

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK FIFTEEN, (REMOTE AUSTRALIA): HITTING A CENTURY IN REMOTE AUSTRALIA: DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

*"They don't give a f*ck what you look like, just who you are and if you have a good heart...Out here I think the desert is so isolating so people are just themselves, and all the pretence of the city drops away..."*

"They" are the Indigenous people in remote communities in Central Australia. And "Amber" certainly knows what she is talking about. As a transgender "lady...I call myself a 'lady' and not a woman..." self-described as "towards feminine", Amber has been working with success for some time in remote communities that are closer to Alice Springs than anywhere else.

Amber's journey to Alice Springs from Melbourne started when she was a child, which included a family holiday to Alice Springs. Years later she would participate in the Peace Walk, a reconciliation walk between Lake Eyre and Sydney spanning some 3000kms. Despite concerns from friends, Amber found a great deal of belonging, a spiritual feeling and acceptance.

An impromptu performance by Amber and other artists was so well received that calls for more performances followed.

"No-one puts on a show for them out here, so they loved it...It was wild and crazy and they went for it..."

Compared to her experiences in queer-friendly Melbourne where venues made Amber and others feel like they should be grateful for any stage time at all, remote communities were throwing dollars, praise and love in their direction to turn up again and again.

Finding herself coming more and more often to Alice Springs, Amber noticed something important after three months of work in remote communities.



“I came off one of the communities and started crying, and I thought, ‘Why am I crying?’...Then I realised that when I was in Melbourne I was getting abused...I was nearly getting into fights almost everyday on public transport just for who I was...”

What Amber described was a dropping of her defenses because, on remote communities, they were no longer necessary.

“I was crying and asking myself, ‘Had you closed yourself up this much?’...”

It seems that because of her appearance, Amber felt that seemingly progressive Melbourne was closing her in.

“In Melbourne people were trying to put you in this box, and that never worked for me...Most people thought because of the way I look I am a crazy, drug party person and I’m not...I’m really straight...I hate going to parties...”

Committing herself to remote community life, Amber decided to find out what skills she could develop in order to bring back to the people that had welcomed her so warmly.

When it became apparent that it was hairdressing and beauty therapy, Amber hopped onto a plane to return to Melbourne to learn just that. Now that is what Amber takes to remote communities, along with her background in youth work. From all accounts the locals cannot get enough of the lively, energetic and entertaining white “lady” who comes in to give them small doses of “feeling special”. Much of Amber’s charm, apparent during my time with her, is her ability to relate easily and naturally quite quickly.



“If you can’t relate to the people out here, nothing is going to be successful...”

Indeed this observation was made by “Shane” (see Kimberleys and Darwin blogs). Working in Darwin’s Indigenous communities teaching circus to young people, Shane observed the difficulties white Australians sometimes have.

“They come in trying to do something, and the Indigenous people say, ‘Who are you?...Where do you come from?...Tell me about your family’...Then they can relate to who you are and are more open to whatever it is that you want to do...But most white people come in and immediately try to start with what they are doing and it just doesn’t work...”

It seems the remote communities have come to know just who Amber is, and they love it. Amber, fluent in local dialects, has been given a title that is given to women in the communities. Not that the locals don’t like to play on it.

“Sometimes you see it, the women set up one of the old ladies...They send her up and she says, ‘Hi [local dialect word for a male community member]’...And I tell her, in [local dialect] that she must be blind, or that something is wrong with her eyes because I’m a lady...And I do it in a playful way and I can see all the other women laughing because they love to see me do it...”

What Amber sees in the communities she works in, she loves.



“It’s a playful culture...They really like teasing...”

This certainly defies the expectations of most of Amber’s friends in Melbourne who expect to hear tales of her being abused and harassed. But Amber says that this happened to her more in inner city Melbourne than in remote communities. And some people can mistakenly think they are experiencing homophobia when, in fact, they might just be experiencing something else.



“Some people have gone out there and say it is homophobic and I’m quite shocked...Like one guy recently...But he was in child protection so of course you’re not going to be popular, and he wasn’t...”

That remote communities can defy city expectations of their levels of acceptance and understanding is something that “Leo” in Darwin talked about. Working across the Northern Territory in sexual health, Leo had some calming news for all the remote hysteria that can whip up.

