

RWAV – Talking Country Health with Simi James

RWAV acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we broadcast. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to elders past, present, and emerging. Welcome to the Talking Country Health Podcast, where we discuss everything their health, health professionals navigate working in rural and regional Victoria.

I'm your host, Andrew Maher, and this episode we'll be speaking with Simi James, a mental health clinician at Southwest Healthcare, just north of the Great Ocean Road in gorgeous Camperdown. Welcome to the podcast, Simmi. Thanks for joining us.

Thank you so much.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your career journey, and uh, where you currently live and work?

I actually come from the southern side of India, a small state called Kerala, my parents and my extended family are still there. I relocated to Victoria in 2023 for this role. And currently I work in Camperdown, Victoria, which is kind of like near to Warrnambool. And yeah, I'm working here for the past two years.

Now, Camperdown. Yeah. It's above Port Campbell, but sort of between Colac and Warrnambool. Would that be about right?

Yes. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. Marvelous cheese country, beautiful rolling hills and of course the Great Ocean Road. Yes!

So what attracted you to Camperdown?

I think from 2020 onwards, I was looking for a much better career opportunity, and I was working towards that goal, and Australia was one of the best options in the field of mental health in here. But it was kind of like a very long process for me. But eventually, I got a job opportunity at Southwest Care. When I got the opportunity, I was in India and I didn't know much about Victoria, especially Camperdown. I have heard

about Warrnambool, at that point of time, but then I fell in love with the town and the area here and I decided to stay back and continue my career in Camperdown itself. It's a very small country town. It's very quiet and calm and I come from a very crowded place in my hometown back in India. So I think it's a change and I really enjoyed that.

And so what drew you to the field of mental health in the first place? Simmy.

I did my education in mental health. I'm a social worker by trade. My higher education was all about psychiatric social work. It's more of like mental health oriented courses and that was the reason, and I'm generally interested in working with people in the field of mental health, and that's how I strive to pursue a career in that.

Wonderful. And what excites you most about the work that you do at Southwest Healthcare?

I work as part of the community mental health team. Yeah. And where I come from, India, everything is different for me. Everything is new for me. And initially it was challenging as well, uh, in terms of like learning new things, language, everything basically. But then it's been three years almost now and working along with the community, travelling to different areas where multiple cultural background and things like that and definitely language. It's, it's been a wonderful and a very challenging, and I think I take that as a part of the growth and it's been wonderful in that level, and the team is very supportive and very welcoming for me, and my journey has been very exciting so far.

And so, how does your role contribute to supporting and improving care for the local community in and around Camperdown now?

Mental health is a very big important factor everywhere at the moment. I'm pretty sure that addressing it and getting the right support, accessibility to the right support is very important. And that's where we come into picture. And from my understanding is that people who understand and able to provide the support without judgment and any kind of like, you know, the right way, of helping, I think that definitely helps the improvement of the community altogether. And that's where our job and our role come into picture, I think.

Certainly. And where did you first hear about RWAV and what has your experience been working with us?

I heard about our RWAV in 2023 when I started my process for the relocation to Victoria. And RWAV was very helpful. One of the reasons is that I had very minimal support systems when I decided to relocate to Australia, and this particular agency definitely was one of the thing which they provided me with the relocation support.

And I came alone actually to Australia. And without RWAV, I think it was actually a very smooth transitioning with RWAV because I had just start from the scratch when I moved here, and RWAV was the support system in that.

That's brilliant. I know from my living overseas years ago, it's very intimidating to after a long flight, go to a new country and stand in the immigration queue and you think, what am I getting myself in for here?

Yeah. And I heard a lot about, definitely the climate was, I come from the southern side of India, which is like, I haven't experienced winter as such, before this. And I came in, in May, I think, towards the end of May, and I'm like, okay, this is, I heard about winter, but When I was preparing to come here, I remember I was very excited, very much excited, like, oh, it's a new, big opportunity, new country.

It's been very exciting. At the same time, challenging as well for me. But I think what I believe is that growth comes with a certain amount of, sometimes we need to be in a little bit uncomfortable to begin with. Yeah. And I take things like that at this moment and I'm trying to learn slowly and steadily.

Apart from the immigration support that you received from RWAV, were there other programs or services that have been helpful to you?

Yes, Apart from that, I got a relocation package, which was very helpful for me to set up my base over here that was actually very helpful. As a person who comes from abroad, financial support is a very big factor.

Uh, also when you are coming for the first time, like I said, um, being alone and doesn't know much about it, it's one of the biggest stressors as well, but. Because of this package and the support they gave. I had a very wonderful, uh, person to support me. Her name is Rachel. Um, she introduced me to the community.

