

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK ELEVEN, (BROOME AND THE PILBARA), WA: THE GAYEST MAN IN BABYLON (OR BROOME)

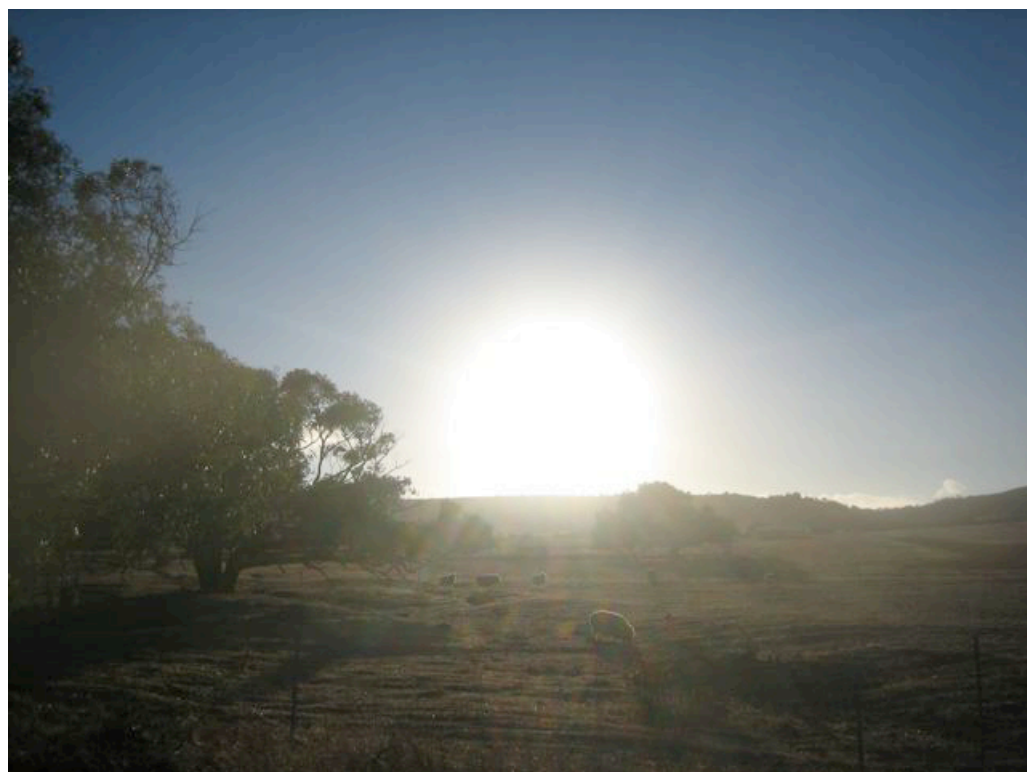
"We would deal with [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students] on a needs basis...We haven't had anything surface...If we did we'd deal with it..."

There are times when I feel my life on my national challenging homophobia tour, Beyond 'That's So Gay', is like groundhog week. Did I not just hear this last week from the school chaplain at Geraldton Senior College? Wait, should I be concerned that the above quote was from the school chaplain, "Joan", at Broome Senior College?

And so this visit to Broome Senior College would kick off my "travel week" in Broome. A "travel week" for me is where the distance I have to travel between destinations is too great for two solid days of driving. If I cannot spend a week at a said destination because of vast distances, I include a travel week. Given that 4000kms separated Geraldton and Darwin, I decided to give myself two weeks to get there.

As I set out from Geraldton for Broome I would hit a milestone, 10 000kms driven so far on the tour, and almost hit two emus who decided they might try to cross the Great Northern Highway in front of me. For almost four days I would drive from sunrise to late afternoon, stopping before dusk: one of the most dangerous times to drive given the number of animals coming onto the road. Despite this caution I still had seen kangaroos, wallabies, cattle, oxen, a snake and even a wedgetail eagle.

As I drove through some of the most unfamiliar, unforgiving and relentless (and remote) of territory, I was comforted by something that



has grown familiar over the last three months on the road: the wave or gesture between passing drivers. Perhaps not coincidentally, I observed that as I got further away from any sign of civilisation, the number of people acknowledging my passing them on the road rose to almost 100%.

Driving to Broome I got a sense of the dominance of mining in the north-west of Australia, most obviously when I hit the Pilbara region. Apart from it's tagline of, 'The Pilbara Region – It's ORESOME!' (which actually made me laugh after too many days alone and driving), I discovered that it accounts for 40% of Australia's exports. This was a point driven home by locals who feel that despite their contribution to the Australian economy, they have been forgotten by successive state and federal governments. This became even more pointed because I drove through the weekend that Kevin Rudd announced the new tax on mining companies' "super profits".

My own experiences of Port Hedland, and it's little sister, Karratha, were limited given the lack of affordable accommodation (I don't call a budget-style motel at around \$260-a-night as affordable). Both towns are said to be severely lacking in accommodation, and struggling to absorb the influx of people due to the mining boom. Indeed I found that Karratha, the first of the two Pilbara sisters, had just about everything you could want; that is, except for shade. Literally.

Even with a few loose leads for interviews and the pending arrival of Ryan, my friend who had so generously baked and cooked a mountain of supplies for my journey from Perth to Geraldton, I decided to move on. Somehow camping under the stars with large shady trees in a dried up riverbed was much more appealing.



