

Music intro ([00:00](#)):

Denise ([00:05](#)):

Hey everyone, this month is welcome month in our Velvet Ashes community, and this month we welcome you to season two of the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast. And to our new format. As you listen to this month's episode, you'll get to hear a bit about who Velvet Ashes is and why we have this weird name and what you can look forward to in the coming months. But we start everything new off with our first Living Legacy story as we highlight the story of a woman dear to our community here. I can't wait for you to hear today's episode. Thanks for joining us for season two of the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast.

Denise ([00:48](#)):

Hey, welcome everybody to Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast. Welcome to all of the women out there who are listening, and I don't know if there's any men listening, maybe just ones that I'm related to, but we wanna welcome you to season two of the Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast. I'm Denise Beck, the executive director here at Velvet Ashes, and I'm joined with Sarah Hilkemann, our program director. Hey, Sarah.

Sarah ([01:10](#)):

Hey, welcome everyone to season two.

Denise ([01:13](#)):

We're jumping in with both feet. We're just so excited, um, for what we have to offer. Actually, Sarah. We're changing things up a little bit here in season two, but even before we get into that, I realize that maybe some people listen to this podcast and don't even know what Velvet Ashes is, aside from this odd name, Velvet Ashes. Um, so I thought maybe, maybe we should give people a little bit of an introduction into who is Velvet Ashes and why do we even put this podcast out?

Sarah ([01:44](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So to start, Velvet Ashes is a community for women who are serving cross-culturally. And so we really want to come alongside women and just bring encouragement and resources, you know, through the joys and challenges of living outside of your passport country, um, and living in another culture. So, yeah, that's, that's the quick version. Um, so the name is, is kind of interesting. It comes from the velvet ash tree, which can thrive in really unlikely places like the desert. And so that's really our heart for women.

Denise ([02:22](#)):

Yeah. As we want to create resources that help them thrive in their unlikely place. And, and we know that like as far as even those who serve cross-culturally that do it for the purpose of taking the gospel to places where it isn't, that 70% of those are women. And so we feel like if we can sit in this space with them and bring them courage, encouragement, resources, community, that we're maybe helping them in their journey, helping them do what God has called them to do, and making that place a place that doesn't seem so lonely to be and to sit. And so, so Velvet Ashes was born and part of that has been a lot of things, blogs, connection groups, retreats, online retreats, in-person retreats, a membership site, and this podcast that we started one year ago. Um, and it began with, let's, let's retell those stories of women that inspired us to go, maybe the stories we heard as children, the stories that we heard at VBS,

um, those legacy stories from the past of women who have gone before us and made a difference in this space.

Denise ([03:32](#)):

But we also realized that our community is full of women who are doing that right now, that are living the legacy. And so in season two, we not only want to bring you stories of those women, the living legacies, but also we wanna bring you topics that women who are serving face today, topics, you know, that weigh heavily on you, that affect you, that challenge you, that you know, you wrestle with. And you'd love to hear how others are wrestling in that way. So, so season two will bring you three different things. You will get a Living Legacy story, you will get a topic that women serving cross-culturally face today, and we will still be bringing you those legacy stories of women from the past. So season two's got a lot for you. We're really excited about that. And, and of course it would only make absolute sense that we would start out with the heart of who we are and why we do what we do right here in our community. So Sarah, why don't you introduce what we're doing today and who is joining us.

Sarah ([04:39](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. We are so grateful as we start with our first, um, sort of living legacy story to have Ruth Potinu joining us. Ruth is part of the Velvet Ashes community, and she's on our writing team. Ruth and her husband and their three kids live and work in Papua New Guinea. And Ruth has spent a significant portion of her life overseas, uh, which we'll get into more as we go along today. Ruth is the author of the book, *Permission to Mourn: Engaging with Culture Story and Scripture in a Quest for Healing with Hope*. Ruth, thank you so much for being with us.

Ruth ([05:21](#)):

Thank you so much for having me.

Sarah ([05:23](#)):

Yeah, absolutely,

Denise ([05:24](#)):

Ruth, we're just, we're absolutely thrilled. And, and you know, Sarah mentioned your book *Permission to Mourn* and you know, you really, you sit in that space in your current ministry of grief and grieving and the ministry that happens in that space. And, and whenever I read your book, there's one story that that really seems pretty foundational to your beginning of this journey and that has to do with your sister. Do you mind just starting right there with us today in that story?

Ruth ([05:58](#)):

Sure. Yeah. Um, my twin sister, she passed away the day that we turned eight and a half. It was very sudden she got malaria. And malaria isn't really common in the area where we lived. We lived up in the mountains, but we traveled and I don't know, um, she just got sick. It was very, very suddenly. Um, my mom is a nurse. The doctor had just, she'd been sick about a week and the doctor had just been out to check on her that day, 'cause we had moved off the main mission station into like a little village. I grew up in Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo. So it was very sudden I'd gone to church that morning and she'd kind of been getting better, but then she just passed away. My mom was carrying her and just she'd taken to her to the toilet and she was like carrying her back to the room and she just like stopped breathing.

