

# Mike King's anti-suicide crusade

LEE UMBERS

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Grahame Cox/Sunday News

**MIKE KING:** "A few years ago I was rich, famous and living the dream, but in reality, I was miserable. Now I'm broke, renting in South Auckland and I couldn't be happier."

Mike King made a fortune as a sharp-tongued standup comedian and TV front man.

But now he's put that money where his motor mouth is, and is travelling the country talking to thousands of schoolkids in an anti-suicide crusade.

"A few years ago I was rich, famous and living the dream, but in reality, I was miserable. Now I'm broke, renting in South Auckland and I couldn't be happier," a smiling King told Sunday News.

"I've sold off most of my toys, including my V8 trike, my old-school Valiant car, and I recently put my Harley-Davidson on the market to continue funding my passion.

"They brought me great joy for many years but my happiness comes from a different place now, it comes from helping other people. Even though I don't get funding and I'm often away from Jo my partner and our new-born baby Charlie Sue, I can still say what a beautiful life I have."

King's mission has taken him to around 30 primary, intermediate and high schools so far this year, including Kaitaia, Auckland, Rotorua, Tokoroa, Hastings, Napier, New Plymouth, Opunake and Hawera - all of which approached him.

He's spoken to around 15,000 children from age 7-17, telling his often troubled life story - including battling depression, addiction and self-destruction - to show it's possible to survive your darkest moments and go on to thrive.

"The talk is called It's Cool to Korero," King said. "It's about a kid who had no self-esteem, struggled to make friends, and spent every waking moment doubting himself. That kid was me. Growing up I always self conscious about what I looked like - a small kid with buck teeth, big ears, and a huge head.

"Then one day I discovered I could make people laugh and I immediately associated that laughter with being 'liked'. If people laughed at my jokes [in my mind] that meant they liked me and for an insecure kid getting that approval meant the world."

At the heart of King's talk is a message of hope.

"A lot of students today connect with my story because they're going through exactly the same thing.

"All kids feel awkward, or socially inadequate at times, and they all have bits of themselves - whether it's their nose, ears, teeth - that they don't like. But if they knew that everyone, including the so-called 'beautiful people', have exactly the same thoughts and fears, then what other people think would be of less importance.

"I try to help our young people to understand that life's about loving yourself, you are worthy, everyone's worthy and everyone has a contribution to make - that's hope."

The aim of his talks is to empower young Kiwis and ultimately prevent them from taking their own lives, but King says "it's suicide prevention at the very top of the cliff, that's so far back from the edge, the word 'suicide' doesn't even need to be mentioned. It's about empowering our kids. It's about helping them to understand what's driving their behaviour and giving them the tools to talk about their problems."

One of the barriers to the students seeking help is the ridiculous "harden up, stay staunch" attitude prolific in New Zealand culture, King says. "When I talk to the kids about seeing a counsellor on my road to recovery I always ask, 'How many of you guys have seen a counsellor?' Not many hands go up, I can assure you. I get more hands going up when I ask, 'How many of you kids here don't go and see a counsellor because you think it's soft?' But after I talk to them about my experience with a counsellor and how she saved my life you can literally feel the momentum swing the other way."

The 51-year-old was helped back from a personal hell by his psychologist who he turned to in 2007 after nearly ending his life in a drug binge - the culmination of 30 years of addiction which went hand-in-hand with and fed his, until then undiagnosed, depression. Today he will be 2358 days sober.

After King gives his talks to the schools, he invites the students to quiz him. "The Q&A is probably the most important part of the talk because it gives the kids an opportunity to seek answers to questions that are relevant to them and their lives. Obviously humour plays a big part in the talks but it's honesty that is the key to success.

"The questions I get asked are pretty real too. 'How do you know if you are an alcoholic or a drug addict?' 'What can you do to help someone you love stop drinking?' 'What effect did your behaviour have on your children?' 'Did they help you in your recovery?'"

King's latest journey has also led to a change in his once busy standup comedy schedule.

"I have cut right back on the comedy shows now because I don't like who I become when I'm on the stage. By its very nature my comedy is quite combative and it's hard telling kids to be positive and kind to each other during the day and then going out and smashing people with my words at night. It was literally doing my head in," he said.

This has led to other significant changes to keep costs down. Gone is an array of companies that used to support his comedy career along with his management team, which now consists of his partner Jo.

"I'm really lucky to have her support because this job would be impossible to do without it. You can't half pie live this life. When you're working with vulnerable people, promising to make yourself available 24/7, then everyone who lives with you and loves you has to buy in otherwise you couldn't do it."

King has largely funded his mission out of his own pocket and with the help of "wonderful" friends.

"Last month, I won \$4000 for The Key to Life at a charity poker tournament run by the Christchurch casino. While I was there one of my friends who came along to support our trust decided that, that wasn't enough and gave us another \$4300 which was unbelievably generous."

Despite the lack of cash, King says he's never been more content. "I began to realise money and fame couldn't buy me happiness back in 2007 when I had stroke and was temporarily paralysed. As I was lying in the hospital unable to move or communicate, all I kept thinking was, all the money and fame in the world ain't helping you much now, is it hot shot?"

## HOW TO GET HELP

Lifeline – 0800 543 354 Depression Helpline – 0800 111 757 Kidsline (aimed at children up to 14 years of age; 4pm to 6pm weekdays) – 0800 54 37 54 (0800 kidsline) Suicide Prevention Helpline (aimed at those in distress, or those concerned about another's wellbeing; noon to midnight) – 0508 828 865 (0508 tautoko) Youthline – 0800 376 633, freetext 234 or email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz) CASPER helpline – 0508 227 737