

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWO, MT GAMBIER: *BE CAREFUL OF THE WAY YOU WALK IN 'THE MOUNT'*

"So who is funding you for this?"

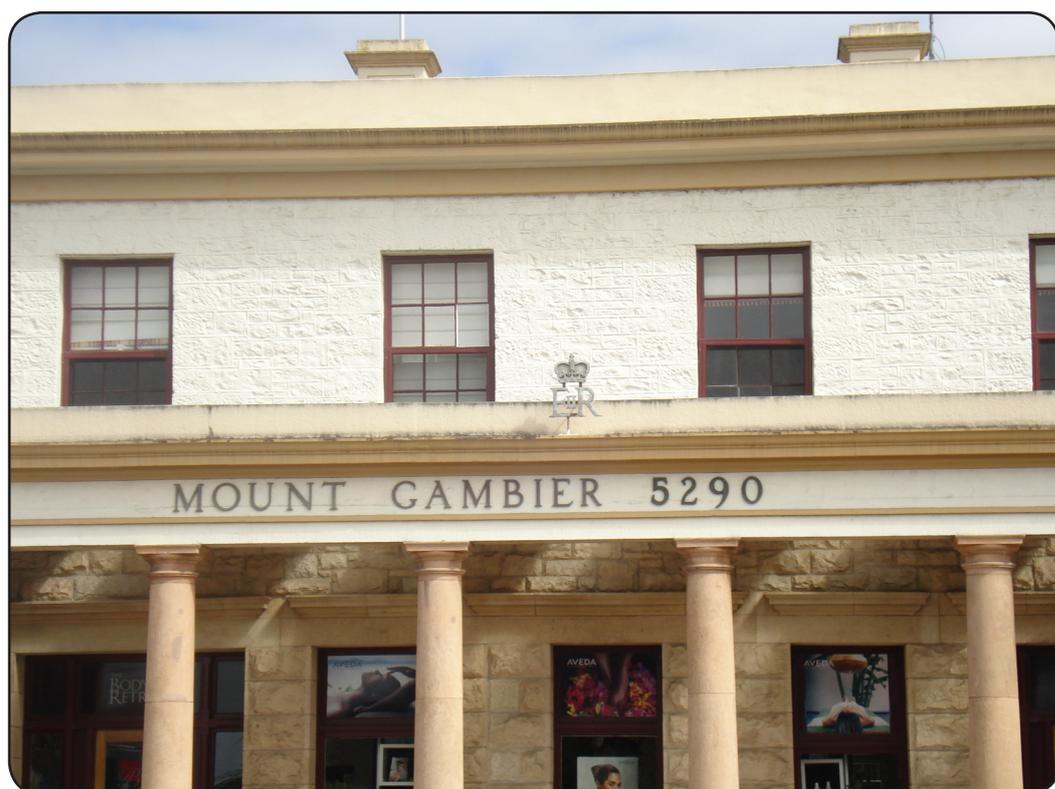
Keith had paused for the first time in about 20 minutes of discussion. His mind now seemed to process the answers I'd given to a barrage of his questions delivered in classic Keith style: blunt, cheeky and brash. His tone became serious with an uncharacteristic suddenness.

I explained that no-one was funding me. Now distracted from making his toast, Keith's head snapped in my direction. He studied me for a few moments before concluding, "Oh you are funding this through your book."

I laughed and explained that making money in Australian publishing, let alone educational publishing, was not an option.

Again uncharacteristically, Keith almost dropped his coffee cup as he turned to me, this time slowly. The reality and gravity of what I was doing suddenly washed over his face. Given our history, Keith is one of the few people who could understand what this meant.

The 20 year-old young man I had met in Sydney literally a decade earlier now stood as a 30 year-old man at his kitchen window in a northern suburb of Mt Gambier. In a moment void of self-consciousness Keith would stare out the kitchen window at something in his mind. In my own mind I jumped back a decade to that first Sydney meeting.



It was April 2000 and I was one of around one dozen people from around Australia hand selected by Tasmania's Rodney Croome to attend the inaugural meeting of Outlink, an ambitious undertaking by the then Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). In part a response to alarming rates of suicide in north-west Tasmania, Outlink was to be a national network for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people in rural, regional and remote (rrr) Australia. Those groups, services and organisations supporting these young people were also to form part of that network.

Attending this meeting were young people representing each state and territory, as well as leading service providers. Keith came as a representative for South Australia as a Mt Gambier resident. I attended both as a young person from regional Victoria and as a service provider.

