

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge

TOUR WEEK FOURTEEN, (ALICE SPRINGS):
BREATHING IN YOUR SURROUNDS:
IT DOESN'T COST A CENT TO CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK

"Well you know that [high profile footballer] is gay, don't you?..."

"No I didn't..."

I thought to myself how many of my gay male friends would be very happy if this player was indeed gay. This was the last thing I expected when I arrived at Katherine High School to chat with a school nurse, a local educator from a non-government organisation and a football program worker.

The way this educator put it, it was if she thought everyone knew of the footballer's sexual identity.

"Well I've been around to my good friend's house when he was with [another less well-known footballer] and let's just say they were definitely a couple then..."

At this stage, "Adam", who heads up a program to keep budding Indigenous footballers in education, expressed as much surprise as me, but for different reasons.

*"[Less well-known footballer]?...Really?...
He is an absolute monster!?"*

It was everything I could do to wait until I could google said footballer's name and image. The gossip had come at the end of an interview about what they thought life was like for non-heterosexual students.



With a 50% Indigenous and 50% non-Indigenous student population, staff at Katherine High School had conflicting ideas at first about what the school environment was really like. Like other schools in regional and rural Australia, there was an example of an “out” student.

“[He] was gay before he as born...He just goes around telling everyone...He is pretty out there...”

This point was gently challenged by “Sue”, a school nurse.

“He actually gets bullied...Certainly things get on top of him...”

According to Adam, there might even be a degree of acceptance, perhaps because of this out Indigenous student.

“Amongst the Indigenous guys there is an acceptance of being gay and bisexual...”

That this might be due to an acceptance of this out Indigenous student, who does not care much for football but is happy to come along every so often to the football program, rather than sexual diversity was suggested later by Adam.

“Our footy boys won’t wear number 8...There is this guy from a rival basketball team who is gay...He wears number 8 and none of our guys will wear it...If they did, there would be a lot of teasing...”

It seems in this environment, young Indigenous footballers will get teased for being gay for doing something as small as bending over to pick up a pen on the ground.

“There is still a big thing amongst the boys...[The football program] would certainly be a daunting place to be [for gay students]....”



Adam, like others I had spoken to, raised the comments of Jason Ackermanis about being gay and potentially out in football. He admitted Ackermanis' attitudes were "not dissimilar to the boys..." He also felt that although Ackermanis had said some stupid things about staying in the closet, he thought the things he said about the AFL not being the most accepting workplace and homophobic reactions were fair calls, adding that he and many others he had spoken to thought he'd been roasted too quickly.

Like every other school, "that's so gay" is common language which staff are uncertain of whether they should or shouldn't challenge it.

"'Gay' is the flavour of the day...It's become a derogatory term...I feel uncomfortable with it..."

Yet there were signs that progress could occur with very little time, energy and investment. "Barb", the local educator who outed a footy star, had tried to affirm sexual diversity a few years ago in a class and felt it went well.

"I was surprised at how well they took it...And after 'oh you guys are gay' they settled and really took to it which I found quite positive really..."

Barb had found out what a lot of other educators have: talking about sexual diversity is a winner with students when a safe and respectful environment is established.

I found this out many years ago. When asking groups of young people for their recommendations on following up Pride & Prejudice in their school, invariably they say: 'it should be mandatory that every student at this school sees this video' (i.e. a video of young lesbian, gay and bisexual - LGB - people discussing their lives). Many young people ask to be involved in showing this video to their peers.

Memo to teachers everywhere: the kids CAN, and do, handle it.

This is not to say that it is all fun and laughter. Affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia is, at its best, challenging work. There will be discomfort. Yet discomfort is a necessary phenomenon in change. Anecdotal feedback from schools that had implemented the Pride & Prejudice program demonstrates that students continue to discuss the program, maintain an awareness of homophobia and its impact in a school context, and even interrupt the homophobia of other students, months after the program's completion.

I would be walked part way from the meeting by Adam, who mentioned that he had come from my hometown of Geelong. When I asked what school he had been to, he replied, "Norlane High". We laughed at the uncanny coincidence when I said that I too had gone to the



school, graduating almost a decade before him. Of the school, Adam observed if someone had come out as gay at Norlane High that “you’d be dead...” Perhaps then it was good news when my mother sms’d only a day later to inform me that Norlane High was going to be closed down in 2012.



