

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK FIVE, (GERALDTON), WA:
I JUST BLEW IN FROM THE WINDY CITY: MEETING GERO'S
ANSWER TO PRINCE FRED AND PRINCESS MARY...

"Most [young lesbian students] come from broken homes with no fathers to pattern their lives...so I let them know [that men aren't all bad]...that's what I think about 'em..."

That's what I thought the school chaplain was getting at, which is why I had asked him a question of clarification.



It was half chance that saw "Rod", the school chaplain at Geraldton Senior High, sitting in a meeting I had scheduled with "Hayley", the head of student services. In what was a very impressive student welfare building, I heard Hayley explain that Rod was "a good bloke to talk to" for any one of 900 students. Rod explained his role further.

"A chaplain, as funded by the federal government, as I see it, is to bring a Christian influence into a government school...Keeping that in mind I don't have any problem with talking to kids about that...I'm certainly not going to condemn them...If I can help them, I will..."

Whilst Rod was clear that "homosexuals and lesbians" were attending the school, he could only give one example of a young man coming to talk to him because "he was going through a questioning time...but he was a young boy and his older brother was homosexual..."

"Maybe [there are more] that way inclined and haven't said it...I don't ask any questions..."

Certainly by the end of my time at Geraldton Senior High that was the point that came through: there are no questions being asked and there are unlikely to be for some time.

When I asked what would need to happen before the school affirmed sexual diversity and challenged homophobia, both Hayley and Rod opted for the “let’s wait and see” approach.

“Well for starters [we’d need to see] that there was a need for that... We have sexually abused kids, Muslim girls being abused, pregnant teens...The kids have to come to us if they need help...We need to see that there is a need, a sounding or a rumbling...”

It was at that point I pulled out the Writing Themselves in and Writing Themselves In Again reports (www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay). I imagined myself whacking him in the ear and asking him if that was rumbling enough. I didn’t.

I calmly sat and asked if they had seen the research evidence I held in my hands. Not surprisingly they hadn’t, but that is not an indictment on them given that no-one except the East Coast has seen them. I went through a few set routines of the existence and significance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people. Just in case Rod and Hayley were going to doubt the numbers in their own region I even threw in a rare, unofficial anecdote I once heard from LGBT education pioneer, Ian Seal, about a regional area in Victoria where principals said they did not have ANY LGBT young people in their town. Researchers in a national study begged to differ (although they could not reveal region-specific data, this particular region had a higher-than-average percentage of LGBT young people.



It reminds me of an exchange I had in regional Victoria with a student, “Julie” who decided to use her mathematical ability on me when I talked of research evidence showing 8-11% of 14 to 18 year old students identified as being same sex attracted.

Julie: ‘That’s an average right?’

Me: ‘Yes Julie, correct.’

Julie: ‘Well an average is made up of certain schools that are higher and lower than that average, right?’

Me: ‘Yes Julie, good maths...’

Julie: ‘Well that means that theoretically there could be some schools where the number is really low, right?’

Me: ‘Theoretically yes...’

Julie: ‘So that means that this school could have no gay students in it and that we could average out a school that had more, right?’

Me: No, Julie...Nice try...You have gay and lesbian students in your school...’

I followed this up with discussions about waiting for students to come out before doing something to support them, as outlined in my Esperance/Kalgoorlie blog. Like with the staff of Esperance Senior High, I explained that research demonstrates that LGBT young people are more at risk BEFORE they come out to someone for the first time. Therefore it is even more important for school support staff to do SOMETHING to demonstrate to non-out students their support.

It would be safe to say that both Rod and Hayley’s faces turned grey. Keen to offer hope, in the form of strategies and resources, I gently challenged (as it was quite obviously very early LGBT days for them both) their thoughts on homophobic language and behaviour at the school. Rod had started.

“I don’t think I’ve come across homophobia...I don’t see people hammering homosexuals and making a big deal about it...The only thing I see, um, is “that’s so gay”...it’s just like a swear word...”

Hayley added in.

*“They know it’s not an appropriate word to use but know they are not going to get in trouble...As opposed to if they say it’s f**ked...I don’t think it’s homophobia...”*

Less than five minutes later, with some challenging and questioning, this view changed.

Over the other side of Geraldton, a TAFE lecturer, “Anabelle” would comment on the school’s attitude over the years.