Ruth ([06:49](#)):

And my mom did CPR right away. She's a nurse. And uh, she was just gone. So it was such a shock, like to the whole community and everything. So that definitely put me on a path, um, to just experiencing how God meets you in those like hard, unexplainably hard places. So yeah, that, that was definitely a big, it's been a big part of my journey and eventually wrote the book and things like that. But yeah, I think when you go through something hard, you're kind of like a magnet and you just draw other people around you that have also gone through hard things. And I know in my parents' ministry it opened a lot of doors as well 'cause a lot of our Congolese friends that when Americans get sick, they go back to their home country and we don't see them kind of walk this experience of going through the suffering that we face every day. So in some ways it was extremely hard and in other ways it was really beautiful. Some of the friendships that came from that.

Denise ([07:48](#)):

I can't even imagine, Ruth, what you felt not only just losing a sister, but losing a twin sister while you were on the field. And, and did you feel that you were also setting that example, um, to others around as they watched you grow up then there in the Congo? Um, you, you mentioned your parents, you know, did you feel the weight of that as an eight year old or you know, was it just part of what was shaping you into who you would become?

Ruth ([08:20](#)):

Yeah, I would definitely say it was a shaping factor. We were just about to take a furlough right before she passed away. And so we kind of took an early furlough. She passed away in July. And so we took a furlough in November just to be with family over Christmas. But I know for a lot of my friends, like that was the first friend that had passed away for them and um, different people. Yeah. So it was you kind of walking through it together in a way. And we didn't end up going back to Africa, which was pretty hard 'cause we had planned to, so we just kind of left all our stuff. We went on furlough and while, while we were on furlough, the Civil War broke out and they said, uh, sorry, don't come back. Everyone just evacuated. And like, our house was trashed and, you know, all that stuff. So in a way, the hard part sometimes is that we didn't get to like go back and say goodbye. I, I still haven't been back. But, um, so many people were going through so much grief and continually in that area. It's just one of those hotspots of the world that since 1996 I think has kind of been in such upheaval.

Denise ([09:25](#)):

Oh yeah. I didn't, I didn't realize that. As I sit across from you, our, our story has some echoes of similarity when we left for a medical reason, didn't get to return as expected. And I only can imagine so many sitting here listening have faced that same unexpected goodbye that they weren't planning. Um, but one of the things that I would love to get into is what you alluded to is that you grew up on the field, but that isn't even where it began for you and your family. Um, you are a fourth generation missionary. And so would you mind just even sharing a little bit about the legacy of your family?

Ruth ([10:10](#)):

Sure. I love that idea of legacy 'cause I think it's often, so often somebody's story leads us to where we are. And yeah, my great grandparents first went out to Africa in 1921. They went to Congo and they took like a riverboat down the Nile and they walked 19 days to get to where they were going. They were there during World War II and they couldn't take a furlough. My grandfather was born in Congo. They also lost a baby daughter who died after three days old. She, um, so they have their own stories and I

don't even know all their stories 'cause it's so far back. But, and then from, they had four boys and from those four boys, three became missionaries as well. One in Irian Jaya, one worked in Sudan, another in Kenya, Congo was my grandfather. He was a builder. So he built a lot of like the missionary kids schools or the, you know, different bible colleges and things like that. So he was more of a hands-on kind of person. And then my mom and my dad, after they got married, they also went to Congo, which was Zaire at the time. Hmm. So there's that, that legacy of just kind of, and then one of my cousins is also working in South Sudan. So I love that kind of in the family. There's just still been some trickles of mission work and I don't think I ever felt pressured to be a missionary, but it was very much a natural thing that was supported.

Sarah ([11:30](#)):

Yeah. Can you talk about that Ruth, a little bit? I, that was one of the things I was curious about was if you did feel this pressure because you have this amazing legacy. So what sort of led you to feel like you personally were called to live cross-culturally?

Ruth ([11:47](#)):

Yeah. Uh, like I said, we left very suddenly. So we had all, we had planned to come back. We left our stuff there and things and you know, we were just taking a furlough. And so when we didn't go back, my parents just kind of waited for a while. Is it gonna open up? Is it not? And then they felt led to stay in the US and they worked with international students so they were still involved in missions. And I was always around like people from everywhere, which was wonderful <laugh>. Um, and when we went to Congo, I was eight months old. So for me, like an airport is where I feel most at home. So yeah. But I don't think I ever, um, felt pressured to be a missionary. And I didn't see missionaries as people on a pedestal because I knew so many of them.

Ruth ([12:30](#)):

And I know that they're imperfect people, but it's amazing how God works through their lives. So I think that was something that I noticed. I know some people, they struggle, they get to the mission field and they're like, oh, these people aren't perfect. They have their issues too. And for me, I'm like, yeah, I know. So yeah, you're gonna have team conflict and you're gonna have some of that stuff. It's part of the part of the ride. But yeah, just hearing those stories, especially my Uncle Ray who worked in South Sudan, um, when he went, he said, I'm gonna build the Bible college first and then my own house. So they lived in tents for like five years while they built the Bible college. And then they built their own house. And his son, my uncle Ron, he was a missionary pilot and at one point he was captured by Sudanese rebels and held hostage for several weeks.

