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The power *in her voice*

BY JASMINE ROLFE

The concept of strength has many different shades of grey and, while it may represent one thing to a person, it can mean something vastly different to another. For 19 year old **Kristine Lio-Willie**, the label of 'strong woman' isn't one she associated herself with in her younger years. In fact, quite the opposite. It may come as a shock if you met the accomplished and driven woman she is in 2018 to know that a mere five years ago she nearly took her own life.

Born into a huge family, and with a hearing impairment, Kristine struggled to speak and didn't develop a voice until she was 10. In fact, her family would not discover she was deaf until she was 8, after a phone call from her primary school revealed her impairment. Reading, spelling and school, in general, were consequently a daily struggle and she became the subject of bullies at her primary school in Queensland.

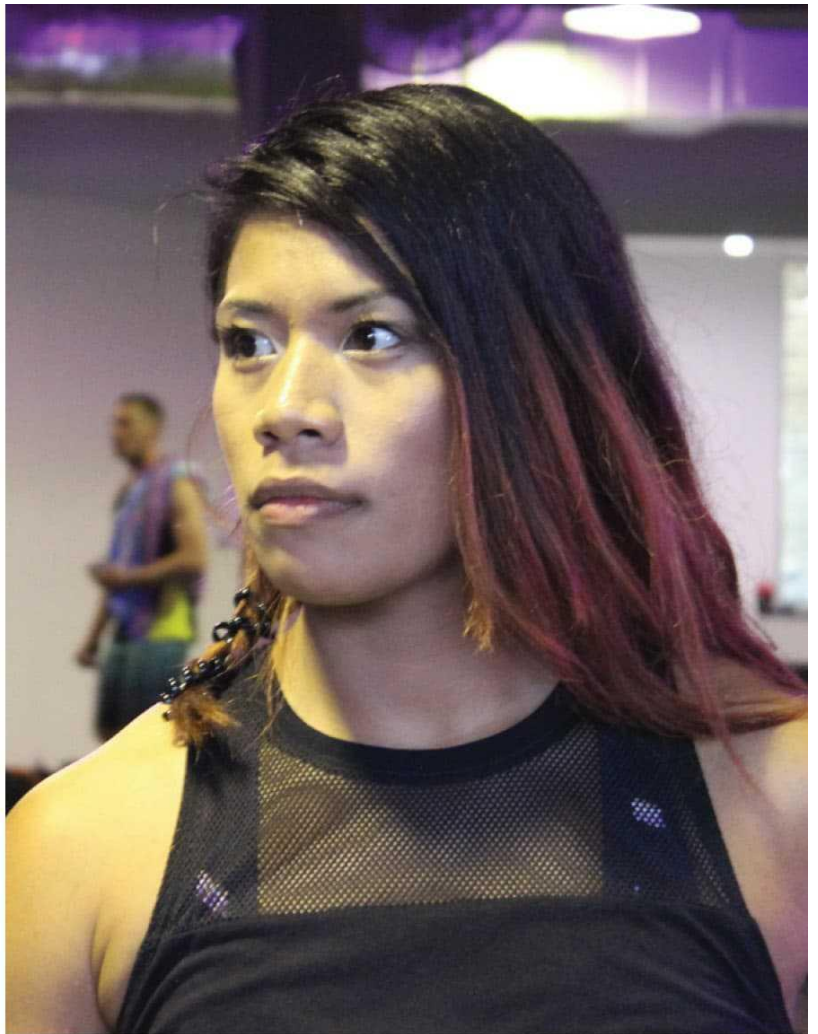
"I was put in the special unit for those who had a disability and needed extra help," Kristine says. "I was embarrassed and ashamed that I didn't fit in with the popular groups. And not just at school but everywhere I went and everything I participated in, I was always different."

Confused and unsure of herself and her abilities, Kristine would listen to every word the bullies spoke.

At a loss for what to do to help, her parents would use food as a comfort for her because at the time it seemed the only thing to bring her happiness. Yet, it would only bring temporary relief and at the age of 14, she made a life-altering decision.

"People doubted me and looked down on me all throughout my school days. I had such low self-esteem and no confidence that it led me to self-harm. I felt like I was a waste of air and space on earth and that someone else could live my life better," she says. "I fell into a depression and nearly put an end to my pain at the age of 14," she says.

"As I took one last look at myself in the mirror, out of nowhere I heard a voice in my head saying, 'I'm sure there is one thing you could be good at', and at that very moment I didn't care what it was. All I knew at the time was I wanted



to be good at one thing," she says.

"I was looking for hope."

Gathering the strength to trust her own voice was one of the most difficult moments in her life - but she knew she had to begin to listen.

"I USED TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING PEOPLE SAID ABOUT ME BECAUSE AT THAT TIME I DIDN'T KNOW MYSELF," SHE SAYS. "IF THEY SAID I WAS DUMB THEN I BELIEVED I WAS. IF THEY SAID I WASN'T GOING TO BE GOOD AT ANYTHING AND MY LIFE WAS A COMPLETE WASTE, I BELIEVED IT SO."