Port Hedland offered a more developed version of it's little sister, Karratha, yet little more shade (a new unofficial criteria for my selecting potential stops on my tour). Later a Broome resident would make me feel only slightly guilty when he pointed out that there are no trees that way because they get ripped out by cyclones, and even shade cloth is too dangerous to erect.

"Anita", the award-winning teacher from Perth, had told me of her time in Port Hedland whilst teaching at the secondary school a few years ago.

*"Port Hedland has the reputation of beating the f**k out of gay boys and putting them in ditches...Gay and lesbian students at the school would go out with each other just for safety..."*

Anita went on to talk about her experiences as a teacher at the school. She explained how for Christmas one year, she was paired in the equivalent of the Kris Kringle with the school chaplain.

*"I received...a cactus in a little pot with a blue ribbon on it...A banana and two kiwi fruits...A cucumber with a red condom on it with a Father Christmas face on it...And a cheap sh*tty Christmas stocking..."*

Even the "progressive" female staff became involved in the harassment of Anita.

"A progressive woman in the department took a photo of me, pasted the head on a picture of a skinny naked female, pulled the hair from her head and stuck it under her armpits and on her vagina and gave it to a senior school staff member..."



But back to Broome and the local school chaplain.

Within a few hours arriving in Broome I could understand how so many would see it as an oasis in the desert, because it is. Given it's reputation as a popular tourist destination, I flirted with having some time off before quickly giving the idea away. Not one to sit and twiddle my thumbs, I thought I would make the most of a few days in Broome by talking with some locals. The way I saw it, any interviews here would be a bonus.

As has become standard, I contacted the Student Support Team at the local high school and spoken with the Manager of Student Support Services. Noting that her team would be meeting the next day, she said she would e-mail her team to see if I could join in on that meeting and get back to me. When she did call back it was to say that I would only be able to have 5 minutes of their meeting time, asking if this was enough despite the fact that earlier we had spoken about the minimum time would be 15-20 minutes. Instead she said she would meet with me personally after that meeting.

When I arrived the next day I would be greeted by the school chaplain who immediately gave her manager's apologies. I realised straight away that this was less about something "coming up suddenly" for the manager. I had been thrown the equivalent of student support services scraps.

Joan, the school chaplain, was pleasant and seemed to search my face for any sign that I was not impressed. I'm not sure how successful I was at hiding my momentary annoyance, but I was soon following her to her office to talk about school life for LGBT students.

Offered a seat on a colorfully adorned couch that attempted to distract from the simple office it was situated in, I sat and waited for a quick brush off. Indeed that was how it seemed to start. After offering a brief introduction of my project – after doing this at least several times a day for the last three months I feel like I am almost of autopilot – Joan's response, as described at the start, was:

"We would deal with [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students] on a needs basis...We haven't had anything surface...If we did we'd deal with it..."

According to Joan, there wasn't really an issue at her school.

As is a theme in regional and rural Australia, teachers and health professionals will typically follow up such statements with an anecdote about "we had this one student once". Joan was no exception. This time I heard about "an Aboriginal boy...who used to sit by himself... and used to sit with the girls sometimes..."





What is not as typical is an anecdote about a current student. Joan again.

“There is one boy at the moment that we have been asked to keep an eye on...He might be gay...That’s very rare...It hasn’t come up yet, but as soon as there was a hint of it, then Student Services would be very supportive...”

For the sake of not boring my regular blog readers, I have spoken at length a number of times (e.g. Esperance/Kalgoorlie blog; Geraldton blog) about the alarming flaw in “waiting for students to come out” before providing support given the research evidence showing clearly that students are most “at risk” before they come out to anyone.

Before I even talked about research evidence or my own work in schools, Joan was watering down any thought of doing something proactive.

“But I can see that an education thing before that is not needed...To suddenly go into classes and talk about it...No...”

When I asked if anything was done at the school, Joan replied, “I don’t think it would be...”

I could have not predicted what followed. Joan on affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia in the school curriculum.

“If something is not delivered properly...kids could think, you know... there is something to try...if it was not done properly...If it was glorified...I know in our sex ed we tried something different once, but sometimes the wrong teacher can do a lot of harm...Because of their idea of what’s OK...Especially when we are talking about Year 7s and 8s...”



Joan went on to say that she imagined older students, such as Year 10s, might be “more mature and able to handle it”.

“They are too messed up in Year 9, I think it would be really damaging... They are too experimental in Year 9... There are all the ramifications if you have boys experimenting with boys... I think it’s important for kids to not feel free to do what they want before they have their heads together... They seem to act before they think...”

The damage and harm Joan fears is that young men will have sex together. Sensing that teachers and health professionals would think affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia might “damage” or “harm” students, I asked Deakin University to factor this in when they originally formally evaluated *Pride & Prejudice*, the educational package I first piloted in an all-boys Catholic school.

The results when evaluating students from co-educational government and Catholic schools in regional Victoria? Were students more or less isolated from their peers as a result of doing “the gay program”? No. Was student self-esteem affected because they suddenly discovered they were homophobic? No. What about reports by teachers? No change. The only thing found to change was students’ homophobic attitudes, and more recently when Deakin re-evaluated the program, that students’ homophobic behaviours.