Ruth ([13:18](#)):

And it was just an amazing story how he was rescued. It was like the day before his 30th birthday and he just prayed. He's like, God, either I wanna be rescued or take me to heaven. And that day he, he was rescued. And so you read stories, but these are also current stories. So I think for me, I love to read biographies like Mary Slessor and people like that, that just, they were ordinary people and they did extraordinary things. But also having those very people in my family was really inspirational 'cause you just hear all the stories, the and, and the normal ones too. Like they're not always the big, big stories. But the normal stories of how God got them through the every day and you know, the mailbox miracles, I saw that growing up when you would have nothing and then you go check the mailbox and there's a check or something.

Ruth ([14:07](#)):

Like you see it, you see that life of faith. So for me, that definitely did have an impact on my life. And uh, we lived in the US so from like eight, I was almost nine when we came back. And so then I, we, I did, I grew up in the US for a good chunk of my life. But then right before I started high school, I went on a mission trip to Kenya with our church and we went to Uganda as well. And it was a really good trip. And my dad and I stayed an extra two weeks just to go visit our cousins in Uganda. And during that time we went to an orphanage and it wasn't scheduled or anything, it was just like, oh, we're gonna go see this. Let's go to this orphanage as well. And we went there and there was a little baby, his name was Job and they'd found him in the trash dump.

Ruth ([14:53](#)):

And he just really touched my heart just to see his eyes. And he was barely talking and the other kids were playing, but he just, you know, he was barely functioning. And I just have such a heart for kids. And that was like a moment for me where I'm like, this is what I wanna do. I wanna go back to Africa and I wanna work with kids. And so I always had that, those two things on my heart, the stories of the legacies, both the biographies and the, you know, the family stuff. Not just family but people you meet on the missions field as well. They have their own stories. And then just that pull to come back and work with kids in disadvantaged situations. So those were two things that really played on my heart a lot as part of my calling. For college I ended up going to Moody Bible Institute. I went to community college first because my parents are like, sorry, we don't have the money. You're gonna kind of have to put yourself through college. And Moody's wonderful. They don't charge tuition, but they still have room and board, you know, so it's a huge blessing that they don't charge tuition, but you still have to, you know, pay an amount.

Denise ([15:57](#)):

Is that still, do they still not...

Ruth ([16:01](#)):

It's the case and it's incredible because they want students to graduate without debt is the goal. So that's a really a huge blessing to get a college education and only have to pay room and board.

Denise ([16:15](#)):

With four kids in college right now, I really wish I would've known that.

Ruth ([16:18](#)):

It's a great school. Yeah, no, it really is. It's a, it's a huge blessing. My parents had gone there, that's where they met, they met at Moody. And so I've always heard again the stories and it's really neat to go there and you see the names of people like Betty Stam, but then I could also find my relative's names on there. And they don't do that anymore, but they had a plaque in the chapel. Anyone that had served as a missionary, you could see their name on the wall. So again, that legacy idea, which is really, really neat. And sometimes you're like, I wonder who else had this room that I'm having for, you know, three years or whatever.

Denise ([16:49](#)):

Oh my goodness. Yes.

Ruth ([16:50](#)):

You think about the people that come in and out. And so yeah, it was a really special experience. But I went to community college for two years first and got my associate degree. And that was actually a really good thing for me to take some secular classes and kind of make my faith my own and things like that. I found that really, um, challenging but also really, really good 'cause sometimes you go straight from, I was homeschooled from second grade through high school. I went to a missionary kid school for first grade. But when we moved into the village then I was homeschooled after that. So it was good. It was like a good balance of kind of making faith my own and then going to Moody as well. But I didn't study missions at Moody 'cause I, even though that's what I wanted to do, I really loved to write. So I did communications and I'm really glad I did that. I never lost that want and desire to do missions, but I just knew that I also had that desire to, to develop that writing more in myself. So you can do both. You can do the things that you're created to do and you can, God will use that later when you're on the mission field.

Denise ([17:54](#)):

I was talking to a woman, uh, a month or so ago who was talking herself to a 90 year old veteran who had served cross-culturally. And she told her, she goes, I feel like all your life you see, it's like this big funnel of God putting things that seem like they don't match up. They're random. And then as your life goes on and he hones it, you see what he was preparing you for all along. So I love that even in your story we're seeing, you know, this love for writing that he put in your heart that later will play out to bless so many people. Yeah. So I have to ask really quick, because I didn't at the beginning. Do you have other brothers and sisters?

Ruth ([18:36](#)):

I do. I have two brothers and a sister. My twin sister Allison. Um, so I have an older brother and then it's me and my twin sister. And Allison was actually named after my mom's roommate who was Allison Sharp. And her family was killed during the Simba Rebellion that happened in the sixties. So again, just another piece of legacy. Um, yeah. Yeah. 'cause Congo has such a, such a hard history at times. So yeah. And then I have a younger sister and a younger brother and they're all in the US.

Denise ([19:10](#)):

Okay. So in your family, you are the one that's continuing the legacy of cross-cultural life?

Ruth ([19:17](#)):

Yeah, my sister, she's married to a, he is a part-time pastor, but yeah. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> mm-hmm <affirmative>, some, some are in the US doing ministry and some are overseas doing ministry. But yet from my immediate family, yes.