“We have one high school here and they choose to ignore [homophobia]...They say ‘It doesn’t affect us so it doesn’t matter to



us'..."

As I was about to leave Rod and Hayley thanked me for my visit and conceded, "They're probably not coming to us..."

Later in the week I sat on Geraldton's waterfront and had a cuppa with the former local school chaplain and predecessor to Rod. "Adrian", now a local government youth worker, turned out to have had an interesting journey to Geraldton from his home country of Denmark.

In a story that mirrors that of Tasmania's Princess Mary, Adrian met his now-wife, A Tasmanian, at a bar during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. With every intention of returning to Denmark, Adrian was swayed by the school chaplaincy role in Geraldton. He now has three young girls.

The story in itself momentarily captivated both the Danish and Geraldton press, who stumbled across Adrian's story by accident. Whilst Adrian and his wife became the subject of national television stories in Denmark, Geraldton ran a small story in the local newspaper. Adrian showed some minor annoyance that they failed to spell his name correctly.



Now Adrian has a big task ahead of him in planning the next 3-5 years of local government's response to the needs of local young people. His take on Geraldton was similar to most people's who I spoke to.

"It's fairly isolated up here...But country people tend to be more inclusive and accepting..."



I wondered if this was only for a white, Western foreigner and his young family.

Adrian admitted that everyone probably needed “to have a better understanding and knowledge” of LGBT issues. When I asked what this means to him, he was clear on what he needed.

“How to approach it, how to deal with it, how to react to it, what to do, what not to do...If they just have ‘this is how to deal with it and these are the services to go to’...”

Young people’s use of homophobic language, yet Adrian was unsure whether or not to see it as an issue.

“I hear kids use all kinds of language...It’s probably not helping but in the context of young people, it’s the language they are using...[At Geraldton Senior High] everyone says ‘that’s so gay’...”

Then things looked different when political correctness came up.

“Everything now is politically correct and it’s hard to step outside of that...It’s not just the homosexuals, it’s everything...”

One of the reasons I use “challenging homophobia” and not “anti-homophobia” is because the latter can dramatically limit the opportunities I have for dialogue, challenge and change. This decision was highlighted when Adrian suggested there is no forum for him to develop his attitudes and practice.

“Everything comes back to [understanding]...Each and every person needs to know where they stand on the issue...The ability to talk freely without being judged...It’s easy to be labeled as [homophobic]...It’s all about an openness and a trust...”

One thing that seemed to confuse Adrian was some gay people he knew using “that’s so gay”. What can be difficult to explain to teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others is that LGBT people can use homophobic language too, and that doesn’t make it OK. Often people will argue that if they use it, then it’s fair game for everyone else too.

It reminded me of John Howard once saying on the subject of some LGBT-related policy matter years ago that he had “spoken” with some “gay people” he knew, and based on their conservative, right-wing and clearly homophobic feedback he was confident it was not something that gay people wanted.

For this reason I have dreamed for years about challenging homophobia amongst LGBT people, however that might be done.



Adrian imagined what life might be like for LGBT young people in Geraldton.

“The smallish community could be a good thing or a bad thing, that could be an issue...Either you do everything you can to hide it or you just don’t care...”

But the bottom line for Adrian was clear.

“People have to realise that there is a need, that something needs to be done...”

This was a point that everyone, except perhaps local school staff, in Western Australia had said about Geraldton.

To get to Geraldton, or “Gero” as the locals call it, you drive about 5 hours up the Brand Highway, or the “Bland Highway” as the most call it. I was lucky enough to have had morning tea with a good, and generous, friend, Ryan. Well-traveled between Perth and Karratha, to Geraldton’s north, he gave me a freshly baked batch of Anzac biscuits (marking the occasion of the Anzac Day public holiday) and a banana cake (an all-time favourite) for my northward journey. For good measure he also gave me a huge container of vegetable soup for dinner the first few nights.

Most in WA had given me the impression that gays and lesbians quite simply did not live north of Perth. It was seen to be a wild concept that I was going north, perhaps even wilder than me going to Kalgoorlie (in all it’s campness, see the Kalgoorlie video blog).