There have been no reports of any same sex sexual intercourse as a result of the *Pride & Prejudice* program, yet I would not see that as a negative thing anyway. The likelihood is, just as with students subsequently coming out, that there is no observable change.

After I had finished asking Joan questions, I shared with her the *Writing Themselves In Again* research, highlighting some of the statistics relating to what had come up in our interview and adding in other research evidence as required. I explained the basics of my book, *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, mainly that schools can now assess their readiness for affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia as well as do something at very point along that continuum of readiness to ensure better outcomes for all students, especially the LGBT ones. I was giving a few examples of other schools I’d worked with that were similar to Broome Senior College when something unexpected happened.

Discussing how I engage teachers when faced with a sea of growling non-welfare staff, by encouraging them to move “Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’”, Joan seemed very open to all teachers challenging and interrupting of students’ homophobic language. This, she said, was something she would take to the next Student Support Services meeting. Joan was confident that this would be a stepping-stone to bringing it up at a whole of school staff meeting.

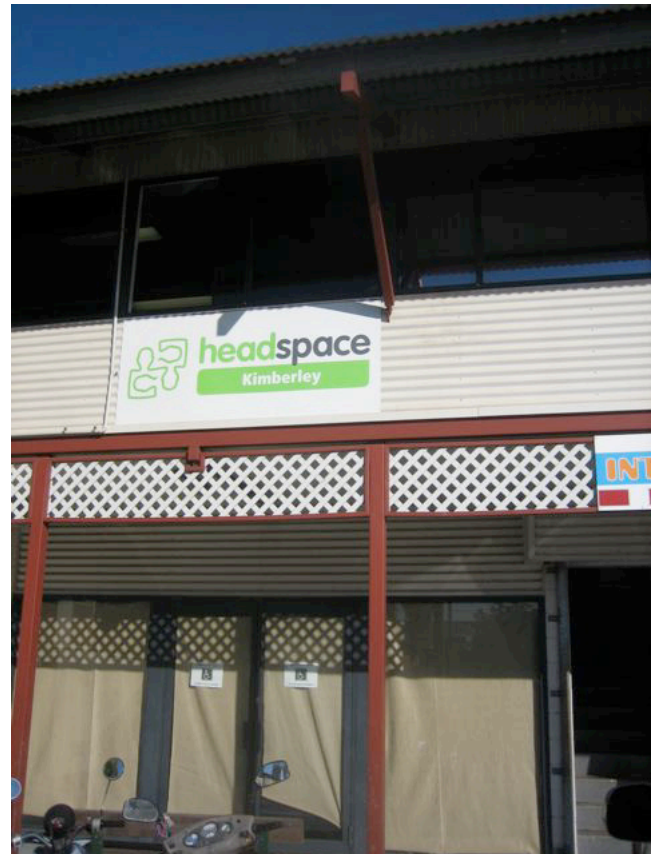


I would leave the school grounds feeling like I had been on a challenging homophobia rollercoaster ride.

At the local branch for youth mental health initiative, headspace, the manager, "Ariel" believes for LGBT young people in Broome, "it would be a tough road". Having supported young LGBT people who have ultimately taken their life and living most of her life here, Ariel thinks Broome "can be not a very supportive place".

Part of the issue might be the very thing that attracts people, including LGBT holidaymakers, to Broome.

"It's a seasonal place that changes dramatically... It's a very transient town... In the wet season, no-one's in town... But it's very different in the dry season... Lots of people come to get away from the grey, as well as lots of foreigners, backpackers... You'd see visitors being gay, but not local young people..."



The consensus from all the locals is that Broome swells from 15 000 inhabitants to around 40 000 during peak season. And as Broome benefits from the mining and tourism dollars, it could be causing local divisions according to Ariel.

"Broome is becoming more divided – local, not; white, Indigenous; affluent, not... There are a lot of Indigenous people who are struggling with housing, domestic violence, etc..."

Through my discussions with locals it became apparent that if you have moved to Broome (or holiday there), are white and have the money to participate, then it can be a very easy place to be LGBT. But as with most regional and rural parts of Australia, successful LGBT life is informal and about who you know and are connected to.

Ariel described some training she had undertaken years before whilst she worked with a housing service. Gay and Lesbian Community Services for WA (GLCS), introduced in my Perth blog, had worked in collaboration with Perth Inner City Youth Service (PICYS) to run



training on young people with diverse sexualities and gender (DSG) with providers of a national program to house young people.

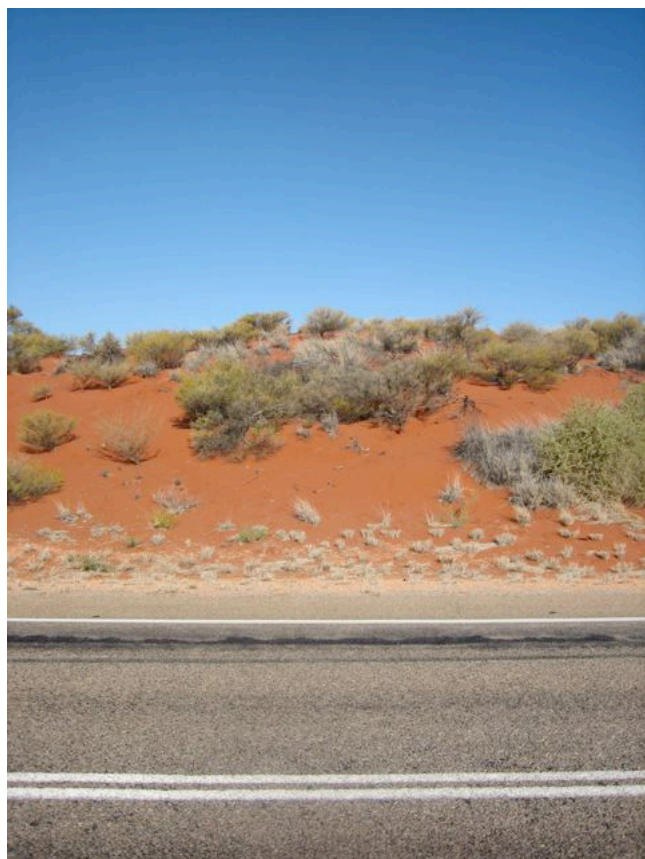
Five years on, Ariel recalls the outcomes of the training and the reaction from other local services.

