



So...podcast – Episode 22

Alix Simpson

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John: I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that I'm currently on, the Wurundjeri and the Boon wurrung people of the Kulin nation. I would also like to pay my respect to elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that sovereignty has not been ceded. We are on stolen land and I am forever grateful that I'm able to live and work on this beautiful land. Greetings, John McKenna, So...Podcast. I'm going to walk the talk with Alix Sampson. Alix, would you like to introduce yourself please?

Alix: Hi John, thanks for having me. Before we start I would just like to acknowledge the land on which we're meeting, or I'm on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people on the call, listening to our podcast today, I don't think that sovereignty was ever ceded and we have a lot to do in terms of reconciliation. So I'm Alix Sampson, I'm a 28 year old bisexual woman and I used to live in Brunswick and I started Brunswick Sole Mates.

John: And that's what caught my eye when I was scanning Facebook and doing lots of things, I thought Sole Mates, what a great name. Obviously let's talk about the name, Sole Mates. So that part on your shoe is spelt... let's go through, how'd the name come up? Let's go through for people who don't know what a sole is.

Alix: Yes, so Brunswick Sole Mates is a play on words. I was trying to find a funky name to call my walking group and the sole of the foot came to mind and the connection between people, so S O L E Mates is what I came up with.

John: Love it, love it. Very catchy.

Alix: It has been mistaken for a dating group before though, so that's not great.





John: We're talking a walking group and I want to start by hearing from you why, why do it? What's it all about? What inspired you?

Alix: It was birthed organically I guess because I love to go for walks before work and after work around my suburb in the local parks, and I felt really unsafe doing that on my own. So I reached out to my local community on a Facebook group and just asked if anybody else was feeling the same way, and I found that a lot of people were, wasn't just me experiencing this feeling of fear being outside after dark or before sunrise. And I just realised there was an opportunity to connect people at our community to walk together and feel safe doing so.

John: Alix, the word fear for people around the world have different views to what fear means. So what do you mean when you say fear? Was it the beeping of the horn, was it the stare, was it the approaches? Could you share a bit more about that?

Alix: Definitely. It's a feeling of being watched as you're walking past a park, it's a feeling of always having to check over your shoulder, it's that feeling you get when you're walking and you carry your keys between your knuckles at night. These feelings of fear are instilled, especially in women, because of things that happen in our communities. And I really don't think that we should be changing the way that we live our lives and what we want to be doing. And I want to go for walks damn it, so I will make sure that I can go for a walk safely because I'm not going to change what I do to live my life, I'm just going to do it in a safer and calculated way.

John: You mentioned that you used to carry the keys in your fist with a key standing out. Now I know what you mean but other, people listening probably don't know. What are you talking about carrying keys in your hand? Why? And tell us more about that.

Alix: It's something I've done since moving to Melbourne in Australia. I have generally lived a little bit of a walk away from a train station so when coming home from work at night time I put my keys in between each knuckle so that I've got basically a guard of keys poking out so that I'm ready, if someone were to come near me I'm basically ready for an attack and I'm able to defend myself.





John: So I think that might surprise a lot of people because people that have come from overseas to Australia especially get quite surprised when, especially if they're not watching mainstream television or media. The people that I've met, Alix, say 'what do you mean Melbourne's not a safe place?' And it's not. People are sleeping on trains. People are always plugged into their mobile phones. And that's cool but I don't think we can underestimate some of the terrible things that have happened. And is there any one particular incident that sticks in your mind that's really concerned you?

Alix: There's been quite a few incidents that I can think of, you know. Just in the inner of north Melbourne Jill Meagher, Eurydice Dixon, all these women that have been attacked just living their lives, and just trying to get from A to B and, you know, pay my respects to them, and there's absolutely nothing that they did wrong or could've done to prevent this. It's really on the people that are not acting in the right way with consideration of their community and other people, and being really selfish.

John: So obviously a walking group, people who are likeminded, share the same view, all they want to do is get out and socialise, create friendship. What are other benefits you're hearing from people? The ones that have been in your groups, why are they feeling good about it? What do they share with you?