“I think people have this skewed view of what it means to be in a community...Living in a community is like living in a large city, it’s

just on a smaller scale... Each community is different...Some are ‘dry’, some aren’t...Some are really proactive, some are in that welfare state...It depends on that community and the LGBT people, if they are visible...”



Phil, introduced in my Alice Springs blog, adds to this and gives an insight into the potential impact.

“My understanding is that the behaviour is accepted but the identity is not...So they go to the cities...They can be

more anonymous, but then they can lose their sense of connection without their family...”

Some communities have also been influenced by Catholic missionaries. Examples of such communities are around Alice Springs and on some of the Torres Strait Islands. Coincidence or not, Leo mentions challenges in these areas around Alice Springs.

“Anecdotally it’s not so good around Alice...To the point where kids are so worried about coming out that they start harming or take it to the full conclusion and take their own life...”

Yet on one Torres Strait Island, things seemed to be on the improve for local Sistagal populations. “Sistagal” is, for some, an Indigenous term for transgender people.



[Popular resource for young people, 'My Friend Is Gay', defines 'transgender' as "a person who identifies their gender as being different to their physical sex"]

"[Sistagal community leader] would say that she is an Indigenous transgender woman...But Sistagal has a different meaning in different communities...Here they dress as a woman, they cook, they clean and they take one of the kids...I think if you look to Northern Queensland it's different again...Sistagal can mean that you are just a gay boy... In highland [Papua New Guinea] it's like Thai ladyboys..."

Leo sees some progress in remote communities through strong Sistagal characters and leadership.

"If you look at this map...[points out a Torres Strait Island]...Don't forget it's a very Catholicised community as well...I think through numbers and leaders, very strong Sistagals, they have educated their own community about taking on the female role and what that means...We now have [large Catholic organisation] that wants us to come and run sexual diversity stuff within their community...And we've seen it for so many years..."

[And as I wrote in my Darwin blog, with news of my IDAHO seminar, a remote community in north-east Northern Territory had shown very real interest in me bringing Beyond 'That's So Gay' to them.]

Communities working out what Sistagals mean to their everyday lives is something that excites Amber.

"There are a lot of young men taking on feminine roles...What happens and what does it mean, because there is men's business and women's business...It's exciting to be around that, to be involved..."



It appears that Amber will be around for a long time yet to see this all unfold. More recently she has been showered with praise from the people who fund her important work. She described a recent meeting with the head honchos in a government department. Amber walked in for a well-attended meeting with lots of men in suits.

“There I was, turning up in my pink hot pants and no-one raised an eyebrow...That would never happen in Melbourne...They said they loved my program and that the [Department] wanted to get behind it...They took me seriously and didn’t care what I looked like...”

Amber laughs and says that she is now seen as someone with experience.

“But that’s not hard in Alice...You just have to be around longer than 6 months...No-one stays longer than that...”

And showing that money follows doing what you love, Amber doesn’t have to worry about funding her work.

“I don’t worry about all that, I let them sort all that out...”

And with the success and effectiveness of Amber’s work, one gets the feeling a lot more money will start flying around.

From all accounts there is an obscene, and in some cases, sickening amount of money flying around Alice Springs and the communities around it. “Obscene” and “sickening” are terms I use because every local has a story or seven about mismanagement of money, embezzlement and corruption.

Sick was how I felt hearing them and not just because I was hearing



some of them in the back of a 4WD driving on dirt roads to a remote community. “Jim”, a good friend of Alice Spring’s “Damien”, had kindly offered to take me for a drive out to one of the communities he works in. For Jim, an older gay man relishing the country around here, the invitation was simple and straightforward.

“If people don’t go then how are they supposed to know what it’s really like?...”

Excited to see a remote community firsthand, I was less excited at first by the drive down dirt roads that I would feel unsafe on at 60km/h. Especially given that I was in the backseat. Throughout my childhood I suffered fairly severe motion sickness that magically disappeared once I learnt to take the wheel of a car or similar vehicle.

So now I found myself traveling along these roads at 120km/h, and somehow I felt calm. Knowing that Jim had been driving these roads for years and years made me feel more at ease. The one concern I had was from the stories I had heard from both Damien and him about wheels flying off at 100km/h and axles breaking. Now driving down these roads at this speed I could see how brutal they were on any vehicle.



