

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge

TOUR WEEK TWENTY-ONE, (BRISBANE PART II)
WHISTLING JELLY BEANS BATMAN:
I'VE GOT THIS UNCLE YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN

"[Students] tell me about some [gay] in their family...One young guy recently tried to hook me up with his uncle...I told him it was not going to work...There were two reasons, one because I've seen your uncle, and two because I have a partner..."

"Charlie" was seated at an inner city café recounting his experiences as a teacher at a school in Brisbane's outer south.

Daniel: "But still, that's cute..."

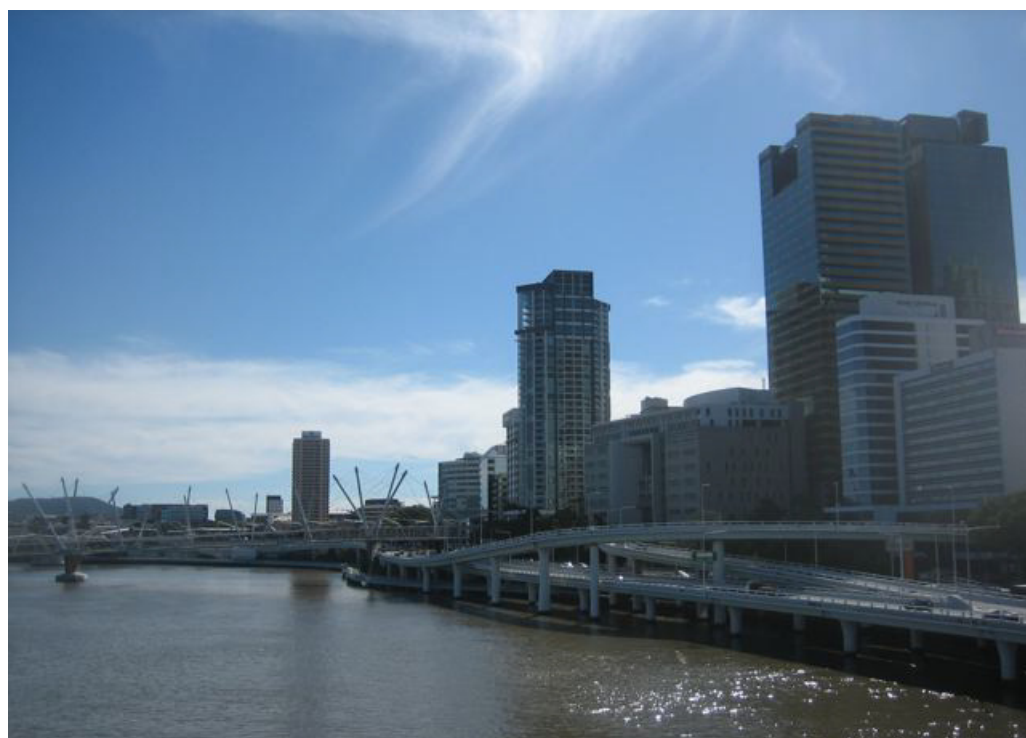
Charlie: "Yeah, it was..."

I met Charlie for the first time months after receiving his first e-mail. As a teacher he had shown interest in the Melbourne launch of my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, back in February. He wanted to attend but also to assist in any way that he could in Brisbane.

In his "spare time", Charlie is also the President of the Brisbane Gay and Lesbian Business Network (GLBN).

"I joined the business network because I was looking for something to do and to meet new people...I stupidly said I'd help out and six years later I'm running it..."

Many would say that Charlie is doing a great job at doing so. I was invited to attend the inaugural "Fruits in Suits" night in Brisbane, a night for gay and lesbian business people to gather and network that has run successfully in Melbourne and Sydney for many years. From all that I spoke to on the night, the first function was a huge success.



As a teacher in business and computer sciences, Charlie sees benefit in mixing his two professional hats. Students in his classes have supported the Brisbane GLBN.

“They helped me design the website and all the promotional material...”

Rather than a source of free labour, the students and school benefit from the association.

“We have had some of the guys from GLBN, like accountants, come in to class and talk to the kids about their jobs...And all of them know exactly where these guys come from...I utilise the [GLBN] guys for my work, such as sending an e-mail saying, ‘Hey, we need some furniture around the school’...Next thing you know, we have office chairs donated...”

As an openly gay teacher, with students, staff and parents, Charlie enjoys a position that most lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) teachers who are partially, or not, out don't: he is a supported, valued member of staff.

Yet teaching was not Charlie's first career choice. Growing up in Wagga Wagga, he initially studied and trained to be a pilot. After a while he realised he needed more than long hours flying to distant places to drop off boxes.

“The jobs are a box that you can't talk to...That got a little boring and I thought, ‘What am I gonna do’...Mum and my sister were teachers, so I got into that...”

Having heard horror stories of trainee teachers – straight or LGBT -



going into schools for 'placements' (e.g. a six-week stint in a school where they shadow other teachers) I wanted to know how Charlie handled coming out.

"My first [school] was a Lutheran school, so I was not out with students, but I was with staff...I wasn't the only one there...Then the next two it wasn't a problem..."

Living locally where he worked, Charlie found his personal and professional lives blurred.

"At the time I was living in the area and I would be seen out with my partner, like at the supermarket...Then the question at school would be, 'Who was that guy you were with?'...I'd say, 'My partner'...Other people, students, would just ask, 'Hey, I heard you were gay. Is it true?'...I'd say, 'Yes'..."

