



It was around this time 13 years ago that I first wandered off the streets into the City of Greater Geelong Youth Services. I walked boldly up to the large counter and sternly announced to two women that I was there to volunteer with their gay and lesbian youth support project.

The reason for my sternness was because I was studying psychology at the time and desperately wanted to put some meat on the bones that I was learning. I was certain they would thank me for my interest and tell me I had nothing to offer them. My fears were not realized and I was welcomed to give it a trial run.

I found out much later that Kylie and Leigh were both convinced that I was only “volunteering” so that I could score a boyfriend.

Soon after I would have no boyfriend yet I had become almost a part of the furniture, so much so that they started to pay me almost out of guilt (for all the time I was now spending there doing whatever I could to help).

In the first 6-12 months I helped with everything I could and did the only things I knew how to do: I listened, I observed, I reflected, I absorbed. What I found difficult to absorb were the experiences of the young gay and lesbian people attending school. [Peter and Kris] I was told to wait for the education department to implement policy. They would do so, 11 years later. I was told to wait for an inclusive sexual health resource called Catching On. It was launched 7 years later. I was told to wait for more experienced workers to find a solution. But the young people I worked with did not have the luxury of time to wait. I decided not to wait.

Fast forward two years and I was standing before a classroom of Year 9s at an all-boys Catholic school wondering how I managed to pilot a challenging homophobia program. Two years after that I was launching an educational package for teachers called Pride & Prejudice that Deakin University found significantly improved student attitudes towards gay men and lesbians. I was wondering why I was asked to train teachers and health professionals, and again did the only things I knew how to do: I told stories, I shared observations and I demonstrated exactly what I did.

On Australia Day, 2000 (yes you might get the impression I'm a workaholic who works

on public holidays), I met with a project worker from the Australian Human Rights Commission who was setting up Outlink, a national network for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people and their workers in rural, regional and remote Australia (try saying that three times quickly). That worker was Tasmania's Rodney Croome. Soon I was asked to work nationally given my experiences working with young people and challenging homophobia in schools.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive response to Outlink, funding was not continued. I would go on to work with a Dutch government funded organization, challenging homophobia in developing countries. Although exciting, I felt restless and uneasy, yet I didn't know why.

In Warsaw I had been asked to guest present and facilitate a worldwide meeting with expert academics and practitioners from every corner of the globe (believe me, that's intimidating). During a break I was asked about my impressions of Australia, whether it was homophobic and what I would national project I would do if I had the chance and the unlimited resources.

Instinctively without much thought I said: "I'd jump in a truck, drive around the country talking to LGBT people about their lives and share the strategies and resources that have worked over the last 10 years." Fortunately or unfortunately depending on your point of view, this idea came back to haunt me time and again. I told myself I could do it, but that I would never get the funding.

That's when I had a lightbulb moment: "Daniel, you have worked in the community sector your entire life, you know how to work on the smell of an oily rag". Like at other times in my life once I decided I didn't look back. I was doing the tour, self-funded with a little help from in-kind support and the goodwill of as many people I could muster.

So organizing a tour is easy right? Me waking in sweats at night screaming "logistical nightmare" and having permanent black rings under my eyes might suggest otherwise. Before me I see 38 weeks, 28 locations, 1 week in each, state and territory partners, venue operators, community champions and interested community members e-mailing and calling each and every day from every part of our great nation. And then there are all the people with opinions: when you say you are undertaking a tour like this, EVERYONE tells you exactly what you should be doing.

Yet all of my stress, concern and doubt is erased when I get a joyous, unbridled "it's about bloody time". There are right now 1000s of people in rural, regional and remote Australia that are hungry for stories, strategies to challenge homophobia and ways to cooperate with their regional cousins in all parts of Australia.

From Geelong I head west to Mount Gambier, before following the coastline to Perth through Adelaide, Port Lincoln, Albany and Bunbury. This clockwise journey is for two reasons: 1. I am wanting to do something other projects don't do, gather the voices and experiences of the west before the dominant east coast. I had the choice to

launch this tour from Sydney (or Melbourne), but as I explain to anyone who will listen, this is less Priscilla Queen of the Desert and more Leyland Brothers. 2. I have a goal to wear shorts and t-shirt every day of my life and I'm following the weather.

