affairs and so making sure that the representation on those groups are, I guess they need to be fair representative right across the NT, so I've been focused on having some really great conversations and my job as a minister who doesn't have a direct lived experience and most of those areas is to listen and to learn.

And so I think you'll agree that I made a really great decision by appointing Sarah as the vice chair.
She does an incredible job with Caleb the chairperson.
They provide leadership, mentorship, and she's just the wealth of knowledge and I continue to learn and thank you very much for being here and facilitating today.
Really appreciate it, Sarah.

And so thank you for the opportunity again to be here.
It's a little bit nerve wracking to talk about yourself to a room full of people, so probably not something that a politician would say publicly, but that's OK.

So I have the tendency to kind of just ramble on when I get really excited.

I don’t know about you. My arms start flailing, the body language goes for it, and I'm a chronic asthmatic who's steroid dependent every day.
So I have a tendency to talk fast because I kind of want to hit really important information in every breath.

So please forgive me if you see me talking and I start to go like that.
I'll start recognising that's an indication to slow down.
I'm alright.
Let's jump straight into it.
Just got some notes because I kind of wanted to make it not too formal, but otherwise I'll forget my train of thought.

So a little bit about me. I'm Ngaire Ah Kit.
I'm a forty-two, almost forty-three year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman of Chinese descent. I'm territory born and bred and I'm very, very proud of my identity, my culture and my history. It was the way I was raised by two beautiful Aboriginal, mainly Aboriginal parents.

A bit about, I guess my upbringing. I'm a Katherine girl, born and bred. I was taken in by the Jawoyn people when I was about three years of age and that is my main identity.
It is an identity that I am very, very proud of and I actually got to spend time on country yesterday and in Katherine because I'm one of the Aboriginal people who, and there's a lot of us around, I didn't grow up on country that belonged to me.
I have Larrakia family and blood relatives, but I'm not Larrakia.
This is not my country to speak for, so all of the time that I'm doing my work, whether it's as a politician, as a public servant before this job, as a volunteer, heading up NAIDOC week in the community, has always been on the knowledge it with the knowledge that I'm an Aboriginal person operating and living on other people's land.
And I've got to do that respectfully, because that's innate in our culture.
So I've always loved working closely with the custodians and making sure that I learned from them and that might work as effective.

Just by the nature of things.

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And you know, when we were leaving Darwin for our sorry Darwin for Katherine, my Dad was a thirty-two year old Chief Executive officer of the Northern Land Council.

That was his role back then was director, Cause Land Council was a lot smaller and it was pretty much about the advocacy and making sure that systems were set up to work properly.
Those were the days of storming the halls of Canberra Parliament House to make sure that politicians and the federal scene listen to what our people needed.
And so my Dad's always worked really hard.
He was very bright, you know.
He was the type of kid that dropped out of grade six.
That was how things were back in the day, especially when he was raised in such a big family.
And so, you know, I got my grounding and my start from two very beautiful people.
So as an example, my Mum is one of eleven children and she's Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander and my Dad's one of twenty-two I think at last count, so we didn't all grow up in the same household. Ghee that would have been interesting.
So with my Dad, he's got two siblings with the same parents.
And then he's got his Mum had two that she brought to the relationship.
So two half sisters, which is what we say other people referred to black fellas, because if they’re your sister they’re your sister.
We don't do the half, the quarter or anything like that.
And so it just makes it easier.
That's why we got big families.
And so my Dad has two sisters with the same blood.

Then my grandmother brought two to the relationship with my grandfather and she had another 10 to a man down at Port Augusta way.
So I've got a lot of family in South Australia and then by the time my Dad, my grandfather and grandmother split up, she took her two girls and my grandfather was such a fierce, protective Aboriginal man, he said.
Daisy, you're not taking my kids.

So he took my Dad, my Auntie Irene, and my Auntie Jane and started trekking up from Alice Springs to Darwin and somewhere along the way, he caught up with a Tennant Creek woman called Stella Tennant, and she brought four to the package.

So they were a ready-made family of five. Aboriginal Brady Bunch. It happens all the time. And then after that they had six Ah Kits together.

So when you go through and you counted up, I think at last count I've got twenty-two aunties and uncles.
I happen to be like one of nine Ngaree’s. We've I've only ever met one, but we're all on the same family history tree, which is pretty cool.
And so when we say we've got big families, we really do.
And that's just those related by blood.
And so we've got, you know, much interconnections, which is a lovely way of living, because basically we still have that sentiment that we try to believe it takes the community and the family to raise that one child.
I don't have children myself, but all of my cousin’s kids are basically my kids and so I get to be not the horrible aunt.
But you know, I get to be the aunt who says I don't have to be your friend.
But you know, I can be your enemy, but let's just get on the same page.
My job is to ensure that you guys are raised the same way with same values.
And they either love me or they hate me.
It's really interesting and that's my role in the in the family, you know.
I'll always say to my cousins.
If the teenager start getting off the train to threaten them that they have to cover and live with Aunty Ngaree with only marry and they don't like it.
My 5 year old nephew got threatened with that the other day and he's a good boy now.
So I'm really nice as an auntie, but it's different when you come and live with the woman who's got no kids, right?
I'm just going to make sure that you get treated the way you do, and by the time you learn, you're going to learn how to cook and clean and budget and be a really good, respectful kid.
And that's the upbringing that I need to make sure it gets passed on.
So as a child growing up, I grew up in a household with two brothers, an older one and a younger one.
And of course, there's an 8 year difference between me and my younger brother, so I was a tomboy because I only had my older brother Jonathan to play with.
And so rugby league was my first passion. And back in the days where that change, you know, twenty to thirty years ago I played rugby right up until the Katherine District Rugby League committee decided that young girls shouldn’t play anymore. I was eleven. I was brand new back in the community I was born in. I had been in Darwin for seven years and I was devastated. They took my love and my passion away. And I hated that. And so I was really pleased to see that people like Jordan. When I moved back, were able to continue on.
And now we actually have women's teams, which is fantastic, but back then, that was just the kind of thing where you dump one passion for another.