Katherine would be a pit-stop for my journey from Darwin to Alice Springs. To get to Katherine for the morning meeting I had woken at 5.00am for the 4-hour drive. Whilst I delighted in the sunrise, I dreaded dodging wedge-tailed eagles devouring road kill given warnings by Alice Springs workers of their lack of willingness to move quickly for oncoming traffic.

Leaving Darwin was surprisingly emotional for me. I talked to “Shane” (see Adelaide, Kimberleys and Darwin blog) about this before I left, finding I was experiencing moving from place to place similarly to how I’d experienced backpacking amongst countries in Europe in 2001.

In 2001 I arrived in Paris and experienced a mini panic attack. My first time overseas, I now had a few months to do as I wished and soak in the best that Western Europe had to offer. As I stood at Gare Du Nord train station watching the foreign hustle and bustle outside, I found it very difficult to catch my breath. I asked myself how my family could let me do something so crazy, and why I could not be safely at home with all the things I knew.

After sitting and catching my breath, I decided to put one foot in front of the other. I needed to find my accommodation (incidentally the Peace and Love Hostel) and then I would worry about food. Within a week I felt remarkably at home in Paris amongst it’s famously arrogant



people and laughed when thinking about how distressed I'd been for a few moments right at the start.

Yet at the end of a week I was due to leave for my next destination: Amsterdam. Once again I felt a sickness in my stomach at having to again work out a foreign city.

In some ways despite traveling for business and pleasure to almost 100 cities in almost 30 countries, this feeling has stayed with me. Leaving Darwin, I was conscious for the first time that I had, albeit in a very subtle way, been experiencing the same feeling each time I moved from tour location to tour location.

Reflecting with Jen Sainsbury from the Foundation for Young Australians, I had observed that I was spending a great deal of my time and energy in each location working out the basic elements I needed to continue my tour: accommodation, internet connection, meals, workspace, gym, Laundromat, etc.



In Darwin this was made that much easier. Shane acted as host for accommodation. On my arrival he made sure I took a much-needed afternoon nap, waking me with afternoon tea and a promise of an evening meal.

The Northern Territory Aids and Hepatitis Council (NTAHC) would act as hosts to me for a workspace. One of the workers from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Team, "Andrew", made sure I had a desk during my stay and would periodically, without prompting, bring me a cup of tea to my exact liking. It seemed that with every subsequent cup of tea I became more and more emotional. "Why are you getting so emotional?", I asked myself.



It would be at NTAHC that I would receive my first in-depth feedback about my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*. As I had left for this national challenging homophobia tour a few days after it's launch, I had not had a chance to sit face-to-face with anyone who had read it.

"Isabel" had just done that.

"I have all of your stuff, I went home and read it in one night because it was so relevant to our 13 year old son...Some of the other kids found out about his family [two mums] and started giving him a hard time..."

It was refreshing that someone had read the book before my arrival, rather than after my departure..

"I have to say thank you for your book because we have been using it in our dealings with a right-wing teacher at our son's Christian school...He was the typical example of a teacher saying we don't have any gay students at this school. I asked him, 'well what do they look like?'..."

Maybe there is hope for the school she and her partner chose, with their son's input, to support his learning disability.

"He took the book and has since told us, 'I can really work with this, this will work...'...Do you get much feedback about your book?..."

"To tell you the truth I actually don't..."

Isabel then made mention of my efforts to highlight the work I had done in an all-boys Catholic school. Taking her right hand and placing it on her heart, she said closing her eyes, "Can I just say, 'Thank you so much'?"...

It seems my insistence on sharing this journey in Catholic Education had paid dividends in one school.

"That has helped so much with that teacher when he says, 'We can't, we are a Christian school'..."

Not only did I get a desk, a cuppa, everyday workplace atmosphere and feedback, I also got invitations to brunch.

On my final day an NTAHC worker invited me to his home, where his mother laid out a Greek feast for brunch. It seemed that Darwin hospitality knew no bounds.

As I left NTAHC for the first time, I got the energy to complete the drive from Andrew, who reminded me of one of my reasons for driving



around the country.

*“Daniel I love it that you are going to all of these places where people say, ‘Don’t go’... You just say, ‘F*ck it’... I love it...”*



Some 1500kms later, I would find myself walking in through the doors of NTAHC's Alice Springs base, a welcoming house in the heart of Central Australia's capital.

