**“Live in the Studio with Rita Telesia”**

**Host: Mereani Qalavokawasa**

 **Guest: Rita Telesia**

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MEREANI: Talofo lava, malo e lelei, ni sa bula vinaka, ki ora and a big hello to everyone listening today on 3CR. Today is our International Day of People with a Disability, and we've got a special guest with us, sharing a bit about life with a disability and from a Pacific Islander perspective, which is going to be awesome. My name is Mereani and today our special guest is Rita Telesia. Welcome Rita. Welcome to the show.

RITA: Talofa lava!

MEREANI: Today we're just going to have a chat about your life. You've lived a very interesting life. Then, I also understand you're having a birthday as well coming up soon, and that's going to be a very exciting and I think a very sentimental time for you. Can you tell us about yourself and your diagnosis as well?

RITA: I was born in Brisbane, originally from Brisbane, born 25 weeks premature, diagnosed with MID or that's the short term or Mild Intellectual Disability and I'm also legally blind.

MEREANI: Wow. Okay. Can you tell us some about growing up, did you know any people in your family or growing up? Did you know anyone else with a disability as well, and how was that like for you?

RITA: As far as I know, I'm the only one out of my whole family who has a disability. There was no one from mum or dad's side with a disability, just me.

MEREANI: Yeah.

RITA: I'm the only one.

MEREANI: How did you navigate life being the only one? How was it like for you growing up?

RITA: At first, not so much, it was the blindness that was because I was used to it, but dealing with having a mild intellectual disability was a struggle for the first seven years of my life. Just understanding why I'm slower than my other friends and why my friends have moved on to mainstream and I'm still at the special school. That took me a long time to get over it. But because I had a lot of positive support, great teachers, a lot of people to help me get through those years, I am who I am because of my school and the people, my family and the people that have supported me, whatever it is.

MEREANI: Wow.

RITA: I'm a strong person.

MEREANI: Yes, you are. That's so wonderful. Yeah. And I hear you learned to play the piano. Now this wasn't at school, but you learned by yourself. Are you self taught?

RITA: Well in fact, this is an interesting story. My dad happened to be playing a church hymn on the piano when I was living in Forest Hill. He just said, "Oh, I'm going to go grab some dinner." While he was grabbing dinner, I decided to jump on the piano and started playing that same hymn.

MEREANI: Really? Wait, just from hearing?

RITA: Yeah, just from hearing it and Mama actually thought that he recorded himself on the keyboard and then she came in the room. "Oh, Rita, it's you. Oh my god." She got a shock. She just couldn't believe it.

MEREANI: Yeah.

RITA: Yeah.

MEREANI: That is a very special talent you've got.

RITA: Yep, thank you.

MEREANI: Wow. So for all our listeners, Rita has this amazing set up with her keyboard and we've got some very, very high tech, what are they called, head speaker phones, speaker box, subwoofer? Rita's actually going to share with us a few songs today, which is going to be very, very wonderful.

Can you share about your life at school as well? You went to a special school and for Pacific Islanders that's probably not an experience we're familiar with or we know other Pacific Islander people who have that same sort of upbringing.

RITA: So for most of my high school, I should say kindergarten all the way up to year 12 I went to a special school for the blind called Royal Victoria Institute for the blind. They recently changed the name to Vision Australia before I left. That school support system helped me a lot in terms of communication, just basically helping me to learn as much as I can before I leave school. They basically prepared me for the real world, what to expect out there in the real world.

MEREANI: Wow. Yeah. That's so important. There's so many obstacles to navigate when we're out in the real world, and it's so good that they could help you prepare for some of those things. Would you like to share with us your first song that you are going to share and play for us today?

RITA: This first song is not an original, but this is a cover of “You're the Voice” by…

MEREANI: John Farnham?

RITA: John Farnham. Yes.

MEREANI: Perfect. Take it away, Rita.

RITA: *[playing piano & singing*]

We have the chance to turn the pages over

We can write what we want to write

We gotta make ends meet, before we get much older

We're all someone's daughter

We're all someone's son

How long can we look at each other

Down the barrel of a gun?

You're the voice, try and understand it

Make a noise and make it clear, whoa, whoa.

We're not gonna sit in silence

We're not gonna live with fear, whoa, whoa

This time, we know we all can stand together

With the power to be powerful

Believing we can make it better

We're all someone's daughter

We're all someone's son,

How long can we look at each other

Down the barrel of a gun?

