

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK SEVENTEEN, (CAIRNS):  
FROM GAY DESERT TO GAY BUBBLE:  
FALLING DEEPLY IN LGBT ACTIVIST LOVE



*"Sorry Daniel..."*

Damn.

So close yet so far. When the text message came through on my phone I realised that I might have to wait another 12 years to meet this man. He explained that whilst walking his dogs north of Port Douglas he was almost run over by a speeding local on a dirt road. All would escape unharmed, yet now "Roger" was laid up with a broken foot.

There is no doubt that the sheer logistics of Beyond 'That's So Gay', the national challenging homophobia tour, mean that I quite simply cannot get to speak to everyone I would like. If I had a gold coin for every "near miss" chat in a town or city, my self-funded tour would be generously funded.

However Roger was someone I didn't want to be a "near miss".

I would first know Roger existed in 1998. In that year I was a baby LGBT worker from Geelong. With barely 12 months experience under my belt I was given, what I believed to be, a remarkable opportunity to attend the Health in Difference 2 conference (a conference looking at lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender - LGBT - health) in Melbourne. Having just driven 20000km in the last four months of this tour, I can laugh at how "big" the 76km drive from Geelong to Melbourne felt each day back then.

Perhaps I was spoilt, because this conference would become my benchmark for all LGBT gatherings to follow. Whilst it lacked what we get now in corporate beige-ing and anxious mainstream envy, the conference was seemingly alive with a raw emotional energy. For example I recall one plenary that had three speakers: the first Victorian Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO), a man living with HIV and an Indigenous man. I cannot recall if it was the GLLO or the man living with HIV who went first, but remember clearly what happened: they talked openly about their lives in ways I had never heard before.

The atmosphere was strangely intimate, so much so that each speaker would end up crying openly to a room full of people. Somehow it felt right, and I was not alone in joining them. There was no concern about professionalism or appropriateness, just about connecting over the sharing of our experience. Whether it was just a romantic memory of the time or not I cannot be sure, but for me there was an uncompromising honesty that I've never seen captured again in the same way. It was the first time I had ever realised that I did not have to modify myself for an audience.

With a backdrop of grief, celebration, sadness, beauty and healing, it was probably inevitable that I would be vulnerable to fall in LGBT-activist-love for the first time. Taking copious notes throughout the conference, I was taken aback when Roger stood to give his presentation on his research. It was not the first time I had seen an attractive, somewhat feisty, brunette who was also young and gay, yet it was the first time one had opened their mouth and had something to say that had me transfixed. I knew straight away that I wanted to be just like him: intelligent, articulate, confident, although I didn't know how.

What Roger presented were the findings of his thesis, "Sexuality & Suicide - An Investigation of Health compromising and Suicidal Behaviours among Gay and Bisexual Male Youth in Tasmania". I even remember an often lost point from this research about the relationship between self-identity, self-labeling, first same-sex sexual experience and suicidal ideation that I still talk to teachers and health professionals about to this day.

It would be Roger's research on the experience of gay and bisexual young men's experience, on the back of a growing body of evidence, that would alert the then-Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to create the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour's predecessor, Outlink: a national network for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people and their service providers in regional, rural and remote (rrr) Australia. Just over two years after sitting to hear Roger speak I would be working on that very national project.



Now in Cairns, so very close to Port Douglas, I just had to sit and finally meet him, broken foot or not. Thankfully, for me, that would happen in my final days of Cairns, and not surprisingly I felt like I was meeting an old friend for the first time.

Despite not yet meeting him, Roger had ensured that I had a warm, hospitable stay in Cairns. A Facebook friend given a number of overlaps in our social networking, Roger's recommendation meant that I would arrive in Cairns to be hosted at Turtle Cove, a long-running gay resort to Cairn's north.

Not for the first time, I felt like I was a "bad gay" in that I was the only gay person I knew who had now been to Turtle Cove before. I arrived with a head full of tales of nude romps on private beaches, attractive staff, visiting locals and internationals as well as hedonistic parties.