“[For our service] it was never a drama... We put up a poster saying all young people are welcome, young people saw it and knew about it... But other services said it might be fine for [Ariel’s service] to do this, but we just don’t have any gay young people that come here...”

It was here at headspace that I heard yet again that teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others lack the opportunity to just talk about sexual diversity and challenging homophobia. A member of headspace’s local youth advisory committee, “Lily” explains what she wanted.

“There are similarities to the stigma around mental health... It’s like some crazy person over there... So people say, ‘let’s not talk about it’... [I want to know] what’s OK, what’s going to offend, what’s not going to offend and how to educate young people so it’s normalised...”

It’s remarkable that regular feedback from the training that I do often centres around the fact that this is often the first professional, and too often personal, conversation that teachers and health professionals have had around sexual diversity and homophobia. That so many are not doing something because they are scared they might “offend” is both a frustration and an opportunity for progress. Clearly facilitating and starting conversations is a very achievable first step across regional and rural Australia.



When I first asked Ariel and Lily about local life for LGBT young people, Lily mentioned that perhaps might be better amongst older young people (i.e. those in their young 20s) albeit only because of one example of someone in her extended social networks coming out in his early 20s and being relatively accepted.

In a perfect example of how small rural and regional centres can be,



I was contacted by this friend of Lily with an offer to show me around Broome and give his perspective of local LGBT life.

“Steven” moved with his family to Broome from southern, regional Western Australia. He was clear why he took longer to come out than most would suspect. As the eldest of three children, he believed that he had a responsibility within the family.

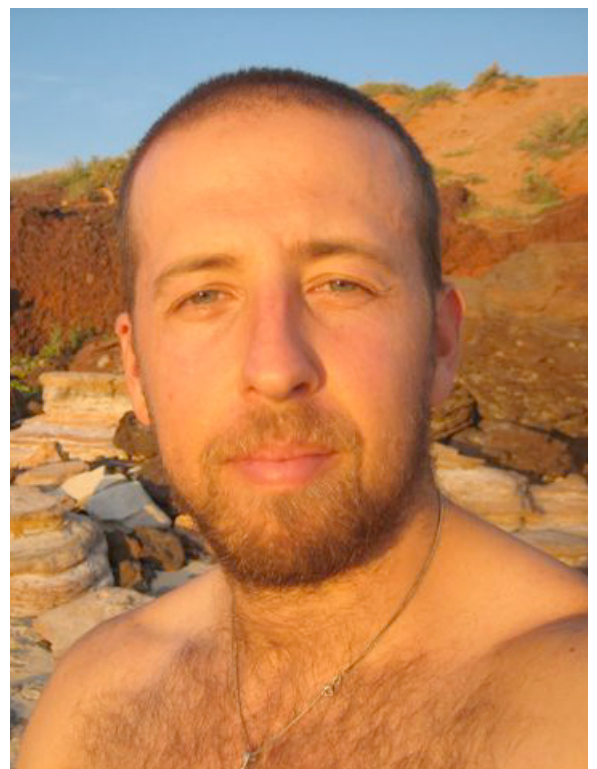
*“I reckon that’s why I didn’t come out until later...Because I had all this pressure not to f**k up...making sure the [family and a boss’] businesses and the rest of the family were OK...”*

His coming out to his extended family was memorable for him.

“It was at an aunty’s 40th and I walked in with this hot boy who was 5 years younger than me and everyone just knew!”

In his life Steven has mostly straight friends, something I got a glimpse of when I met him at the local watering hole that is the main destination for the town’s folk on a Friday evening. Incidentally the night coincided with a final for a swimsuit competition for a lowbrow men’s magazine cover shoot and spot in the national final. Uncomfortable with the whole concept given my recent years in working with men around violence against women, I still marveled that I managed to predict Miss Congeniality, People’s Choice and the Top 3 place getters, in order.

I was quickly accepted by all of Steven’s straight friends, who liked my T-shirt and had seen me around town. In a slightly disconcerting moment most of his friends told Steven that they had seen me around town that week, including at the local gym. Starved for any opportunities to exercise I was there each day, only to find myself as the only man in most group fitness classes. Apparently there are only two conclusions that can be drawn by my fellow female class goers: 1. He’s gay; or, 2. New meat has arrived in town. I think that I have been conducting an experiment to see how long my beard will grow between Perth and Darwin is the only thing that confused some on which of the two conclusions to go with.

