

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWENTY, (BRISBANE)  
PLAYING TAG: AFTER MIDNIGHT,  
WE GONNA LET IT ALL [COME] OUT

*"Ya f\*ckin lesbians...You need a dick!..."*

Rural Queensland? No. Regional Queensland? No. This happened in Brisbane during Oktoberfest and was not an isolated comment from just one man. "Michelle" was with her female partner, and after a few beers was not concerned about being too vigilant on their walk home through the inner city. They held hands.

The two young lesbians, in their early 20s, responded differently. Whilst Michelle saw it as an isolated incident, her then partner, by all accounts a "femme" lesbian, decided to modify her appearance and behaviour. Observing that such an incident had never happened when Michelle was dating a woman who she describes as "more androgynous", Michelle's "femme" partner did what she thought needed to be done.

*"My femme partner started to dress more masculine because she felt she had to..."*

Her hair was cut short, she stopped wearing dresses and became more masculine in her behaviours.

**[For a brief introduction to 'Femme' and 'Butch' see:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch\\_and\\_femme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch_and_femme)]**

What surprised Michelle was that going out to lesbian venues in Brisbane, and not mainstream events, had her questioning whether she, a femme lesbian, should modify her appearance and behaviour. Walking into an all-women venue, Michelle experienced what a number of women have described as Brisbane's "lesbian monoculture" (i.e. a single way of being that dominates an entire group).

*"Are you lost?..."*

This for wearing a dress and heels.

*"I actually find it funny..."*

Now, but earlier.

Despite the occasional homophobia of heterosexual men and the pressure to be "butch" from the lesbian community, Michelle has gradually thrived more and more both personally and professionally since moving from Townsville to Brisbane.

In Townsville, Michelle came out to her family after some intense

questioning from her mother. Unlike the majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people I have spoken with on this tour, Michelle successfully evaded her mother's question of 'Are you gay?' three times (most have told of coming out after the first or second time).

Undeterred, Michelle's mother struck a fourth time when Lisa least expected it.

*"I was woken at 3am by mum...She said, 'I'll be really disappointed if you are, but are you gay?..."*

After telling her mum, Michelle had planned to come out to her father when she was ready and her mother agreed. At first.

*"A few nights later mum couldn't sleep so she woke him up during the night and said, '[Michelle's] gay!'...Dad said, 'No she's not, don't be stupid', rolled over and went back to sleep...Mum wakes up people a lot..."*

Fully awake, Michelle's dad absorbed his wife's news the next day. Having come out to her parents, it was now time for Michelle to come out to her brothers.

*"Mum rang ahead and said [to Michelle's brothers], 'Your sister is coming around to tell you something'...They thought, 'Cool, she's finally going to come out'...My younger brother said, 'That's great [Michelle], but just make sure that when you go buy your motorbike that I come because I know a thing or two about motorbikes'... [laughs]...The next day my older brother e-mailed me a link about biker boots and wrote, 'I thought you might be interested'...So they were totally OK about it..."*

Whilst Michelle has some good examples of family reactions to her coming out as lesbian, a female cousin admitted that she was grateful that she heard through the family, and not from Michelle, that she had come out as a lesbian.

*"She told me, 'I'm glad that I heard from someone else because I would have probably offended you with my reaction'..."*

Her cousin is now very supportive. Yet Michelle still feels the need to challenge her mum, such as when she blatantly labels a baby as heterosexual.

*Michelle: "Why do we assume that this baby is straight?..."*

*Michelle's mum: "Well it's like not giving babies a religion and expecting them to decide for themselves..."*

Breathe Michelle, breathe.



Admitting that Brisbane was a necessary step to finding herself and her sexual identity, Michelle is now both anxious and excited about a potential posting to Mt Isa after the completion of her degree. As we sat in a trendy, inner city café that she had carefully selected (see hamburger and corn stools), I heard some of the unfounded fears of what life might be like for LGBT people in Mt Isa that I'd heard from so many others. Yet having been to Mt Isa, Michelle also is hopeful and optimistic about the life she can lead there.

Unlike Michelle, Josh had an immediately supportive response from his parents after coming out at school as a 16 year old. Now 22, Josh is back at home with his parents, about 90 minutes drive west from Brisbane, after his own stint in metropolitan Queensland.