The night before the meeting there was a distinct rrr-LGBT atmosphere in the air at Sydney's Hotel Y. I remember Keith bursting excitedly into the room of Rodney where I had reported upon arrival. To me he was like an unexercised puppy, all energy and uncoordinated limbs. I, on the other hand, stood very still and observed. This was only my second time in Sydney and I was still trying to work out what was about to take place. I had never thought that I would be involved in anything remotely national, or in this case national and remote.

"Who are you?" Keith fired at me.

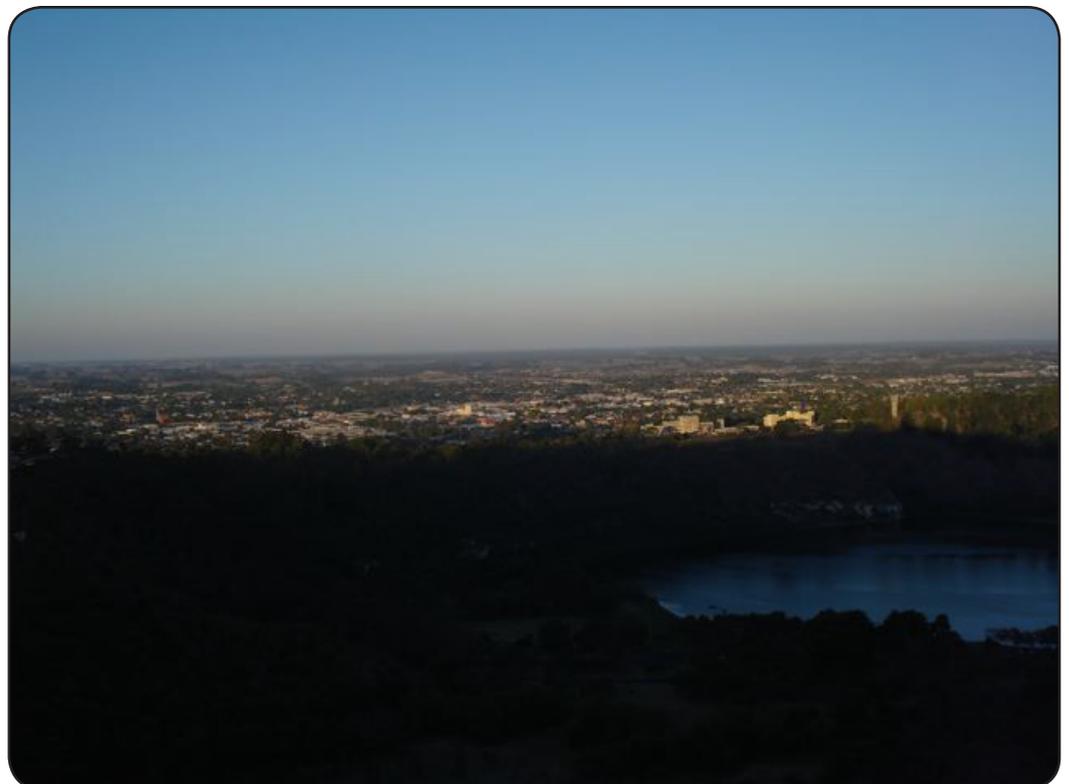
Keith had come to Sydney as a key figure of Mt Gambier's LGBT group which boasted around 50 members, no mean feat for a town with 25 000 inhabitants. The group was said to have a mix of ages, genders and identities.



In 2010 I found a very different LGBT-climate in the place locals refer to as “The Mount”. Although I had met with the local LGBT group earlier in the week, Keith was no longer a part of it. I had not even known Keith was again in town until I was alerted by his Facebook message: “are you still in Mt Gambier? I’m living here now...”

“I guess I should have really paid attention to your schedule...” Keith offered, explaining that he had accidentally seen one of my Facebook status updates mentioning Mt Gambier. Given I was in the final hours before leaving Mt Gambier it was lucky he messaged when he did.

As fate would have it, Keith would be a block from Ben’s house. Ben, a local primary school teacher, would be my host for Mt Gambier. As chance would have it Ben would ask innocently in the countdown to my national tour if I would be swinging by Mt Gambier. Similarly to Keith, I had not known Ben was back in his hometown.



Just as I had met Keith many years before, so too I had met Ben 12 years earlier at the second national Health In Difference Conference in Melbourne which explored LGBT health. A wide-eyed volunteer with Geelong’s local gay and lesbian youth support project, GASP!, I was excited that the City of Greater Geelong had invested in me by paying for my conference registration. An eager sponge, I attended sessions with my GASP! co-facilitator and mentor, Elisa Parker.