She took me to things like setting up my documentation and things like that, finding a house for me. Which was one of the biggest thing because when I came here, one of the biggest challenges that there was no home to rent. She was the one who, in a week time, we managed to get everything in place and that was like the best thing and I'm very grateful for that support from RWAV.

Big, high Five to Rachel and what have, yes. What have been the most rewarding aspects of working in rural mental health in Victoria?

When you talk about Australia as a whole, from a point of view, from who came from an other country, I have, I have only heard about Melbourne or Sydney.

You know, that's big cities, and that's what Australia is about. But when I came here to the Southwest and definitely in Camperdown, when I started living here, it's a different picture. It's like, you know, very calm and quiet and definitely that's one side of it. And like I said, rural mental health, it's more about community and growing and exploring and seeing people. It's a new, new thing for me. I haven't done this before where I worked in the past and my education and my previous career experience, it was more of like institutionalised or a place where we'll sit up and then people would come around to get the service from us.

But here we are providing the service in their own environment. And to do that, I have to learn a lot of things. For example, like driving to understand more about the community where I, where I work, and language and everything. So I had to expose myself from my safe zone into a different picture. And that's a stressful situation, but at the same time, that's exciting. And like I said, growth comes from pain or uncomfortable position, so. I think it's, it's rewarding for me as a person I came to know that I can do this, as a person who was with parents, living in my safe zone back in India, where I come from, I am here doing things which I never thought I will be able to do it. That's very exciting, I think.

Absolutely. And so have there been any, um, interesting experiences from your time in rural practice that stand out to you?

Yes, definitely. When I came here, people were still using masks and stuff like that because it was like COVID time. Oh yeah. About the end of COVID time. So this is again, a personal growth perspective I'm talking about. So English is not my first language, and I thought, how I'm going to make this actually, because I couldn't see. The lip movement when people talked. And I used to think in the beginning, oh my God, I don't think I can, I was questioning my decision altogether, how I'm gonna do it.

But my experience from with the community here was that very accommodative, very helpful. We understand each other. That's my understanding now. I remember, when I used to talk to the consumers, we start helping each other. A lot of people helped me through this process where they understood my

limitations and what exactly I was going through and what kind of support I can put in place. They help me to do that, and there is a. Feeling like I am accepted and I am part of this place from a very different picture. So that's there for me at the moment. And I have heard a lot of stories actually like sometimes people suffer, experience difficulty with things like this, but for, for me, it was a very comfortable journey so far.

I'm really happy to hear that. And so what advice or tips would you give to mental health professionals considering working in a rural or regional setting?

Few things from my understanding. A different experience. It depends on how you take it. For example. Sometimes we need to come up with a understanding, for me, the flexibility of it. For example, I had to come up with an understanding that, okay, let's, this is different and I have to be open-minded about it. Yeah. I had to go through a little bit of difficult times when I, when I started the first time, like, you know, relocation and loneliness and things like that because you're away from your family.

I just visit them once in a year or things like that at the moment, and it's very tough, but it's still possible to make a home here. Just that little bit patience and things will be fine. Yeah.

And what do you enjoy most about living and working around Camperdown?

Like I said, I come from a very populated place back in my country and coming to Camperdown, it's an absolute difference in terms of like, you know, I started loving that calm and quiet life. Yeah. I don't know how to explain that, but. It's not a bad thing, it's more of like, I focus more on my routine and sleep and that's make a huge difference. And the community is very close. So everybody knows, you know, everyone here and they know me and I'm just learning to getting into the rhythm of a much smaller rhythm place. Yeah. Yeah. A town of three and a half thousand people. Yeah.

Can you recommend some nice sightseeing around Camperdown or around the Shire of Corangamite?

What's your favorite thing to do when you're not working?

Yes, we live around 45 minutes for Port Campbell. And it's like wonderful. I go there sometimes during the Saturday or weekend, sometimes with friends or whoever is coming around, you know, friends who, um, lives in the, the city, Melbourne.

Sometimes they come here and then we'll go there. So I'm kind of like an official tour guide for certain people who comes from different place. Port Campbell is a beautiful place and we do have Timboon. Timboon, we have this Timboon ice cream, which is good. And I, for my work purposes, I, we travel around that side a bit. Port Campbell, Peterborough, Timboon. We go for small hikes and things like that around, we have Mount Leura, in Camperdown and yeah, things like that.

Oh, brilliant. Now, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners who might be considering a similar career path to you?

Yes. Like I said, it's a different, uh, experience. It's, it's a growing phase where you will come up initially, uh, a period of excitement, then a period of like, you know, confusion and, and questioning, uh, whether your decision is right or not. Like this is according to my experience. The whole thing is to be consistent and focused and things will come into place.

Wonderful. Well, Simmi, thank you so much for joining us today.

Thank you so much, Andy.

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