

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK NINETEEN,  
(MACKAY, BIGGENDEN, MUNDUBERRA)  
THE GOOD DOCTOR AND HIS "WIFE":  
CONTRIBUTION RURAL STYLE

*"Well it's funny because I went to Melbourne [from Mackay] to come out and get a boyfriend...I ended up having a boyfriend for the first month, then I was there for three years without one..."*

Although "Darren" got a great deal from his time in Melbourne, he felt the need to return to his country Queensland roots. When I met Darren mid-morning in Mackay, he was clear that this was where he needed to be.

*"Well my grandmother is not well and my sister just had a baby...I have a connection to the land...I just feel very strongly about being here right now..."*



Living west of Mackay on his parent's sugarcane farm, Darren and his brother were about to undertake a major fencing project on the property. Here, Darren gets to be on the land he grew up on, as well as pursue his passion in life: arts therapy as a means of self-expression.

*"I just do it because I have a real affinity with self-expression..."*

Not only is Darren using arts therapy with local disabled people, he is looking at trialing coming out workshops with an arts therapy focus. In many ways this is a way for him to step back into active lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community life.

*"I just got burnt out..."*

Darren is certainly not alone. In my travels of regional and rural Australia, it's clear that most people leave LGBT community organisations and/or groups due to burn out, bad experiences and/or a lack of recognition. With passion to burn (out) and often little management and support, volunteers can find themselves taking on more than they can healthily manage over time.

Yet Darren is a good example of burnt out stars returning to the fold. When he returns, it will be cautiously and with a renewed focus of what he can and cannot do, as well as what he feels he can best contribute.



One of the ways Darren has dipped his toe in the LGBT waters of Mackay is through the local Rainbow Youth Mackay (RYM) group. I sat for a morning tea of sorts with him at Mackay's Pioneer River, the setting for gatherings of RYM. It's here that an impressive public space project has recently been completed, and I joked with Darren that this would be the most stunning setting for an LGBT youth group in Australia (although all correspondence will be entered into).

Not that RYM is confined only to young people. The group has been active in leading gatherings for the local LGBT community (with 100s turning up to a recent night), with Darren saying there are roughly equal numbers of (young) men and (young) women.

The birth of RYM can be traced back to a regional and rural project by Open Doors Youth Services. A Brisbane-based service providing support for LGBT young people or who are exploring or questioning



their sexuality and/or gender identity, Open Doors worked with eight key areas through 2008 and 2009. “Steph” ran that project.

*“Mackay was the most north we went...”*

That project trained local service providers for two days, spread three months apart. The aim for Day One was to look at the needs and experiences of LGBT young people and the barriers that they face. Day Two looked at what workers and local organisations could practically do. Steph found, as I have over the last five months, that what workers usually needed was quite basic.

*“It’s more about, ‘What do we do when we see them?...What do we say?...How do we help a young person disclose?...What shouldn’t I say?...What is offensive?’...”*



One outcome was the birth of RYM, and with it came the involvement of some, by all accounts, outstanding young individuals who drove the group to this day.

Not that there was not already an organised LGBT community in Mackay and it’s surrounds. Steph feels that the Open Doors project restarted a conversation.

*“I think we revitalized the energy a bit...”*

That energy has been buzzing in Mackay since at least 1991. It was Darren who put me onto a fascinating Youtube clip documenting the history of lesbian women gathering in Mackay. Titled “Cyclonic



Sisters” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhtYfT1aH38](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhtYfT1aH38)), this two-part video charts the beginnings of organised lesbian activity in Mackay to a newspaper ad in the local Saturday paper that set local women who love women ablaze.

The local newspaper would not allow those placing the ad to use the word lesbian. This had a significant impact on one woman interviewed for the video, who describes how she felt by this restriction.

*“Irritated...Horrible...Don’t forget I had just got to the point in my life where I’d been closeted...I’d sneak around like a mongrel dog pretending I wasn’t a lesbian and I was, I’d done all that...So this was a major thing for me that I was proud to call myself a lesbian...”*

I dare you to watch these clips and not sigh and smile by their end.

The challenges of the local lesbians seems to be symptomatic of a broader hostile climate for LGBT people. One young gay man who I spoke to in another Queensland location told of being the victim of gang rape at a local beat.

