

Self-advocating for rights, one poem at a time:

*Experiences of archiving Luke Taveta's poems by Psychiatric Survivors' Association
with the help of TCI DPO support grant*

TCI's story of meeting and working with Luke

TCI team met the Late Mr. Luke Taveta during a visit to Fiji Islands, in February 2020 and exchanged with the Psychiatric Survivors Association of Fiji (PSA, Fiji). Started in 2004, from the life experiences of Luke, PSA is 18 years old and is among the oldest psych survivors' organizations in the Asia Pacific regions.

Persons with psychosocial disabilities in Fiji, as in some other commonwealth nations, experience civil death and legal shackling. Fiji was a British protectorate and has the British legacy of mental health law and incapacity provisions. Lives of members of PSA revolves around St. Giles' Hospital, the single mental asylum that exists as a semblance of a 'mental health service' for all of the 100 or so inhabited Fiji Islands.

Learning this incredible history of Luke and PSA, TCI offered support to itemize and make public his works- interviews, poems, etc. and the history of PSA. Luke was moved by this offer and worked closely with his sister, Laila Taveta and Danielle Mallam, other than PSA core team. Unfortunately, before the poems were finally readied for publication, he passed on, on 8th June 2021.

Luke had been on lifelong psychiatric drugs and repeated incarceration at the asylum. He died early, due to the damaging effects of these medications on his general health. Luke's way of life included deep devotion to Jesus Christ and the Faith. His poems were fluid in stream of consciousness style, allegorical, and with deep sentiments of surrender. He published "Creative Expressions" (Barnes and Noble, 2016).

Watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dTTZYgVVFQ>

Luke had an unflinching view of himself as a psychiatric survivor. Luke left a message for all persons with psychosocial disabilities in the Asia Pacific regions, and worldwide. His life was a lasting search for freedom. Luke, as the thousands of testimonies of persons with psych survivors attest, is not alone in his struggles and martyrdom, a lifelong witness to a terrible care system, his spirit vanquished only in death. We honour his memory with this blog piece.

In the words of Sera Osborne, Psychiatric Survivor's Association (PSA)

Remembering Luke Taveta, Founder of PSA

“About Luke, he attended an infant school primary school and then had his high school at Marist Brothers. After that, he pursued his tertiary education at the University of the South Pacific, studying foundation science. And then he was supposed to go and study medical science in New Zealand. But he opted to study Cadet Officer Cadet, where he had his nervous breakdown by the age of 19. Till then, he has been with psychosocial disability and being a mental health advocate. He had a love of poems where he expressed his feelings on paper and also as his coping mechanism. As I mentioned, he is one of the founders of PSA, a senior member of PSA and a great advocate. And he was a man full of knowledge. He's full of knowledge and he's just smart. I've never met anyone like him. There's a lot of stories I've heard about him from other senior persons with disability who have been part of the disability movement.”

“.....Psychosocial disability in Fiji, we still feel like we've been discriminated within the disability movement. We still feel that way. According to how things are done and how other persons with a disability look at us. So he attended that conference and they were given a few minutes to present and then I don't know what happened. He was the last person, and when it was his turn, he was told there was not much time left and it was the time that was given. They cut it short again and then they were amazed when he presented. When he presented, he didn't allow them to bully him. It was amazing to them because when he presented the five-year work that they were trying to put together, Luke was already presenting it to them. He just made it a lot easier for them and with the members in the office for us, like for us. Luke, I was able to help us understand how not only psychosocial disability and the advocacy work, but how to do the work in the office. So he was a teacher to all of us as well. And yes, he has a daughter, he has a daughter, who he only came to meet a few months before he passed on. So basically, those are some of the things about Luke that I can share with you this morning.”

Archiving a survivor's history in Fiji Islands

“Let me talk a bit about how the decision was made to archive Luke's poems and works.

Luke was one of the founder of PSA and he was a man full of knowledge. He was somebody that, I don't know how to describe him, but I would say that he was so full of knowledge that he was one person that I looked up to when I took the position of being the project officer. I did not finish my education and all. And he was somebody who had faith in me and I used to bank on him for that in terms of making decisions, I was sitting there....”Luke, I'm stuck with this can you help me”? And then within minutes, I'm on track. And so he was something like that to us. It was a great asset in terms of advocacy. He would pen everything down, like he would just write down everything. Oh my gosh!... You know the way he would write, I don't know how he does it, but from the morning

till afternoon, he was writing. And then, apart from the advocacy writing, he used to write poems. And he had a whole stack of poems. He just had so many poems.”

“.....And then we had this visit from Bhargavi and she really helped us realize the importance of archiving his work. The importance of realizing that advocacy was in the poems. The advocacy was in what Luke would write down on his books here and there. And she helped us understand and realize, too, the importance of why we needed Luke's work to be archived. So it helped the advocacy work we do here and also help others who would come to work in the office, build their knowledge. And it was something for me, it was a testimony itself that a person with psychosocial disability can be a genius too. They can sometimes do things that other people cannot do. And that's where everybody agreed that the importance of having the work done and we were so thankful that TCI had the funding. To actually get all those done and it came at the right time because Luke just passed away a few months ago. It was a month or two after he completed the project. And if TCI did not support us, we wouldn't have been able to capture and record and to keep all the memories and the wisdom and the knowledge that he had been sharing with us.”