And as a young person, adjusting to a completely different life, it was really tough.
And so when I moved back to Katherine, I was ten years old.
I had spent my growing up years at Malak Primary School and then Mum and Dad decided to move and my entire world I thought was ending.
I had all of my friends, my social life.
I had fun.
All my family were up here.
All my Ah Kits are up here.
Why are we going to Katherine?
Number one, don’t diss your birth town.

Number 2 our Jawoyn family are down there and number 3.
The Jawoyn people need us to go down and help, it was pan gold mining at that stage, at Mount Todd as well as Nitmuluk.
So my Dad has always had this calling to help our people to a greater level, even if that meant a bit of family sacrifice.
So we've packed up, we moved down there and ended up having a really great time and learning about that community spirit, where everybody looked after everyone and everyone knows everyone's business and Katherine, and they still do.

And it was a lovely sentiment where if you got into crisis, the entire community was basically there to have you back.
And so as I got older, we ended up leaving Katherine in 1997, in November, about 8 weeks before the 1998 Katherine Flood, one in 100 year flood.
So I got dragged down kicking and screaming.
By that stage I was working in retail, I worked six days a week.
I had six shifts a week.
I was doing grade 11.
I had good grades.
I played sport five days a week.
I used to look a lot different.
I was fit and healthy.
I walked everywhere.
I didn't even get my license until the week before I left, but I loved that financial independence and I loved that I was a Woolworths check out chick.
A job I'm sure I'd love to go back to one day and I worked at my CD shop because I love music.
I never made or saved any money, so sorry I made money, but I never saved it.
But I tell you what, I was really well dressed.
I had a great wardrobe and my CD collection was off the chain, but that was fun.
Growing up, you know, my parents never spoke about well you're earning money, which was a lot, so you know you have to pay rent.
It was always about please don't ask for pocket money.
You've got plenty.
So I learned that way,

But when I came to Darwin my parents said we don't want you to work.
Want you to focus on grade 12 and getting good grades.
My family's here and I have spent a lot of time growing up here, especially at down the football, watching the buffs through my teenage years but leaving my friends in Katherine for grade 12 was a big adjustment and I'm a pretty resilient person.
But I wasn't coping really well.
I settled back in the Sanderson Middle School.
The teachers were great.
I had my cousins there and it was smoother than a lot of people, you know, probably would have adjusted to, but then I missed my sport.
I missed my work.
I missed my financial independence and again I had another dip in my mental health.
I continued to go through my dips every couple of years and that's when I thought, OK, what do I need to do to find, you know, my happiness again and I threw myself into my schoolwork.
When graduated I was always fixated as a young person.
I want to be a lawyer and then it was kind of just something that I just I really wanted to do because I wanted to help those who needed help.
I wanted to make sure people who couldn't have a voice for whatever reason had one through me and I think where I kind of mis-imagined is I was focusing on one pathway when I should have been thinking I'm a natural helper.

How do I have a position where I can naturally help people every day? And so politics believe it or not, is pretty much why I got into the path that I did.
I went to uni for about 18 months.
I hated it.
I was so depressed I got myself into a lot of mental health strife.
You can hear the seriousness in my voice because it sticks with me and it's made me who I am today.
I ended up turning down a cadetship with the NT government and I went to work with transport and works and again I found my happiness.
Financial freedom and stability.
I found my smile again.
A lot of people around me were really concerned and they should have been, but I was able to kind of just change in an instant and say to my parents, I know that you'd love to go around and tell everyone that your daughters a lawyer, it's not going to happen.

Not right now.
And so they said.
Bub we just want you to be happy and we want you to be healthy and safe.
And that was good.

I have just got the most amazing parents.