You're the voice, try and understand it

Make the noise and make it clear, whoa, whoa

We're not gonna sit in silence

We're not gonna live with fear, whoa, whoa

Thank you.

MEREANI: *[clapping]* Woo, yeah! Thanks, Rita. Thank you for sharing that. Everyone. Welcome back to the show. You're listening to 3CR community radio, and that was Rita Telesia singing, “You're the Voice by” John Farnham. Thank you so much for sharing that. Can you tell us why you chose that song?

RITA: I've been a massive John Farnham fan for years. Growing up in Australia most of my life, he was one of my favorite Aussie artists growing up, and I really enjoy his music. I thought, you know what, I'm going to sing this song because it really means a lot to me.

MEREANI: Yeah. I remember singing that song in choir in primary school. It definitely has some really special memories for me as well. That was wonderful. Thank you.

RITA: Thank you so much.

MEREANI: Can you share more about your music? I see that you have a Facebook page as well.

RITA: I do.

MEREANI: Can you tell us when did you decide to start sharing your music with the world, Rita?

RITA: Well since I discovered Facebook about five years ago, I thought, why not create a Facebook page and start getting myself out there. Just this year, I created a Facebook page specifically for my music because I want every single human being to hear what I sound like and just to get myself out there. That's why I started this whole music journey.

MEREANI: Okay. What are some of your favorite songs to sing?

RITA: I sing everything from country, a bit of gospel sometimes, and also from where I come from, the island of Samoa, I love to sing Samoan songs.

MEREANI: Wow, that's so good. That's a very, very big, what is it called? Repertoire of music.

RITA: All different, yeah.

MEREANI: Wow, that's so special. Cool. Yes. This is live radio, and you're joining Mereani and RITA in the studio. We're sharing about life with a disability and Rita did you want to share with us about life growing up in your family with a disability and how that affects the family dynamic.

RITA: Okay, so I'm the oldest of four children. There's two boys and two girls. My family have always treated me exactly the same as what everyone else would want to be treated. I'm always included in family things like outings. When it's rugby season, we often go too, like the rugby to support my cousins. We do a lot of family. Everything we do is basically together. We go out together. We socialize together. We just do what families do, what every single family does basically. I'm involved with not just the family but also the church as well.

MEREANI: Okay.

RITA: I play the piano for the Sunday school, especially this time of year. I'm usually pretty busy and also choir. Choir has been a huge part of my life for about six years.

MEREANI: Okay. And can you share a bit about the choir as well? Is this church choir?

RITA: My family friend, her name is Rita also, she has an organization called PICA, which you know about.

MEREANI: PICA, yes.

RITA: She's been amazing over the years. We've done lots and lots of performances like at festivals and all across Melbourne. It's been such an amazing experience to share my talent with other people who love to sing as well.

MEREANI: Wow.

RITA: It's been a blessing.

MEREANI: That's amazing.

RITA: It really has, yep.

MEREANI: That PICA choir is where I first met you.

RITA: That's right.

MEREANI: For those who don't know, in 2016 at NGV, they had a special Pacifica exhibition and the PICA choir were invited to sing a few songs and open the exhibition. That's where I met RITA and a whole bunch of other amazing Pacific Island artists and singers. Yes. And we sang there, didn't we?

RITA: Yes, we sure did. We sang a huge variety of Pacific Island. I think it was a medley from my memory. It was a medley of songs and people were marching and clapping and dancing and celebrating.

MEREANI: Yeah. Yeah. It was really wonderful. Yeah. I still remember a little bit of the song. I think there was a “Happy, happy Tonga”. “Happy, happy Tonga”, and yeah, that was a great song. Yeah. You guys have performed in many different events as well, so that's been wonderful for PICA.

RITA: Yes.

MEREANI: All over Melbourne.

RITA: Pretty much, yeah.

MEREANI: Yeah. That's wonderful to hear. Did you want to share with us your next song or shall we?

RITA: Yep. The next song is called “Differently. This basically relates to what this day is all about, so I hope you like it”.

*[playing piano & singing]*

Sitting on top of the world, no where to go.

Nothing to do but sit alone.

We can't even get the world to move an inch.

Scream from the top of our voices and see everyone in this world has different abilities.

No two people are the same.

We're all differently.

Everyone in this world has different abilities, no two people are the same.

We're all differently. We're all differently.

Watching us go by, stare at us why? we are people who, who are just like you.

Look me now, I'm independent now.

I have dreams and goals and they're my own.

Everyone in this world has different abilities.

No two people are the same, we're all differently.