On the second day at lunch I was approached by a young man with the opening line of, “Excuse me, this might seem a little strange, but...”

Ben would introduce himself. He explained that his colleagues had spent the evening before talking excitedly about his “twin” at



the conference. Now emboldened by his giggling colleagues, Ben marched over to request a photo with me to prove he had a twin. A little taken aback I obliged Ben, and the photo was taken. When Ben left Elisa would show great concern. *“You have no idea what could be done with that photo, he’ll probably go home and say that he slept with you...”*

As it was Ben would show it to a colleague back in Adelaide, Dean, who would later become my boyfriend just over 18 months later. He was said to have marveled at the “smiley boy” in the photo with Ben. But more on Dean another time.

I would find Ben in Mt Gambier after a 20-year absence. At 17, he left for Adelaide to study at university, eventually becoming a regular, devoted and adored volunteer in the LGBT community. Ben had made the decision to move back to do what he loves most: teach. He still possessed a storytelling ability and infectious laughter that was as potent a decade before. Ben’s stories about his primary school students had us in fits, from camp outcasts from higher grades seeking refuge and children describing rural towns as “greater than lollies” to boys receiving handouts from Ben and genuinely saying with affection, “thank-you my Queen”.

Ben’s story echoed that of all the LGBT folk who I met in The Mount. All described moving for one of two reasons: (1) work opportunities; and/or, (2) a relationship.

“Ellen”, a younger lesbian woman, was an example of someone who came to Mt Gambier to follow her partner, “Olivia”. Olivia had “won” a leadership position in education, a great opportunity for her career. Ellen, excited for Olivia, didn’t think twice about following and supporting her.

The friends and family of Ellen, gathered from an upbringing in Canberra and Adelaide, would all ask, “Why would you go there?” The impression she got was that Mt Gambier would be a bit backwards.

Ellen laughed recounting these concerns because Canberra folk were said to have said the same thing about Adelaide, an assumption that Adelaide was a backward step. She was now used to it.

The reality of Ellen’s life in Mt Gambier might be described as private comfort and public concern. She is happily partnered, accepted and respected by her “educated” colleagues and making a real, significant contribution in education. Ellen and Olivia go out with work colleagues for social drinks and meals, yet although their group knows they are together, those outside the group would not.





Upon arrival in Mt Gambier Ellen described a role reversal in her relationship with Olivia. In Adelaide Olivia had been the one more likely to show concern about their public displays of affection (PDAs). Now in Mt Gambier, Ellen reflected that it was her that now showed much greater concern. Without the anonymity that Adelaide's size provides and concerned that parents might find out that they are a couple, Ellen and Olivia resort to one of two strategies. Ellen explains, *"we don't go out together, or we need to have someone else with us when we do...to act as a shield..."* In her description, it was clear that this was a great cause of distress for both Ellen and Olivia as individuals, yet also a cause of stress on their relationship.

When she looks around Mt Gambier, Ellen doesn't see any support services or groups for LGBT people, young or old. When I asked Ellen what advice she would give LGBT young people in Mt Gambier, she said, *"it is like those signs you see on the road: Proceed With Caution"*.

"The first thing that comes to mind, but it's not very nice, is 'be careful'. Be aware that not everyone will be as accepting as you'd like. Life is not easy, don't take it for granted...And tell them that gay conversion doesn't work, not that I've tried it!"

Ellen and Olivia's example was very similar to the experiences described by "Matt" and "Carl". The difference was that Matt had been born in The Mount. He had returned home to find a more conducive work-life balance to completing his post-graduate studies. Carl, a teacher, had moved to be with Matt and to find a better teaching environment.



Matt and Carl had very different reasons for being privately out (i.e. with trusted colleagues and friends) and publicly in (i.e. single, asexual and/or not gay), yet the common theme was that being openly gay and a couple would cause irreparable damage to their careers.

As with Ellen and Olivia, Carl and Matt did not have overwhelmingly positive tales to tell of family acceptance, although all had pockets of great support and signs of improvement over time.

Ellen, Olivia, Matt and Carl were not engaged with the local LGBT group in Mt Gambier. All spoke of how work for them was an important, consuming but also convenient distraction from rectifying an LGBT deficit in their lives.