Poems help build a movement

“The beginning of the process of archiving, with Danielle and a few other volunteers in the office, we had to type up all the poems because most of his poems, he had just written them down on paper. First off, we had to type them up. And then came the selection part where the first selection was made by PSA members. We had to give the first opportunities to the members. Members came in, sat around a table and then poems were distributed in a file, whereby each member had five to six poems. If I remember well, they had to choose one or two from there. And then apart from the members, we had another sharing session whereby we had representatives from other disability organizations. And just when we were nearing the time for donors, other stakeholders, network partners to come and help in the selection, we had the lockdown. We had the lockdown and that was one of the big challenges. So we had to hold the project until everything started cooling down in terms of the restrictions and safety protocols. And then we had the final selection which was made up again of persons with psychosocial disabilities and representatives from other DPOs. We couldn't get in like partners and stakeholders as we wanted, but some of the representatives that came in were representative representing the OPDs that they are member of, as well as the organizations they work for.”

“Collecting all the poems and typing up them and lockdown due to COVID...I think those were the two main challenges that we had. But there were just so many poems. I think there were so many poems and there were only two, Danielle and another volunteer, who were working on it, typing it. I saw that sometimes they had to work on the weekends to type it up, and there were just so many poems and we had a timeline. And with the COVID thing happening, it did not really help because they had to put everything on hold. And it came all of a sudden that some of the work stuff was in the office and we had to wait until everything cleared and cool down and so that Danielle could come back to the office and complete everything. So those were the only two challenges. Apart from that Luke, he was very cooperative. He was really helpful in terms of helping with the work

given to the two who was assisting him to in the project. And like I said we are grateful for the support from the TCI, which made it possible.”

“...Another challenge as an organization we face....the board members we have like board members who we have an AGM with every year and all year, and this is where board members are newly elected. But one of the challenges that we faced, we are facing, like from my time as a board member and till date being the project officer is that we've had AGMs and we've had members of persons with psychosocial disability who are regular members. They will start off as active and then after that, some become unwell. Some, I'm not sure. Maybe they've lost interest or they just don't know the roles that they play being part of the board. And probably that's the reason why most of the time our board members, they don't last a full year and it leaves the team in the office at a very tough position because in terms of decision making and because for us, in order to get activities implemented or have changes in the office, we need the board to endorse things. And when we do not have board members that are active, it delays our work. Or if we do continue with our work, then the new board comes in and they start to question, why did you people do this? Because then we have to explain to them that with the donor money coming in for activities where there is a certain timeframe and we cannot return the money and not do the activities. So, you get to those. I mean, that is one of the challenges that we're facing.”

“My own experience of reading those poems was emotional. Yes, a lot of that happened not only to me, but to other members, like some had tears in their eyes. And in one moment, everybody would be silent, because somebody had found a poem that just hit them so hard; and everybody could relate to it in terms of the experience in the hospital or how it felt to be discriminated. How he would transform it and use words that really depicts how it feels like to be a person with psychosocial disability. And some had poems that just gives you that hope and you feel that there's hope. And there were some where you just have a good laugh about it, because it was talking about experience whereby, a journey where you couldn't find somebody to love, maybe; or, to have a relationship and all these things. So it was all a mixture of emotions. But it was very educational, though, and some of the representatives from the organization were even surprised with the kind of words used, ones that we've never heard of and then, we were using our phones to Google up what it meant. And we're just looking, we are just looking at each other in being amazed at how can somebody like Luke could write all those poems and what it meant and (laughs..)”

“The last selection that we did was really was emotional for everyone because we knew that he was not around anymore and that we were so lucky to still have his work, where we could read through and remember him. People started coming up with the different types of advice you would give to everyone. So the last selection was really an emotional one for everyone.”

“How's it coming along?”

“I feel Luke was very excited in the beginning regarding this archiving work. He was very excited and in the process of doing everything he was happy about it. I could tell he was happy and excited, because he came to work despite being sick and already at that age, he came to work and

he never missed a day. And he was helpful when we went there. They were not sure, they couldn't sometimes understand the handwriting, the handwriting or the words. He was already there and he was always checking on them. 'How is it coming along?' 'How do you find it?' And in the middle of everything he would discuss with them, like what the poem is about and he would sometimes even say, 'Oh, I wrote that at this time, it was early in the morning' or the time he was writing, so he was happy. He was happy about it, and he would remind us that that we should be, as he was kind of very religious as well, he would say we should always thank God because this is God's will and it's God's will that God called every one of you, this team to be working in this office at this time. And when I'm gone, at least we have some work here that I've done, that you can always look into to help your people. He was emotional on our first selection of poems because we did a video call with him, while all the members were at the complex in the conference room, with their different with their files of poems."