I walked in to find a relaxed yet subdued atmosphere, finding out quickly that the whole resort was recovering from the (Saturday) night before to celebrate the Queen's Birthday Weekend. Over the next few days stories would slowly filter out about who did what, although usually after a guest had left the resort.

I must admit to feeling uncomfortable at the time given that until this point I had only been hosted by individuals and couples. Now that it was a gay business I felt out of place. What were the expectations of my stay? Did I now have to rebrand my tour? Did they know that no-one reads my blog? What I did know is that it is a unique institution that has been around for 18 years in Far North Queensland and I wanted to find out more of it's story.



Once at the bar I met my contact for Turtle Cove, was asked to sit at the bar for a drink and to meet the new owners. Waiting to do so I was asked to explain my project again. This turned out to be a reminder to me about how powerful the idea of this project can be to people. Having spent the last four and a half months talking about my project, I almost went into auto-pilot to explain my tour. Yet I re-assessed quickly when I turned back from the sun setting on the horizon to the barman who was now in tears.

*“I’m sorry...”*

The barman explained that he’d recently known two young men in love. Both living on farms on the opposite ends of Greater Cairns, one of them decided that he could not handle it all and had committed suicide. When his young partner heard about this he too took his own life.



*“[tears]...I guess it’s something I’ve buried so deep...”*

After settling in and freshening up I was invited down for dinner where I was encouraged to join in. Looking for a spare seat I was taken aback to see a familiar face. Within minutes I was seated with Victoria’s Jamie Gardiner and his partner, Greg, laughing about the coincidence of us all being there.

Jamie, coincidentally born on the August 24th like me, and I would discuss the upcoming {also} Awards recognising the LGBT community. Jamie and I laughed that, with 29 years separating us, both of us had been nominated for a Hall of Fame award.

I was taken aback when Jamie returned from his room with his own copy of my book, Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, so that I could finally sign it for him. As I signed I stopped and asked why he would take my book along on his holidays. When Jamie replied, “So I can continue reading it”, I started playfully challenging his taking work on vacation and got a wry smile from his very understanding partner.



Over the next few days I would spend a lot of time at Turtle Cove blogging, setting up my week in Cairns and preparing background information for my {also} Award nominations: Hall of Fame, Activist of the Year, Contribution to Sport. This allowed me plenty of time to observe both Turtle Cove at work and the people who chose to relax and play there.

There were the “gay cowboys” who were said to have broken resort records on the Saturday night. There were gay couples who were relative “regulars” to the resort for their standard break. There were gay single internationals who could be a different version of themselves 1000s of miles from home.

On the first night a friendly gathering around a bonfire (that incidentally flirted with being out of control), morphed into a drag performance and “party games”. After four and a half months of being in what has felt like an LGBT desert, I was almost overwhelmed at times by three men dressed as sailor girls, best bare butt competitions and races to find Tic Tacs in the underwear of your partner (if indeed your partner was wearing any).

Whilst it took me some time to become reaccustomed to such an intense concentration of LGBT energy (or to be accurate: gay energy on this occasion), others found it a little too much. At dinner I’d spoken with a gay cattle rustler, who I later found out was at his very first gay thing ever. Having never been to a pub, event or other venue, this man of the land decided that Turtle Cove would be his very first foray into all things gay.

Hours later he was gripping my arm and asking all manner of questions about gay culture, the role of drag queens and other things that did not yet make sense (and to be fair may never make sense). When I arrived for breakfast at 7am the next morning, I was told that he had checked out early from his stay and was on his way back to the cattle station.

It drove home to me that resorts like Turtle Cove are much more than just a holiday destination. For so many who arrive for some rest and relaxation, there are wildly different expectations about what their stay will provide. This is something the new owners, a family with a gay son who were visiting at the time of my stay, understand. Facing up to criticism that the previous owners had treated the resort as less of an institution than it deserved, the warm and welcoming Kelvin and Jacinta, their charming son Jake and his gorgeous partner Michael are working hard to invest, upgrade and return Turtle Cove back to what it became known for: a gay resort that offers more. They even took the step of sponsoring a Port Douglas Australian Rules football team which caused a media stir that turned out to be nothing that positive.