Whilst Ellen and Olivia were not aware of any LGBT community, Matt and Carl were clear that they were not interested in attending the current evolution of the local LGBT group. The group had dwindled from its heyday in the early 2000s to its current handful of regulars who were all older gay men who were not from The Mount. Both Matt and Carl were not interested in mixing with those attending, so had resolved not to go.

I reflected on how there were similar concerns of group size and quality of participants with Geelong efforts to form LGBT groups a decade earlier. With some parts amusement and more parts frustration I concluded at the time that if everyone who had these concerns would all turn up then they would immediately become null and void.

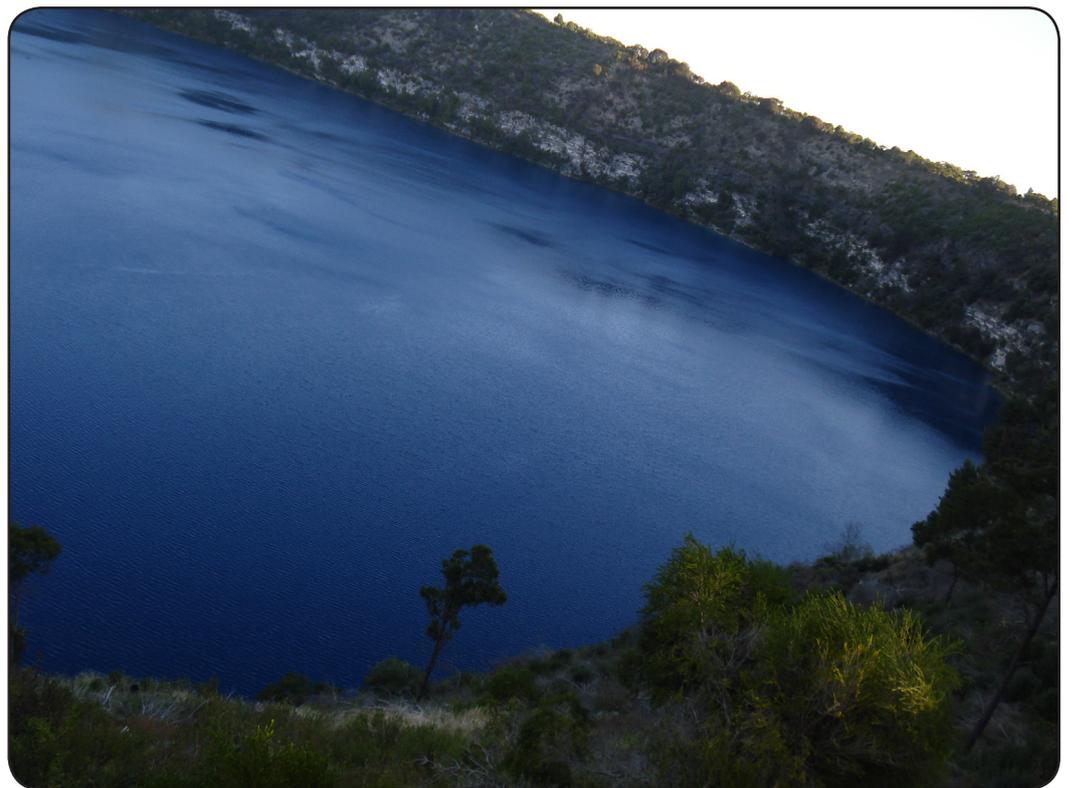
The lack of recent investment in the local LGBT group in Mt Gambier was explained by current convenor, Ewan, a local media identity. I



would meet with him in a radio studio to discuss his take on LGBT life in the Mount. Not a local, Ewan explained that the local LGBT group thrives when there is someone to drive it and invest time in it. He openly admitted that he was unable to give it the time and attention it deserved like his unemployed predecessor.

Ewan was an example of an educated, confident gay man who experienced minimal homophobia in his life, save a few “faggots” yelled typically from a block away from various unknown individuals over the years. It is important to note that Ewan had been born, raised and developed in other places, yet he was able to apply these lessons to a regional setting. He moved to Mount Gambier for work. Ewan is also very safe and supported in his employment, unlike every other person I spoke to in Mt Gambier.

Except one. On my first day in Mt Gambier I met “Adam” at the local LGBT group meeting, held somewhere between once and twice a month at one of a number of local pubs or cafes. As with most groups that wane in numbers and energy, the group seems, in some ways understandably, to now cater mostly for those who attend regularly.



An older gay man originally from Adelaide, Adam moved to The Mount for love. After eight years the relationship broke up, however Adam decided to stay given his well-established medical career and social supports. It also provides a convenient springboard to Adelaide and Melbourne for his racing interests, given that Mt Gambier is equidistant between the two metropolitan centres.