It's no mistake that I commenced my journey in Geelong. Not only is it my hometown, it is also the place where I set the foundations for my challenging homophobia journey. I learnt the things I needed to in my formative years that have held me in good stead since. Sometimes it gets overwhelming: flying to Warsaw, statewide implementation of my school-based program or 200 growling teachers. When in doubt I try to remember the lessons I learnt here and that I only ever wanted to make an immediate difference for a small group of gay and lesbian students who I worked with in Geelong in the mid to late 1990s. I remember that I was once a naïve volunteer who had a head full of ideas but no way of making them a reality. I remember wanting to do something, anything, however small to make a difference to their experience.

So now that this tour is finally underway, what are my hopes for it?

Firstly, I am hoping to get a modern day snapshot of what life is like for LGBT people, particularly young people, in rural, regional and remote Australia. I want to document their experiences, listen to them and let them know their voices matter.

Secondly, I want teachers and health professionals to attend Pride & Prejudice Facilitator Training sessions and return to their classrooms and workplaces feeling confident, competent and supported in challenging homophobia and affirming sexual diversity. Later in the year results will be published by Deakin University that show that P&P impacts significantly on homo-aggressive behaviour, the very behaviour that research shows has the biggest influence on same sex attracted young people's health and well-being. Although launched 8 years ago, it seems this challenging homophobia dinosaur has legs. Further I want these same teachers and health professionals, along with homophobia-curious others to attend readings of my new book, Beyond 'That's So Gay', step through their own discomfort and have a good read along the way.

My message in the book is quite simple: we underestimate the role that homophobia plays in our lives and our own abilities to challenge it; we overestimate how difficult it is to effectively challenge homophobia and to defeat it. Old thinking suggests that few schools can take on this work. In my new book I demonstrate that every school can assess how ready their school community is and do something. It's practical and full of stories about what actually takes place in our schools, not what we think happens.

Thirdly, I hope that spending a week in each location will provide opportunities I could not have predicted. In 2000, Rodney could only spend a few hours in Geelong. In my week, for example, I've had media spots, I'll meet with the principal and deputy of an all-boys Catholic school and I'll march with the GASP!ers in the local Pako Festa Parade.

Fourthly, I'm hoping not to be beaten up, to get fat from all the sitting or go broke before it's finished.

Finally, I'm eager to re-invigorate a conversation that was started a decade ago by the Australian Human Rights Commission. The end point: We all have the right to live where we want in Australia, we don't all live in the capital cities nor do we all live on the East Coast. We all deserve to feel safe and supported wherever we call home.

I'm not saying I have all the answers, but we have what we need to make a great start. We can get better, we need to get better. If a young gay atheist from Geelong can challenge homophobia in Catholic schools, imagine what a network of confident, competent and supported teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others could do.

My thanks will be brief. Firstly thanks to Uniting Care - Cutting Edge in Shepparton for auspicing this project. Secondly, thanks to No To Violence for providing the necessary base and infrastructure for me to get the foundations of this national tour together. Finally, my thanks to the City of Greater Geelong, especially GASP! worker Jami Jones. From the moment I mentioned the tour and my hope to launch it in my hometown, Jami has been nothing but excited, supportive and helpful above and beyond what I could have expected.

*I think the rest can be said by my dedications: For all the lesbian, gay and bisexual young people I worked with early in my career. For the generous, wise and supportive people who have guided me on my challenging homophobia journey. To my family and inner circle who have endured my long absences and withstood homophobia merely for their relationship to me. Thanks for loving me even more fiercely as a result.*

The first step is breaking the silence that homophobia craves. If Beyond 'That's So Gay' gives people permission and an excuse to talk to one another, then I've done my job.

Finally Bart Cummings said during this year's Melbourne Cup: "You cannot buy experience, but you can earn it. I've got some and maybe it's starting to work." And so I give you the Beyond 'That's So Gay' National Challenging Homophobia Tour.