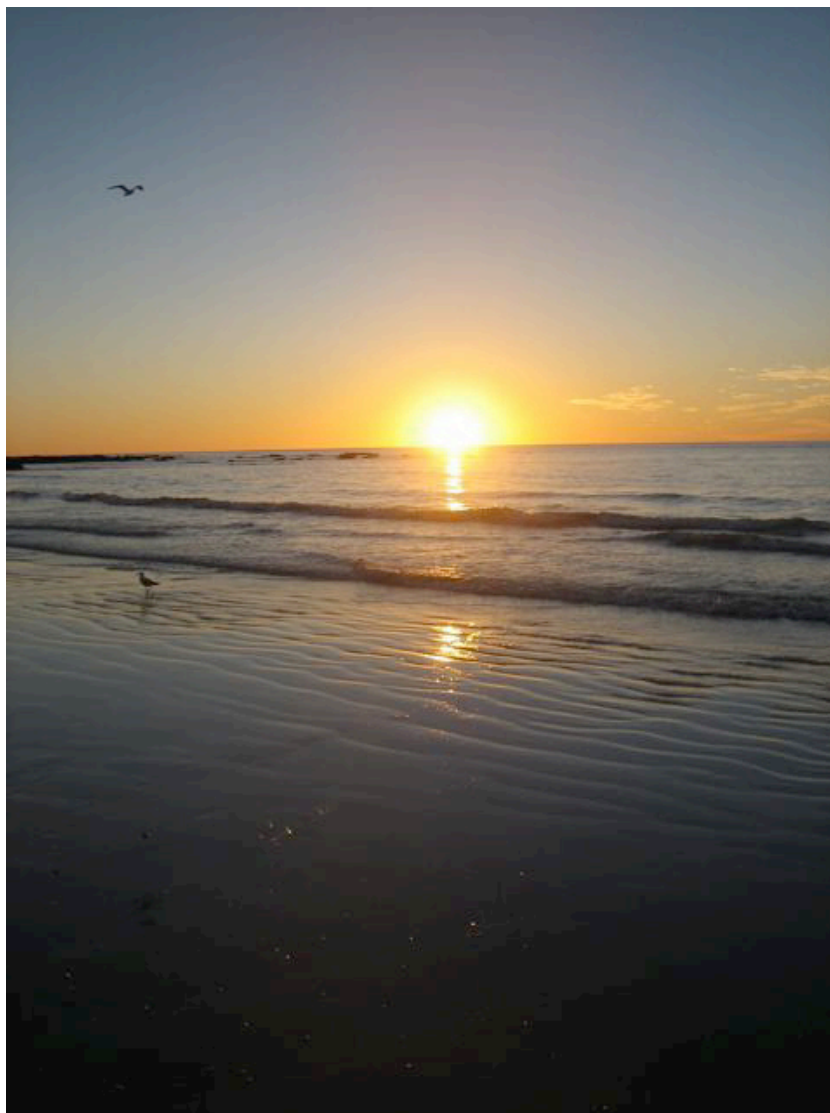


When they heard what I was doing, Steven's friends were interested in sharing their stories. The most entertaining perhaps came from one of his friends who worked at the local Catholic primary school. "Annie" gave an example of one of her pupils who she adores. "Jarred" is said to always be dressing up for school costume days as The Little Mermaid or other Disney female characters. And it seems that it's not only just at school. Annie told of a recent confession.

"Miss Annie...Tonight when I go home, I'm going to sneak into my mum's bedroom...I'm going to open up the jewelery box where her pearl necklace is and just STARE at it..."

Jarred's mother, a fellow teacher at the school, was said to be in disbelief when Annie recounted this story and dismissed it. Yet the fact that Jarred has to sneak around and covets this said jewelery item is what fascinated me.

Even in the town's main bar, where Steven says the men come "to get laid or get into a fight because they can't get laid", he appeared at ease and at home amongst his straight friends. He tells a story about the only time he felt unsafe there.



*"I was with this guy I was dating, but you wouldn't have known that we were necessarily together... These two guys had obviously picked up on the fact that I was gay and started getting in my space, and talking about me so I could hear it... So I thought, 'f**k that sh*t', and walked over to the biggest friend I had... I pointed to them and he looked at them, pointed and went like this [Steven runs a finger across his throat which means the friend has just said 'You're dead']... He then walks to two of his big friends and points at these two guys who then do the same thing... They got out of my face and out of there..."*

This stems from a belief that Steven has that he has a right to go out with his friends and not be disturbed by homophobes. There are many other LGBT people I have interviewed on this tour alone who might have reacted differently. Perhaps this belief in being himself and being safe has evolved given his upbringing, something he agrees with, and the social circles he keeps. After leaving the local watering hole I met one Steven's "black sister", a charmingly down-to-earth Indigenous woman called "Selma". Steven and Selma have been very close friends since high school, and this fact means that her 10 brothers always approach him when they see him to see if he is OK. Links to a band of notorious brothers ensures Steven feels safer than perhaps a lot of other LGBT people in regional and rural Australia.

Yet despite being successful in work, family and friends, Steven admitted to me a few nights later that it was difficult to meet other gay people, for friendships or relationships.

"It's not even about finding people on the same page... it's about finding people in the same book..."