### **[more on Josh's story in next week's blog]**

I first met Josh at the 2nd World Out Games in Copenhagen last year. Defending gold medals in tennis, some Sydney friends came to watch me and my doubles partner in an important match against an American-German pairing. As one of their softball teammates, and a former tennis prodigy, Josh came along to see some tennis.

It's safe to say that I had a significant hand in playing Cupid with Josh and another tennis teammate. Staying in contact via Facebook, Josh had been excited for months about my arrival with my national challenging homophobia tour. His parents had no choice but to be excited too, because I drove to Brisbane knowing that I was to join them all for an old fashioned roast meal.

In yet another display of the hospitality with which I've been "blessed" on this tour, I was warmly welcomed to Josh's family home by his parents and family pets, Boof and Muffy. I would be welcomed to sit by Josh's father, Kevin who talked to me about his life in the military with a proud, reassuring warmth.

Talking to QNews ([www.qnews.com.au](http://www.qnews.com.au)) about Josh coming out, Kevin recalls his response.

*"I remember the afternoon well...He had already told his mum...I wasn't sure if he was going to tell me...I don't know if he knew how to approach me on that...His mum told me when we were sitting out the front...I thought I was pretty calm and collected, so when Josh walked out I told him that I knew...He broke down a bit, but I told him we would work through it whichever way it goes...But I'm very proud of Josh...Always have been, always will be..."*

Soon Josh's mum, Nerida, would serve up a delectable roast that almost took me back to my mum's in Geelong. (In fact my mother got very excited and reassured when I explained the hospitality and care I was being treated to.) I chuckled to myself as I watched Nerida



smack Josh for picking at the food before everything was served up.

*“Joshua!”*

Tired from two days of work and top-level softball (Josh has represented Australia internationally in softball), Josh went for a nap ahead of watching the Wimbledon women’s final with me. Kevin would head to bed at his customary early hour which left Nerida and I to talk whilst she did some handy cross-stitch work on a teddy bear image, occasionally and proudly handing me newspaper clippings of her son.

**[I was told later that Kevin was infamous for pulling stunts to embarrass the family in front of strangers and newcomers, yet I had been spared. “He’s being polite!”]**

Nerida explained how things had changed for Josh in his small hometown over the years.

*“You know he lost his first job when the boss found out he was gay...He was still at school...He was just working in the local little supermarket...But everyone knows he’s gay down there now and they love him...”*

The love that the locals feel for Josh is nothing like the obvious love his parents feel for their son. It was this love that led to Josh changing sports as a child. At 7 years of age his parents watched their naturally athletic son playing rugby. Whilst cute that he ran when he had the ball with his tongue poking out, they knew it was only a matter of time before “he lost his bloody tongue”.

Once on a softball field Josh would excel, culminating in him being selected on the U/19 Australian softball team.

Intelligent, attractive, athletically gifted and with a down-to-earth charm that is obviously thanks to his parents, Josh was encouraged to enter the 2008 Mr Gay Brisbane competition. Nerida explained that she and Kevin proudly attended the final at Brisbane’s Wickham Hotel. It was their first time in a gay bar.

*“We were the first parents ever to go to the competition and support their kid...We supported our kids in softball, why wouldn’t we support him in that?...”*

To everyone’s surprise, Josh would win. And family support was what Josh acknowledged right away after the announcement.

*“It hasn’t really sunk in yet, and to have my family here means everything to me. I have always known that my parents have loved me but this is the final acceptance for them. I know it sounds a bit*



*cliché but I really couldn't have done it without the support of my family. It means the world to me that they are here with me."*

The win was even more important to the family because of its timing. Nerida explained at the time to QNews.

*"We are really proud of him...His granddad would be really proud of him too...He passed away on this day twelve months ago...I know Josh dedicated his win tonight to his granddad..."*

**[To see Josh's cover shot after winning the Mr Gay Brisbane 2008 title, read his interview and hear about his parent's immediate reaction go to: [www.qnews.com.au/issues/pdf/207.pdf](http://www.qnews.com.au/issues/pdf/207.pdf) ]**

The excitement continued when Josh flew to Sydney and was runner-up in the Mr Gay Australia competition. Yet that enthusiasm and pride was not shared by all in Josh's small hometown.