**[Wikipedia: In Australia, the term beat is used to refer to an area frequented by gay men and non-gay-identifying men who have sex with men (MSM) who are cruising for casual sex, and where sexual acts occur.]**

*When he approached the local police said that he “deserved it”. There response to saying he’d been raped was, “no you weren’t, you guys don’t get raped...”*



With this atmosphere, it might not be a surprise to hear that “Mark” had lost gay friends.

*“I lost two friends, male friends, to suicide a few years back when I was at school...One came out to his family as gay and was disowned...The other came out as gay and had such a hard time of it...”*

Feeling unable to come out as gay and live in Mackay, Mark moved away to Sydney, then Melbourne to study.



*“It took until the end of my degree before I could admit I was gay... Everyone was like, ‘It’s great you are comfortable enough now to tell us’...”*

Like Darren, Mark is a perfect example of a young gay man who left a regional or rural area to come out, and who then returned home for a reason. As had Darren, Mark moved back to Mackay for family reasons.

Mark was asked by his dad to move back to Mackay to take over the family business. Interestingly his father did not want either of his two (straight) brothers to take over the business. Not that this does not involve some risk to the business that has been running locally for over 20 years. Mark is concerned that his father’s older, more conservative clients might find out he is gay and that this might impact on business.

*“I’d like to think that it wouldn’t matter, but a lot of dad’s clients are older, more conservative and it could...”*

Whilst Mark is openly gay with his immediate family and friends, he is more careful with his grandparents, extended family and the broader community. Yet Mark feels his grandmother is onto him.

*“Gran tries to fish it out every time she comes up here...I was doing the ironing, as gay men do, and she said, [Mark], we have a homosexual in Gunadah’...I said, ‘Really gran, that’s nice’...And she said, ‘But he’s not a practicing homosexual [Mark]...I nearly burnt a hole in the shirt...Practicing?...What’s that about?...”*

And it seems that this could be getting in the way of family relationships. Plus, “Gran” seems to be in charge of Mark’s grandfather’s inheritance. Maybe soon that won’t matter.

*“My mum got so angry the last time she saw Gran...Gran was really getting stuck into gays and mum came back saying if she said anything else about gays then that would be it, the end of it...”*

Whilst Mark is taking a more conservative, cautious approach, particularly with the older generation of Mackay, that is not the approach of Jono in rural Queensland.

Like Mark, Jono being out and openly gay in rural Queensland could have very real ramifications for both his and his partner’s professional and personal lives. Yet Jono seems to be benefiting from a “get your hands dirty locally” approach. Perhaps I should explain that some more.

Jono wasn’t expecting much the day he was involved with a performance on a Brisbane bridge. Admitting that he was hungover



and lacking enthusiasm, Jono halfheartedly encouraged passersby to join in. He hardly noticed when a tall, attractive student in medicine walked up and started “asking all these questions”. Getting more and more annoyed Jono would answer the student’s questions, not understanding why he would not go away.

That student was Vinny, and the rest, so they say, is history. Having the most diverse CV I have encountered for a while, Jono worked as everything from a wedding DJ to a journalist to a business practice manager in a medical clinic as Vinny worked his way to becoming a doctor.

Taking advantage of a scholarship whilst finishing his studies, reality kicked in when the fineprint on the scholarship became a reality: by taking up the scholarship, Vinny agreed to working as a doctor in a rural location for two years. To say they were both nervous would be an understatement.

A talented photographer and filmmaker, Jono decided that he would document his journey into rural Queensland with Vinny. And so the documentary, *The Doctor’s Wife*, was born ([www.justoffcentreproductions.com](http://www.justoffcentreproductions.com) or Facebook group: *The Doctor’s Wife*).

Watching both trailers for the documentary you get a sense of the journey that Jono and Vinny took to Munduberra, five hours drive to Brisbane and home to about 2000 people.

Jono: *“What makes you nervous?...”*

Vinny: *“I’ve never been to Munduberra, what makes you nervous?...”*

Jono: *“Uh, we’re gay and we’re going to rural Queensland...”*



Jono admitted to me that he thought that he was on a unique odyssey, and it was this belief that led to our first contact. It would be “Roger” (see Cairns blog) who would suggest Jono get in touch with me, given the tour I was then about to commence. Jono says that he could not believe it when he heard about my 38-week tour and that other LGBT people were venturing into regional, rural and remote Australia. In many ways that Jono and Vinny were not unique provided some comfort.