Denise ([19:29](#)):

That's a great point. The legacy doesn't just have to be on foreign soil. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you can continue the legacy of the, the heart of that anywhere that you are in any profession actually that you do. Okay. So you're at Moody and you assume graduate.

Ruth ([19:47](#)):

I did, thankfully <laugh>. Yeah,

Denise ([19:49](#)):

Yay. That's a huge thing.

Ruth ([19:52](#)):

I was there for three years and after I graduated I was like, I wanna go back to Africa. This is my, my drive. But I, even though it's a debt-free school, I had to borrow about \$2,000 from my dad just to pay off the rest of my tuition. So instead of being able to just jump on a plane, I ended up working for three years. And that was a really tough three years. I worked for a Christian television station for a while and then I had a very random opportunity to reopen the local newspaper in my parents' town, which was something that everybody else wanted me to do, but I didn't wanna do it. And I did it. And I went through some serious depression during that year because I wanted to be in Africa. And it got to the place where it was just really, really bad.

Ruth ([20:41](#)):

I remember one day I, I just got to a place I didn't wanna wake up in the morning, it was that like severe. And I was driving my car one day over a bridge and I just like saw myself driving over the bridge and I was like, I can't do this anymore. I can't stay stuck here. Um, but that day an article I had written for a magazine in Northern Ireland was published and they ended up featuring it on the front page of the magazine. And that small little act was like, okay, wherever I am, God can still use me. And that kind of like pulled me out of the funk that I was in and I decided to close the newspaper. I moved to St. Louis with my best friend and her husband. Um, missions is always a community like, you don't ever do anything on yourself.

Ruth ([21:22](#)):

They're like, yeah, sure you can come stay with us for free. And so I worked as a nanny for a few months, um, and I was like, who's gonna wanna hire a nanny for a few months? Because I wanted to be honest with them. Like, I'm leaving in May and it's January. But there was a family, they're like, oh that's perfect. Our au pair is coming in May or whatever. So it worked out. There were two different, well three different families that I worked for and I was just able to save money to buy a plane ticket. Um, my sister was graduating, she also went to Moody. So I was like, okay, I'll go to her graduation and then I'll go work in Kenya. Friends of mine, um, were starting a children's home and so they were looking for people to come and work at the children's home, which was perfect.

Ruth ([22:01](#)):

Like, that was like my heart to do that type of work. So the day I moved to or the week I moved to St. Louis, it was my birthday and that week I got a nannying job. And then when that one finished, 'cause the au pair was coming that next week, I got another nannying job for a couple that had like eight week old twins and they just needed someone full-time just for a little bit. And then they were gonna go, you know, it's just perfect the way that God works. And so it was a big step of faith to close the newspaper to move to, you know, do all that. And, but it all fell in place. Like I think sometimes you have to take that step, not always knowing the answers and then things fall in place and if you wait for everything to kind of be all set, you're gonna be waiting and waiting and waiting.

Ruth ([22:43](#)):

So yeah. And I had a friend that I'd gone to Moody with and um, she said, Hey, on your way to Kenya, come visit me in Northern Ireland. And so I was like, yeah, sure, why not? And I was traveling with

another friend of mine, she came to Kenya for two weeks and then she was heading back. So I was traveling with her, which was very fun, good memories. Um, and that's actually that trip is when I met my husband, which is a crazy story on its own. So just the timing of it all. And I remember thinking just randomly one day, 'cause that three years was really hard. And I thought, what if the timing of this makes it so that I meet my husband? You know, it was just one of those random thoughts in my mind and I never thought about it again.

Ruth ([23:19](#)):

And that's exactly what happened, like the timing of that three years. My husband, he's from Papua New Guinea and he was going to Belfast Bible College and he was good friends with my friend Lindsay's husband. And so we just met like randomly it was um, my friend's husband's birthday and they were kind of taking us around and there was one extra seat in the car and they're like, Hey Simon, you wanna come with? And he is like, yeah, sure, why not? And so <laugh>, that's how we met. It was just like five minutes talking and we just, neither of us was like, oh my goodness, love at first sight. It was just such random conversation. But later we stayed in touch and he also has a, a background in missions and um, that's what really drew us together. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but I didn't think of I, like I was on my way to Kenya. I didn't even say bye to him. Right.

Denise ([24:05](#)):

Africa was calling. Yeah,

Ruth ([24:07](#)):

Exactly. That was, that was on my mind. So that, that was the first time we met. It would've been June 1st, 2013. Yeah.

Denise ([24:15](#)):

Oh my goodness. Yeah. Okay, so after Ireland you finally make your way to Africa.

Ruth ([24:24](#)):

Yeah, I worked at that children's home for nine months and it was one of the best nine months of my life. It was absolutely wonderful. I got to work with an amazing team and the kids were amazing and it was really, really neat. And during that,

Denise ([24:40](#)):

This is in Uganda?

Ruth ([24:40](#)):

It was in Kenya near Naivasha, Kenya, yeah. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Okay. Near Naivasha. So yeah, it was just such a amazing time where I just felt like I was getting to do what I loved. And um, even at one point, like I had, I'd met Simon, I think he sent me a friend request. I said, okay, yeah. 'cause I remember, oh, if I was here I'd probably be friends with him. That was kind of my thinking, but it, it didn't go beyond that. And then we messaged a little bit, but just very general. And then I kind of stopped and then later he messaged me and he's like, Hey, I really want to get to know you. And I said, yeah, that's nice, but I'm gonna be in Kenya for the next five years. And that was my way, polite way of saying, no thank you.