A piece in the local newspaper celebrating the achievements of their local boy was not welcomed by everyone in town. An anonymous letter was written to the editor not one, not two but three weeks later. With religious overtones, the letter made Kevin furious, as Nerida explained.

*"I've never seen Kevin so fired up...He went straight to the computer, immediately...I said to Josh, 'You know what your father is like with you kids'..."*

One heartfelt, considered and moving letter later, Kevin sparked off a predominantly positive flood of local support for Josh and other non-heterosexual young men and women. Some other parents even felt encouraged to write about their own experiences of the parent of a gay or lesbian child.

Even though most have moved on, Nerida still thinks there are people that some locals won't change. She recounted a story that, even though she believed Josh didn't know, he later conceded he does.

*"I've never told Josh but when it all came out I was walking down the street with him...There was this father and mother with their little girl, and I actually saw them grab her and take her to the other side of the street...Can you believe that?..."*

With that Nerida got up to fetch me a blanket to keep me warm (it had dropped to around 1 degree celcius that night) and to make me a Milo. Asking how I had it, she balked at my answer of water and milk.



*“You can’t have that...I couldn’t have that...I have all milk...”*

With an all-milk Milo and wrapped in a blanket, I cosily listened to Nerida talk about her hopes for Josh and fatherhood.

*“I’ve said to Joshy, we don’t care how much it costs, we’ll pay...I want to be a grandmother, and the other two [Josh’s brothers] won’t be having any...”*

Similar to Josh, “Joe” grew up west of Brisbane in rural Queensland. Still at school and having recently moved to Brisbane, Joe told of a sexual health class at his high school delivered by a male teacher who believes, like many men, that he knows how to pleasure the opposite sex.

*“We were told how to give a girl an orgasm basically...”*

Joe was singled out by the teacher (“he was looking straight at me”) when the class was told that it was not OK to “be anything other than heterosexual”. The other male students supported the teacher’s view and, like the male teacher, let Joe know they didn’t support him.

Asking Joe how he felt about this he identified two things that led him to his reaction of, “I kind of really didn’t care...”

*“Because I had the support of all of my friends...Plus I have been involved with Youth Parliament [a statewide YMCA initiative] and they have members that are gay...”*

For Joe, the Youth Parliament has been “a safe and secure environment, and we have mentors and stuff...”

*“With Youth Parliament I have felt more and more myself over time...”*

I met Joe and a number of LGBT young people at Open Doors Youth Service (ODYS), introduced last week in the Mackay etc Blog, who had also moved from regional and rural Queensland to “the big smoke”.

**[Open Doors Youth Services is a Brisbane-based service providing support for LGBT young people or who are exploring or questioning their sexuality and/or gender identity. [www.openddoors.net.au/](http://www.openddoors.net.au/) ]**

I was invited by “Steph”, also introduced last week, to attend the Open Doors “drop-in”, a space where young people between 12 and 18 years of age are free to attend, talk to a handful of support workers, catch up with their friends and/or just “chill out”. A lively, energetic atmosphere greeted myself and every other person who came though



the door.

Steph explained that the age of participants is dropping.

*“This year we’ve had young people coming out at 13, 14 and 15...”*

I sat amongst young Ls, Gs, Bs and Ts and talked about coming out, their experiences at school and why they came to Open Doors. On this afternoon many of the young people were relatively new. The “drop-in” is usually a stepping stone to one of Open Doors’ other programs for LGBT young people (I will talk about one example, the transgender youth group, Jelly Beans, next week).

Steph explains what young people typically coming to Open Doors are seeking.

*“What young people are most looking for is connection, meeting other young people...They want to know that they are not on their own, to not feel so alone whether that be a relationship or friends...”*

Recently Steph was reminded of how challenging it can be for a young person to come along to Open Doors for the first time. An “Open Day” was held that saw 45 young people come along, 17 of them for the very first time.

*“I guess young people are asking, ‘Where do I fit? Is this where I fit? In this space?’...The initial reaction was, ‘This is a bit overwhelming’...”*

Yet with Steph, other workers and Open Doors regulars that soon changed.

To some people’s surprise, there were parents in attendance. Steph explains how one father brought along his very shy 15 year old son.