So I started as an AO1 receptionist in the Department of Transport and Works on the second floor of Energy House and I loved it.
I worked my way up, I worked really hard.
I'm not one to just tick boxes, I always try to go above and beyond, so I learned. I got my mentors in the workplace.
I made some really great friends.
I was nineteen.
I was the youngest person, probably on that floor, and one of the youngest in the building.
People didn't realise.
They thought I was older.
I always tried to, I guess, act older, but it was really interesting because my Dad was an opposition member at that stage.
And then all of a sudden, we go to an election and then I jumped on the lift with the CEO on Monday and my Dad's not the opposition spokesperson anymore, he's my minister.
Well, I wasn't ready for that.
And then all of a sudden, it's like everybody knew my name.
And then that was not as much fun as it might sound.
People started acting like they were scared of me.
Like if they said, something in the workplace.
My Dad might fire them.
That's not helpful.
That’s not how it works.
There's an independence of government, but that's OK, you know, it was just a strange situation to be in for me.
I couldn't get a job for three and a half years.
I couldn't score permanency and I'd earned it.
I really did, so I blame my Dad.
I got to the stage where I said to my Mum and I broke down in tears.
I said that I want to change my name by deed poll.
Can I change it?
Then they said and they said if it makes you happy.
Well, Dad was an overly excited, but he said I
I don't think it's me, but hey, if that's what you think will make you happy going forward.
Change your name. Distance yourself from me because the last thing I'm going to do is upset my daughter because I'm now a minister in the government.
I didn't.
I threatened I got the paperwork, but I didn't do it and I just thought, no, that's not the character I want to be.
I don't want to be the blame person.
You just keep going and I taught myself that whenever one door closes, one opens.
That wasn't where I was supposed to be with that role.
Maybe the next one will be.
I ended up working for this incredible Aboriginal woman who was the Executive director of
Indigenous housing. I think it was called back then. Aunty Trish Angus and she's always been a very close family friend and a mentor.
And I've spoken to Aunty Trish about, you know, Aunty Trish I want to get into a leadership role and all of this stuff.
And she said, well, you’ve got to work hard for it.
You’ve got to plan.
It's not going to happen by being at discovery on Thursday nights.
That was my life as a, you know, early 20 year old.
And so I went, you know, point taken, lock it in the brain.
And then Aunty Trish comes out one year.
She says here Bub, you've been talking about this and she slams, not slams, but she throws down a copy of the Youth Roundtable application that says, here this is where you can start.
But it's not discovery.
This is it.
So you said you've been talking about it.
Do something about it.
So I did and my thinking was well, cake and eat it too.
If I apply and I'm not good enough and that's how I would talk to myself and I'm not good enough, then at least they’ll know I’m interested.
And maybe if I go again next year, they'll say, wow, she's back.
She's 24.
She's going to miss out, you know, with future opportunities.
We'll just go to her.
So when I get a phone call from youth person, we'd love to have you in there.
I was a 23 year old Aboriginal woman working in government.
I was playing sport.
I was like, well, socially connected and I was willing to give up my commitments on the outside to be a part of this program and that is what changed everything for me.
So I'm always very grateful to Aunty Trish for listening to my ambitions and dreams.
And then kind of giving me the swift kick up the backside that I needed to say, stop talking about it, start doing it and it was always a lot more gentler than I explained, but she was very proud when I went home and told my Mum and Dad I'd applied and then got in, they was super excited and I learned a lot through that journey.
I was teamed up with a 17 year old at that stage and so two people who were completely polar opposites who were able to bring and calm each other down, you know, bring ourselves, bring the best out, which is really interesting and I love that experience.
And so I became a bit of a an advocate, and I went around and told everybody about my experience and how that was the start for me.
After I finished that journey, I ended up accessing a whole bunch of information.
It's like a door open to a new world that I wasn't privy to before and I loved it. So I told everybody and I ended up following through on a national Indigenous Youth leadership group straight after.
I was working for NT government.
I ended up doing the Indigenous Women's Leadership Development Program where I got to complete a diploma of Frontline Management and learn how to manage and look after staff properly.
So all of those things I challenged myself, I had really great support to all along the way and it helped me build my passion of where I wanted to be.
So then I started reassessing mid-20s.
I'm going through this leadership things.
What do I want to do and then all of a sudden bam, 3 o’clock in the morning when get a phone call, your little brothers passed away, and shit just hits the and you can't breathe, man.
You can't cope and you, you can't even think about tomorrow.
And so you go through a trauma and then you have to kind of reassess, pick yourself up for weeks on the couch is pretty much all I had in my leave bank.
And then you go forward and you go life has changed.
I've changed this to human being.
What do I do?
Do I succumb and become a victim or am I going to be the survivor I was raised to be?
You know which path I took, and this was very difficult.
I was mid 20s, big family and a lot of publicity around all of that stuff, but it was about I ended up joining like I was on the Danilla Dilba Aboriginal Medical Service Board, and my passion was from access dental services to suicide and mental health awareness to trying to communicate and educate our community about identifying people who are struggling, who cannot or will not or are not wired to ask for help even though they desperately need it to be out of risk and to stay safe.
And so I met with a group of local volunteers and community members who are interested in the same pathway.
Danila Dilba organised the meeting over at Malak.
It was fantastic and 11 and a half years ago we started the Darwin Region Indigenous Suicide Prevention Network.

We called it a network because we didn't want it to be a talk fest.
We wanted to walk out of the meeting and be able to make a difference straight away, and that was each and everybody's commitment in that room.
Let's find out as much as we can about what services and supports are available.
And then every single one of us has the duty to go and tell everybody we know about them.
Hopefully the people in the NT will hear the same information multiple times until it sinks in and then we can look at working with others to ensure that an Aboriginal voice was heard in that space about our lived experience.
So it ended up leading me down that path where I looked after for a number of years as a concerted group.

We got to a stage where no suicide prevention project would come to Darwin without us first being asked for a planning meeting.
How do we do it culturally appropriately?
How do we make sure that this is going to be impactful for Aboriginal people? And that's where the importance of working with the Larrakia people, and you know, really rose to prominence with this was not our land.
This was Larrakia land and we had to do things properly. From the get go with that and everything else.
I've always done, always looked at that succession planning.
I wasn't going to be able to head up DRISPN, or be involved forever.
How do I make sure that the importance of that outlives my time and my availability there?

