

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWELVE, (KIMBERLEYS TO DARWIN):  
LIKENED TO A PEDOPHILE: FROM GEELONG TO DARWIN

*"Oh don't worry about that, he's gay..."*

It was early afternoon when I set out from Broome for what would be about one and a half days of driving to get to my next destination, Wyndham, the oldest town in the Kimberleys in Western Australia's north-east.



Although the main aim was to arrive in Darwin, stopping in Wyndham was an opportunity to meet a friend I had made in my final year of high school. "Liz" has spent all her years since university teaching in remote communities, both in Australia and Papua New Guinea, and subsequently has many tales to tell.

Wyndham, with its 800 or so inhabitants, is one of the larger communities Liz has found herself in over the years. Working at the local Catholic Primary School, Liz was a welcome addition to the teaching staff where she specializes in a program called "Reading Recovery". Far from feeling limited or isolated by the relative remoteness, Liz finds that the pace, amount of people and proximity to others to suit her just fine.

When I arrived I met Liz outside her home, on the edge of the Catholic Primary School grounds, and took her lead to not give her any welcome embrace or kiss (which is like second nature to me). Once inside Liz would sigh loudly and say that there had been a lot of talk amongst her fellow teachers and the school principal about my arrival.

*“You’ll all be interested to know that I have a friend coming to visit...”*

This was of interest until they all discovered that I was a male. Agreeing to follow the Catholic ethos as an employee of the school, Liz was not meant to be having a male, non-marital partner staying under the same roof as her.

I had to laugh at her reply, meant to allay the fears of her colleagues and boss. She is not sure it worked.

*“Oh don’t worry about that, he’s gay...”*

Her enthusiasm in discussing my reason for traveling the country also did not foster much excitement. Yet I found my self staying on the school grounds which could be one small step for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) progress in Wyndham.

To give you an impression of Wyndham it has two parts: one, situated along a main road with a giant crocodile as its highlight; two, situated around a port that is the most important in the Kimberley regions. There is a lookout over this port area that is called Five Rivers, where one can watch the sunset at the point where Five Rivers intersect.



Liz drives once a week to Kununurra, about 100km west of Wyndham, to go to a major supermarket chain that does not charge like a wounded bull. One highlight is that attached to one of the petrol stations in Kununurra is a major bakery chain where some creature comforts from the big smoke can be tasted.



It was in Wyndham where “Lois” from Perth explained that LGBT training for a local housing service (in the early 2000s) happened on a verandah of the building where the organisation was housed. Too hot to be inside, training was delivered to staff on the verandah and had to get creative because in punishing temperatures of over 40 degrees the data projector kept on overheating.

After a night at Liz’s I would conduct a radio interview (JOY94.9FM, [www.joy.org.au/listenlive](http://www.joy.org.au/listenlive)) that I did on her landline because my mobile phone service provider did not work between Broome and Katherine in the Northern Territory. As it was the service faded in and out rhythmically so that I was hearing half of every question I was asked, but luckily all were understanding.

Perhaps Wyndham has suffered because of it’s pretty, younger sister, Kununurra, close to Western Australia’s border with the Northern Territory. Knowing about Kununurra only because of the controversy that surrounded a documentary that followed the story of a young Indigenous girl there, I arrived not only for a pitstop but also to talk to the head of Save The Children.

“Ridge” had a name that was named to me because of his seminal work in the 1990’s that engages young men around masculinity and, in particular, sexual assault. Challenging homophobia had always been a foundation stone of his work. A friend and colleague had mentioned that I was passing through and interested in talking about his observations. Not looking to originally stop in “Kunners”, as locals call it, this interview would be a bonus.

*“This place has all the trappings of heterosexuality and invisibility...”*



Rather than having a cuppa, when I met with Ridge I would enjoy a much needed glass or three of cold water after escaping the unforgiving heat outside. It became clear that Ridge had walked in that morning to a range of “bushfires” that required his attention, and therefore I knew our meeting needed to be short but productive.

Still relatively new to Kununurra, Ridge had brought the remainder of his family here after a son moved out of home. Ridge decided it was good timing for a family adventure.

*“In Kununurra there are different stratas of community...There are many from a liberal, Euro-Anglo background that have a lot of understanding for non-prejudice in general...Then there are the non-Europeans that have narrower and more rigid views of gender and sexuality, and there are high levels of homophobia which generally promote friends, children and extended family members not coming out of the closet...I haven’t heard of any violent [homophobic] incidents with people, but I do know there is abusive behaviour in all of the communities...There is still a lot of hurt, still a lot of pain in the communities and for a variety of reasons all of the social indicators for health and well-being of Indigenous people is quite low...I know of Indigenous people who are in the process of coming out...”*

For Ridge there are missed opportunities in the local mainstream services.

*“For example, the local hospital has a sexual health position...Her work is very much taken up with pregnancy prevention, STI prevention, all the classic things...But most of this work has had a focus on heterosexual responsibility and identity...This person coordinated World AIDS Day, but the LGBT aspects were invisible...”*



And its in social marketing campaigns that Ridge sees an opportunity to make a local difference. Knowing through a previous role of mine where I engaged men around violence against women, I knew that Ridge had a bias towards campaigns and wanted to know more about his take on what that meant.

