Nine years strong: Rowan's Walk lights up the darkness



Kesi-Maree Prior



Walkers and community gathered at the Hedland Health Campus for the 2026 Rowan's Walk. *Picture: supplied.*

Ahead of World Suicide Prevention Day, Rowan's Walk is celebrating nine years of bringing Pilbara communities together through remembrance, lived experience, connection and hope.

Content warning: This article discusses suicide and the loss of loved ones.

As people around the world prepare to mark World Suicide Prevention Day tomorrow, September 10, a community-led initiative born in Port Hedland has already spent nine years turning conversations about suicide prevention into collective action.

Rowan's Walk brings families, communities, and services together to remember and honour those who have died by suicide, support those carrying grief and remind anyone going through difficult times that they do not have to walk alone.

The walk was established by Rowan Dann, a proud Nyamal man who grew up in Port Hedland, in Western Australia's Pilbara region.

While he was still a student at Hedland Senior High School, Rowan lost his beloved aunty to suicide. Faced with overwhelming grief, he wanted to raise awareness, create hope and make a difference in his community.

Supported by staff at Hedland Senior High School, and joined by community and government organisations, Rowan led the organisation of the first Rowan's Walk in 2018. What began with one young man's determination to bring light into a time of darkness has grown into an important annual gathering driven by community, for community.

"Life is one of the amazing gifts that God has given us," Rowan said.

He believes the challenges people face can build strength and help them lend a hand to others.

"This is why we walk together, through the pain every year, to be together and help each other make it to the end of our journey, so that you know you are not alone."



Revena Maher (Rowan's mother), Kesi-Maree Prior and Rowan Dann at the 2026 Rowan's Walk ceremony, Port Hedland. *Picture: supplied.*

Each year, the walk creates a place to remember, understand and honour. It raises awareness of suicide prevention, encourages people to speak up and reach out, and strengthens the cultural, family and community connections which help keep people safe and well.

This year, close to 300 people joined Rowan's Walk in Port Hedland under the theme 'Light Up the Darkness'. Lived and living experience speakers shared stories of loss, courage, healing and hope, while local organisations and support services stood alongside the community.

Rowan's grandmother, Avril Maher, understands deeply why the gathering matters.

"After losing my daughter, son and husband all to suicide over a span of six years, Rowan's Walk allows us to honour their lives every year, as well as raise awareness of suicide prevention in our community and others," she said.

The impact of suicide is also carried by children and young people. Nine-year-old Clarence spoke about why he chose to walk.

"I'm walking because suicide took away my uncle, my aunty and my poppy," Clarence said. "They were my family. They made me laugh, gave me hugs and made happy memories with me. I miss them every single day.

"Sometimes people think kids don't understand loss, but we do. We feel it too. We carry it in our hearts."

These lived experience voices give Rowan's Walk its meaning and direction. They help the wider community understand how suicide affects families, friends, schools, workplaces, cultural and community groups, and that people with lived and living experience must guide suicide prevention, healing and change.

Over nine years, the movement has extended beyond Port Hedland. Karratha and Roebourne have held Rowan's Walk in previous years, while Newman and Paraburdoo continue to hold walks, carrying its message of remembrance, connection and hope across the Pilbara.

While community organisations, government agencies, local businesses and services contribute support, the strength of Rowan's Walk comes from the families and community members who continue to show up.

The walk demonstrates that suicide prevention does not happen only within services. It happens through connection, relationships, listening, shared stories and communities creating safe spaces for one another.

The 2026 World Suicide Prevention Day theme, 'Changing the Narrative on Suicide', carries the call to action 'Start the Conversation'. Rowan's Walk has been putting that call into action for almost a decade by moving the conversation from silence and shame towards openness, understanding, compassion and hope.

Rowan's uncle James Maher said every person lost must be remembered for the life they lived, not reduced to a number.

"Behind every statistic is a face, a name, a story that deserved more time," James said. "This is why we walk. Not because we have all the answers, but because we refuse to let people believe they have to carry their pain alone."

As Rowan's Walk approaches its tenth year, the community will continue to walk together, carry hope and create change for the future. Its message remains:

Today we honour.
Today we remember.
Today we understand.
Tomorrow we make a change.
Light up the darkness.

If this story raises concerns for you, call 13YARN on 13 92 76 to speak with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander crisis supporter, or Lifeline on 13 11 14. Both services are available 24 hours a day. If life is in danger, call 000.

Kesi-Maree Prior is a proud Bidjara and Kamilaroi woman with more than 25 years of experience across community services, mental health, suicide prevention and social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB). She is an accredited LivingWorks ASIST, I-ASIST and safeTALK/YARN trainer with extensive experience in culturally-responsive facilitation, program development and community-led initiatives. Kesi-Maree is a research fellow with the Kwop Boorn Djenara Centre at the University of Western Australia, contributing to projects that strengthen the SEWB of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 2025 she received the Western Australian LiFE award for outstanding contribution to suicide prevention, was highly commended at the National LiFE Awards and received the 2025 AHCWA ACCHS service Award.

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