*“Recently a dad turned up to the Open Day with his 15 year old son... They actually found out he was gay, he didn’t come out to them, because there was porn on the computer at home...They said to him, ‘We don’t mind if you’re gay, it’s really OK, but please don’t look at porn on the computer because it means there will be [computer] viruses. But you need to meet some other young people and get some information’...”*

Steph became a fan.

*“I was like, ‘Oh my god, I love you guys. You are amazing’...I told them that usually parents are the last people to know...They said, ‘Yeah, we love our kid, but we see he’s struggling’...”*

Yet for all the great work that they do, Open Doors struggles, like so many LGBT organisations to maintain funding and services.



Despite the fact that they are not funded to do so, through the Commonwealth's Reconnect program, Open Doors feels pressure as the peak LGBT Youth organisation for Queensland. Between direct support, advocacy, research, community development and requests for professional development there is a lot of need that cannot be met.

*"We're not funded to do that, but..."*

This is the story of LGBT community organizations across the country; regional, rural or metropolitan.

*"We struggle to get any funding... There is currently no LGBT services funded at a state level... There is a lack of recognition of LGBT young people's needs, and that this should be recognised with significant funding... Sometimes mainstream organisations are more successful when they have their brand behind them, such as Relationships Australia and headspace... We are a gay organisation so we struggle for legitimacy a bit and are thought to have an agenda..."*

Not that the work does not have its benefits. Steph pinches herself sometimes when she reflects on being the Coordinator of Open Doors.

*"I love being out in every aspect of my life with young people because I couldn't do that in other organisations [in previous professional roles]..."*

Starting out as a volunteer telephone counselor with the Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association (GLWA). This was a natural stepping stone into LGBT community work which has continued to this day.

*"I sort of fell into the work, but I love it... It's great to be gay..."*

[more on GLWA in next week's blog]

Steph explains what motivates her to work with young people.

*"You start to see them becoming the adult they are going to be... I think a lot of adults forget how tough it can be to be a teenager... I love their energy and want to see them get through their 'sh\*t' years... Knowing how hard the world is out there, seeing how we can make that easier..."*

And reminding me of describing myself in my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, as a "professional poofta" and "palatable poofta", I heard Steph refer to herself similarly. As I have found over the years, especially when living, studying and working in my hometown of Geelong, Steph too sees this provides a unique set of challenges.





*"I call myself a professional gay...I'm a member of the community but I work in the community...We talk about boundaries a lot here, that it is a potential blurring...I have to think about what's work and what's not...It always takes a while to learn that..."*

Even if Steph has to monitor herself at LGBT events and in LGBT venues, the verdict is still clear.

*"It's great to be gay..."*

This sentiment is something that is brought to Open Doors and it's "drop-in". I got talking to a young Indigenous gay man, "Blake", after Steph had briefly introduced me to the crowd of young people gathered around a large table on all manner of couches and chairs. Explaining I had been to places like Mt Isa and Townsville, Blake stopped as he walked across the room and turned.

*"There's gay kids in Townsville?..."*

Blake has recently moved to Brisbane on a scholarship to study performing arts with an elite Indigenous program. I asked what his audition process was like.

*"I sang 'Words' by the Bee Gees...But not like them...I sang it like Jessica Mauboy on Australian Idol..."*

**[Out of interest, on Youtube:**

**<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaxfDfWStoo>]**

Only recently in Brisbane, Blake is finding it a challenge to get used to a large city without the support of all his family and friends in Townsville. Yet all of them are incredibly supportive of this opportunity for him.

"Kerry", a member of an Indigenous lesbian project fostering connections and leadership, too found it difficult to adjust to life in Brisbane after moving from Rockhampton.

*"There is a little community there but it's not very big...I think it's hard to be gay in a small community...I thought, 'I can't do this. I can't be here. I have to move to Brisbane. I have to see what it's all about'..."*

Life in Brisbane away from her support networks presented more opportunities for Kerry than she imagined.

*"I found it challenging...You lose your family, friends...And living in a big city for the first time...There are 3 or 4 gay places and they are open every night...In Rockhampton you had one small gay bar...You had to hide around the corner and run in, because it was around the corner from a heavy metal bar..."*

In sport Kerry found something that had been missing in her move.