If I had met Amber before this drive perhaps I would have been tenser.

She told of two very recent stories in some local communities where drivers had died: one teacher had died when their car rolled; one worker had died when they hit a camel.

The roads we drove on were in quite good condition, if what I am told is correct. Add that it’s not wet season and I had a fairly quiet Sunday afternoon drive compared to what I could have had. A real fact of life is that sometimes you just can’t drive some places for weeks because roads can become flooded overnight. Occasionally Jim will assess his chances and drive through, telling tales of water rushing over his rather high truck bonnet. In Wyndham, Liz, introduced in my Kimberleys blog, sometimes waits an hour and finds that such a flow of water can drop from a car roof level to midway on the tyres.



It's these kinds of conditions that Leo says makes supporting people in remote communities most challenging.

"It's the distance...In terms of, you'll know from driving around the country...Up here in the wet season, forget it...In the dry, not a problem...If you want to do something in the wet, you have to charter a flight, unless it's well serviced because there is a mine there..."



Now that I have traveled through most of the most floodable parts of Australia (touch wood), I am thankful for my original plans. Not aware of how much the wet season in northern Australia could have disrupted my plans in a major way, I mostly planned to be in northern parts during "colder months" and down south before and after said cold months. Driving across countless dry riverbeds across northern Australia signed as a "floodway" and hearing the stories I have, I feel rather lucky.

Back on the road to remoteness, it's possible I was distracted from a potential driving fatality by Jim's stories. For me, he was as comfortable a man in his own skin as anyone I have met for a long time. Jim had an easy, natural and un-self-conscious way of telling a good yarn. One minute it would be about the mistletoe on the trees we were speeding by or the local budgies, the next it would be about his encounters with creepy crawlies.

Loving his life on the land, Jim has a country getaway. He can laugh when telling of the bite he received from a white-tail spider out there, "I wouldn't want to go through that again..." Apparently no limbs dropped off.

"Nah, I just waited two days for the swelling to go down..."

Patience in the bush when help is far, far away may be a virtue. Jim told of a large, dangerous brown snake in his bedroom.

"I got to the bed and saw his tail going from the pillow under the sheets...I closed the door, got [his dog] and put her inside...But the bugger went up the doorframe...I tried everything to get it out, but



the bastard wouldn't come out...So I closed the door and didn't go in there for the next few days...But I do have other bedrooms, it's a big place out there...[laughs]..."

Having driven for 17 000kms now myself, I was particularly interested in Jim's own relationship with the land as he drove across it. What struck me was his obvious deep affection for it, as well as his ability to notice subtle differences along the way at over 100km/h. Time and again he told of how particular parts were now flush with wildflowers or there was a great photo opportunity around a certain bend.

And photography is something he takes very seriously. If Jim sees a great spot, he'll get up at 4am so he can capture it at sunrise. Soon, Jim will be entering some of his photography in the Alice Springs Show, but laughs when he tells of the \$20 per photo entry policy given that first prize is \$5. Some of Jim's friends believe he photoshops his work.

"I'd have no idea of how to..."

Upon arrival in [remote community], Damien and myself would take a wander around. I was conscious that I was not here by invitation, only a tag along, so I was merely an observer for the day.

Damien and I would get a pie from the only store, microwaved and, it turns out when eaten, frozen in the middle. Taking bites around the frozen centre at the football oval, I had a moment of emotional reflection.

On this very day I had hit 100 days on my national challenging homophobia tour. I had not expected to get to such a remote community (despite wanting to) and had not been able to fathom what Day 100 of my tour would be like (despite wanting it to happen). Perhaps to some it might seem strange, but reaching the 100th day really took me by surprise. Time has not flown, by any means, yet the launch of my book and tour seems like only yesterday.

I would quietly tell Damien about the milestone as we walked around



the dry, dusty football field half-expecting that he would understand what it might mean to me. Of course he wouldn't (and couldn't), and so my visions of sharing a delirious "can you believe it really has come this far" moment of skipping and laughing across the dirt-covered football field was instead an almost silent meander.