“Ken”, one of the Turtle Cove team as well as a long-time local, returned to Turtle Cove because of this approach.

*“Turtle Cove kind of deteriorated through bad management...I could see what the new owners were trying to do and I wanted to be a part of that...”*

When I asked Ken why people come, he was clear.

*“You get a lot of people coming here because it’s more isolated, not so visible like a nightclub...It’s like a sanctuary where you can come here and be yourself and go...You don’t have a mate seeing you coming out of some nightclub in your town...And here we have a policy of ‘what happens at Turtle Cove stays at Turtle Cove’...That’s very important to us, to protect the privacy of people...If you don’t want to come out, then we are not going to betray that trust...The difference with Turtle Cove [to a nightclub] is you might still get the odd person that’s coming to terms with their sexuality, but it’s clear that they’ve been thinking about it for a while...”*



Ken’s story spans remote, rural and metropolitan Australian life, yet he always finds himself coming back here where he was born. Moving to Hobart to work in the media after completing his studies, Ken made a little bit of Australian LGBT history when he was fired and banned from working for one of the gold standard media outlets in the country because of an insinuation that he was in a relationship with a high profile politician.

*“All for going to see a [state] ballet performance [with said high profile politician]...When I think back...All that happened was that we walked*



*down the steps and had our photo taken, I was not even near him but the big question [in the paper the next day] was, 'was I his partner?'...I went in [to the paper where he worked] to find out I no longer had a job..."*

Having shown a flair for media that attracted competing job offers, Ken now saw his job prospects dry up.

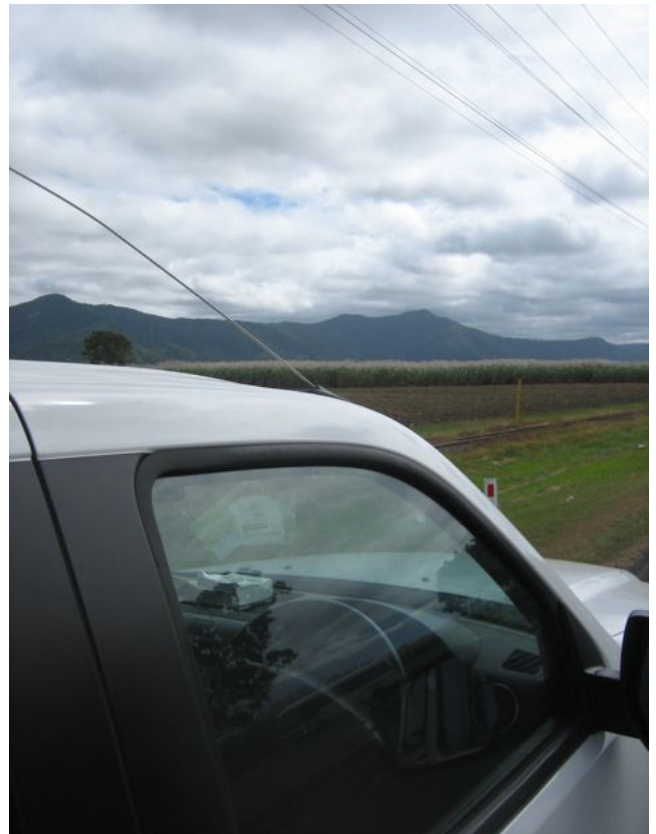
*"It destroyed my career big time...I stupidly signed a letter of agreement saying I would never work in [company] ever again...I would only get my entitlements, I couldn't get them, about [significant amount then or now] until I signed it..."*

Although Ken ran to London to cope, he eventually found himself back in Far North Queensland again where he slowly established himself as a businessman. Yet in the small community of Mossman that wasn't so smooth.

*"Rumours started to go around that I might be a poofa...I used to have people doing the usual name calling... It's like everything, you have a percentage who are supportive and a percentage who aren't...I had to go through the whole process of coming out again..."*

Moving back would bring more than just financial reward.