It was a surprise to be contacted by Jono so early on. Eager to share his and Vinny’s story, I was invited to stay with them months before I even arrived in Queensland. For my part I was eager to hear Jono and Vinny’s story in order to share some good news; we don’t hear often enough the stories of LGBT people thriving outside of the metropolitan east coast.

By the time I arrived in Biggenden, where Jono and Vinny live, I felt like I knew Jono. In his capacity as a journalist with QNews ([www.qnews.com.au](http://www.qnews.com.au)), Jono and I spoke a few times for articles that he wrote, which I have to thank for many responses from Queenslanders.

Being an openly gay couple was not the only challenge that Jono and Vinny faced when they arrived in Munduberra. What they found was a community who had not been overly happy with their doctors in the past and felt that those doctors and their wives were reluctant to get involved in the community.

For Vinny I suspect it was arguably “easier” than Jono’s. Vinny’s challenge was to be a great doctor, and this was something he is said to have done incredibly well. In my time staying with Jono and Vinny, I saw first hand the very long hours that Vinny worked (and this was a good week) with precious few breaks; a 10 minute lunch break in a 12 hour day is commonplace. In rural Australia, good doctors are few and far between, and news soon spread about Vinnie.

Yet for Jono the challenge was to find a role as the partner of the local doctor. The Munduberra folk were open in telling me that the previous wives of local doctors were loathe to get involved in the local community.

*“Usually doctors and their wives come to town and they’ll separate themselves...”*

Somehow Jono knew that this was not going to be his approach. As down-to-earth as they come, he decided to jump right in. The locals noticed straight away.

*“This couple came to town and they got involved...”*

A small yet significant social earthquake went through the town the



first week when Jono and Vinny turned up at the local pub for a meal on the Friday night.

*“We thought, ‘What are you doing here?’...The doctor and his wife haven’t eaten here in 20 years...”*

Part of the surprise was the history of doctors’ wives in Munduberra. Stories of wives that spent as much time away from Munduberra as possible and a sense that they were “too good” for the locals rubbed everyone the wrong way.

In addition to supporting Vinny’s local medical centre as business practice manager, Jono set about a plan to immerse himself in all things Munduberra. And how.

Jono explained that he took great care to shop locally and buy locally. Cheekily he added, “And I made sure I was seen by as many locals as possible buying local produce and products...”

If there was an event, an opening, a wedding or a funeral, Jono turned up, even if Vinny was unable to attend because of his incredibly punishing hours as the local doctor. For those who haven’t lived rural, this is potentially exhausting. Locals took notice.

*“They were so involved right from the start...”*

Relaxed, funny and warm, it was not long before friendships formed. A local hairdresser, “Sally”, explains how she first met Jono.

*“Australia Day was the day that I saw them, but I never met them, until Jono came and got his hair done and the rest is history for us... He was a little more nervous than me, maybe because he’d had a hairdresser in Brisbane for a very long time and he was a little bit worried about what I might do to him...But yeah, after the first do, it was all good...”*

Many wines on the back porch with Sally later, Jono can call Sally and her four sisters great friends.

When I arrived to stay with Jono and Vinny, a move from Munduberra to Biggenden (45 minutes drive east and a population of 500) was still fresh. It would be fair to say that both Jono and Vinny were still grieving the Queensland Health orchestrated move from a community they had become a part of.

Staying with Jono and Vinny and their adorable Labradors, Hedwig and Sappho, I got a glimpse into why the move had shaken their worlds.

Fortunate enough to walk the main street of Munduberra, Lyon Street,







I saw the reactions of locals to the doctor's wife. The first words to pass everyone's lips was hopeful.

*"Are you back now?..."*

Sadly for them, and for Jono and Vinny, no.

Jono explained to me on the first day I arrived that he was going down the street but he might take a while. Everyone is said to love stopping for a chat. This can lead to all manner of outcomes.

*"I went to check the Post Office box and came back with a bed...It should have taken ten minutes and I didn't even end up checking the Post Office box..."*

Talking with "Doreen", incidentally as rough as hessian underpants and as lovely as anyone I've met on my tour so far, I quickly understood the impact of Jono and Vinny on Munduberra and why they were held with such genuine affection.