My uncle still looks after it now, and there's still a steady group of volunteers, which is really great, but I ended up delving into suicide prevention wholeheartedly.

I put my hand up for a number of national opportunities and we're sitting on the lived experience network ward with suicide prevention Australia when I nominated to join politics And I’d gotten to the stage where it was really great to be able to have some input and some impact, but I just felt that the changes that needed to be made needed to be made in places like Parliament House Darwin.
They needed to be understood from up the top, right from the grassroots level, not the other way around.
So always came in with that background of being a grassroots community person who won't change no matter what job I'm in.

I still talk the same today as I did when I played netball when I was 16.
I'm just a little bit more blunt sometimes. But always looking at doing things differently because lives matter.

Every single life matters, and it breaks my heart when I see systems that just aren't working as well as we all know that they should be.
So that's why I got into politics. My reason for joining politics was also because I watched my Dad for 10 years and I got to see how much difference you can make in that place and how important it was to ensure that we have a diverse representation in that building.

It shouldn't be 25 people who all look the same, who are all the same age, who all have the same background.
That doesn't do any territory justice.
You know, I'm one of six Aboriginal people in a parliament of 25, but we are still far from fair and equitable.
We need multicultural representation.
We need older people to serve in our Parliament.
We need more people with diverse experiences, and so, even though that may do me out of a job, I continue to spout that because I believe it and it's the right thing to do because politics and government and life and projects are much bigger than anyone individual, including me.

And so I took on that commitment to try and help people save as many lives as they could by having open and frank conversations like we are today. By ensuring that our systems are reviewed and that people with lived experience are actually sought after and asked about how do we make things better.
And I continue to do that on a daily basis now.

I guess some of the things I wanted to talk about also were, I guess, some of the biggest challenges that I've come to because I'm very, I don't even know how long I've got and I'll just keep talking.
But I did want to focus on some of the challenges, so.
I lost my little brother when he was, you know, three months shy of his 18th birthday. And I was mid 20s and my Mum always called me the glue that held the family together and a lot of us women, we naturally gravitate and that's the role we take on because we are the emotional beings and we are those people.
That's the role we play in our families.
And so I was very different.
I was about 25.
I was still pretty young, still needed my lived experience and then I knew that everything would change and everybody needed me.

And that's when I first started putting all of myself here on the backburner.
I didn't play sport anymore.
I wasn't doing all the social things. I was checking in on my family and making sure everyone around me was OK, because that's what I do.
I'm a natural helper.
It's a habit that I formed that I'm still trying to work on every single day because I still don't look after myself as well as I should.
I barely sleep.
I am so wired for this job.
I'm always looking at how I can spend that extra hour thinking about projects to benefit someone tomorrow when I really need to be sleeping and refilling my glass for tomorrow.
So again, I've got a, you know, always got my plans to work on those things.
When I was younger as well, I was 14 years old, and that was the first loss that I really grappled with at that stage.
I lost my younger sister when I was fourteen.
She fell pregnant quite early, I think at about 17, and she had a baby just over 18th birthday and she was diagnosed with leukemia.
And as a teenager, attending Katherine in high school, I don't know about that.

I don't know about cancer.
I didn't know about blood disorders or any of that, so I did a bit of homework and, you know, she ended up spending the next three years in and out of hospital with treatments and chemo’s and lived a really tough life.
But my sister never complained once.
She was a mom, she was the oldest sister.
She was a daughter.
She was best friend.
She never complained once.
I know she went through hell and back and she left us with a beautiful almost 3 year old and my niece is in her 30s today and she's got two beautiful little girls of her own and she is a resilient and just beautiful young woman that we could not be more prouder of.
And that's just you have another, you know, life hits you in the face with something really terrible.

And you have that prostrated point of view.
I can succumb to become a victim, or I can go down this other pathway, be a survivor and not let this break me.

How do I use this to kind of view the fuel the fire in my belly to be the person that I've always wanted to be the person I was raised and supported to be and then you know you kind of go through it and you work on all of that stuff.
And I'm only 11 years older than my niece, and so I wasn't in a position to step up as a Mum.
And so we've got this really beautiful special relationship where I basically am a Mum now that I'm older, but I was only 11 when she was born.
And so we're very, very close and I'm very close with her daughters, which is really great.
And sometimes I've had to reflect and say when I'm feeling sad and sorry for myself, I reflect on.
I had someone.
I still have a Mum.
I didn't lose my Dad until I was a full grown adult.
Like I'm always trying to make sure that I'm not doing myself my own pity party for too long, because that's not OK.
Someone somewhere has always gone through something much more dire than I, and I can always find at least one example of someone who's been through that and is doing far better and is far happier than I am, and I think that's the kind of person I want to be.

Glass half full.
Every single day.
But what's got me through a lot of that is all of the special people I have my life, who continue to recognise the signs of when I'm not coping.
I don't ask for help.