Safe, supported and well established in his career, Adam, like Ewan, feels able to be openly gay and “himself”. Both Ewan and Adam



feel that young LGBT people's lack of acceptance in Mt Gambier would be best rectified if they were encouraged to be themselves. Adam now feels that he is out to 90% of Mt Gambier folk, claiming to use this position to support, nurture and guide those young men who subsequently approach him through their first emotional and physical gay experiences.

The general assessment of life for LGBT young people in the region was bleak. The main reason given for this dark outlook centred on "family". The thinking in Mt Gambier is that young people will not come out "because of their families". Life in Mt Gambier is thought to centre on the family and family-related activities (e.g. weekend sport). "Neil", a local gay man, would relate the issue not just about family, rather as "everyone knowing everyone". He describes the impact as very isolating for LGBT young people who therefore don't know other local LGBT people:

"You need to be discreet about your sexuality....because everyone knows everyone...it could get spread around...and you don't have control over who is told, when they are told and you don't know how they'll react..."

And it seems that bad reactions have cost this community young people. Betty, who holds a position high in the upper echelons of the region's Education Department office, puts it bluntly:

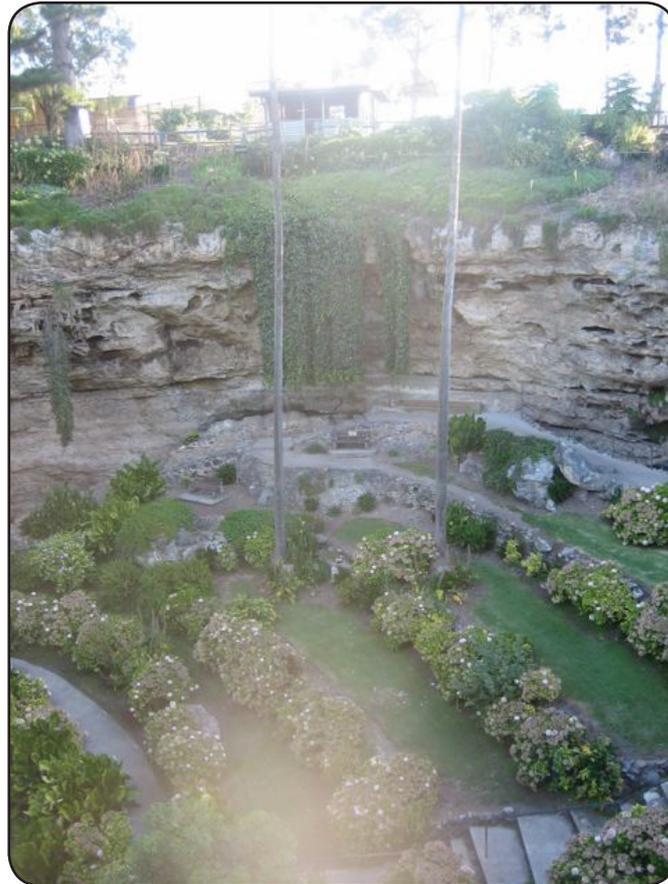
"Young people leave our community because there is nothing here for them. I know some of them and they feel they didn't have the opportunity to have any life here. The main reason they gave was community attitudes."

Ellen described "entrenched [homophobic] community attitudes" because of "generational history in The Mount".



It seems no one really knows quite exactly where to start. Two more likely options, a thriving LGBT group and school-based work, currently leave the locals scratching their heads.

The locals are divided on whether Mt Gambier residents know about the LGBT group. One camp points out that only those LGBT people who know about an Adelaide-based organisation, Bfriend, or a handful of regular participants will know about the group. The other camp believes that the residents of Mt Gambier know about the group, citing other reasons for why attendance is low (e.g. LGBT people's fear of coming out publicly and resources).



Without doing a community survey I can only say that the teachers and health professionals I spoke with did not know about the group, suggesting some marketing opportunities. Though it must be made clear that Mt Gambier lacking any identifiable service or organisation that provides quality, consistent and professional support to LGBT young people is not going to be rectified with more Mt Gambier residents knowing about the local LGBT group. Established

pathways for LGBT young people with health professionals and organisations were not evident in any conversations I had in Mt Gambier. A number to call an Adelaide-based service that did not always answer and a local branch of a national support service with a history of homophobia were not seen as good enough.