(Incidentally only a few weeks after leaving Kalgoorlie the town experienced an earthquake which damaged a number of buildings. This tour seems to see me blessed given I missed this, left Melbourne a week before floods and hailstorms, got to Perth a week after similar floods and hailstorms, and cancelled a trip to Indonesia with 24 hours before I left due to terrorist threats. I hope my concerned mother takes these matters to heart x)

In telling people of this 38-week national challenging homophobia tour, most have shown genuine surprise that I am driving around the ENTIRE country. It was important from the start for me to go west (life is peaceful there). It felt right to launch the national tour in Geelong (rather than a Priscilla-esque send off in Sydney or Melbourne) and then to get west of the East Coast as quickly as possible. Quite simply the west of Australia has been neglected in any many national dialogues, and past examples of flying to Perth for the day to tokenistically consult the west felt wrong. And I wanted to hear what the west had to say first.

This voyage west underlies what I said during my launch speech:



“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.”

Going to the places where people live, rather than expecting them to come to you, was a lesson I learnt when training teachers and health professionals in regional Victoria and Tasmania for Kids Help Line. It is fair to say that part of the reason for the enthusiasm and energy I have experienced in the west is because I made this decision to include them meaningfully, and right from the start so that they could help establish the foundations for a national dialogue. I have not been disappointed.

Heading to Geraldton I had only two leads: one professional and one personal. More on the personal later.



A number of key WA contacts had spoken highly of a police officer who was doing great things for young LGBT people in Geraldton, and openly. “Isabel” has a diversity role with the police and came out very publicly in the local newspaper. Apart from talking in that article about supporting seniors, Indigenous and disabled locals, Isabel also came out as a lesbian.

There is no doubt that Isabel takes her diversity role and the role of a prominent out community member seriously. Isabel proudly wears a very impressive (and thick) rainbow lanyard for all to see as part of her uniform. At the local TAFE Isabel regularly does guest lectures



with the nursing and community services students, particularly around “dealing with same sex families”. Annabelle, the local TAFE lecturer who gets Isabel in, sings her praises.

“We’re lucky because [Isabel] is pretty high profile and I wonder if that makes a difference...But there are not many men...I don’t think gay women are as affected...”

Not that it’s easy.

“Some know why I was going in and I’d have people with their arms crossed...The community is very judgmental, it’s a big country town at the end of the day...Full of rednecks, homophobes and zealously religious people...”

But being a real example of flesh and blood in the local community helps.

“I’m lucky because I’m a police officer and I’m a parent whose kids have grown up here...I’ve got kids at high school...[Being gay] is a small part for [me] but maybe a big part for everyone else...My number one thing is being a parent...”

Having such a prominent and visible role has its benefits, one of which is that “people know they can come to [Isabel] and get help...”

One such example saw a young man come forward to Isabel a few years back. The young man knew Isabel was openly gay (more on the local use of “gay” as a label for women soon) and wanted support. Whilst her role had no resources apart from her own time, she attempted “to facilitate a safe same sex space in Geraldton, sometimes having to make do with the lounge room of the young man’s mother as a venue.

For a time she attempted to work with metropolitan based services, like The Freedom Centre. An attempt to run a “camp” to The Freedom Centre in Perth saw only the original young gay man attend.

“It was a good weekend...We said ‘It’s all paid for, just throw some clothes in a bag and we’ll drive you’...But no...”

Isabel is modest about anything that she had done. She admits openly that she supported a small handful of young gay men, but “they don’t stay here...they all gravitated to Perth”. Isabel reflects that even if there were young people coming forward now she feels she might not be the best person to support young people.

“I’m older and have become a bit judgemental...They are not my peers, or my issues...”



Isabel cites issues like drugs and alcohol use as a barrier where she feels out of touch. She reports that of the original group of young gay men, “only one is stable now with his work and studies”. Annabelle observes.

“There are certainly not as many young people as there used to be, but there’s very few services for gay people out there...There is nowhere for them to go other than Perth...”

Isabel and others feel it is vital that young LGBT people see that life can work out well in a regional centre like Geraldton. Hoping to give a glimpse that there can be a future for young LGBT people in their own community, there was an attempt to hold an inter-generational dinner between older and younger LGBT locals.

And it seems that there are many out and relatively visible, at least in their own circles, community members who are seen to contribute more broadly. Between Isabel and two others, a list of LGBT community members was listed with local police, politicians, historians, museum and gallery curators, psychiatrists, wildlife carers and TAFE lecturers.