"Mike" finds the same thing in Broome. As soon as he could Mike moved to Broome, despite not having even been there. A family friend would tell a young Mike about Broome and thereafter he always knew where he wanted to be.

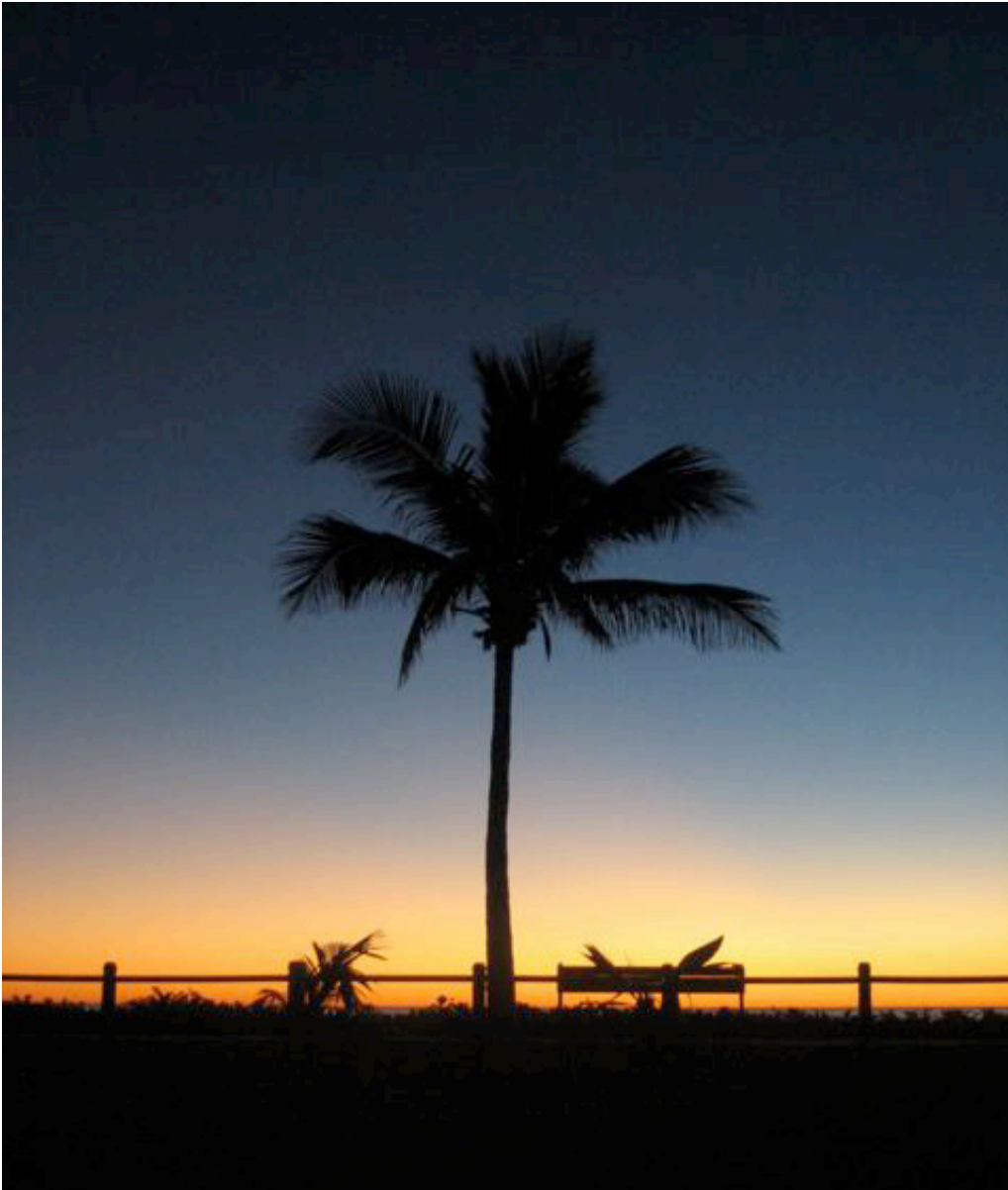
Working in hospitality, Mike gets to meet many LGBT people who are local or passing through. Mike bemoans that in such a transitory population where most gay men are in couples, he is "asked for a lot of threesomes, to just be friends or both..." This combined with being in Broome for most of his adult life means that Mike is looking for a change. He says he experiences Broome now as something that is "slowly suffocating..."

It seems that Steven has made one close, long-term gay friend in "Percy", who he met through another friend, an older woman who is known to wear lots of diamonds and to have many gay friends. Percy actually helped Steven come out when he was having dinner with him and a visiting gay couple who wanted to know if Steven was gay.



“One of the couple said, ‘Look [Steven], you hang out with Broome’s biggest fag and Broome’s biggest fag-hag, you’re gay and that’s that...’...He couldn’t argue...”

A few nights later, as we watched Broome’s sunset from a busy beach, Steven admitted to me that he has “not dealt well with the whole being gay thing...”



During that same conversation he asked if I’d made any other local contacts up here. It was then that I told him of this strange recommendation by a former openly gay politician. As if it was part of local legend he told me about a “gay butler” for one of Australia’s richest men who owned a holiday estate in Broome. I laughed, “yeah right, I’m just going to walk up and knock on the door of all the estates up here looking for a gay butler!...”