Later I would shed a joyful, disbelieving and somewhat lonely tear to myself. I had not expected much from Day 100 because I could not know what the first 100 days could bring. It's safe to say that any initial expectations have been far exceeded.



Walking around [remote community] would not take long, given that "walkingaroundtheblock" as a child in Geelong would have taken longer. Built around an old train station on the Old Ghan Railway Track, [remote community] still had some interesting offerings. We actually drove back to Alice Springs on the actual track, which still offers large iron rail pegs and squeezing through where a passage would have been carved for a train.

Damien was concerned how I might react to coming to a remote community. I was grateful for the concern, yet also amused given my travel for work and pleasure through any number of developing countries. Be it the putrescent smells of Egypt or Sri Lanka, the dog population in Thailand or remote villages of Indonesia, I'd seen enough to prepare me for remote Australia. Yet as Jim pointed out, "We are living in a developed country in 2010... Things should not be like this..."

Change is happening, especially where there is not a fast turnover of good people. It seems white people coming and going is expected. And when they do, invariably it's in white government 4WDs. In Darwin Shane told of how one of his fellow workers arriving to run an Indigenous community program with his new personal vehicle: incidentally a white 4WD.

"All the kids got upset with him and said, "Noooo Mr [worker]...Not you...We want you to stay, not to go!..."



It seems government initiatives are called “snow storms” in Darwin. It’s said that every now and then all these white people blow in and then quickly go again.

In some ways turnover can be encouraged by some. Damien tells of some Indigenous locals calling white people “white goods”.

“Ya get em in there, run em into the ground and then ya get a new one...”

But some great people are staying. And they’re loving it.

On the drive there, Jim told of how in this remote community, the locals have welcomed the introduction of letterboxes. Previously, each resident had their mail delivered to a large set of pigeonholes. Privacy was an issue, with locals opening their neighbour’s mail to check on their bank balances and the like, then dropping the mail on the floor or quickly stuffing it back, into the wrong pigeonhole.



Now with their own letterboxes, Jim smiles when he sees them decorated with dot paintings or their football team’s colours.

Leo also talked about communicating with remote communities as a barrier to good support.

“In terms of communication, some have internet, some don’t...Usually if you want to talk with someone in a community you ring the local office, leave messages and hope someone gets back to you...And hopefully they do...And as you’ll know driving around the country, sometimes you’re in range and sometimes you’re not...It’s forced us to be pretty creative with how we deal with that...”

Normal service protocol might not always work either.

“And it’s not a structured thing...If they are in town, they’ll just drop in... It’s not just about saying “Oh, can we have a meeting or appointment



on Friday at such and such a time..."

It helps to be clear about what you can and cannot do. Spending time with Jim I got the sense that he had worked out where he could make a difference, and didn't try to do anything more than he could do well. Such wisdom seems to give him energy in an environment where the local challenges and the complicated history of not getting things right might paralyse a person, or make them give up their "missionary" fantasy (see Alice Springs blog) and run back to the big smoke as so many do.

Someone feeling temporarily overwhelmed is "Chloe", introduced in my Alice Springs blog. Although overwhelmed for now, she is definitely staying. Just as there is wisdom in knowing where to focus your energy, there is also wisdom in admitting it's bigger than you could have ever thought.

"I would say that being in this town is a completely different experience in learning about Indigenous issues, because I came here for that primarily...I've wanted to learn more about that, and coming here, instead of helping me know, it's just made me realise how much I



don't know and how massive an issue it is...As a white person from Sydney, I just feel now, that the most challenging thing is not feeling like I know what needs to happen, what my place should be... ”

Not that there aren't your fair share of people who think they can come in and "solve" Central Australia. Sharing a drive with Jim and Damien I get the sense that it's as easy as solving the situation in the Middle East.

Damien has a simple shortcut for finding out who is serious about contributing and who are destined to leave.

*"I ask them, 'Can you tell me about the basic Aboriginal family structure?'...If they can't, then f*ck off!...I have no time for you..."*

Leaving Central Australia I could not help but feel a little saddened that Jim was not eager, like his superiors, for him to take a larger role in working across more remote communities. Perhaps Jim, with his relaxed self-awareness, knows something I don't.

One thing he does know is that he is one of the luckiest men in the country.

"I feel privileged...Not just to see all this country, but to also work with it's people..."