Like their northern NTAHC counterparts, NTAHC Alice Springs hosted a seminar for local teachers and health professionals. Presenting on my work in schools, I got those gathered to assess their schools and organisations for readiness to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia.

When I asked the locals what they most wanted from 90 minutes with me, their hopes included:

- To learn strategies and tips to teach about homophobia;
- To expand knowledge and assist clients;
- To learn something new, focus on challenging homophobia and responses to “that’s so gay”;
- More insight into helping families affected by homophobia;
- To learn more in relation to HIV and homophobia.

Encouraging them to talk with one another, I also shared some strategies for challenging and interrupting homophobia.

One of those in attendance was Phil Walcott, a local health professional. Phil is a perfect example of many others I met who “came to Alice Springs for two years, and I’ve been here 17...”



Phil's varied experiences in Alice Springs have included being the school counselor at the local independent, religious school and one of headspace's counselors.

Indeed when I contacted headspace I was told that rather than talking to them, I should talk to Phil. It was with some surprise that my request for a cuppa was dismissed over the phone, given the welcome responses of other headspace locations.

"I haven't clinically come across those young people and haven't come across those issues...Neither of the girls [i.e. other headspace staff] have either...There is nothing I'd be able to give you...I'm sorry I couldn't be more of a help..."



I felt like saying, "It's not me you should be apologising to, it's the local young people..."

Now an independent candidate in the 2012 NT elections, Phil's engaging personal story is for all to see at: philwalcott.com.au

Phil is clear that challenging homophobia is "about educating the educators...them getting more comfortable..." One of Phil's slogans is: "It doesn't cost a cent to change the way you think..."

Sharing his own history of interrupting of homophobia with students as an out school counselor, Phil's style focuses on a mixture of correcting language and personal rapport.

Student: "That's so gay..."

Phil: "What?...That's so wonderful and fabulous?..."

Student: "No Phil, that's so gay..."

Phil: "Yes, I understand...It's wonderful and fabulous..."

*Student: "No, we mean it's sh*t..."*

*Phil: "Well if it's sh*t, say "that's so sh*t", it's not gay..."*

The powerful connection Phil has for Central Australia is clear to

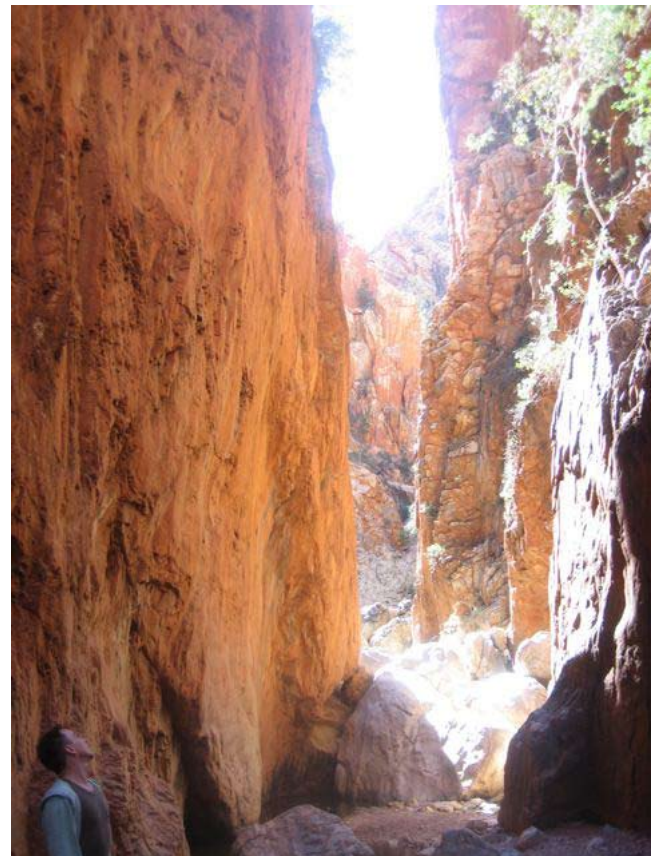


anyone talking to him. He puts this down to it being Aboriginal country, “a phenomenal place with great spirit...These ranges used to be as high as the Himalayas...”

To get to Adelaide from Alice Springs you need to drive between a gap in these ranges. Known as “the gap”, one of Phil’s well-known slogans is “Phil The Gap”, which amuses or annoys depending on who you talk to (although those annoyed will say it’s only because they have heard it so many times).