I'm 43 soon I still don't ask for help.
I keep thinking every year I'm going to get closer to verbalising and asking for help.
I feel like over the last weekend I'm doing a little bit better, but I'm still not there yet and so my closest friends and family know that and they know that it's not me deliberately trying to be strong and do everything on my own.
I'm just not wired that way and I keep trying to learn lessons of how I could be more open and transparent.
I ended up working in the Mental Health Directorate as Indigenous Suicide Prevention Project Officer and I loved it.
But then I needed to get out of that space because my life was all about death.
I was waking up volunteering on suicide prevention. I was catching the bus to work so I could get an hours’ worth of minutes and meetings and emails done on the bus ride in at home.
My lunch breaks are all about eating lunch in the community room with my laptop in front of me so that I could type up letters and do a grants and organise Suicide Prevention Day walks and stuff, and I loved it.
I loved it for a long time.
And then I realised my life was all about death.
I was comforting people.
I would get phone calls to say can you come down I’m worried about my son. Then it was the connections and I thought oh I'd just.
It really started wearing away with me and it wasn't until one of the clinicians that I worked with pulled me aside for a coffee over at the old Ducks Nuts and said make me worried about you.
We haven't seen you smile, crack a smile and two and a half weeks.
We're all trained.
We know what the signs are, and we know you very well.
We haven't heard your laughter.
We haven't seen you smile and we're really, really worried.
And I looked at him and I went, do you know what?
I didn't even realise that until you told me. I was just doing what I could.
But I was close to burnout.
I was doing too much for everyone else and I wasn't doing enough for me.
And as a woman, as an Aboriginal woman, as a daughter, I wasn’t really raced to be selfish, you say no to others and you put yourself first.
That's something that I'm still grappling with, and so I thought about it and I'd always wanted to get into politics because I felt like my passion, my needs and those of those around me that I was working and supporting.
Weren’t exactly getting understood from up there, no one was flying the flag saying we have too many suicides, let's do something about it.
And I thought, well again crossroad, I could whinge about it and do nothing or I can try to make a difference in a different manner.
So I said to my group the Darwin Region Indigenous Suicide Prevention Network, those that I've met through the sector and said we need to make changes from top down, not just the bottom up, we need to kick in that floor so that our ideas get to get all the way to the top.

Now there's two options.
Youse mob can do it, or I can do it. And they said you. And I went oh well I think I'm just about ready, but that means that I leave a big gap in the work that I've been doing.
So we started gearing up for succession planning and that gave me the ability to say it's OK to walk away from this because I'm still committed, but it's time for others to take over.

By me being there and doing a lot of the heavy lifting, it didn't give them the opportunity to step up, to learn to shine and to grow.
And that was not OK.
And so we worked through it.
Very, umm, uh softly and but it was a real, you know, changes and so after I nominated and I got in that was my commitment from the get go. How do I use the role that I have to talk to people about the importance of saving people from their own actions and behaviours sometimes? Recognising when people are struggling and more importantly having systems in place where they don't have to come and knock on your door or their Mum doesn't have to drag their son into ask for help.
We can go out, knock on their door, and if we get invited and we consider around their table, have a cup of tea and just say we're here.
When you're ready, we're here to listen.
We're here to understand and we're here to help.
And that was the whole basis and the drive behind DRISPN as well.
It was our people looking after our mob because for Aboriginal people that’s
what we knew.
We can't talk for any other race or any other community, because that wasn't ours.
And so we wanted to have that space to be able to do our business our way and that was DRISPN’s motto that we worked really hard or was get involved, give hope, save a life, you know, very succinct message that tells a clear story, that there is a role for everyone to play in that.
And so, you know, politics is not an easy job.
And it's not always fun.
I still have my bouts of mental health issues.
I have really great people on standby.
I have people who are looking after me when I think they don't know what I'm up to or what I look like when I'm sitting unshowered watching TV in the early hours of Sunday morning on Netflix.
It's like my family had this innate sense. They know when I'm not coping.

What I tend to do when I start feeling my dips I go back, I readjust my plan.
I've always got to have my goal.
If I don't have a purpose every day I run into trouble.
How do I know at the end of the day that I've done something valuable to help somebody and I won't know that unless I've got a checklist and a bunch of people who were supporting me to get that done as well.
I learnt it off my Dad.
I do a lot of gratefulness stuff.
He used to wake up and look in the mirror every morning and tell himself, John, you know better than anyone else.
You're definitely know worse off.
You will be a better person today than you were yesterday.
You will be humble and you will be proud and you will help.
So I said to my Dad.

He achieved a great deal and he never got a big head or, we never let him, he tried but we just cut him down but in a lovely way.

Don't do things for kudos boards or any of that, please.
You know, that was just the way that we went through our life.
We would evaluate our life to see have we genuinely been able to support or help another person? The way that I was also raised is about you need to teach a person to fish rather than give them a fish.
Set them up for life, not just for a meal.
And so with that and I'm always looking at the language that I use, the way that I communicate, taking up opportunities like this so people can hear a little bit about my story and maybe and when I make decisions or I say things that you don't agree with, you kind of look to understand a little bit behind what I'm saying.
I'm actually not a nasty or mean person.
I got into help people save lives every single day, but it's always as a collective and there's always going to be people who disagree.

I'm always just looking for that mutual respect.
And so in my role I work really, really hard to have an open door policy with everybody.
Anybody can come in and I'll tell you what COVID was really great example.