The inter-generational dinners are a concept piloted in Bunbury by True Colours (discussed in both my Albany and Bunbury blogs). Ex-True Colours Coordinator, “Ella” explains the concept at the time in Bunbury.

“It’s where older LGBT people are invited to talk to younger people... For example there were a younger lesbian couple who were trying for a baby, a gay couple in their 40s and an older lesbian in her 50s involved in women’s lib...The young people loved that...They could compare and contrast what was the same and what was different...”

Lois from True Colours weighed in.

“It was like a light at the end of the tunnel...That you don’t have to leave your own community...”

Sadly it did not end up happening in Geraldton, according to Isabel.

“We wanted them to see the normality and stability that was possible here...But we didn’t have enough young people to make it worthwhile in the end...”

Larry (see Albany blog) thinks that the divide between younger and older LGBT people as a real challenge for LGBT progress.

Local TAFE lecturer, “Annabelle”, talked to me about a relatively successful group for gays in the mid-west “which meets irregularly”. She admitted, “but the young ones don’t want to hang around with



us oldies...” Still a recent lunch shows a great deal of gay female energy.



“We had lunch the other day with 30-40 gay women...”

Talking to Annabelle, I asked about an observation I’d made that all the older non-heterosexual women called themselves “gay” as opposed to “lesbian”.

“That’s probably true...All the women up here call themselves gay, less so lesbian and rarely a dyke...In Perth you’d have all three...”

It appears that there is a definite bond between older gay men and women up Gero way.

“Gay men and women stick together much more up here than when I was in Perth...It’s all one group...”

Not that it’s all good news for Annabelle, who cites a recent example of being discriminated against at the local hospital, so much so that she and her partner have now taken out private health insurance.

“You gotta live in a town...You’ve still gotta live here...It’s a very discriminatory as a town in general...I don’t know how a young gay couple would go trying to get a one bedroom flat...”

In describing herself, Annabelle says she is “a gay lecturer”. Perhaps this is leading to some progress across the Geraldton campus.

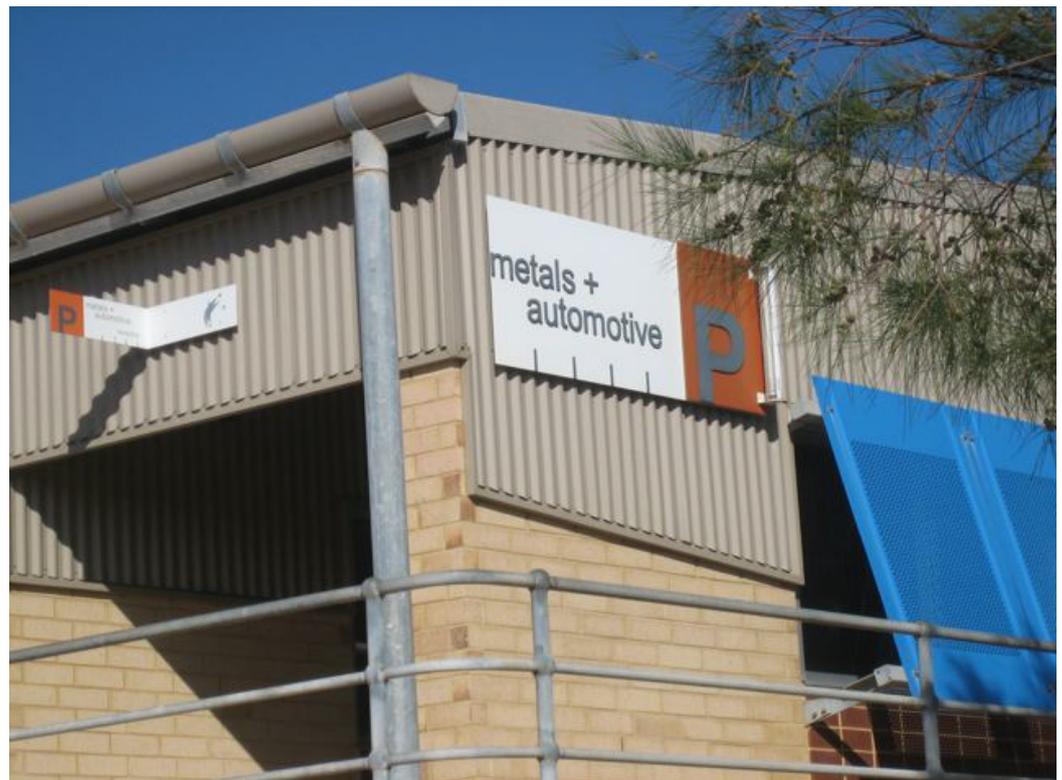
“There is always a component of homosexuality in my lectures...So