Ruth ([25:19](#)):

And he wrote back and he's like, oh okay, I'm fine with that. And I was like, wait, what <laugh>, you're fine with that because normally guys are like, oh, nice to meet you. Have a great life. Right? Like that's, that's the response I'd gotten in the past. And so when he was willing to make space from my calling, that really like shocked me and I was like, oh, this could work <laugh>. Um, and so we did get to talk more and he came over and visited me during his Christmas break and things like that. So, which was wonderful 'cause it was like a month break and he got to see my life and um, we got to spend some time. So a lot of our relationship at the beginning was, you know, long distance. But we also got some really sweet moments of in-person time.

Ruth ([25:59](#)):

And again, we just both, he had worked in Mozambique and India and different places. So we both had that mission calling and he had also been praying, he was about to start his senior year and he said, God, I don't wanna go back as a single, I've been doing that for years and years, but I don't wanna go out looking for somebody so you have to bring somebody here. So I guess somehow my trip kind of like for him was like, oh, maybe she is the one and sparked those thoughts. So yeah, it ended up working out later he was able to go to the US and meet my family and things like that. But yeah, the children's home was wonderful. It ended on a really hard note when some of the leadership decisions, our team was like, we don't agree with this, we can't work anymore with some of the not great decisions being made. So we kind of ended up packing up within a day and saying bye to the kids and going back, which was really, really hard.

Denise ([26:51](#)):

Another abrupt goodbye. Yeah,

Ruth ([26:53](#)):

It was, yeah, it was extremely difficult. Again, one of those situations which a lot of people face in missions where you think this is the plan, this is how it's gonna go. And then something happens and you're like, oh, that door just closed and sometimes closed very quickly and you kind of have to regroup and go, okay, what's the plan now? And I had actually, I had recently gotten tickets to go back from my sister's wedding, but I had gotten tickets to return to Kenya as well. Like it was just going for a month kind of thing. So I followed that, I went back to the US and Simon was able to come during this, that trip and meet my family. And we got engaged at that point. And then we went to Northern Ireland for his graduation and then we decided to go back to Kenya together.

Ruth ([27:36](#)):

Um, and spent a three month prayer trip with YWAM in Mombasa just kind of like praying about, okay, God, we know that we wanna do missions but we don't wanna just do it for the sake of doing it. Where do you want us to serve? And that trip when I got back to Kenya, I just felt this like peace about saying goodbye to Kenya, which for me was huge 'cause I've always been East Africa, East Africa, East Africa. Like I can be in Congo, I can be in Uganda, I can be in Kenya, but I need to be in East Africa. Like that was the pull for me. And so that trip I think in a lot of ways was just a healing time for me. I wasn't in Naivasha, I was in Mombasa, which are two very different Kenyas, but I was still in Kenya, I was still around Swahili and the culture, which I love.

Ruth ([28:19](#)):

And it was just this beautiful time to just kind of like be able to say goodbye. And that's when God placed on both of our hearts separately to come back to Papua New Guinea, which is where Simon is from. Which was a bit of a cultural experience for him too because he'd been doing missions for years and years outside of Papua New Guinea. Yeah. So to go back as a missionary to your own country was kind of a, a cultural change for him. But also that time was really sweet 'cause we were both kind of like in not our own culture but together able to kind of like test out some of the like okay. You know, sometimes people would speak to him in Swahili and I would translate, you know, <laugh> and things like that. And so just that reminder of what is it like to be in an environment where you can't understand the language? What is it like to, you know, have to do some of those cross cultural things 'cause we were both in a different culture so I think it was good premarital counseling or premarital preparation. And then we went back to the US and got married in St. Louis, which was wonderful. We have a really wonderful church there. And then we left for Australia slash Papua New Guinea in April of 2015. And we said we would come for two years and it's been eight going on nine, so

Denise ([29:36](#)):

Yeah. Oh my goodness.

Ruth ([29:37](#)):

<laugh>.

Denise ([29:38](#)):

Yeah. So you are eight going on nine years in Papua New Guinea. What has your ministry grown into? What does it look like as you serve there?

Ruth ([29:50](#)):

Yeah, Papua New Guinea is a very unique country in a lot of ways Africa was a good preparation 'cause it's very much a tribal because country, a lot of places a rural, um, our ministry, we mainly have a ministry to widows and their children. We do a lot of skills training for them, helping them with baking skills or sewing skills or even getting them jobs. Working as a nanny with an expat family or something. 'cause there's no social services when a woman's husband dies, they're just kind of on their own. And so that was something that was really on Simon's heart since he's from here to help those ladies who are in very vulnerable situations. Um, most of the things in our ministry they, we would come, come under the umbrella of empowering life. So we also work with young people. We also try to support local PNG missionaries as they serve around the world.

