
An Interview with Jude Simpson: Growing Beyond a Life of Abuse and Gang Involvement in New Zealand

8

Jude Simpson and Michael Ungar

Jude Simpson lives in Mount Maunganui, New Zealand, a beautiful small town that seems a long way from the world of family violence in which she works. Her self-published biography *“Lost and Found”* tells her story of growing up neglected and abused and then her years of involvement with criminal gangs. Now a Family Violence Prevention Advocate with Presbyterian Support Northern in New Zealand, Jude works tirelessly to help families avoid the mistakes she made. In her public talks, and in her work directly with families, Jude brings her own personal experiences of abuse as a child, and the wisdom that comes with having overcome her violent past and grown into a successful woman in her late 40s. She explains how family violence had altered her life course and how it instilled in her troubling beliefs about herself. As she says, “Carrying an incorrect negative belief about yourself can lead you into places that are not healthy and nurturing and loving but painful and scary and sad.”

Her life would have been very different if she hadn’t met a counselor she was mandated by the courts to see. It was through that relationship that she gained a new outlook on her life and the motivation to reconnect with her own children. In this regard, Jude’s life is a testimonial to the power of relationships that change life trajectories. Her resilience, difficult to have seen beneath the troubling

behaviors of her youth, was periodically visible to those who knew her and appreciated that Jude was doing the best she could to survive in an environment that offered her few choices.

The following interview took place in April 2009.

Michael: Jude, can you give a sense of what you experienced growing up? What were some of the challenges that you faced?

Jude: I have to say, one of the first things and most important things I experienced was I had the love of one parent, which was my dad and he became a rock for me for most of my life. His love was absolutely paramount for me. It was the only thread I had to hang on to. I hate to think what would have happened if I didn’t have that love of a parent. Surrounding me there was so much rejection and abuse. But I always had him. I realize now how resilient I was. That I could be subjected to so much hurt and pain, but the love I had for my father was my absolute strength.

Michael: Did you live with him?

Jude: Yes, when I was very young I lived with my four older siblings and my parents. But my mother didn’t want to have me, she didn’t want to carry me at birth, she didn’t want to be pregnant with me, and then at birth she didn’t want anything to do with me. She completely rejected me. So I grew up in a family where there was a divided line. There was my

M. Ungar (✉)
Killam Professor of Social Work,
Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada
e-mail: Michael.Ungar@dal.ca

mother and siblings on one side and my father and I on the other. And I used to often look at my mother and siblings and wonder what I did wrong? Why doesn't she like me? That's why my father's love was so important. If I didn't have that, I wouldn't have had anything.

Michael: How did he show you that love?

Jude: That is an interesting question. Men back then didn't really express their love. He wasn't an affectionate man. He didn't verbalize his feelings, and I now realize that I can't actually say how I knew he loved me because he never told me and he never hugged me. But I knew he did. Maybe it was because he was kind, and he was very gentle, and he always spoke to me nicely.

Michael: And, in contrast, what did you experience with your mother?

Jude: She was never physically abusive or horrible to me, but she just never liked me. She just never wanted anything to do with me. She spoke to me if she had to. I remember walking down the main street of town 1 day and we were going to cross the main road. I was four, and I tried to hold her hand and she wouldn't hold my hand. The day my mother died, when I was 16, the last words she said to me were, "Your father not's even your real father."

Michael: That sounds awful.

Jude: I don't know what that was about. My mother used to do things with other men. And I wonder, even to this day, why she would say such a thing to me, knowing that she was going to die and that was the last thing she left with me.

Michael: Where did your life go after that, given these experiences with your mother?

Jude: In my early years, I lived with a huge sense of rejection. And confusion. I grew up wondering what was wrong with me. But then I had that love for my dad, except later when I was nine, my parents divorced. Then my father got a girlfriend and she absolutely hated me.

That's when the abuse started. Physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse. My father was working and she was at home with me. She was absolutely terrifying. It didn't take long for her to have full power and control over me. I couldn't tell my father of course. If I did, then look out when he goes to work the next day and I was home alone with her again.

Michael: What would she do, while your dad was gone?

Jude: First, there was a lot of verbal abuse. She'd tell me I was a piece of trash, that I was scum, that I was unlovable. And she used to say, "Even your own mother couldn't love you." After 5 years of having that said to me, I took it as the truth and it became a very entrenched belief for me. I walked with that for the next 30 years. Keeping it all inside. The results were absolutely devastating. My self-esteem just plummeted. There was lots of other psychological abuse too. She used to spit in my dinner. I'd watch her do it, then she would put it in front of me and make me eat it. I was just hurting all the time. I was confused. I was sad. I didn't understand. Then I began getting angry. To me the world was such an ugly, horrible place. It was cruel. But then, I believed that I was just a piece of scum.

Michael: And where did that take you?