therefore because I'm out other lecturers follow and ask me about what they can do in their lectures...For example I talk about what a massage student might do if they had a transgender person on the table...Would it change things for them?..."

She admits that this might be different outside of her areas of nursing, community services and beauty therapy.

"If [LGBT young people] went to apprenticeships and metals they'd not be out, I couldn't see anyone not being run out...But they're also sexist...There is a huge amount of issues with acceptance in those areas..."



Not that she only has students that accept her.

"I've had a couple of people pray for me in my class...I have one young woman who prays in my class everyday for my soul...I say 'Keep it up love, I'll pray you'll become homosexual..."

One student even falsely accused her of sexual harassment. Upon questioning this student admitted they, "only said it to get to me..."

Being out, vocal and female makes it difficult for Annabelle to locate where prejudice and discrimination comes from.

"I've always been out, I've never hidden it and it's always held me in good stead...But I'm not sure if that's because I am vocal and a woman or if it's just homophobia...I don't have any homophobia as an individual, as I see it, and that's a bonus..."



Annabelle takes a proactive approach in life to being open and out, as is evident in her interviewing of service providers for her and her partner.

“If I go to a GP and they ask, ‘Why are you here?’ I reply, ‘I’m here to see if you’re good enough to be my doctor’...I do the same for nutritionists and other service providers...”

One service that admitted they were concerned that young people were not coming out to them was the local youth housing service. “Marg”, the service manager, explains.

“I must say that we don’t have people coming out...It’s a bit risky for them...We did have some posters up...But they get destroyed and vandalized soon after we put them up...So we have probably been a little slack in putting them back up...”



Later in our conversation I mentioned a recommendation from Victorian LGBT education workers that such posters and relevant information needs to be put behind glass. This service was refreshing in their openness to feedback on their practice and asked questions about whether they should specifically target LGBT young people and other practical questions about whether young gay men should be allowed to share rooms.

Years ago I completed a project in Melbourne’s north-west that investigated what housing services were/n’t doing for LGBT young people, what would make a difference for their service and then delivered training. In that project I found that housing workers lacked the opportunity to ask such questions and to reflect on their everyday work practices with young people. I also found that workers were eager for these practical conversations to happen.

For more information on that project, go to: www.moss.org.au

This project built on the great work of ‘Opening Closets’, a project that trained housing workers across WA years ago. Developed and



delivered largely by Gay and Lesbian Community Services (introduced last week in my Perth blog), this training still is talked about years later, such is the lack of professional opportunity to learn more about LGBT issues.

I asked Marg if she could easily locate the report and recommendations for 'Opening Closets'. She could. I told her that a great starting point, as a housing service, would be to sit and read that over a cuppa before opening a discussion at her next staff meeting. I also suggested that Marg could raise this as an issue regionally with the funding providers, after she bemoaned that they now have a section for cultural diversity in statewide standards.

One of her housing case managers, "Yvonne" wondered if they could be doing more as a service.

"We provide equality across the board, but we don't specify it...We'd accept someone who is gay the same way we'd accept someone who has cerebral palsy...We don't actively educate the residents about homophobia...I guess if you came out and were gay, I guess there are indicators to let them know that it's OK..."

Yvonne doubts life would be good in Geraldton if you were young and LGBT.

"If you look at something that is sort of related, such as extreme dress codes, one young woman felt really alienated and dropped out of high school...I thought if that's what it's like for her, imagine then what it would be like to be gay?..."

But yet again there seems to be a gender divide.

"For the girls who are gay I get the impression that it's much more acceptable...A bit more kudos than for the boys..."

One young gay man back in Geraldton after some time in Melbourne and Perth, is "Robert". Robert says he knew he was gay at 15.

