

Where do I begin. I was gifted the most incredible opportunity to go to the Phoenix World Burns Congress in Maryland USA. At first, I didn't know what to expect, I was nervous, beyond excited and anxious for what was to come. I had been to many of the Burns support groups events here in NZ, Woman's retreat, Survivor Sunday, Camp Awhi, all of which had played such a big role in my personal recovery and acceptance of myself but to have the opportunity to go to such a grand event like this was truly special.

We embarked on the journey to the USA with our beautiful group of survivors and supporters, my first big trip overseas so that in itself was a journey all on its own. We had a few hick ups on the way, missed a connecting flight, ran for what I thought felt like a marathon from terminal to terminal but we made it safe and sound, luggage in tow and was greeted with the crazy DC heat!

As soon as we landed in Maryland and made our way to the Gaylord convention centre, I was overwhelmed with the sheer size of where the congress was to take place. I thought to myself wow, this truly is going to be something I would never forget.

Our first day of congress, I met a lot of new people, I like to think of myself as quite a confident person, but I was so nervous, almost terrified to start conversations with them. I felt like a fish out of water. I exuded confidence but was floundering on the inside. I think all in all I was overwhelmed, but seeing how happy the people who were surrounding me made me feel at ease, comfortable, and pushed me to just be myself and interact with whomever I could.

We had a Kick start celebration, a meeting of all people who had travelled far and wide to be here. Had some laughs, first introductions, and a good feed. It was a great way to start the congress.

On the second day of congress, we had a key note speaker, sharing in his journey and how he used mindfulness to achieve his goals. We also had an open mic session. People showed courage to get up in front of a lot of people. It is always hard hearing some of the horrors that are our burns journey, people going through horrific and terrifying things, but the people who stand out in front of those stories are some of the kindest and most beautiful people you would ever meet. The strength they show in the face of adversity is admirable. I regret not getting up to speak about my journey and feelings regarding loss, how we mourn the loss of our old selves and all feelings of loss a burn injury brings, along with regret for not sharing how much I love my scars, how I find beauty in them and my outlook on life.

In the afternoon we had a workshop outlining the benefits of laughter and using humour as a coping mechanism. This was hilarious! The panel of people running this workshop were all so passionate about laughter being a tool for all kinds of healing. I am someone who uses humour on a day-to-day basis sometimes to take away the awkward looks when we first encounter new people or really just to create some sense of relaxation in what sometimes can be a very awkward interaction. And to be honest, I love being the centre of attention so anything to bring the focus back to me, I'm doing it!

We also had a young adult woman support group meeting. It was an intimate setting with no more than 15 of us. We shared our journeys, our views on our journeys, what it is like as a woman to be on this path and how we viewed what happened to us all. This was incredibly emotional and powerful. All of the Wahine were in different stages of our journey's, so in hand in different stages of grief and acceptance. I heard stories of triumph and stories of great loss. I shared my feelings around acceptance of you are, my love for my scars and all the heartbreak in between. This was my absolute highlight of the whole congress. It was a beautiful experience, shared with beautiful Wahine being open, honest, and understanding. Best session of the entire congress.

Day 3 of congress rolled round quickly, and we heard from a panel of women discussing a lot around mental health the importance of seeking help with a therapist to address issues we may have when surviving a burn injury and its long term affects. One of the speakers spoke about her issues with hallucinations due to the high amount of pain relief she was on, long dressing changes and how your loved ones are also affected by your burns journey. This really resonated with, I suffered horrific hallucinations that stay with me to this day along with gruelling and painful dressing changes. You sometimes forget that you are not the only one who is suffering or has suffered and was a reminder that although we feel so alone at times throughout our journeys, coming together in an environment like this with people who have endured similar experiences makes you feel not so alone.

We attended a mindful art session in the afternoon, where we utilised art to help with our mindfulness around the way we felt about our journeys and where we were in our journeys. This was relaxing and meaningful. Triggered some deeper thought about how I felt about myself.

To finish off an incredible couple of days, we hit the dancefloor at the evening celebration and boogied to our hearts content. Danced and laughed with friends I

had met throughout the duration, friends who I knew and friends who I had not yet interacted with. This was incredibly fun, to let our hair down! Nick blew us away with his night fever dance moves and we had the whole crew up singing and dancing together. My throat was worse for wear after all the scream singing! It was just the perfect note to end on after an emotional and full-on couple of days.

As a whole Congress was such a valuable experience. I felt so privileged to have been given the opportunity to attend and meet some of the most inspirational and happy go lucky human beings in the world. To the burns support group, thank-you. A thousand times thank-you. Thank-you for the knowledge I was able to obtain attending, the friendships I got to make and all the memories that I will cherish for years to come. I am privileged and grateful to be part of such an incredible community of people who truly want to improve the quality of people's lives and gift them with incredible experiences and memories. I hope to make it back some time soon. Time to start saving those pennies.

Nga Mihi,

Aroha