Jude: When I was 14, I left my father to live with my mother and because I had no sense of belonging or feeling of love for her, or maybe because I was separated from the only love I knew, which was my dad, I went out on the streets and started looking for love. And I became very promiscuous. I substituted sex for love. I thought boys would make me feel loved. You know, it was like I was desperate. It was like I was on the hunt for food, for someone to make me feel that I was okay. "Please someone, be nice to me. Please someone make me feel loved." You know?

I ended up getting pregnant at 14 and had a termination, and then got pregnant at 16 and got married because that was what was expected. I married this poor boy who didn't want to be married, but his family made him marry me and it was just destructive. Then to make things worse, while I was pregnant, my father was killed in a car accident. Four months later, my mother died of cancer.

Michael: That's a lot to have happen at one time.

Jude: It was devastating to lose my father. I got involved with drugs and alcohol and left my husband and took my baby. And then I got involved with one of the most notorious gangs in New Zealand which was the Mongrel Mob. And my daughter and I entered the gang world. And we got involved with all sorts of terrible, terrible things. That's when my husband took me to court and got custody of my daughter. He took her to live with him and his family and I stayed in the gang world and got really involved in gang life. Drank lots, got involved with organized crime, things like that. Those people are very brutal, very vicious.

Michael: Inside the gang, you experienced more violence?

Jude: Extremely so. But by this time in my life I'm very used to it. It was very normal for me. And in fact, if I weren't in that situation, I probably would have thought there was something wrong. Isn't that a bizarre way to think?

Michael: I've heard the same thing from young people who have experienced a lot of abuse.

Jude: What's strange, though, is that even though I was in that incredibly abusive and ugly world, I still felt a sense of belonging. And that was what I was searching for.

Michael: What was it about the gang that gave you that sense of belonging?

Jude: They were like a family. We were all alike. Ninety-nine percent of the gang members were from incredibly dysfunctional homes where they'd felt no sense of belonging. It was different in the gangs. There we could feel like we belonged.

Michael: That makes sense.

Jude: It was the same for me. It was abusive, but as horrific as it was, in their own distorted way, they look after their own. They care about you like you are family.

Michael: Did you go on to have more children?

Jude: Yes. I have a son with a man from the Mongrel Mob. But I left the Mob when he was 9 months old after my partner tried to cut my throat. It was quite normal, except that time it was more vicious. I had to leave my son, though. If I had tried to take him with me, his father would have killed me. So, I had a choice. To either stay and continue to be brutalized, or leave my son. I chose to leave my son, which I regret because he's suffered a great deal. He is a broken man.

Michael: Where did you go?

Jude: I ran away to the South Island. But within a week of being there I got myself into an identical relationship. I felt absolutely desperate. When I left the Mob I felt so alone. There was no place where I could belong. And for me, I was always trying to find that with a man. I needed a man to make me feel loved. So, within a week, I was back in an incredibly violent relationship and the cycle started all over again. I had another child, a little girl. When she was 15 months old, my partner went away for a week and I went down to a local pub and met another man and he was from another gang in New Zealand called the Highway 61s. And we got talking and he said to me, "You know Jude, if you don't get out of that relationship you're going to

be murdered.” It was the right timing. I truly believe in timing, I don’t think anyone will move us if we are not quite ready to move. So I left and I took my daughter and that man in the pub and me became involved and 11 years later we decided to have our own child together. We never lived together but we had an on-off relationship. I’ve had four children to four different men. But when I was in the early stages of that fourth pregnancy there was a knock on my door one evening and it was the police who told me my partner was one of New Zealand’s most wanted criminals. He was an armed robber and I was being taken into custody and locked up and charged with three counts of armed robbery and one charge of harboring an escaped prisoner. And I was facing 10 years in prison if convicted.

Michael: Did you go to jail?

Jude: No, I was held in jail for a while, then the judge released me to give birth to my daughter. I ended up being found not guilty on three charges and dismissed on one other. During that time my partner told me that he was already married, and that he was leaving me to do his prison term in a jail closer to where she lived. So he left me after 11 years, pregnant. It was one of the biggest betrayals I’d ever experienced in my entire life.

Michael: How did you ever leave this life behind?

Jude: It was a person. I got sent to a course by my worker at income assistance, which is a government social service department. She was the facilitator. Deb Chase is her name. I had to go to the course, otherwise I would have had my benefits stopped. She had the ability and the wisdom to know what she was seeing in me. I had quite a bad attitude and I wasn’t a very nice person. And she challenged me, and she said to me, “You know, if you could lose that bad attitude of yours, and if you would let me help

you, you could turn your life around, and then you could use what you been through to help others.” And that’s exactly what we did. She’s been helping me for the last 10 years now.

Michael: Did other people extend you a hand before that? Other social workers, police?