"I saw a guy naked and I thought, 'oh hello'...It was a PE teacher, he was getting changed...We were doing something and he was getting changed...I realised then that I liked the male anatomy...In my mind I always knew that I was always meant to be like this...It's a natural thing...It's just life...You can't change, and I don't want to change and I wouldn't..."

Robert describes Geraldton as "rough". He quickly adds, "no it's alright". Robert admits since coming back to Gero that he keeps to himself and finds it hard to trust people. But in a customer service role where he has lots of contact with the public he feels the occasional hostility from customers.





“You get [male customers] who don’t want to know about it...They are back-offish a bit...I don’t know...”

Fitting some traditional notions of what it is to be a gay male, Robert admits that he is very cheery and happy in his interactions with customers. But this sunny disposition seems to have made a positive impression of late. That afternoon a woman coming through the checkout would ask whether he was always so happy and customer-focused. When Robert said he was and explained the importance of his role the woman asked him to come and work for her.

It also seems that Robert has made a great impression on his colleagues, including one heterosexual male, a manager of his. Robert admits, ‘I treat him like I would treat a girl, and he knows that...’

His male friend, “Carl”, would sit in the passenger seat when Robert drove to our meeting, given that Robert is on a learner’s permit.

I would run into Carl again on the last night of my stay in Geraldton at one of the local backpackers. I came to stay there because of my friend “Pat”. Pat does not remember our first meeting, nor does he want to. We met when he had consumed quite a bit of alcohol and had shown interest in getting to know me. Sensing that Pat was seeing me through “beer goggles” and wanting to be home in bed at a reasonable hour, I genuinely, yet possibly too shyly in hindsight, asked Pat for his number so I could call him in the coming days. Seeing this as a sign of rejection, Pat declined and said some things to let me know he was not happy.

Seven years later I would meet Pat again, for him like it was the first



time. Pat looked white as a ghost when I recounted that I met him and what we talked about, including his name, regional WA past and my failed attempt to get his number. Not only did I remember this because I seem to recall such details vividly, I'd also been quite upset that my sincere attempt at a raincheck had been rebuffed.

Pat would apologise frantically, only imagining how he might have been so many years before and I apologised for not being clear in my interest at the time. Pat would go on to be someone who I would keep running into for the next few years, saying each time we should catch-up rather than continually run into each other randomly.

So when I got to his hometown of Geraldton he Facebooked me to ask if I had accommodation, offering that I should call his brother, the gentle, generous and patient "Nate", who ran the local backpackers. Nate could not have been more hospitable, from my own room to a freshly caught snapper fillet for dinner one night.

On the first night he invited me down for some sunset beers with he and some local friends. In between beers I headed to my room and returned to hear one of Nate's friends, "Bill" talking about "Bruce", my 4WD, and the logo on the side.

"That's so gay?...Does it have beyond written on it?..."

I arrived back and we all looked at each other knowing that the pink elephant in the room was now under the spotlight. These very conversations were what my Bunbury assistant and friend, Simon, had wanted to avoid when he asked that I not park in the carpark at the Bunbury backpackers. For his sake I would park on the street.



Not so here in Gero. I took a deep breath, hoped Bill was not like the cheap stereotypes of men from fishing boats in my head and explained the basics of the project I was doing across the country. He and his other friend offered that it had happened at their school, admittedly many years before, then went on to ask questions about how things were and then the safe male territory of the tour logistics.



Later that week whilst eating a slowly-fried snapper fillet (thanks for the cooking tip mum) I sat and talked with a temporary resident, “Shelley” who had every intention to become a school teacher and said that seeing the truck parked everyday had her thinking a lot about homophobia. She said she imagined it would be tough in Geraldton. I even had a service station attendant politely interrogating me as I got a tank of diesel to leave Geraldton. She was genuinely interested and we only stopped when some other customers started clearing their throats wanting to pay for their own fuel.

As I left Geraldton I wondered if I’d found a familiar scenario. Most people who were out and had not moved to Perth had just about everything, seemingly, that they needed. Therefore the motivation and energy to do something for those who are not out and without the things that they need. This is as much a challenge as those places where there is “nothing”.

“There is a bit of a splurge of energy every now and then...But we all have our own lives...Isn’t that what it’s all about?...”

