**Jamie-Lee Bracken – Ōritetanga Learner Success Conference, August 2019**

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Kia ora, kia orana. Ko Hikurangi te maunga, ko Waiapu te awa, ko Te Ariuru te marae. He uri tēnei o Ngāti Porou, nō te moutere o Aititaki hoki. Ko Jamie-Lee Bracken ahau.

Until this year, no one in my family has ever graduated from a university, has ever been close to getting a degree. It was neither through lack of trying, neither because they just didn't want to-- they couldn't. Many of my family had families to support and work was more important than studies-- study was what other people did.

My koro grew up in Tokomaru Bay. My nana grew up in the Cooks [Cook Islands]. And they were teenagers when they left their homes nearly sixty years ago.

My nana headed to Otara in South Auckland. And my papa headed down to Lower Hutt in Wellington.

My dad, the most intelligent man I know-- and I'm not being biased-- really, really wanted to be a pilot. He studied super hard at school and made sure he aced every exam.

But when he was seventeen, he came home and his mum said that she'd found him a job. So she went back to the Cooks. And he left school and he became, as the oldest man in the family, the main caregiver for his brothers and sisters.

Many of my family share that same story. And looking after the family had always been top priority. And university wasn't part of the plan. And it wasn't actually a path that anyone had taken or even considered a possibility.

So from the moment I was born, my parents made sure that education and seeking education-- university was a top priority. They worked hard to send me to a good school. They paid for tutors. And I always felt like it was my responsibility to go to university because they had invested so much in me.

My nana passed away when I was sixteen after battling aggressive bowel cancer for 10 years. And her passing was devastating for my family. But for me, it made me want to study medicine. And my family, especially my parents, were overjoyed because I would be a doctor.

I'm halfway through my Postgraduate Diploma in Journalism now. So my story--

[LAUGHTER]

So my story was not as clean cut as I thought it was when I first enrolled.

As the first in my family to ever go to university, when I walked into my first lecture I felt extremely isolated. I felt so lonely because everyone around me had a mum, an auntie, grandma, uncle, a cousin, who had been to university, had two degrees, or had a Master’s. I didn't even know what a degree really was.

So I'd moved down to Dunedin. I'd set this goal to make my family proud and be a doctor. But not long after I started, I realised it honestly just wasn't for me.

And while even I was buzzed about class, I felt sick and faint at the sight of blood. And I dreaded class because I just knew I didn't enjoy it.

But every lecture filled me with this guilt because I was so ashamed because the course was amazing. The lectures were incredible. But it just wasn't for me.

And some people I knew didn't even get the chance to go to university. So I felt really ungrateful. I felt like I was failing my family too.

I stayed in a hall, and I had people telling me that I was getting handouts because I attended Māori and Pasifika tutorials. Or they questioned why I attended them in the first place because I wasn't a real Māori or a real Pasifika person anyway.

I felt awful. And I was so tempted on so many occasions to just finish university altogether. It would be far easier.

And whenever my family rung, they'd always be, oh, how's it going, we're so proud of you. And I'd be like, yeah, everything's great, I love it. And then, they honestly believed it.

And after six months, I actually withdrew from the course. And I would be lying if I said that my family straight away accepted that and that they were OK with that.

And for them, they just didn't realise that they were any other options apart from law and medicine. They hadn't been to university, neither had anyone close to them who could reassure them that change was OK. For them, you chose something, you stuck to it, or you'd failed.

So I came home anyway and began a Bachelor of Communications. It was the best decision I ever made, but I felt like I'd failed. And I felt really ashamed.

I was in class one day after starting this new course and feeling pretty low. And a lecturer turned to me and said, You're really good at this, Jamie Lee.

And at the time, I don't think she really knew what was going on with me. But it actually made all the difference because someone cared. And this was when things began to turn around. I realised that I had found my path and I loved communications.

My lecturers were really encouraging. They'd smile and wave at me when they saw me on campus. And they put my name forth for new opportunities.

It made all the difference because I felt at home and a sense of community. I also had other people in my life who were supporting me along the way too.

Soon I’d gain the confidence to write for the student magazine. I joined the Student Association. And I helped out at events. But it was only because I had the backing of lecturers who took the time to get to know me and pushed me to try other things.

They showed me through small acts of encouragement and kindness that I had chosen the right path, and that I wasn't a failure. My amazing family rode this journey with me too. And they started to learn the ways of the university. And that not being a doctor or lawyer was actually OK.

I no longer felt like I was ashamed. And I felt like I belonged at this campus.

Experiencing university for the first time was like being thrown in the deep end of the pool with no idea how to swim. I was scared, I was lonely. And after withdrawing from my first course of study, I was so ashamed.

But now I'm happy and incredibly grateful and excited for what's to come. I graduated in May with a Bachelor of Communications. And I'm about to finish my Post-Graduate Degree.

My family were with me at the graduation. And later that night, I saw my little sister, who's sixteen, looking at universities on her computer. And I think of all things, this was the greatest win for me because my journey is going to help her, and any other people in my family go to university.

Just last Friday, I was offered my first permanent full-time job. And it's honestly a dream. I'm hoping that this job will enable me to support communities because my community is what helped me to get to where I am. Now, it's my turn to give back.

Thank you so much for having me. I would like to finish by singing a few lines from my koro's and my nana's favourite song. It's about asking Matariki to shine a way forward for people who need the most help. And if you know it, feel free to sing along.

(SINGING) Horohia e Matariki ki te Whenua Te māra-matanga mo te motu e. Kia tipu he puawai honore. Mo te pani, mō te rawakore e.

Thank you so much for having me today.

[APPLAUSE]