COVID scared the living daylights out of me as a chronic asthmatic, I updated my will.
I was prepared with my asthma plan and I had to get my family prepared that I could end up in hospital and I wouldn’t make it home, you know, and I started panicking and that really shook me.
And then again, I look at the opportunity to reassess and make sure I'm on the right track so that when my day comes, I will be very happy and very comfortable that I've done all that I can.
And that was really hard to have conversations with people who were also scared about COVID.
And I completely respect all beliefs and ideals.
But you know, I sat there and people wanted to be with me.
Who were they?
They weren’t anti vaxxers.
They've been vaccinated for everything.
They said Ngaree, I'm not an antivaxxer.
I have vaccinations but I don't believe in this one for a whole variety of reasons and I'd like to tell you why.
Come on in.
Let's have a yarn and I tell you what, it blew my mind and I learned so much.
You've got to make sure that in whatever role you do, you listen to everybody's points of view, not just those who are aligned with you.
That does not make you a good person or thorough and makes you a little bit ignorant and it gives it robs you of education and an opportunity to learn more and grow as a person because other people with conflicting ideas and backgrounds they don't have the opportunity to have your time.
So that was that was a really great way.
So we just said from the get go, come on in the way that it will work is you go first and then I'm going to go and then at the end we'll do a little bit of back and forward, but it's all respectful.
We'll do it over a cup of tea.
We can do it at the coffee shop.
I'm not here to convince you that I'm right, and please don't think that you're going to be able to convince me that you’re right, but we need to have a respectful conversation and people really appreciated that.
My biggest focuses since becoming a Minister, I've always looked at different challenges and so after being a backbencher for the first term, I got myself into a position as an acting minister under Natasha Fyles, Dale Wakefield and then Selena Uibo.
You go to learn about what it would take to be a minister, how to make sure that you have great policies in place, the right people supporting you, and how to make sure that the decisions you make up there are actually what the community needs down here and that will have sustainable and ongoing benefit.
And so I was always preparing with my plan for the next step up.
I'm not one to wait around for opportunities.
If I'm ready, I go seeking them and that's what's gotten me to where I am.
And so I was ready for a change.
And I lost my Dad 7 and half weeks before the election, and that was just devastating.

I couldn't get off the couch. After four weeks I was still miserable.
My Dad was pretty much my world and I couldn't get off the couch and I if I didn't get off the couch, I wasn't going to get enough votes to continue with another term to help in some of the amazing things that we as a community, not just in my electorate, but outside of suicide prevention, had started on and I really panicked.
What do I do?
And that's where other people around me really came to my aid.
And so making sure that you've got really strong people who are very supportive, making sure that you take the time out to look after yourself because you cannot pour from an empty glass. Being human and taking the opportunity to give people insights like I am today.
And you know, I can get chastised and criticised.
I can get everything in my role, but as long as I'm true to me and as long as I'm a daughter my Mum and Dad are proud of a sister, my siblings are proud of.
And auntie that my family's proud of.
You're not going to win every fight.
You're not going to win over every single person in your office, in your job, in the world.
You're not supposed to. But if you keep working hard, and if you have your plan and you look after yourself and you surround yourself with good people who will pick you up when you need it, you can basically do anything that you want to do.
So I want to say thank you again for the opportunity.
It's really lovely.
I see so many women and men invested at those online to want to hear and learn.
The best thing that I can leave you with is women continue to support women.
This is a fantastic network, one that I've had the opportunity to engage with us as the incoming Minister for women's policy and very proud to be here and happy to take questions.

**Sarah Skopellos**

So thank you so much, Minister.
I'm I know, speaking for myself.
There was so many takeaways in your speech and I really appreciated the honesty and how what the ticket was.
Thank you so much for sharing.

So we are going to open it up for questions.
Does anybody have any questions and I'm legally blind.

So Anne is going to help identify people if you have your hand up.

**Anne Walters**

And anyone online as well, yes.

**Bronwyn**

It happened between 2010 and about 2013, working with Legal Aid and then the DPP and I was really interested in your comment about when you were younger, you remember Katherine as having no crime. And having worked in those jobs I've never seen Katherine with no crime.
But when you have a comment about the factors bout what was different in that, you could drive a car and not lock it to Woolworths.

**Minister Ngaree Ah Kit**

Yeah.
So as young people growing up in Katherine at the high school that day, it's this.
It was a community centre, but we have one we had one high school down there, so all the kids went together.
I think we had 620 students in one year that I was there.
We all played sports together.
There was no judgment.
It was a world where equality was just a given.
It was like morning your blood at birth at Katherine Hospital.
And so with that, we used to have, as an example, I would have a birthday party.
My Dad would say to me you're turning 16 you could probably have a birthday party or what?
And I went alright.
And then he goes.
Well are you going to do an open house or an invite?
And I went open house and he goes right.
Well, it's Barunga festival.
Mum and I are going to stay down there.
You've got the house till 3:00 PM tomorrow.
So we didn't have Facebook, we had to go out and ride around on our bikes and tell our crew at Woolworths and at Red Rooster at Barnacle Bills.
Yeah, go down to the river and tell all the kids come around.
Yeah, there was a little bit of alcohol.
There was always fun.
There was more, more people who were just engaging in conversations and good music at that stage.
But the police would rock up.

Hey Ngaree. How are you?
Now you got them sitting on our front fence.
The kids were like riding around then with no helmets and they're like, you know, helmets are always better.
It was the community sentiment and so growing up, and I won't say the family's name, but every time I heard about an incident involving youth crime, it was always one family and like us mob, all of the other kids would go these mob.
What's wrong with them?
They’ve got everything.
Both parents work.
Those kids are just naughty.