*“It was hard not to have my family and friends here...So the way I got around that was to play sport...It was great...I found women’s sport, it was really good...Having team members who are gay...”*

Yet despite her first steps into lesbian culture, Kerry felt that her own culture was being lost.

*“Because you don’t have your own culture around you, you adapt into the mainstream...So it becomes about the gay culture because there is no Indigenous culture around...”*

I was eager to talk to Kerry given an observation I had made throughout my travels thus far of regional, rural and remote Australia: whilst teachers and workers talked about the presence of young Indigenous men who identify as gay, bisexual or transgender (Sistagal), they have not yet talked about the presence of young Indigenous lesbian women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Through the project, Indigilez, Kerry and others are working hard to combat the invisibility of Indigenous lesbians. They have a few ideas on why invisibility exists.

*“The [Indigenous] cultural expectations are that women are the lookerafterers of families, to be child bearers and to look after everyone...”*

With looking after everyone else as a priority, the focus becomes others first. This is one element of Indigenous lesbians not accessing services.

*“Women we work with were not accessing the Indigenous health services...So you might go to see a psychologist that might be your cousin...Also you might see a psychologist who understands your culture, but not what being lesbian is all about...The same with gay organisations, they might understand what being a lesbian is all about, but not about your culture...”*

Kerry has also been instrumental in working with Indigenous LGBT young people, including running a camp with the Indigenous project of the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC) on nearby Stradbroke Island with Oxfam funding.

**[more on QAHC in next week’s blog]**

The camp started well.

*“We got one of the elders of Stradbroke Island who came along and spoke to the young people...He welcomed us to the island, spoke about the people, the history of the land...”*



The format of the camp was less formal.

*“It was great because it wasn’t, ‘Let’s do a workshop’...It was, ‘Let’s talk whilst we’re fishing’ or ‘Let’s walk to the Gorge and sit and have a talk there’...Having activities and having a talk makes Indigenous people feel more comfortable...”*

Through her involvement with Open Doors the service has seen an increase of young Indigenous LGBT people accessing things like drop-ins and other programs.

One of Kerry’s successes was getting a group of LGBT young people to play in a local football competition: Oztag (tag rugby). The team was a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous LGBT young people, and the combination was challenging at first.

*“After the [Stradbroke Island] retreat we brought the group back to Open Doors for a BBQ with the other young people...There were some really racist comments about the group coming back...But after they’d played footy together that stopped...Perhaps they’d only had bad experiences before with Indigenous people...”*

The result was clear.

*“So these young people who were making those racist comments were now playing footy with the Indigenous kids and making friends...I think it brought the Indigenous kids out of their shell to be able to mix with the kids...”*

Perhaps it was also the experiences of the football competition itself, by all accounts horrifically homophobic, that helped form stronger bonds within the team.

*“The young people at first copped a lot of sh\*t and homophobia...We had it all through the competition...I think it was like the stereotype like gays can’t pass a football...”*

Before the competition started the team had sat down and discussed the possibility of homophobic reactions.

*“We said, ‘We have our own code of conduct, if players experience abuse, we don’t give it back. We talk to the organisers if we experience it’...”*

To everyone’s surprise, the team played well and made it to the Grand Final.

*“Then it all changed and there was none of that ‘faggot’...They were all friends and then mixing in...We were a good team and we could play football, and they didn’t expect that...”*



And it was not just sporting prowess that did it. Kerry observed what so many have in changing attitudes and behaviour.

*“The way that the young people handled the homophobia and handled themselves...They would still talk to people, play football and turn up each week...I think they got to know us as individuals and people, rather than gays...”*

Clearly enduring abuse, harassment and ignorance can win you points eventually, although one wonders if there is another way apart from being patient.

And patience is still required if Indigenous lesbian invisibility is to be overcome, as well as the racism within the LGBT community.

*“We’re the minority within the minority...There is still a lot of discrimination with the gay community...Hopefully that will change one day...That’s really frustrating to me...I just hope we work together instead of fighting each other...I think we’d get a lot further...In Queensland we have a long way to go...”*

Yet on an everyday street in Brisbane we can see there is hope.

*“After the football, I live down the street from one of the young guys who played football against us, he kept hounding me about when we were ‘coming back to play footy with us again’...”*