Ruth ([30:38](#)):

Simon does a lot of teaching and preaching and I'm also asked to do some teaching sometimes. So yeah, that's kind of the umbrella of what we do. We spend most of our time in the capital city of Port Moresby. And then we spend usually about three months outta the year up in Simon's Village in Mount Hagen, which is beautiful in the mountains, very rural, no electricity, no running water <laugh>. So it's like you have both the city which is loud, noisy, you can't go on a walk by yourself. And then you have the village, which is gorgeous mountains and very, very rural <laugh>. You kind of have to, it's like a 45 minute flight. There's no road lengths. And then the roads have been better since like a 30 minute drive and then it's like a 30 minute walk 'cause you can't really drive. So it's just, yeah, it's very, very much a trek. So you go to the grocery store, you buy what you need and then you have to carry everything you bought down the mountain <laugh>.

Denise ([31:32](#)):

So you definitely don't overbuy only what you need. No.

Ruth ([31:36](#)):

And all the kids come and help you. So it's like this little train of people walking down the hill, which is really, really fun. But yeah.

Sarah ([31:43](#)):

Ruth, we um, mentioned at the start that your book is called Permission to Mourn. And we started with this story of losing your sister. How has this theme of sort of grief and mourning kind of kept through your life? How did you come to write a book about mourning?

Ruth ([32:00](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. Um, it was actually after my friend Alice died. She was a, a doctoral student from Kenya that my parents worked with 'cause they worked with international students. She died very suddenly of a brain aneurysm. And then one of my coworkers at the TV station at the time, her mom also passed away from cancer. And one thing I noticed is how hard it is to grieve in Western society compared to how communal it is in many other societies. Even when my sister died, like we were part of a choir and they just came and sat outside our house and sang hymns and it was so beautiful to just like, they knew that there wasn't anything they can do, but it was just their way of saying, we're here, we're here for you. No one is ever alone in their grief.

Ruth ([32:46](#)):

And PNG is very similar in that way. They have what's called a house cry. When someone passes away, people just come and sit with them. Like you're never alone. You're never expected to jump back into life. You're just allowed to, to be and to grieve. And I just see how when people are given that space, they actually heal so much better because it may be a slower process, but it's a much more sustainable process. And I think especially in Western cultures, we're often pushed to just, okay, you had your week, funeral's over, get back on with life. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And here one tradition that they do is when you lose someone really close to you, you just tie this red ribbon around your wrist. And so you can see throughout the, as you go about your day, oh this person has lost someone close to them.

Ruth ([33:31](#)):

Oh, it's just this visual reminder like they're going through something so maybe give them some grace. And I just think that's, there's so many things just naturally in the society that are there. And so that was a big part of why I wrote the book Permission to Mourn. And you see it in the Bible as well. Like there's Lamentations, like the Psalms have so much space to lament and say, this is hard. And I think so often in western circles we're just pushed to be like, it's hard but there's good and it's hard. But, and you always have that like silver lining. Mm-hmm. And then, which is it's true. There is good, God absolutely can use the hardest things of our life to often do the greatest amount of ministry. But he gives us space to say this is a broken world, this is painful, this, this is, this is raw.

Ruth ([34:19](#)):

And, and yeah, it's like a physical wound takes time to heal. An emotional wound also takes time to heal. So I think partly losing my sister, that's always been a part of my story since then. And also just walking

through it with different friends and seeing how different cultures make space for grief. The Jewish culture as well, they have that sitting with the family for seven days and for a year you recite a prayer, the same prayer. And it's just those things are really, really beautiful. And so that was kind of what inspired the book.

Denise ([34:49](#)):

Tell me about putting that book together. Did you invite others into that story with you as you tell the stories?

Ruth ([34:57](#)):

Definitely. That was one thing that I really wanted to do because grief is so different. Like with my sister, we lost her really suddenly and she was young, but some, like my friend, she, she was the first person to contribute an essay to the book and she lost her mom very slowly from cancer. So there's pre-grieving and um, there's so, but even you lose a grandparent and you think, oh it's okay. They live their life. There's still a hole that they leave. And so I wanted to have different stories. So after each chapter is an essay written by just, just a normal story, like they're not some big fancy, you know, famous person. They're just normal. What does everyday grief feel like? And I think the beautiful part of those essays is you can often say, yeah, I, I've experienced that or Wow, yes, that makes sense.

Ruth ([35:44](#)):

You know? Um, and stories are powerful. I love stories 'cause you can't argue with someone's story. <laugh>. Yeah. It's what they've experienced. It's how God's met them. It's, it's the day to day. And so I think that's one reason Jesus used stories so often is they just really speak to your heart and they help you get through. And I know from my mom, like often she'll go to funerals and um, she went to a funeral of one of her students who was hit by a train and she just shared with the mom a little bit and the mom said, you standing there gives me hope that one day I too will be able to kind of walk this road. So I think people are quick to say, oh, you know, like it's your story. I don't understand. And that's true. We have to give space for that.

Ruth ([36:25](#)):

We don't know exactly what other people are feeling, but we do know what grief feels like. And so because of that, I think so often we're afraid to say anything. 'cause we don't wanna say the wrong thing, but we don't have to say anything. We just have to show up and be a presence and just let people have space to grieve and to lament that, that there's heart in life. And it's not just death. Like, you know, me leaving those kids in Kenya. So suddenly that was a huge grief in my life. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and I got back to the US and I, I couldn't talk about it with a lot of people. There were very few people that I felt like, okay, this is a safe person, I can talk about it and process. And it took about two years for me to process that pain and hurt.

