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## Warrnambool's Kajol Eagle talks about her life and moving from an Indian orphanage to Australia

Katrina Lovell

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**Kajol Eagle has overcome more than most – adopted from orphanage, endured 20 brain surgeries and a life-threatening car accident – but it's her acts of kindness that shine bright.**

When Kajol Eagle took out a Warrnambool youth achievement award for kindness, resilience and compassion, she lived up to the title by passing on her \$200 prize to others in need.

Last week she handed over the cheque to Warrnambool Foodshare but in her 26 years, Kajol has overcome more than most.

She was adopted from an Indian orphanage at the age of 11 months, has endured 20 brain surgeries, and had to learn to walk and talk again after a car accident at age 15.

After all she has gone through, Kajol has devoted much of her life to helping others – whether its setting up a fund to help educate those at the same orphanage she was adopted from, or helping the migrants and refugees feel welcome when they arrive in Warrnambool, she has plans to do more.



Home: Kajol Eagle was one of Warrnambool's youth achiever award winners.

Kajol's parents – Carol and John – had already adopted two other children before they brought her back to their Camperdown home. "My older brother is from Fiji and my older sister is from Sri Lanka, so it's a very multicultural family," she said.

In 2017 and 2019 Kajol visited the orphanage in Napur, India – about two hours from Mumbai – where she had spent the first 11 months of her life, just to see how it had changed. It was a visit that she said left her with a sense of hope.

As a baby, Kajol was one of more than 250 children living in what at the time was an overcrowded orphanage. "The babies were just in one small room, we were quite malnourished. We didn't have enough food," she said of the conditions 25 years ago.

"There was not enough people to look after us and any time the babies cried we just had blankets over our cots because no one wanted to attend to babies. So we were kind of deprived – deprived of light, deprived of food, deprived of love.

"Unfortunately it was a very common thing."

But life at the orphanage has improved for the 50 girls and babies that now call it home. "The girls are looked after. They have their own dormitories. They're healthy and well fed. They're attending school and it's a lot better," she said.

"The government has stepped in. Thankfully there is a better rate of adoption now."

Kajol said that while she was thankful to be adopted at 11 months, there were so many orphans who were not as lucky as she was. "Education is an important way to get out of poverty," she said

"I was lucky enough to get an education. I thought I might as well give those who weren't able to be as lucky as me and to give them an education."

So Kajol set up an education fund which goes towards ensuring the orphanage can get a computer and projector so the kids can study better.

"They're getting more education now thanks to all the funding," she said.

The education fund she set up, along with her work volunteering with the F Project and Brophy's language cafe to help the multicultural migrant community feel welcome when they arrive in Warrnambool were just some of the reasons she took out a Warrnambool youth award last month in the 19–25 age group

"I was very excited and I'm very honoured because I had 20 other worthy people nominated, so I'm very proud to be among them," she said. "I'm just trying to do the best I can with what I have.

"I'm very active in human rights and I'm into the Amnesty International group and hoping to join Oxfam if I have the time."

Kajol donates money to Sri Lankan housing projects and sponsors a girl named Ruwani to continue her education from high school into university where she hopes to become a nurse and help support her family.

She also shares her story as part of Road Trauma Support Services Victoria in the hope that it saves others from having to go through what she went through.

"When I was 15 I had a motor vehicle accident, and I use that in order to help others to be aware of the risks of motor vehicle accidents and what can happen and hopefully prevent any more of those from happening," she said.

"I was on a school camp and I was just crossing to a tram near Flinders Street and got hit by a speeding car.

"I was in a coma for about four days and I was paralysed right down the right side. I received a severe acquired brain injury.

"The doctors didn't know if I was going to make it and, if I did, I probably wouldn't be independent."

The accident happened in November 2009. Earlier that year Kajol had undergone brain surgery for severe epilepsy, but complications meant she had to have more than one surgery.

She had only just recovered from her fifth major surgery when the accident happened.

Within hours of arriving in Melbourne for a three-week camp with her year 9 classmates from Ballarat Grammar, she was back in hospital.

She had been crossing the road to get to a tram with a friend during the school lunch break when she was hit.

At the time of accident, her mum Carol said it was the extensive brain surgery which Kajol had undergone to help treat her epilepsy in the weeks before the accident that saved her life.

"She's had a very significant subdural bleed," she said at the time.

"Her surgeon said she would have died at the scene except that she already had a craniectomy which allowed for the blood and swelling to escape from her skull."

Part of Kajol's skull had been removed before the accident, a procedure which had taken her away from boarding school for seven weeks.

She spent more than three months in hospital recovering from the crash and over the years she has undergone 20 brain surgeries.

"I had to relearn how to walk again, talk again and how to eat properly," Kajol said.

***"I had to relearn how to walk again, talk again and how to eat properly."***

Kajol Eagle

"I'm no longer paralysed but I have this thing called neglect so basically my right doesn't work as well as it used to. I have a lot of fatigue, pain and mobility issues. I can't last a day without needing a sleep.

"I live independently but I still have a lot of trouble. I am lucky to have the support of the Warrnambool community, the medical community and my parents."

Kajol said she tried to go back to school for two years after the accident but she was so sick she could only do one subject.

"My health became very complicated so in the end I couldn't do year 12," she said. But that hasn't stopped her helping others get the best education they can.

"Living with an invisible condition is very hard, I may look normal on the outside but inside I struggle with a lot of things," she said.

"I think we should accept that everyone is fighting their own battles regardless the size and do the best they can with what they got. I know that I am certainly going to try and live to the best of my ability"