Jude: No. I was never involved with any social workers, never. And as for the police, there wasn’t really any help like there is today. Domestic violence wasn’t a huge issue. There wasn’t the awareness that there is now. Even when I was arrested, no social service agencies came to find out what was happening to me and my children. No one came near me. Not one person.

Michael: Was there something special about the way Deb approached you? What did she do that captured your attention? Was it the course content?

Jude: I just felt her sincerity. I knew she didn’t have any hidden agendas. She just openly cared. And I got that. People like me know when people are real or they aren’t real. I knew she was real. She was the first person ever to believe in me.

Michael: After your father.

Jude: After my father. Yeah, she was just amazing.

Michael: And the course Deb was offering? Was that important?

Jude: The course was really irrelevant.

Michael: Well you’ve just trashed hundreds of human service programs! If I hear you, what you’re saying is we have to put nice people in front of wayward children. That’s it, isn’t it? You’re saying something very profound. It’s so easy to forget that the programs professionals offer are often secondary to the relationships that are formed.

Jude: Absolutely. The course was for solo parents to try to help them to get back into the work force because the government wanted us off benefits.

Michael: Do you think Deb saw herself as doing something different from what she was supposed to be doing?

Jude: I think she was there to deliver a program. But you could tell she wanted people to have the best in life that they could have. She came from a place that was 100% heart. The content of what she was delivering was good, but it was how she delivered it that mattered.

Michael: What happened after that? After you got inspired to make some changes in your life?

Jude: Deb helped me get a job with the same company that she was working with. In fact I ended up delivering the same program to parents. I wanted to be around her as much as possible. She was helping me create a new belief system. She kept telling me that it was never true that I was a piece of trash. It was never true that I was unlovable. I could walk with that.

Michael: Could you have heard this same message a decade or two earlier if you'd met her then?

Jude: I don't really know. I believe in the perfect timing of things. I often have wondered, did other people present opportunities to me like this one and did I just not see them?

Michael: After you started working with Deb, what happened with your own children?

Jude: It was interesting because my children were starting to repeat the same life I'd lived. My third daughter got pregnant very young and was in a bad relationship. She was becoming dependant on benefits. You know, exactly the same stuff I'd experienced. But then she watched me slowly start to turn things around and develop a new attitude. She did the same. Now she works full time.

Michael: And your other children?

Jude: My daughter, she's coming up on 33. She was angry with me until she was 30-years-old. Because I had abandoned her, and left her with a gang member.

But she came to me when she was 30 and said to me, "I've been angry at you for so long now, I just can't stay angry any more." We have a very good relationship now, which is wonderful. But my son, unfortunately, he grew up in a very abusive, destructive place and he became an addict. He's been clean for the last 2 years and has come back into my life. His father died a few years ago. I think he felt more comfortable to come to me after that. My four children came together for the first time earlier this year. It was absolutely fantastic to watch all of them. I sat there looking at all of them quite astounded and quite overwhelmed at how they seemed to fit together.

Michael: Jude, this term resilience, if I say it to you, what do you think it means?

Jude: Resilience? I find it absolutely intriguing. I guess it's how we hang in there when the odds are so overwhelming. How we overcome, even as a child.

Michael: I hear you saying that resilience is about something inside us that helps us cope. And yet, in your story, I hear you talking about not only the importance of your father, but also Deb. And the way you are influencing your own daughters. Is resilience all about what's inside us or is it also about what is outside?

Jude: Absolutely. It's a combination. Who we are and the other people we meet. I don't believe I could be where I am today without the people that have been influential in my life. There's not many of them, but the ones who have been there for me were so important to helping me get through situations. Except it hasn't been just about getting through. I hear people say, "I am a survivor of abuse," but they aren't really living. They might be physically living, but they are caught up in ways of thinking that hold them back. Resilience has to be more than that.

Michael: That's interesting you say that.

Jude: I could have just survived. But I'm very blessed. I'm not just in any job. I have work I'm passionate about. That I just love so much. And I'm giving back.

Michael: I know you work for a religious organization. I'm curious is religion or belief in God or spirituality a part of what makes you resilient?

Jude: I am a Christian, but I didn't go to Presbyterian Support Services because of that. They actually approached me and created a job for me.

Michael: Oh.

Jude: I truly believe that in the last 3 years that God has been watching over me. I was brought up believing in God. My brothers and sisters and I, we all went to Sunday school. My parents never came, but I always believed in God, always.

And when I was going through all those years of hurt and turmoil. I never stopped believing in Him. I just never went near him because I was doing everything that I knew he wouldn't like.

Michael: I see.

Jude: It wasn't until years later when all these wonderful things kept happening for me that I started to think, I am making all these good things happen. And I realized, this is God. And from that day on I committed my whole life to Him. And that's exactly what I've done. And it's just gone from strength to strength to strength. But I don't talk very much about my Christian faith. It shuts people down. That's not what I want to do at all. I want to help them, like others helped me.