Everyone in this world has different abilities.

No two people are the same, we're all differently.

We're all differently.

MEREANI: Yay, thank you very much, Rita. Welcome back everyone. This is a 3CR Community Radio, and we're celebrating the International Day of People with a Disability. You just heard RITA with “Differently”. Can you share what this song is about, Rita?

RITA: I used to be in a group called Wild Davis. They were part of an organization called Club World, and basically they wrote this song to spread a message that what the song says "we're all differently, that we're all not the same."

They get ideas of what they wanted to put in a song, and then they created this song with the help of my good friend Le Cash, he wrote the music for it and all the girls came up with, brainstormed some ideas and then turned into a good song. Yeah.

MEREANI: It's such a special song as well, and embracing all the different parts of us and that's what makes us special.

RITA: Yeah.

MEREANI: That was so wonderful. Thank you for sharing that with us. Would you like to share as well your contacts, if anyone else would like to get in touch with you as well. You've got your Facebook page and I believe your YouTube page as well.

RITA: Yep. You can search me up on YouTube. You just type in Rita. That's R-I-T-A. Telesia, T-E-L-E-S-I-A same for the Facebook as well. So yeah.

MEREANI: Yes, like, comment, subscribe, all the fun things.

RITA: Yes, likes, comment, subscribe, and share the love.

MEREANI: Share the love. Share the love on our Facebook and YouTube.

RITA: Yes.

MEREANI: Great. Rita, would you like to share, are there any words of advice that you would share to your younger self having gone through all the things that you have? Any words of advice?

RITA: I would say to my younger self, "Be proud of who you are and all you have accomplished in your lifetime. Never give up on your goals and dreams."

MEREANI: That's great. Thank you. Very important and very wise words for everyone as well. Yeah, you've come so far, Rita. Thank you so much for sharing your story, and it's been great to have you here. We're just chilling, hanging out here. Also, big shout out to her brother. Lucky. He's in the studio with us. It's nice to have the family Ohanna up in the studio as well. This is your younger brother you've got here?

RITA: Yes.

MEREANI: Great. Oh, we've got one more song.

RITA: I've got one more song to end it off.

MEREANI: Oh, perfect.

RITA: This wonderful International Disability Celebration and because I'm a proud Samoan, as I would like to sing a song called Samoa Matalasi.

MEREANI: Thank you. Rita.

RITA:

*[playing piano & singing]*

La’u Samoa, e matalasi Ua si’osi’omia e le sami Atu mauga lanu lau ‘ava Feoa’i fi afi a o ou tagata.

La’u Samoa la’u Samoa ea Le Atua o lou fa’avae e moni lea Le Ao o lou Malo tali’ilagi Samoa ea i Malo aufa’atasi.

Tu lata oe i le ekueta E mafanafana fo’i ele vevela So’o se mea aua le popole E mamulu mai ile fa’amolemole.

La’u Samoa la’u Samoa ea Le Atua o lou fa’avae e moni lea Le Ao o lou Malo tali’ilagi Samoa ea i Malo aufa’atasi. Samoa ea i Malo aufa’atasi

Thank you so much for sharing that with us, Rita, and thank you so much for sharing a bit of your culture as well, the Samoan song with us. Quickly before we end, I understand that you have an important role at your church and with your youth group. Could you share a little bit with us?

RITA: So I play the piano for every Sunday school event or Sunday school, for Father's Day, Mother's Day, all the occasions that we have.

It's my job to play for the Sunday school and for the youth group for every single event that we do. We have lots and lots of occasions throughout the year.

This year, in a few weeks time, we've got our Christmas combined carols, and my role in that is I'm playing a song as part of the church play, as part of the youth play. That's basically my role and I love what I do for my church and for my community. It's been amazing.

MEREANI: Wow. That will be your final performance for the year at church?

RITA: That will be my final performance.

MEREANI: Oh wow. Then, I hear you're off to Samoa after that.

RITA: Yeah, I'm off to Samoa for a nice Holiday.

MEREANI: Well, good luck with your church performance and big love to all the Samoa family as well who have supported you in all your music endeavors and safe trip to Samoa.

RITA: Thank you very much.

MEREANI: Thank you so much for joining us this afternoon at 3CR, and everyone, that was Rita Telesia. You can find her on Facebook and YouTube. Show your love and support for her and have a wonderful afternoon. Keep tuning in for the rest of the day at 3CR and a big mole from MEREANI and Rita.

RITA: Tofa soifua!