They're still naughty today, unfortunately, but back then we did, we've accidentally left cars with keys in the ignition, and then you come back out after your Woolworths Shopping you go where are my keys?
My windows down my keys are in the ignition.
You just jump in the car and drive home, you know?
So back then, it was really different.
I mean, we were at the school and I think I saw three fist fights that Katherine High School in my 4 years there.
And when it happened, we were all like, what do we do?
Like, we're not rehearsed for this.
Like get a teacher and break it up.
We just had better coping mechanisms of how to sort out our stuff rather than resorting to stealing other people's stuff.
So there was definitely crime back then.
But as a young person through that lens, we weren't oblivious.
Every time we heard about a crime, it was the same group of little, yeah, small group of kids.
And we loved it.
The good old days.

**Anne Walters**
Questions? Anyone online got a question?

**Sarah Skopellos**

For me, may I may step in here.
I really love that idea about being unaligned to deliberate, you know, because quite often we have our ideas about things you know, and we're so convinced that we are right, you know, and it's always a really healthy reminder that actually the best results come about when all the inputs come together and thrash it out. Any other takeaways or anything else that anyone wants to go over?

**Audience member**

Ngaree thank you so much for sharing. It was so real and so personal and very moving.
A big part of your story was about family and the support of family and family being sensitive to when you're down and all of that kind of stuff.
And I think there are probably a lot of people now whose families are very fractured, who don't have the kind of beautiful family support and connection that you had.
And I'm wondering if you're seeing any strategies for helping those people stay on track or get back on track.

**Minister Ngaree Ah Kit**

Umm, there are a lot of opportunities out there.
I guess I'm making sure that everybody I'd love to see a world where every person has at least one person who has their back no matter what, because then that would take the majority of, you know, citizens out of risk. Knowing that you can offload any of your issues or seek help from anyone is absolutely key.
I spent a lot of time with my seniors.
I've was over with some seniors the other day and heard very clearly that if they didn't have a regular weekly catch up, they wouldn't be here today and they were very, very forthcoming and sharing that with me. Do not take away those social connections.
My Mum's at home.
She's living on her own.
She's almost 65 years old.
She's 3 and a half years without my Dad.
I worry about her every day, making sure she's got routine.
So you've got to have people checking in. If you know anyone around, try and make sure that they've got the support people, especially with fractured families.
So this is where work is key.
Sport is key.
Activities are key.
I spent a lot of time with my seniors because they've lived their lives and they tell it as it is.
They're so much fun, but they they'll get up and go and do their knitting and crochet at Karama library every Monday they'll go to COTA every Wednesday to do their sewing.
They will do their probus trips down to Litchfield during seniors month.
They are out and about and they're very mobile.
They've worked their entire lives to make sure of their independence and their resilience, and so if anybody is concerned about anyone who doesn't have connections, please reach out to my office.

We've got information overload out there.
We've got websites that contain activities for young people. For older people volunteering I've got RSPCA in my electorate. Anybody want to foster or come along and clean out a kennel? Let us know.

There is plenty to do without being all confrontational, and so some people that I've spoken to, knocking on doors and meeting people and saying I'm really worried about your isolation. And they're very, very introverted.
How about you come on over to my Christmas seniors party.
Psychosocial experiment.
I put them on the most boisterous table.
You know that table?
Yeah, they're like the teenagers.
They rock up an hour before the seniors lunch because they're reserving their spot with their handbag, and then you put them there and then all of a sudden you see them having coffee the next week.
They've helped the introvert come out of the shell and the introvert has helped to calm them down a little bit.
So there's all of those things we can do without interfering by doing introductions.
And so we have a great website with heaps and heaps of stuff on our calendar and there's naughty kids in Katherine and they’re now naughty adults and they've got naughty kids.
This is a generational thing.
They have this.
Audience member:

And so how do you connect them to those sort of positives.

**Minister Ngaree Ah Kit**

So with the department, I get to do a lot of hands on follow ups and so making sure we look at is are there lessons to learn from way back when I was a 16 year old and Katherine to see if there was something we could have done differently to perhaps prevent. So always looking back but always saying here and now what do we need to do.

Part of my remit in the social portfolios.
I've got urban housing.
I've got Territory Families which includes child protection and youth justice.
I've got the ability to support and identify dysfunctional or families who aren't coping as well as they should, I’m always trying to look for the glass, half full words and respectful way of working.
But I get to basically put a, shine a light on a household and have a look at how they're functioning and to break it down to say, does the Dad have a plan to get back into the workforce to sort out any legal issues?
Does the Dad have a job or a pathway to training.

In suicide prevention they teach you three things to keep a person out of suicidal risk.
They need a strong sense of identity.

Who am I? Where to I belong.
You need a strong sense of connection.
If you don't have work, if you don't have a purpose or a rugby team or anything like that, and if you don't have anything to do well, you're in a lot of trouble.
So I look at my Mum, I look at all of those others who have graduated out of the workplace.
If you don't have a safe plan to keep you busy, your mind stimulated and you're connections there, you automatically enter risk if you lose somebody who ends their life, you're automatically at risk.
And that's for the rest of your life.
It's like it opens the, it gives you kind of this permission to do the same because you've been through it.

It is so severe and so dangerous, and so it's always looking at people to say if I'm doing really well, how do I make sure that others maybe get to wake up with the same sentiment I've got?
So if you can help someone who you think might be struggling or deserves a better opportunity to smile every day, absolutely look to see what you can do to help and you can do that without being too forceful or too rude.
So with minds, it's like, hey, do you know that we've got a group of 40 women who meet every Monday morning for a, you know, knitting and crocheting in the Karama library?
They're really lovely.
How about I pick you up and we can go together?
I don't know how to do it, but I'll try and that's just like going above and beyond.
You'd be surprised.
Or maybe you wouldn't.
There were so many people out there who are isolated and they shouldn't be.
They have family all around the.
Lack of said there might be fractured and who likes being on their own when you need help?
No one.