"And we did a video call and he was so emotional. He was emotional looking at the members and thanking all the members for coming in to help in the selection. And he also hoped that the poems would help them. But overall, he was happy. I think this is something that he had been wanting to do a long time ago. But he didn't want to be thought of as a burden on the organization because of the many things that members needed in order to improve their lives. I guess that's one of the reasons to, why he never pushed or never asked me to look for something or donations or funds, to actually get his work done. Because, also as the one thing Lela mentioned, writing was his coping mechanism. So it was something he did because he loved doing it and it was just something he did. I think that kept him away as well from the hospital and not having relapse ever since. I got to know Luke and for the seven years I've been with PSA, he never had a relapse. He was moody at times, but he knew how to handle it. He knew how to. He knew how to deal with it. And because he was always writing something. But I can say that he was happy, he was happy with the work. And I think because it made him feel special as well, having to have a project on him about him and the work that he does."

Opening our minds about us

“The positive experience of working on this project... that did not only come from me, it came from other members of the organization as well. It was mind opening for us. It kind of changed how they looked at persons with psychosocial disabilities, who work in our office. And it boosts and motivates other persons with psychosocial disability who were a part of the selection of the poems, even to me and the team. It kind of gave us that feeling that at least we had somebody in our country who outshined the other senior DPOs there. Even one of our colleagues, Josh¹ who used to be with another organization, he even shared how Luke did a presentation during a conference. That his presentation was something like a five year strategic plan that they were all trying to put together. What it meant for us to hear that from them!! One of those big names in the disability sector in our country, we felt like Luke left something of a proof for us that we can do it, too, despite the stigma. We just have to work together! He had so much love and unity in him. He was the kind of person who would bring us together and try and get things done, like in teamwork, always consulting and communicating. That was.... that was Luke here. He was a great leader to us.”

¹ Name changed to maintain confidentiality

Luke's poems

CELL BARS

I am caged physically
Behind psychiatric cells.
But they cannot
Take my freedom
Away from me.

Why can't I be different,
Be myself,
Without being constricted
By psychosocial nametags
By psychiatric
Constrictions and
Textual classifications.

I am free
Lord, please give us
The freedom to be
Free.

I'm a prisoner
In my cell
But despite my mental subjugation
I'm free as a
Bird in the sky.

FREEDOM, FILIAL FEALTY

The inner being cries out for freedom from constricting subjugation
at home, at school, in the church from pervasive inhibitions.
The minds of our people must not be subjected to deviant variations.
Our people must be taught to think for themselves and bear responsibility.

For their actions, they must be led to vouch for their accountability.
However, their freedom must not trespass the rights of others.
Their training should begin in childhood, continue throughout adolescence,
Meander through adulthood until they voyage on once again.

Freedom, filial fealty coated in relationships, encompassing all civilization
Personally, within a family, communally and albeit nationally.
It must be attested freedom, not violating any basic human principle or agreement.
For the price of freedom, we must be prepared to make sacrifices personally or otherwise.

Once we have gained our freedom, we must be prepared to maintain the status quo.
Then the rigmarole begins again through clinical deviations or meanderingly
To maintain freedom, we must regularize our fealty, instead of stops and starts.
In accordance with its principles, freedom is bought at a price, a cyclical price.

There are many forms of freedom but only one aim- emancipation.

You can pressurize it, try to suppress it but no one can live without freedom.
What is the meaning of freedom? It's the act of enjoying your rights without violating others.
Now that we know the whole story, where do we go from here? Forward!

HOPE

Hope eternal is my destiny,
My dream.
I'm bombarded daily
With divisive voices
All clamouring for attention.
The transient media,
Secularist academia,
So called technological advancements
Rights of different interest groups
All clamouring for a place
In humanity,
Insanity in all its conceptualities.

But I hope daily
That sanity will prevail
The initials of God
Emblazoned in the roaring seas
The majestic mountains
The cascading waterfalls
All empirically show
That there is still hope for tomorrow
Hope- a dream?

Civilisation shows since time began
It's a rock-like reality
After all is said and done
The sun comes up in the morning
For mankind.
Hands down,
There is still hope for tomorrow

FREEDOM

After you have fallen from grace
Learn to love to live again.
There may be heartfelt sorrows encountered along the way
Tribulation and heartaches
Meandering along the pathway...
Life begins again,
There is a regeneration of spirit.
Success in life is measured step by step.

Wednesday January 3rd 1996

And one for the road, one of Luke's devotional poems...

ALL IS PEACE FOREVER

Mankind all will be peace forever more
As we gather on heaven's beautiful shore
What a happy day that will be
When redeemed saints shout God's victory

Heaven will be beautiful with every hue
There'll be a mansion just for you
The lamb, the lion both will be tame
There'll be no sorrow, no longer any lame

We all will be perfect physical specimens!
To God we must raise praise and Amens!
There'll be no longer any sinner's blight
Everything will just be all right

God will teach us the mystery of creation
Daily we will receive Godly education
We'll sabbatise on the Sabbath day
With Him our redeemer, the only way

In heaven everything will be at peace
Joy will always daily increase
We will always sing and shout
You don't have to be from heaven shut out

Getting there is amazingly free
Just accept Him who died on Calvary
You must tell others of the place where there's peace
Where there's harmony, where death forever will cease!