Ruth ([37:04](#)):

'cause it was, you know, it was real. And I think in ministry, a lot of people go through things like that. Whether what they went to do turned out differently within than what they wanted to do or they had to leave sooner. Or there's so many, um, griefs that you have to process when you're in cross-cultural work or even that life is hard, like <laugh> the daily life that you have to go through and you know that you have to grieve missing out on different things. Whether that's a birth of a you know, a a niece or a nephew and you don't get to be there. Those, you know, there's, there's beauty in cross cultural life, but

there's also a lot of pain in, you know, being away. Sometimes your heart's just in two places. <laugh> it is

Denise ([37:43](#)):

It is. Forever. I know. Forever.

Ruth ([37:46](#)):

Yeah. Forever.

Denise ([37:47](#)):

I, I wonder, as you know, we will link your book in these show notes so I'm sure people are gonna be curious about it. But who would you recommend, I mean when you're browsing books, a book on grief maybe isn't the the light read you'll pick up for your furlough or vacation, but, but maybe it needs to be. And who would you recommend pick up this book?

Ruth ([38:09](#)):

I think there were two people I wrote for um, one obviously people who are going through grief, whether that's loss of a loved one or just going through a a painful time. And also if you have a friend who's going through a painful time, I think one of the focuses the book is how to help other people walk through grief how to, um, not just like step back, but how to step in and be a comfort. Um, yeah, I think this, the essays especially I would say are powerful. They're my favorite part of the book. Um, because they just show like what's the process? And so often you see that grief takes time and grief is a journey and you're never gonna be the same from it. And that's okay. And also some of the beauty that is brought through grief. Even my friend who wrote about miscarriage in the book, she now fosters and they've, I think they have three little girls at the moment.

Ruth ([39:09](#)):

Something like, it's just been so amazing how this journey of her, she has three boys but she miscarried and lost a little girl and she's always wanted a little girl. So for her it wasn't just the loss of a baby but, and she couldn't have any more kids biologically. And so getting to see this last year as they've become foster parents and had a lot of little girls in their home has been just beautiful. And you think if that painful thing hadn't happened, would they have gone that route? Probably not. And so it's not that, you know, James talks about God sends good gifts, whatever he sends is good, death isn't good, death is the result of sin and brokenness and disease. But you know, like Joseph, he can take what is meant for evil and use it for good. And I think that's a really beautiful other side of grief that you see when you look back on it. You don't see it at the time 'cause you're in the middle of it and you know, our lives have chapters and, but when you look back you think, oh okay, that's something that God was doing and is doing in our lives.

Denise ([40:12](#)):

Ruth, you mentioned you know about your friend having children. Tell us about yours.

Ruth ([40:19](#)):

Sure. Um, my son Trevor is seven and Allison is four and Abigail is two. So they keep us very, very busy. A couple months ago I experienced a miscarriage, which was really hard. Um, I was actually the day that I

started to do the Velvet Ashes retreat and it's amazing how God met me in that space. Um, the theme was like the river of God's love and I could just see that like one of the exercises was like, picture yourself in the river. And some of the ladies like, I'm standing on the bank and I was like, I'm in the middle of the river. It's a rapid river. It feels crazy. It's not a peaceful like, and then the imagery about floating and like at the end of the retreat, just how God carries you in the hard like yes the river, the abundance, it can feel overwhelming and yet um, there's so much beauty in how he holds you in that hard too.

Ruth ([41:15](#)):

So it was, um, yeah the Velvet Ashes retreats have just been incredible. Um, I think one thing, our mission is really small and we're their only PNG missionaries. So for me, I've had to really kind of like build community and for I think it was about two years, I didn't really wasn't connected with any other expats. My husband's from here, we work in remote areas, but even in the city I just didn't, you know, didn't know many people. And so I was having, um, so I was praying for some friends and um, 'cause I'm like, you know, the honeymoon period is mm-hmm <affirmative> gone. I need some people to just, you know, do life with. And I'd gone to one bible study, which was nice, but they're all grandparent age and I was just like, God, I need some people who are kind of in the same season of life.

Ruth ([42:01](#)):

And so I met one lady, her name was Erin and she, her son was about the same age as my son. And um, I was like, okay, we're gonna do this. And she's just one of those incredible people who always has people over at her house and her husband travels a lot, but she would have single people over or people with kids over just join the chaos. And um, my aunt had sent me an email about Velvet Ashes and she's like, Hey, you should check this out. The one whose husband was a pilot in South Sudan. And I was like, oh, okay. I'd never heard of Velvet Ashes before. And that same day my friend Erin, we'd gotten together to go to the park and she's like, have you heard of Velvet Ashes? I was like, no I haven't. Well actually I did this morning my aunt sent me an email <laugh> and she's like, alright, let's do a retreat.