Steven said, “Oh, I wonder if that’s [Percy]...But he’s not [said rich man’s] butler at all...Hang on, I’ll call him...That’s so funny...”

Two days later I arrived and was buzzed into the Broome holiday estate of one of Australia’s richest men, to meet the man who is not



his “gay butler”. I would share a delightful morning with Percy over a cuppa and too many shortbreads that he had purposefully fetched for my visit that morning.

Looking much younger than his 64 years, Percy describes himself “just as totally gay...no half measures...I know you get that these days...” I laughed.

Rather than being a butler, Percy says that [said rich man and wife] refer to him as “their Ambassador”, where he acts as a medium between them and all of the staff on the property, as well as the neighbours and relevant locals. For his trouble Percy gets to stay on the property and receives a generous allowance.

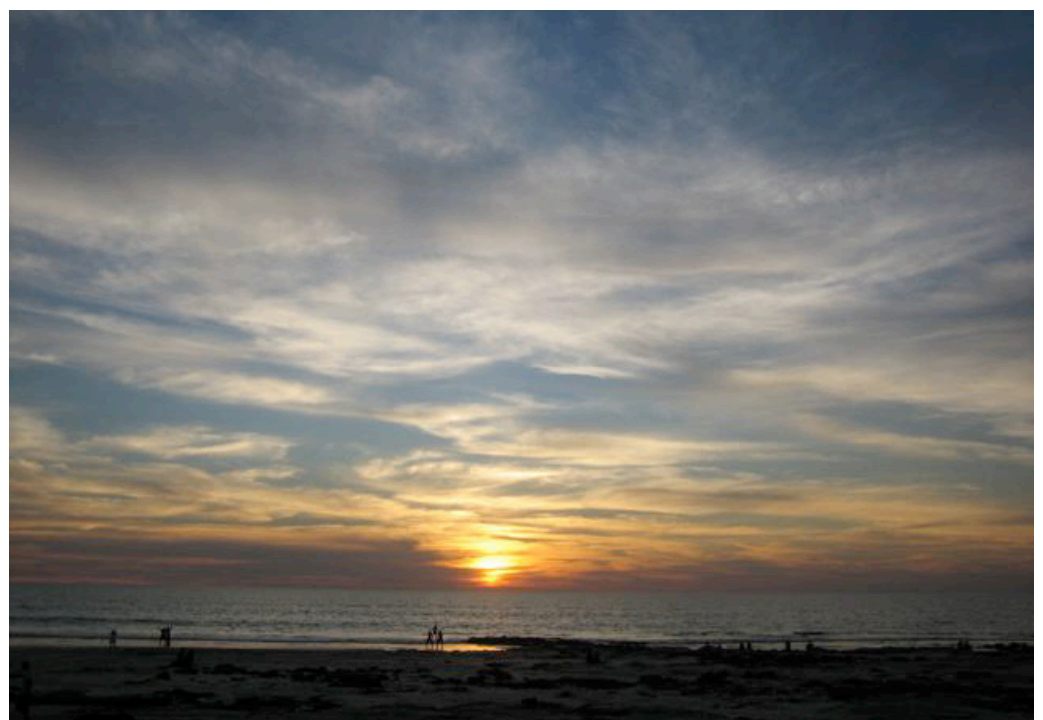
Many of Percy’s friends joke that they want to know when he is going to die so that they can take over, but it’s clear that this role only came about because of the person that Percy is. Known in the latter stages of his career by [said rich man], Percy had offered to help his son when he arrived knowing no-one on Broome, where Percy had gone to get away from a high-stressed career.

When [said rich man] purchased a property in Broome and required someone to be a set of eyes and ears on the ground, Percy was the first choice, partly because of this selfless deed and partly because of his top people skills.

“What you give out, you get back, that’s the only reason why I am here...”

The role suits Percy to a new, not the least of which because he gets to meet so many new and different people.

“I regard meeting any new person as a possible new friend...Broome is a very transient town...But new people come into your life...You’ve



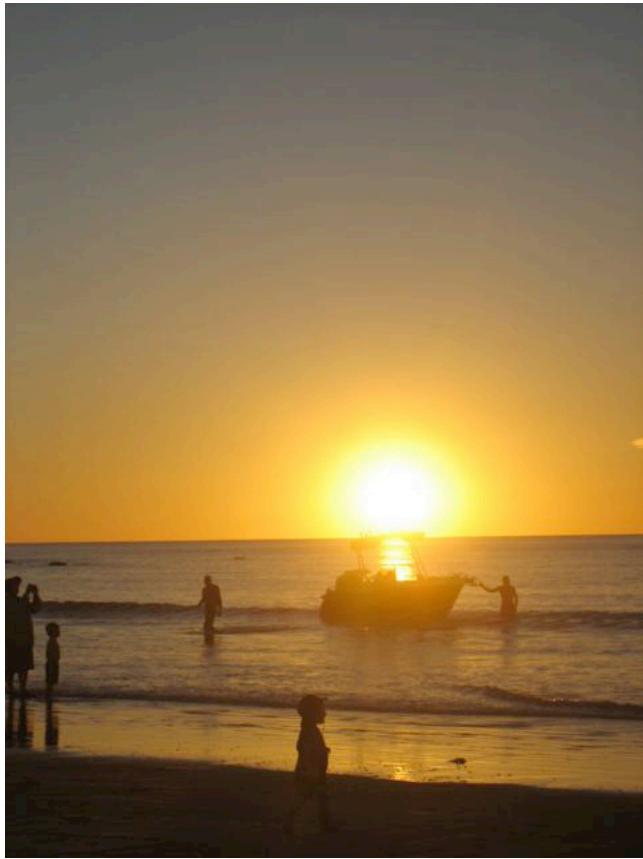
gotta be open to meeting new people...