*"I was out in Cairns and met [partner]...He turned out to be from my Mossman...He knew me but I didn't know him...Our fathers used to play football together when they were younger...We were together for eight and a half years..."*



Given the magnificent opportunity of staying at a gay resort in Far North Queensland and the fact that on the second day I was struck down with what would be diagnosed five days I would not like to repeat later as the flu, some might forgive me for staying put in the "gay bubble". However I was still interested in life outside the gay bubble in Cairns. Especially given that men still occasionally park their cars at night on the outskirts of the property and yell "poofs" (although it has to be said that only nightstaff ever hear them). Even the acting



General Manager, a heterosexual woman described as the ultimate fag hag, got into a verbal altercation with a Cairns man whilst in town after he made disparaging comments when he found out where she worked.

*“This guy was saying some pretty nasty stuff...I started yelling at him and telling him he didn’t know anything and that he shouldn’t say anything...I thought, ‘He’s either going to shut up or I’m going to get a smack in the mouth’...”*

For the record he quieted right down.



Overall, “Paul”, a local youth worker supporting LGBT young people, believes Cairns offer a tolerant climate.

*“Cairns in a snapshot is a very tolerant place, probably because there is a high volume of tourists that move through the place...We have a huge mix here of Torres Strait Islanders, Cook Islanders, Indigenous, New Gunineans...We’re closer here to all of those communities...”*

Local LGBTs also seem to be a part of Cairns life.

*“There is also a fairly big, I’d say older, gay and lesbian community here...The beat sex culture is really strong...We have a high number of STIs and HIV in Cairns, so safe sex is a big part of what we do... One in ten, maybe even 9, gay men in Cairns is HIV+...I know a lot of the older gay community comes to Cairns because they like the climate...”*

**[As context I saw a resource that put 1 in 14 gay men in Queensland as being HIV+]**





Yet despite a seemingly tolerant climate and a youth space where LGBT young people could come to, it seems that LGBT young people are not coming.

*“We don’t get a lot...But they don’t even mention it...The ones that do seem to be quite comfortable with it...”*

Attempting to promote the LGBT youth space, albeit a space they would share with other young people with relatively high needs, Paul has approached local schools.

*“It varies in their response...The school nurses are really kind and just want to pass on the information...But generally they are pretty straight places and they don’t want to deal with anything that’s not heterosexual...”*

Down the road at Cairns State High School the welfare staff were keen to have a cuppa to discuss all things non-heterosexual. “Grant” explained that students are selected to come to the school, with an emphasis on arts, music and other pursuits of talent.



*“It’s a good school for cultivating creative students...”*

As with other creative selected-entry schools in regional Australia, there were some more obvious examples of LGBT students.

*“[Male student] has made no secret of the fact that he’s gay...In fact, he celebrates it...”*

Coming out during Year 9, this male student then started actively pursuing other, usually younger, male students. This bucks the general trend of young gay men remaining romantically isolated in school environments. The school became concerned that he was “soliciting younger students inappropriately”.

*“But I think he was looking for a partner...”*



Now in his final year, this student recently wowed his fellow classmates at the recent school camp.

*“He had his kinky boots on...He got up and did Lady Gaga stuff with an entourage of girls behind him...He’s got a fairly confident type of personality... He’d be out there if he wasn’t gay...He always looks like he could deal with people putting him down...”*

And perhaps this student would need to deal with put downs.

*“[Gay] is a kind of put down they use regardless of sexuality...They know it pushes people’s buttons...It’s a general putdown...”*

Grant believes that adjustment as LGBT in a school environment very much “depends on the individual student”.

*“We’ve got kids like [female student]...She’s pretty out there...Shes copped a fair bit of negative comments...Her style tends to be pretty aggressive, she’s a bigger girl, she plays AFL at a pretty high level...I don’t think she has handled it particularly well...But I think that there is more going on for her than just her sexuality...”*

At times Grant has even learnt from his student’s journey.

*“There was a transgender student that I supported for a while...The way she talked about it, the more we did, you got the feeling she was definitely on the right track...She was pretty comfortable with it, although others weren’t...”*

New to the school welfare team, “Prue” didn’t have examples of students yet, although one of her young son’s workmates seemed to fare well.