The benefit of such a service was made clear to me early in my own career in Geelong. The City of Greater Geelong Youth Services made a commitment to promote a project supporting gay and lesbian young people as part of the work they do. At times this was a broader message, at others a more targeted one. When asked to put forward a volunteer for National Volunteer Week for the local paper they chose me, given the opportunity to highlight the project.

Almost 18 months later I was sitting in my office when a young man visited to have a talk. "Adrian" was a young man who had struggled for



a long time with his sexual identity. Presenting as hyper-masculine, Adrian was trying to reconcile being gay and not wanting “to be one of them”. He said that through his struggle he kept coming back in his mind to the article he had seen in the paper about the project. *“I knew that if ever I needed it, it was here. It just felt good to know that something was there, even if I never came in.”*

Adrian’s would not be an isolated piece of feedback, yet it was the most dramatic.

In rural, regional and remote Australia the issues of isolation and invisibility are regular themes for LGBT young people. Hence one of the first questions I ask myself when I get to a regional centre is, *“What is there around here to give someone the idea, the hope or the challenge that not everything is necessarily heterosexual?”*

My school experiences were mostly hopeful, save my first phone call to a secondary school in Mt Gambier. Calling weeks ahead to discuss some teacher training I had planned, I was asked by a staff member of one high school to submit something in writing so that she could get it approved by the school authorities. Checking if this was just process or something more I asked what needed to be checked.

“It could be seen as controversial from a [education department] curriculum perspective.”

Daniel: *“Would you say that this training could be seen as controversial?”*

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

Daniel: *“So challenging homophobia in a secondary school in South Australia is controversial?”*

“Please, I’m really not at liberty to say. Just please send something through and...”

I didn’t hear back.

Yet where one government school floundered, a local Catholic school excelled. After dining with the upper echelons of a Geelong Catholic School the Friday night before to discuss all things challenging homophobia, one could accuse me of doing a national challenging homophobia in Catholic education tour (and I’ll do my best I promise).

The welfare staff at Tenison Woods College were very welcoming not only of me but also my ideas and questions. Starting, as I like to, by making a cuppa, I was quickly given a school history lesson by Joe, head of a program supporting students who aren’t quite fitting in educationally at the school.

Julian Tenison Woods, the man you might guess the school was named after, was an influential man in Catholic education. It is said



that on the day he rode to meet his fiancé to get married, he dramatically turned his horse at the last minute to ride to the local Bishop's lodgings where he begged to be accepted into the seminary. Between the lines, although these were almost screamed to me by Joe, was that Julian was thought to have been same sex attracted and conflicted. It is said he devoted himself thereafter to Catholic education for its betterment. It must also be noted that Julian is said to have had a hand in Mary McKillop's ex-communication.



With this context, I would hear about the work that Joe had undertaken with same sex attracted students at his school. His experience and observations were impressive. Yet what struck me most was his answer to my question:

“Many people who I talk with would be pleasantly surprised and a little shocked at how this could be happening in the Catholic education system. They would want to know why you are doing this work when so many others are not?”

Joe: *“I tell people who challenge or question me: you can say what you want, but when you stand at the gravesite of a young person, watch the coffin go down and wander what you could have done differently as a teacher, you’ll know why. When you think, as I did, that as a teacher you were doing enough and you weren’t (without me owning that death of course) and wanting to get better at what you do, you’ll know why.”*

Joe and his colleagues identify the two biggest barriers to challenging homophobia within secondary schools as: (1) male teachers (e.g. “that kid should not be here” and “this is not something we should do”); and, (2) community attitudes.

Like Betty, the upper echelons educationalist I described earlier, Joe would echo her thoughts of challenging homophobia in schools: *“There is a place for something, but I don’t know what and I don’t know how.”*

Daniel: *“I’d like you to consider reading my book [flashing product].”*



There is no doubt I'll be keen to return to Mt Gambier and work with local teachers and health professionals there. Yet maybe I would have a different gait next time.



As I walked from Keith's door to Ben's to get in my truck, Bruce, and drive to Adelaide, Keith would say, only as he could:
"And they really should have taken you to see someone when you were younger to fix your pigeon toes..."

Having been told off by my Pliates teacher in Berlin, I held onto my VERY slight pigeon-toe-ness knowing that it had worked for Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi (who, like me, are Olympic gold medalists in tennis, although mine come from the Gay Olympics) and a handful of men in the last few years who have noticed it and said it was cute.

Keith would have none of it: *"It was cute when you were 4!"*

I laughed, walked slightly pigeon-toed and waved goodbye as he got distracted in his front yard.