Alix: I know I said it was, you know, birthed out of a need for safety but definitely some of the founding members have been in it for the connection, for the human connection. I know one of our members, Anita, she works from home and so when she's working from home all day every day it's really an opportunity for her to come on a walk and speak with people for perhaps the first time in person that day or that week and really build those connections outside of the walking group. You know I think of these people like my friends and connect with them about all sorts of things outside the walking group and we all live in the same community. So it's also about connecting people that live near one another and can call upon each other when they need to.





John: Obviously being a founder of setting this group up you must get a great thrill just watching from a distance the different types of connections that happen. Any stories you can share along those lines?

Alix: I think it's been really nice to see that even though I've had to move out of Brunswick at the moment because of what's happening with Coronavirus, I've relocated to Altona Meadows. But it's been nice to get the notifications that the group is still going and that people are still using it to walk alongside someone else. So that's probably the nice part of it for me. And hearing about people setting up their own Sole Mates in other locations, like Footscray Sole Mates and St Kilda Sole Mates, you know it won't be long and I'll set up my own Altona Sole Mates.

John: Watch this space.

Alix: Yeah.

John: For other people considering doing something like this, what are the fundamental basics you need to have? And obviously you don't read out a list of rules that people must follow, but ideally you want to have some sort of structure whilst keeping it organic.

Alix: Yeah definitely. And I've given some help to the people that have set up the other Sole Mate groups around Melbourne, and just let them know that they're welcome to use the framework that I've set up with Brunswick Sole Mates in that it's welcoming of everybody. So there's no specifics around a person's gender or their sexuality or their cultural background that they must be, anybody and everybody is welcome. That's one thing that I think is really important. And another thing is that the safety around the group itself is of utmost importance. So having membership questions for people to even join the group, just to remind them that whilst it is a group to connect people, anybody can join so they need to keep their safety front of mind when sharing locations and meeting up with just one other person. So the safety within the group is something that needs to be monitored as well.

John: Obviously things such as Facebook play a big role in starting it up. What about if you don't have Facebook, how can people be involved in a group without Facebook?





Alix: It's a good question and something I haven't come across, probably through not having connected with people directly that are in that situation. But I would say that if someone wants to come on the walks, perhaps the way to get informed about them is to have that one person that connects them to the Facebook group and they can be updated on when the walks are happening and what location they're going to be at and what the planned route is, because the Facebook group really gives us opportunity to connect with one another and make those plans, you know, only a few days in advance. So when we might make a plan on Sunday to go for a walk on Wednesday, and if that one person doesn't have Facebook perhaps they need to get told by, you know, a friend or a family member that is in the Facebook group, go, 'hey, this is where you need to be if you want to go for a walk with that group in your community'.

John: So the average walk would go for, what, an hour or half an hour? How does it work?

Alix: It really depends on what the group want to do. I tend to like to go for a walk for about 30 to 45 minutes and then I'm a bit tuckered out, not only from the walk but also from the social aspect of it. So when I first started the group we also had, I wanted to make people feel comfortable, especially if you're neurodivergent and wanting to connect with people but not have to feel like you're needing to socialise. So we would have antisocial social walks as well where people can rock up with headphones and still come on a walk but not necessarily need to interact. And I'm happy to go on a walk like that for much longer than a walk where you have to socialise as well. So it could be from half an hour to an hour and a half or so.

John: Wow. I like that, I really do because, you know, traditionally you'd say, okay, going to walk and talk, you could talk, got to be nice to each other. But there is something where people just want to be with another person that you trust and feel comfortable with, so it's not about having to talk.

Alix: Yeah exactly.

John: Really interesting. Off topic a little bit, but I was reading something the other day about body doubling, which is basically different parts of the world, as long as you've





got someone with you in that space, it might even be online, and you don't need to talk but you know there's another person there on a similar journey. So it's fascinating.

Alix: Yes.

John: So for those people who are listening and say, okay, I'm going to go and do my own 'cause I like this, what's the first step they need to consider?

Alix: Just join Brunswick Sole Mates. Join a Sole Mates group that already exists just to get a feel for what the framework is and how you think it'll best work in your community, and adapt it the way you need to.

John: Pretty simple. Sometimes some of the best ideas are simple and basic. Alix, thanks for coming onto the So...Podcast and sharing your story.

Alix: Thanks for having me, I really appreciate it.

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