*“In his small [mechanics] workshop there is a young guy...He’s been supported by his family and his friends at school...He seems happy within himself and he’s really supported, you can tell...Obviously there is a little banter, but it seems to really work...It’s not a putdown stuff, it’s more jokey...My son says he’s a really lovely person to work with...”*

For a time, a few years ago, the school ran a school-based program.

*“We ran that program here for 4 years with the Year 10a...Once you did get into it the boys tended to settle down...I think it was better handled generally by the girls than the boys...”*

Interestingly, Grant believes that young people need to something themselves before they can start embracing others.

*“I think it’s about young people feeling accepted and respected themselves before they’ll accept others...”*

Welfare staff have also looked beyond the classroom to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia.

*“We did consider setting up a more visible support group in the school but that was not supported by admin...The preference there was that they would want it to be out of school...There tends to be a fair bot of conservatism around sexuality...”*

And perhaps it’s important that such a group exists, given that only two students are out at the school. Back to Prue.

*“It’s the quiet ones I guess you worry about...The ones who can’t share what is going on in their life...”*



Over at the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC), the new version of the Queensland Aids Council, “Tony” acknowledges that schools are tough nuts to crack.

*“We have a good relationship with the school based nurses...But we find the connection between us and the education system...”*

Tony isn’t buying the good press on the modern experience of LGBT young people.

*“There is this perception here that young people cope better now... That things are better than it used to be...Whereas we get the stories of young people who are coming out in schools or post-school who are feeling quite isolated...”*

Local youth workers seem to be a challenge.

*“I think also the youth services up here are really disengaging because they work with kids that are having major issues...So if a young person’s issue is sexuality, they are finding it hard to fit in... These services are funded for kids who are having major issues...”*

A former teacher locally, Tony talked of a student-created “Safe Zone” at an all-boys Catholic school. Entirely set up by students themselves, this space provided a haven for non-heterosexuals.

*“In this space a boy was safe from any fear or danger...A lot of the gay boys and the boys who were less masculine would go and hang out there...I liked it because it wasn’t an arts or music space, so teachers didn’t have to be there...”*

Tony was eager to get a copy of Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’. So that he could share it with nurses across local schools

*“I talk with all the school based nurses, we are actually meeting next week, and they get told to do all that stuff that schools don’t want to do anymore...They are not supposed to run classes but often they are asked to anyway...This will be perfect for them...”*

Like their other state and territory counterparts, QAHC struggles to meet a range of LGBT community needs given a tenuous relationship between what it’s funded to do, what it has to do and what it needs to do.

*“QAHC has brought to Cairns the first LGBT organisation, whereas [the Queensland Aids Council] was more support and care...Now we are, although our bosses don’t like it, a one-stop shop...Ageing, lesbian, youth, transgender, you name it, we’ve got it...”*

What can both help and hinder is that what is happening in Cairns is



pretty similar to what happens in Sydney.

*“Sexual behaviour up here is no different to what happens anywhere else...We have the same lust and juices...Except perhaps for identity...”*

Identity for LGBT people, as well as HIV+ people might differ in Cairns according to anecdotal and research evidence.

*“There are barriers to people identifying up here...A lot of people, especially in the [HIV] positive community, there is this fear of being identified...That is a real big issue up here: ‘I don’t want to be known as that’...So they want to keep it hidden...There is a secrecy to it... Because the community is so small, there is a fear that it will be known that you are positive...But I think a lot of that stuff is long-term stuff that the sector has to face about stigma and discrimination and to put it on the LGBT community to see them as a valuable part of our community...”*

As in other regional and rural parts of Australia, QAHC faces expectations about it’s role and what it could provide. Yet it recognises that the needs of the LGBT community here might very well differ, despite their similar “lust and juices” to their metropolitan counterparts.

*“I suppose there is this perception that there isn’t enough to do...But I think a lot of people come here for that purpose, they want a change in lifestyle...So the social life is more about BBQs and the beach...So I feel more connected to LGBT community than I did in the city...”*

It’s a theme that has echoed across regional, rural and remote Australia since I set out in February: living outside metropolitan Australia offers a different opportunity for “community”, albeit one that is not as visible, constant, commercialised or passively entertaining.