I met Phil through the Coordinator of NTAHC, “Damien” who would play host to me for my week in Alice Springs. Well-connected and tireless, Damien made time to assist my professional and personal adjust to Alice Springs. Offering a desk, plenty of cuppas and a comfortable stay in his guest bedroom, Damien would ensure I had contact with any number of folk of interest.

I got a sense of Damien’s love of Central Australia whilst watching a sunset on Alice Springs’ Anzac Memorial Hill. Prone to hugging the odd tree, you could literally feel Damien breathe in his surroundings and become nourished as a result. Observing the nuances in the sunset-filled sky, Damien could distinguish in the colour of the horizon based on the time of year. More than any place I had been to on this tour, people’s relationship to (and love of) their place was evident.



Most people I met had come to Alice Springs, like Phil and Damien himself, for a short, defined period of time and then found themselves staying for much much longer.

I wondered if Alice Springs had a similar appeal to Broome. In my Broome blog I wrote about Percy, who believed that the popular holiday destination attracted people who were “escaping” or “hiding”. “Chloe”, a young queer health professional, thought Alice Springs attracted yet another type of person.

“I think people come [to Alice Springs] for other reasons...I guess



this place attracts people with a missionary sense...They don't like to admit that a lot of the time..."

And this missionary zeal seems to be most directed from white Australians toward Indigenous communities. Yet not everyone ends up staying, often when they realise that being a saviour is not what they expected.

Chloe herself has surely one of the most interesting journeys to Alice Springs. Whilst at university, Chloe was part of The Global Solidarity Collective. When the "Children Overboard" incident occurred, the group decided to do something about asylum seekers.

A trip to Woomera Detention Centre cemented an idea for a larger project.

"The government was putting refugees away from people, where no-one could see them...We got back and decided to make it into a bigger project..."

That project involved collecting people's stories and raising awareness.

"We decided to confront the untruths that were in the media...There was a documentary made, media and public forums...We had a 52 seater coach that someone donated to us that couldn't go faster than 80kms/h...We all had to get our truck licences..."

As a group of predominantly gay and lesbian people traveling to regional, rural and remote areas of Australia, being non-heterosexual was not what was most challenging to people.

"That was amazing...We were having more trouble for being [in communities] about asylum seekers than we were about being queer...The worst confrontation was in Port Hedland...I was quite nervous about that...We had a run in with a couple of bikies who were upset cos we had our bus painted with stuff about refugees..."

Chloe wonders if it the lack of homophobia came from the focus of their tour.

"We went into a lot of church groups and a lot of schools and a lot of conservative places in each town and I found people didn't have a problem with us at all...I don't know if that's because the issue of asylum seekers was a lot more divisive at the time than queer stuff, or what..."

Yet the pace was punishing.

"We did the whole thing in about 8 weeks...We averaged 1000km a day..."



Clocking 100 days on the tour during my time in Alice Springs, I reflected on the comparison to my 150km average per day to this point.

For Chloe this pace, and a lack of results, was a challenge.

“Towards the end of that I was feeling really burnt out and really frustrated that change was not happening quickly enough...”

A chance meeting with a nurse doing “amazing stuff in Woomera” convinced Chloe to adjust her plans. What also helped was the number of people who questioned why she and others were not focusing on the challenges in Aboriginal health. Studying medicine in Sydney, Chloe decided to specialise in Aboriginal health. Soon she would find herself traveling to Alice Springs.

“I picked Alice Springs because I’d met people who said it had a strong queer community and a strong activist community and an interesting artistic thing happening that is very different to what a lot of other regional and rural places are like...”



Now in Alice Springs, Chloe observes a conservatism.

“I think it is a lot more conservative here in terms of the queer scene...I’ve been around queer people who are also activists, been on the edge of normal...There are a lot less people doing alternative relationships...Like there are a lot of longer term monogamous couples...There is definitely less gender diversity and probably a lot more women who identify as lesbian...There’s not that much of an organised queer community...”



What exists are “Girls Drinks” and “Boys Drinks”. I managed to get to “Boys Drinks”, which consisted of no-one who could be described as anywhere near a “boy”. Around 10 men gathered for a Friday evening drink and some conversation.