**Sarah Skopellos**

I think we have an online question and we might make that the final question.

**Minister Ngaree Ah Kit**

I told you I could talk.

**Sarah Skopellos**
Yeah, well done. I know.
I'm hoping to go through rooms at the few things from you.
Can we go to the online questions?

**Anne Walters**

I will read it out.

**Sarah Skopellos**

Yeah. Thanks for that.

**Anne Walters**

You said earlier we need more diversity within Parliament.
How can we make politics more attractive to the wider community to get that diversity?

**Minister Ngaree Ah Kit**

That's a question I'd have to post to all of you.
So politics became attractive to me because of my lived experience 10 years as a daughter of politician. I grew up with, you know, all the people on the news and federal politics and territory politics at night.
We're all eating dinner in our houses when they pass through Katherine, and so politics has been in my blood.
My grandfather was a wharfie and a Labor unionist up here and so as soon as I joined up as a Woollies checkout chick I was like give me my union form.
Let me pay my dues and be supported properly so the one message I would send to everybody, if you feel like your voice is not being heard, that your needs are not being represented and if you give people the opportunity to do their job, me and my other 24 colleagues and that doesn't benefit you the way it should, you should be looking to put your hand up. And not everybody has to be a politician.

Politics can be for everyone, so I had a conversation with some Aboriginal pre law students yesterday and said we need advisors.
We need people developing policy.
We need managers, executive directors and policy development officers in government.
This is a an absolute team effort.
We need really good people to be able to think outside box.
We're Territorians, lets pride ourselves on doing that and if we don't have things in place now, we need to consider how we can get those in place for the very near future and so if to anyone who's ever considered running for politics, you know, you've got your federal level, you've got your territory level that I'm at and you've also got your local government level, but you could start small if that's what you wanted and cut your teeth, so to speak.
I did roundtable.
Then I did Daniella Dilba.
I did a National Youth leadership group.
I learned about how to fight for what was right and be respectful of others’ opinions and also the importance of when you're losing an argument or any heated argument, don’t
raise your voice, improve your points, always be respectful because you know what?
I've got to be respectful every day in this job, so should every other politician, because things might change in August.
If not this August, it could be the next election or the next election.
So you don't want to leave a pathway of this devastation by treating people like crap because you could be out tomorrow and you've got to be back here and you should still be fighting a pathway to support the Territory we all want.
And so yeah, if anybody wants to have a chat about politics, please let me know.
I love it.
I'm excited, but the one thing I don't want to see, and I really worry about, especially for our younger people, with the introduction of social media and I don't like playing victim.
But with the introduction of social media, I have received death threats.

People have been sharing where I live online.
There is that constant ridicule and judgement.
I'm a very sentimental and sensitive person.
I work to save lives every day, so putting on a rough exterior you'll see me in Parliament.
And I’ll go for it.
Inside, I'm crumbling.
I don't like being called names.
I don't like being, you know, the Voice brought out a whole lot of racism in my electorate that I'm still really angry about.

I have never treated people with disrespect and I will not tolerate that from others, but again, I try to look at it and you try and you know, I always try and tell myself it's politics.
It's not personal.
You start questioning my ethnicity.
You try question my family, my background, my race, me being a woman, game on. You do not do that.

If you talk about policies and things like that, absolutely happy to have a respectful conversation, but there's a place in politics for everyone we do need and we've got an incredible way to that we've been leading with women.
Let's get as many people out there, and diversity is key.
So if anyone wants to have a chat, please feel free to contact my office.

I'd love to catch up for a coffee because if I get back in, that's it.
I've always said to my community, please give me 12 years.
I have a succession plan.
I came in with an exit strategy.
Give me 12 years.
I'm going to be now, you know, in at 35 and out of 47 to live the rest of my life because I don't know why anyone would want to be in politics every day forever.
You see my face?
No, thank you.
My Dad was like, yay, Bub.
Do you get in 10 years before me?
You could do 20 years and it was like 2000.
So I said to my community, I’m 35, I’m young and sprightly.
I've got good ideas.
I understand government, I've worked this, and so I was nineteen.
I'm a community, you know, person and a go getter.
I see an issue I don't whinge about it, I try and figure out what the group of people how can we solve it together and I'm always going to be a little bit different in this role because unashamedly I'm just going to be me.
I'm not going to change for anybody, and if that's not your cup of tea, you know what?

That's OK.
I'm not going to hold that against you, but I've worked really hard to be resilient.
I've gone through hell and back like all of us have.
I have seen some issues and tried to tackle them head on and I'm not perfect, but I'm going to try again tomorrow and so again if there's any questions or any follow-ups that people want to touch base with me, please come through my office and I'd love to, you know, come back at the next networking opportunity Anne and hear from others about their stories as well.
Thank thanks everyone.

Again, big political question, is it OK if I get a photo with everyone in the background?

I don't do selfies.
I don't know how to.

**Sarah Skopellos**

Thank you so much again for everything and speaking today.Thank you all for making the effort to welcome to stay for a few minutes that working.

Thank you to everybody.