*“You can have your big day, but your big days come and go...How do you ensure visibility of the violence and abuse throughout the year...I see a campaign here where there are community celebrations and events...That there are materials which are there...It’s the idea of mainstreaming acceptance of GLBTI people as anybody else, as opposed to having a PRIDE March in Kununurra or a specific event...”*

Mainstreaming came to mind when Ridge suggested becoming a part of National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Commemoration (NAIDOC) Week.

*“You could have posters that focus on gay and lesbian Indigenous people...It’s to raise the visibility without making it a core issue because I don’t think it will get legs at this particular time...”*

Ridge’s comments highlighted a key theme in regional, rural and remote areas: the challenge in making affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia relevant to locals.

Whilst many in non-metropolitan Australia are throwing their hands in the air and feeling like this is not possible, I have used an approach that has been working with young people for some time now. Rather than setting out to change student attitudes and behaviours, instead I wanted to present information, perspectives and questions that were previously not available to them. Then it was a matter of encouraging



discussion, asking what they think and trying to find out how this might be relevant to them from THEIR point of view. Our challenge is how to do this as often and as widely as possible in regional Australia.

Whilst some might have expected that it would be in places like Wyndham or Kununurra that I might experience homophobia, it would not be until I arrived in Darwin that I got my first taste for some weeks.

I was fortunate that my ex-boyfriend, "Shane", introduced in my Adelaide blog, had recently moved to Darwin. A talented young circus performer and trainer, Shane now is the lead circus trainer with a local youth arts organisation. Now in Darwin, this meant I could spend a week in a relatively unfamiliar destination with someone who knew me well.

Shane was so new to Darwin that the day that I arrived I would help him move to his new place of residence. It was with some excitement that Shane arrived, only to find that having me as a guest soured the situation, even though my staying had been OK'd by the household. Despite not being together, the thought that we once were seemed too much for one of Shane's new housemates, "Ice". Taking Shane aside, Ice explained that he had been abused as a child and that my being in the house made him feel unsafe. This happened only after we had completed moving Shane. At this stage Ice had not even met me.

Regardless of what I wanted to do, I stayed out of the picture whilst Shane discussed this with Ice. After all, Shane was presumably going to be staying here for some time.

The next morning I would finally meet Ice who said he'd had a revelation overnight. He explained that I was "allowed to stay" if I paid for the privilege, setting a figure that he felt was "reasonable". This floored the other housemates, including Shane, who now had to pay extra rent every time they had a guest to stay. I was floored that money could somehow change something that had so deeply affected someone the night before.

It had been sometime since I had been accused of being, or likened to, a pedophile. The first time was when I worked supporting gay and lesbian young people for the City of Greater Geelong. In the mid-1990s I was effectively called a pedophile because of my work on the front page of Geelong's then-broadsheet, the Geelong Advertiser, which went ahead with accusations and threats from a disgruntled parent.

Now somehow this was happening again, and under the roof of my former boyfriend. I was an adult visiting his former adult partner. For Shane's sake I kept the peace and went for a VERY long and vigorous



workout at a local gym. Fortunately by the time I arrived back Shane had organised to move back with his new-to-Darwin housemate. He concluded that this was not the kind of household he could live in, regardless of the many benefits the new abode offered. Despite being farther from his new place of work, Shane is very happy with the arrangement.

Later, Shane would reflect, as a young gay man (raised by a lesbian woman on a farm outside Adelaide who came out at high school) that this was the first time that he had experienced homophobia from others. Helped perhaps by the fact that he has spent much time in circus and other performing circles, Shane laughed that the only time he had experienced homophobia was because of me on my tour.

Apart from the “event” that overshadowed my arrival, Darwin was a welcomed pause in my national challenging homophobia tour. With just over three months, 14 000kms driving and a third of the project behind me, I enjoyed a weekend with Shane who was adjusting to his first full-time job.



It also gave us an opportunity to connect since our break-up at the start of the year, a necessary decision for us both given our lack of proximity over the last two years (2009 saw us spend 2 of 12 months together, 2010 would be 2 weeks of 52). The fact that we both had traveled so much for our work (Shane: SE Asia, New Zealand, now Darwin; me: Europe, Asia, now the country) and that this would continue to separate us into the future was the main reason for us breaking up, which still feels incredibly strange for us both (and for so many of the people around us).

Rather than complicate things, instead we have enjoyed afternoon naps, taken walks on Darwin's beaches with it's tiny hermit crabs and guzzled too many mango lassis.

And it seems that Darwin's pace of life, or lack of it, might catch up with me. The people have quickly grown on me. After an event to mark the International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) – see next week's Darwin blog – I spent a relaxed early evening with workers from the host organisation: Northern Territory AIDS and Hepatitis Council (NTAHC). Speaking with one of the workers, "Edward", about my tour he stopped and said, "Daniel you are brave to do what you are doing..."

As I went to respond he pre-empted me.

Whack!

*"Just shut up and take the compliment..."*