These new people quickly become good friends, including the many staff and groundskeepers who make sure everything on the property is perfect. (I was told a story of new grass being shipped in each year that has to be kept refrigerated.)

And being “just totally gay” doesn’t bother the many people that Percy comes into contact with, now or throughout his long, distinguished career.

“I have never had a negative, anti-gay issue...Being gay has worked for me by a mile...None of the tradesmen or groundskeepers shake my hand...They always just say thanks and give me a hug...”

Talking with Percy I felt like I was on a Queer History Walk in Melbourne that the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives run annually. Growing up in suburban Melbourne, Percy tells a remarkable story about his mother, in his words, “a Madonna, a spunky woman for her age”.



As an only child and the smallest at school, Percy was called “a big sis” and regularly threatened because he “didn’t swear” and “was not good at sport”.

“I came home crying one day...Mum asked what was wrong and I must have told her...The next day I was excused from assembly, I didn’t know why, but I looked through a window and saw her addressing 1500 boys...I couldn’t hear what she said but she must have really got the point over...In fact things were much better after...They put the Head Prefect, the best footballer in the school, in charge of looking after me...I had no problems after that...”

Part of Percy’s success in life might very well be that he knows his strengths and weaknesses in life. Working for a major bank when he had left high school, Percy describes working life.

“I was the worst, most hopeless person in the bank...But the manager of the bank liked me being on the counter...Every day I was sent after



3 [when the counter closed] to count pencils in the pencil cabinet...I was hopeless..."

Almost on a whim, Percy drove with fellow bank employees across the Nullabor in the days when you were able to make your fortune in Perth. Here Percy would focus on working with people rather than attempting to be practical, and he never looked back.

When I asked Percy to describe Broome, he gives some insight into why it might not be a place where anything formal and LGBT could happen.

"There are a lot of people in the tropics who are running away from something, wanting to hide or wanting to drop out...It's often a new start somewhere...It's hard to get any kind of group started in Broome, even the [Country Women's Association] and Rotary folded...It's a town that doesn't necessarily want to have normal groups...It's even hard to get people for the [State Emergency Services]...I do know a lot of gay people in Broome...There are more gay people than you think...A lot of them are here because they don't want to be a part of a group in Perth, Melbourne or Sydney..."

Another barrier, according to Percy, for local LGBT people included being a part of one of several prominent families that "still run Broome". (Interestingly in Geraldton I was told a few families run that town). It is unfortunate that two interviews with Indigenous lesbians from two local and prominent families fell through.

True to Percy's nature, soon after the formal interview ended he began to ask questions of me. I was only too happy to answer them, although he did check to see if it was OK that he had "turned the tables..."

For the last fortnight I have had people asking more of me than usual, and it took me sometime to realise it was making me somewhat uncomfortable.

It all started in Geraldton when a housing worker observed that a 38-week national challenging homophobia tour was a remarkable undertaking and wanted to know how I was ensuring I was taking breaks and looking after myself. When I said I took a break when I was driving between locations I felt like I got a small smack from her. Then I had to admit that I had not really had time to take in many of the sights along the way. Later I had someone at the Geraldton backpackers asking if I was going out drinking on the tour. When I mentioned that I rarely took a drink and had been out a few brief times in Perth he asked why I was so serious all the time (something that has been said about me since primary school). Minutes later he was almost a blubbering mess admitting that he needed to have something fulfilling in his life and was sick of just drinking and partying all the time.



Broome seemed to be a respectful probing. My fellow inhabitants referred to me as “Mr Mac” because whenever I was at the Backpackers I was blogging or responding to e-mails. One young local said he was considering starting his own blog after asking me about and watching me work on mine. Days later I was taken to dinner by Mike, who had known about me through my video blogs on Youtube, who wanted to know about my motivations, journey to the tour and what I wanted to happen as a result.

Perhaps I was warmed up when I finally was asked questions by Percy, but regardless I felt very relaxed in his company and could see why he had been such a success with people his entire life.

After hearing my answer to what I was going to do at the end of the tour he wrote a note for me to look at when I got home in November. On the note he had written “RESTLESS”, what he thought I would be when I finished.

I laughed and told him that my mother has been saying that I am restless and unable to sit still for well over a decade. He then took the note back and said “LEADER RATHER THAN FOLLOWER”, saying that he had met many people in his life and could just tell I would be a success at whatever I chose to do, even though I might not be sure of that will be. As I tried to modestly deflect he made the point again. Coming from someone who has experienced and seen all that Percy has was a huge compliment.

As I drove from Broome and into more red dust, what I’d heard in my meeting with Percy somehow calmed and reassured me. In the absence of legislation, campaigns, projects, media examples and role models, he’d led what he describes as “a blessed life...” Being gay to Percy had been a bonus.

“It’s just worked for me immeasurably...Maybe because I’m not a threatening issue...Being gay is nothing but a plus...And also they all think I’m helpless so they just do everything for me...”