Ruth ([42:44](#)):

So I was like, okay, sure. So we did, and we've done a retreat every year since and now twice a year. And Erin has since moved, you know, as the expat community does. And it's always different people. I think this year we had seven different nationalities, which was so much fun and at the end we had like, 'cause a lot of the dads and kids will take the kids, the dads will take the kids for the day. And I was like, okay, we're just gonna do hamburgers and everybody join us at the last, um, session. And so I don't even know there was like 50 people in the house or something.

Denise ([43:20](#)):

Oh my goodness.

Ruth ([43:21](#)):

It was chaos. But it was like one of those beautiful moments where you're just like, this is God's abundant love and it was such a beautiful thing. And yeah, I think for me, especially being with a mission that's really small, which is wonderful, it serves our needs so well. But you have to be really intentional about doing your own member care and building your own community. And now we meet like twice a month on Saturdays and we have a regular Bible study and then we always do the retreats as well. And

it's just been so life giving and it has been the most amazing, amazing thing ever. So thank you Velvet Ashes, you really have helped us all connect and it's been, it's been a wild ride but a beautiful ride.

Denise ([44:03](#)):

Oh, you don't know what that means to us because that is exactly what we hoped that people are experiencing is that it's this gift of community that the Lord brings at the right time. So thank you for your encouragement, even in just sharing what Velvet Ashes has meant to you. That just means a lot to us. For sure. Ruth, I don't want to end this conversation because I am being so ministered to by sitting across from you. Is there anything else that you feel like the Lord has placed on your heart maybe that somebody needs to hear or a part of your story that would, you know, be a blessing? I don't, I don't wanna cut it off before, before you're finished sharing what the Lord has brought you to share today.

Ruth ([44:51](#)):

Um, I would just say that, um, you're living, everyone is living a story and you don't know how your story will affect the next person. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And one thing too, um, one of the best advice I got when we first came was actually from my husband and he said, take the first year to learn language and culture and the American in me did not wanna do that. Like we had all these great ideas and all these programs, but that was the best advice. Um, and I see so much fruit now in our ministry because I can speak the language because I don't speak his language, but I can speak the trade language. So it's hard. Like you sound like a two year old for a while and it's really like yes, you know, challenging, but to just like sometimes take a step back and let things happen slowly.

Ruth ([45:37](#)):

Um, we just had a missions, uh, missions camp last weekend and um, one big thing on our heart is to help local missionaries serving in PNG to go out. 'cause the country has grown a lot. Like it used to be a country where people would go to as missionaries and now it's a sending country in some ways, which is really neat. And, but for a long time our missions meetings would be our family, the pastor's family, and maybe two other people. And it was that way for years. And this mission camp we just had, it was over a hundred people come and the young people are taking lead and you know, as I said, it's like we've been here eight, nine years and now we're seeing the fruit. So I just wanna say if you're new to the field, don't give up and don't feel like you're wasting your time.

Ruth ([46:19](#)):

Like friendships take time to build and ministry like can often take time and always try to build up leaders, especially local leaders that are kind of passionate about what you do as well and kind of come alongside you 'cause God will show up like he's moving everywhere, all over the globe. And it's just incredible to be a small part of that. I feel like our ministry is so much of just a bridge of helping connect different people and places and often we don't do much. We're just kind of the conduit of letting things happen. And so it can be hard as an American to kind of like put the programs on the backside and to just kind of like build into relationships. But I would just say that that's when real ministry can happen. And yeah, it's a beautiful thing, but everyone has a story. Some chapters are definitely hard, but God will use those hard chapters and they're not, they have a purpose. They're not just painful for the sake of being painful. Like it will help mature your faith, it will help you grow, it will help you see God in a deeper way that you wouldn't see him without going through those difficult things.

Denise ([47:24](#)):

Wow. Thank you so much for that.

Sarah ([47:27](#)):

Yeah, Ruth, I feel like that just captures so much of what you have modeled and how you have shared your story of seeing God's faithfulness in the hard and the good times and through each chapter and through each season. So thank you for being honest, um, about those things and being willing to share your story.

Denise ([47:50](#)):

I would just echo that and I, Ruth, I feel like, you know, you mentioned at one point in your essays they're the favorite part of your book and they're not flashy, they're not by famous people. And I feel like that just resonates so much because so many in our community are unseen and they have chosen this life knowing it would be a life of obscurity. And knowing that maybe they could have stayed in the states and built a following and but, but that wasn't what they were called to do. And and you minister to people in that space. And so thank you so much for using your story, for using your words, for allowing the Lord to take hard things in your life, um, and speak to those who minister quietly in obscurity, um, and make, make a difference for eternity. Um, you have blessed me today. Thank you so much. Um,

Ruth ([48:42](#)):

Thank you and thank you for being such a huge part of telling stories. I think that is such a blessing to us on the field to get to hear those stories. I love podcasts 'cause you can listen to them while you're doing the dishes or anything and it's just like so encouraging to hear those real life stories and the good, the hard all of it.

Denise ([49:02](#)):

All of it. Well, you will be that story in many people's ears this month as they do those dishes, go on those walks, um, and are ministered to by your words. And, and we just thank you all for joining us for this first episode of Velvet Ashes Legacy Podcast season two. And we look forward to joining you here next month as we continue to tell those stories and meet you where you are. Thanks Sarah. Thanks Ruth. We'll see you here next month.