*"They don't judge you here on who you are, they judge you here on how you treat people...We're a town of 2000 people, so we all need to get along...And because of that, we are probably more tolerant here than you would find in larger places..."*

Repeating a pattern that I've observed time and again (e.g. adult gays and lesbians in Geraldton; "Amber" in remote Northern Territory communities) the number one thing that makes a difference is contribution to the local community.

Although different in how they contributed, both Jono and Vinny became real people to the town of Munduberra. Materialising into



flesh and blood, Jono and Vinny were not the gay couple that no-one sees or knows because they are scared of the locals or think they are better than them. As real people, it was impossible for the locals not to like this couple, gay or not.

*“We know them, we like them...”*



Jono would not be thinking too long or hard about what he would do in addition to providing the necessary foundation for Vinny, which could be easy to underestimate and overlook, to thrive professionally. As soon as the locals found out that Jono had multimedia talents, funding was found for him to run a school holiday program for young people interested in making films. Every young person had a DVD at the end of their time and a positive stir happened throughout Munduberra and led to requests from other nearby locales. So much so that Jono is now seriously considering setting up a company to work in rural Queensland on various multimedia projects (in his “spare time”?).

The buzz around Jono’s potential to provide something unique to Munduberra was apparent when I met with local staff at a branch of Queensland Health. Set up as a direct point of delivery of state and federal services, staff were keen to hear about my tour and to get some advice on how to be more responsive to LGBT customers, particularly in relation to recent changes in Centrelink benefits and entitlements.

What I focus on with teachers and health professionals is the difference between process and content. Most teachers and health professionals feel confronted in affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia because they don’t feel they have the



“content”. Comments such as “I’m not gay myself so...” and “I don’t want to say the wrong thing and offend...” are commonplace.

What I try to do is shift their attention from content to “process”. Invariably most teachers and health professionals know how to do their jobs well. By getting health professionals to reflect on good process (e.g. following procedures, being mindful of language, being open and transparent if something is new for them, asking people what they need, etc) this takes the pressure off for them to be content experts. Setting a course of “LGBT basics with process first, then content” seems to be a model that regional, rural and remote Australia is responding to.

And it’s process that brought locals, Jono and Vinny together, not content. By getting involved like everyone else, and locals treating Jono and Vinny like everyone else, it all came together quickly. The content (i.e. all things LGBT) is something that has seemed to come along over time.

Regardless the outcome is clear. One woman sums up what I saw for a few hours on Munduberra’s main street, how the locals really felt.

*“These two boys, I just love ‘em...Just like my sons...”*

I have to admit that I too responded to the warmth of Jono and Vinny. Spending a few days with Jono saw me feeling both fortunate and disappointed. Fortunate that I had met someone who I could imagine being lifelong friends with and disappointed that I would have to move on. I explained this to Jono, observing that it’s rare that I get a chance to talk about things other than the basics about my tour (e.g. the logistics).

One night, I stayed up until 2.30am talking with Jono and a friend about the moment I first knew it was OK to be gay. Jono challenged me when talking about if I have a man in my life.

*Daniel: “I am in a relationship with my national tour, and occasionally he allows me to see other people...”*

*Jono: “ But Daniel, you can’t spoon a tour!...”*

*Daniel: “Hmmm, good point...”*

A highlight, and challenging one for me at that, was Jono doing a photo shoot with me. I explained that I have this uncanny ability to stiffen and be completely unnatural when a camera is on me and Jono quickly negated this concern.

*“When I do a shoot it’s all about me...I’ll tell you exactly what you’ll be doing and you have to do exactly as I say...”*



The results can be found on Jono's website, titled 'The Highway Man'.

[http://www.justoffcentreproductions.com/Just\\_Off\\_Centre\\_Productions/Photography/Pages/The\\_Highway\\_Man.html#3](http://www.justoffcentreproductions.com/Just_Off_Centre_Productions/Photography/Pages/The_Highway_Man.html#3)

If you have the time, please do yourself a favour and have a look at The Doctor's Wife. I dare you to do so and not get a frog in your throat. Jono has also generously and expertly interspersed moments from The Doctor's Wife into my video blogs for Biggenden, now uploaded to [www.thatssogay.com.au](http://www.thatssogay.com.au)

Reluctantly I moved onto Brisbane, yet with Jono's advice ringing in my ears.

"Everyone needs a good dicking every now and then..."