At these drinks Damien spoke with a German man, “Patrick”, who had received an exciting letter from Germany. As a teenager, Patrick had a secret relationship with another young man from his school. Patrick still even had a photo of the two of them sunbaking from the time. Fifty years on, he had been contacted about a 50 year school anniversary. After some investigative work, Patrick made contact with his former teenage lover, “dropping hints” in his letter that he was gay. His former lover would reply, “dropping hints” in his own letter that he was gay. Now, Patrick is preparing to head to Germany.

Far less entertaining and romantic was my own conversation with a local man from the media. He spoke of how frustratingly resistant the Alice Springs community was to change.

Everyone I spoke to told me about “the 6 month”, or thereabouts, rule. This rule states that you must leave Alice Springs every 6 months in order to maintain your sanity. Chloe is a believer in this rule too.

“You have to go to the city often enough to get out of that small town network...”

After “Girl’s Drinks”, a number of women debated about the name. Having heard about the wave of feminists and activist women who had fallen in love with Alice Springs in 1983 and stayed, I found it quite odd that a women’s gathering would include the word “girl”. Chloe describes the debate.

“We had a big debate over what it was called, how it was a bit exclusive and what it might be called instead...It was a calm debate...Some people were saying it doesn’t matter what it’s called, and it was the younger people there that were saying it does matter...”

Chloe and her peers feel the absence of a LGBT specific space in Alice Springs.

“We don’t have a space in town that is a queer space...We spend a lot of time together informally doing other things like drinking and going out bush...I’d like to see a space created...Even if it was only a occasional...I think maybe because it’s so small, like when we called about putting on a night, it’s likely to be all the people you are sitting around in your backyard with anyway...”

I got the sense that maybe this was not what Alice Springs wanted.

“The pace in town is a lot slower and people do sit on verandahs and



have cuppas and go camping...They are less likely to have the kind of busy lifestyle that you have in Sydney or Melbourne...And in the city there are all sections of the community that are focused on being queer and I think it's just about the number of people and that people have other things as their priorities..."

Whilst I got the sense there was a relatively strong LGBT adult community in Alice Springs that was fairly active in public life, I did not get the same sense for LGBT young people.

A number of people observed that most of the adult LGBT community was not from Alice Springs. Chloe spoke for many in talking about the situation for young LGBT people growing up in the town.

"I think if you grew up here, it would be a different place to come out in just because everyone sees you, knows your business and talks about it all the time..."



This was the verdict when I spoke with staff from the senior high school in Alice Springs. "Brigitte" described the general school climate.

"As a community, a school community, we are probably similar to the broader community here in that we are at an early stage...I'd say it's much easier for young women, but the real issue would be male homosexuality..."

"Jodie" thought males would also fare worse.

"It's a tough town for that..."

Staff had one example of a female student couple at the school, who



were “openly gay”. Brigitte admitted that one of the female students was a very strong and popular personality, and that this was important in their acceptance.

“In the school it was OK...But they were copping a hard time out of school a bit...But they’ve now dropped out of school...It was very complex in the end...”

One young man had been outed in recent years after a friend could not keep the news of his friend being gay to himself.

“That was very difficult for him...There was awful graffiti at the local shops that we had removed...They left town, his family, but not because he was gay...He actually e-mailed me from WA and was quite suicidal...”



Brigette worked hard to link that young man in with local services in WA.

Staff agreed that there were challenges for the school.

“We’re quite inclusive around race...We have 40% Indigenous student population...And around disability too, we are inclusive...I think our challenge is around sexuality, around inclusion...”

“Jodie” believes teachers seemed to be a logical start.

“We need to know where teachers are at...It would be great to have some tangible, non-threatening tools for teachers to use...”

Brigette added to that.

“How to challenge ‘that’s so gay’ and the attitudes behind it...We already have some teachers doing that...”

It seems that just having the NTAHC hosted seminar in Alice Springs had started conversations in the school. Unable to make the seminar, Brigette had sent around the seminar flyer to other staff who responded positively.

Soon Centralian Secondary College had purchased a copy of Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools and were preparing to have conversations at their weekly health and well-being meetings. Responding to my encouragement to focus on tangible, immediate steps, staff were eager to start talking with their colleagues about strategies and resources that could be used immediately.

As Brigette walked me out to the sunsoaked carpark, I found myself saying in my head the words that Damien had used in response to spectacular sunsets, breathtaking landscapes and views from high places around Alice Springs. Feeling the enthusiasm of the school staff and their likelihood to follow through immediately, his words seemed appropriate.

*“Now that’s the sh*t...”*