"Before this moment I hadn't listened to or had any trust in my own voice," she says. "Now I believe the most important part of living and overcoming obstacles is that only your voice, thoughts and actions matter. You know yourself better than anything."

Learning to accept herself for who she was, Kristine became disciplined and determined to care less about the bullies trying to break her down. Rather than trying to walk with the 'cool crowd', she focused on being the best version of herself and standing out in her own unique way.

Yet, her journey to finding her 'hope' and something to live for wasn't an easy one, as her parents came from a strict Samoan background. Kristine began to feel a cultural struggle and describes having to "toughen up as weakness was not tolerated" - and, on top of that, her parents did not



understand her depression. This also had a flow-on effect in her personal and social life as it limited her opportunity to seek out her passion and meet new people.

"Years passed and I felt little hope in improving my learning and my knowledge," she says. "Yet I know there are people out there going through a hell of a lot worse than me. We all have our fight and we all have our struggles, weakness and mistakes. But I know then I wasn't put on the earth for no reason."

"It was time to step up my game and gains."

Seeking opportunities to develop her self-love became an important part of Kristine's life, and kick-starting her health and fitness was only one of the decisions she would make that would lead her to become the strong woman she is today.

"I was too young to sign up for a membership at the gym so I had to ask my Dad, a father who was very old-fashioned and didn't have any value in that area," she says. "An Islander typically loves their food and he replied back by saying 'why should I waste my money?'"

"I was so determined to prove to myself and my father that I challenged myself and went through a weight loss journey that saw me lose 7kg within two weeks," she says. "With very little knowledge of nutrition, I cut back my food to no dairy, no fried food and no soft drink, just water and I satisfied my sweet tooth with honey and fruit."

Witnessing her determination and her increasingly positive attitude, her father happily signed her up to a gym at the end of Year 10.

"IT WAS THE END OF THE YEAR LEADING INTO THE MOST IMPORTANT TWO YEARS OF SCHOOL (YEARS 11-12). I WAS SO PUMPED AND EMPOWERED TO MAKE NEXT YEAR MY YEAR," SHE SAYS.

"I felt it was my time to shine and created a bucket list of what I wanted to achieve in my life."

Ticking the Kokoda Challenge (a 48km hike) off her bucket list would be the first of many achievements in Kristine's life, not just physically but mentally.

"It [the Kokoda Challenge] led me to learn so much about the history of developing countries," she says. "As I put my mind and body through this amazing experience I became very thankful and had such a big heart for those who died for us to have a better life."

"People are dying to be in our shoes and there are those who are wasting their life not living when there are so many opportunities out there, they just haven't found them yet."

The Kokoda experience, as well as the Pacific Island lead camp program, gave Kristine the drive to break down her own walls to accomplishment and would soon go on to becoming overall athletics champion at her high school.

"When they called my name to stand up in front of the whole school as ages champion for athletics... I knew that anything was possible when you believe and have faith in yourself," she says.

"I DIDN'T JUST DO IT FOR ME, BUT FOR THOSE WHO DON'T HAVE THE ABILITY TO TURN THEIR DREAM INTO REALITY. I'VE LIVED THROUGH IT AND I'LL LIVE IT FOR YOU TO PROVE IT'S POSSIBLE," SHE SAYS.

"Completing school was only the beginning of a new chapter that life didn't become just about me. But doing all I can, to give, offer and continuing taking every opportunity.

As time went on Kristine continued to make positive changes every day, following her heart and understanding that she would soon discover her purpose in life.

"I was so focused on improving on myself that I didn't once ever think of completing or comparing myself to anyone else, as everyone is different," she says.

Using the gym as an outlet for her newfound determination and focus, she found herself gaining not only physical but mental strength.

"AS I GREW MENTALLY, THE PHYSICAL SIDE JUST FELL INTO PLACE AND NOW I LOVE LIFTING AND CHALLENGING MYSELF. IT'S MY WAY OF LETTING GO OF STRESS, WORRY AND FRUSTRATION," SHE SAYS.

As her physical strength increased, life would present yet another obstacle in Kristine's path and she found herself in a situation so foreign to her that it hardly seemed a reality.

"People became jealous and started to compete with me (mostly the males)," she says. "They became intimidated by me and I didn't understand why, but in their reality males have to be stronger than females which really got me thinking. I love being strong, I love lifting and I had become good at it. That was when I made the decision to explore becoming a professional powerlifter."

To date Kristine has competed in two powerlifting competitions, winning both, and now looks to compete at a state and national level. Just one step closer to becoming the strongest woman in Australia and eventually the world, and on her journey hopes to inspire others to pursue their dreams with as much conviction as she does.

"I'm not willing to settle until I make a huge impact in the health and fitness community and change many lives, as I did mine. But I can't do this on my own," she says.

More determined than ever, Kristine continues to prove to herself and others that despite what challenges you may face and impairments you may carry, your voice is powerful and it deserves to be listened to. ●