Charlie has remained at the same secondary school ever since he finished his teaching degree. Now in his fifth year, I asked if he was ever concerned, as so many teachers are, about negative parental reactions. Charlie thinks the location and level of disadvantage of the school might also play a role.

"That's difficult because it's not something I have experienced...I think what helps is it's a lower socio-economic area with a few more minority groups, so perhaps they are more open-minded to start with..."

In the late 1990's when I first delivered my challenging homophobia program, *Pride & Prejudice* (www.hbe.com.au), in Geelong schools, I noted the very same thing. Whilst seasoned workers warned me I'd be tarred and feathered for working in an area where there were three generations of welfare recipients and a growing "melting pot", I found young people grateful for being respected enough to "handle the topic". Respect was something that was in short supply. Charlie agrees.

"I think [being openly gay] has made it easier...A lot of what I teach is based on experience...To be able to talk about it honestly makes it a lot easier...It's also made it a bit...There's a lot of respect because I'm honest with the kids, and I get a lot of respect for that...I get a lot back about things that they are going through..."

And it's parents and other teachers who see the person he is and the contribution he is making.

"I guess my character has a lot to do with it...I've proven myself as a professional person...I have some credibility with all the work I've done with the middle school...I'm not some 30 year old weird guy working with kids, I'm with my partner of 10 years, we have property together, it puts a bit of stability onto it...Even with working on boys



programs, we go away for a few days...There has never been a problem...All of the kids know, all of the parents know..."

[For more discussion on “being a palatable poofta” and it’s relationship to sexual diversity in schools, see my book, *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools.*]

Not that Charlie doesn’t still face everyday comments and jokes.

“There are comments, but having a sense of humour, a laugh and joke with them about it has helped...They might say, ‘Are you going Mardi Gras?’ and I’ll say, ‘No, are you?’ or ‘I missed it, did you enjoy it?’...There might be a kid every now and then that [reacts negatively to him being gay] but when they look around and see the other 27 kids who are saying, ‘Whatever’, there is not a massive weight about what they’ve said..."

On my travels around the country I have found teachers of similar teaching ability, personality likeability and humour, yet their school has not been supportive of them being open about their sexual identity. Did Charlie decide to be out first, or was it the result of the school staff environment?

“The latter...The three principals I’ve had have been fine with it... They actually saved me once when a 12 year old girl stood up and accused me of staring at her breasts...They actually had a laugh about it later..."

And what of Education Queensland (the Department of Education)? Do they have any stand on affirming sexual diversity, challenging homophobia and teachers being openly gay?

“What are you trying to get me fired?...[laughs]...It’s non-existent... There is nothing there for my sort of development in that area... Statistically if we are saying 10% of our students are gay, then why isn’t there anything?..."

Again it seems that it’s less about the system and more about individual schools and teachers.

“We are in a lucky position because our guidance officers are young, fresh and eager to do stuff...We have had a couple of people come in saying, ‘We want to run a program’, but it never got off the ground... Generally a lot of the little community groups are not really organised... Otherwise it is not seen as a priority in the school, so it’s just seen as not needed..."

Someone who thinks a lot about the system and bigger picture is Stephen Page, who has been working with LGBT clients and community groups for the last 18 years. He is also responsible for the Australian



Gay and Lesbian Law Blog <http://lgblawblog.blogspot.com/> and 15 years of columns relating to legal matters in the Queensland LGBT media. In that time he has seen great change in the justice system.



“I think probably the biggest change that you can identify is that [the legal system] is much more accepting of gay and lesbian relationships than it has ever been...Going back 20 years [in custody disputes], if you were gay or lesbian it was thought that you were putting the child at risk...”

Fourteen years ago Stephen was involved in a case where a woman had left her husband for another woman. In a subsequent custody dispute, the father legitimately could put forward a number of concerns.

“He said the children were being infected with the gay disease...They were also going to be exposed to pedophiles and the kids were going to end up with HIV...Mind you he decided only 9 months later that his children were at risk...9 months!?!...”

Whilst the legal system advances, there is some way to go.

“There is still discrimination...It’s largely gone but there is some still some there...It’s still an issue for clients, and for me as a lawyer, that



you go before a judge who might be homophobic...You live in hope that they are going to be OK, but ultimately you don't know..."

Through all his contacts with LGBT people, there is still concern about how they might be treated.

"Too often gay and lesbian clients worry about whether the lawyer they see will be homophobic..."

With changes in federal and state laws over the years, the legal fraternity have been exposed to greater numbers of LGBT clients than ever before, and Stephen believes this has helped effect change.

"I've had many lawyers come up who have also worked with gay and lesbian clients and say, 'They're just like everyone else!'..."

Who knew? Interestingly this was what Year 9 students said at an all-boys Catholic school in Geelong after I delivered the first Pride & Prejudice program in 1999. That was over a decade ago and these young men were 14 and 15 years of age.

Yet there are still "virgin" lawyers who approach.

"They ask, 'What's it like working with gay clients?..."

What drives Stephen to advocate for LGBT clients and educate his colleagues, is a passion for social justice.

"My view in life is that everyone should be equal under the law... It's a pretty simple concept...Jefferson talked about all men being created equal...If he were alive now he'd probably say all people are created equal...He also talked about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...Life can be hard enough without being discriminated against..."

Nowadays Stephen finds himself mainly looking at relationship break-ups ("arguing over property...money...about kids..."), surrogacy and lesbian couples having a baby together ("the simple answer is don't have sex with a bloke...").

One area that still has a long way to go, according to Stephen, is transgender people and the discrimination they face.

"It's difficult for transgender people...It shouldn't be..."

For the future, Stephen is blunt.

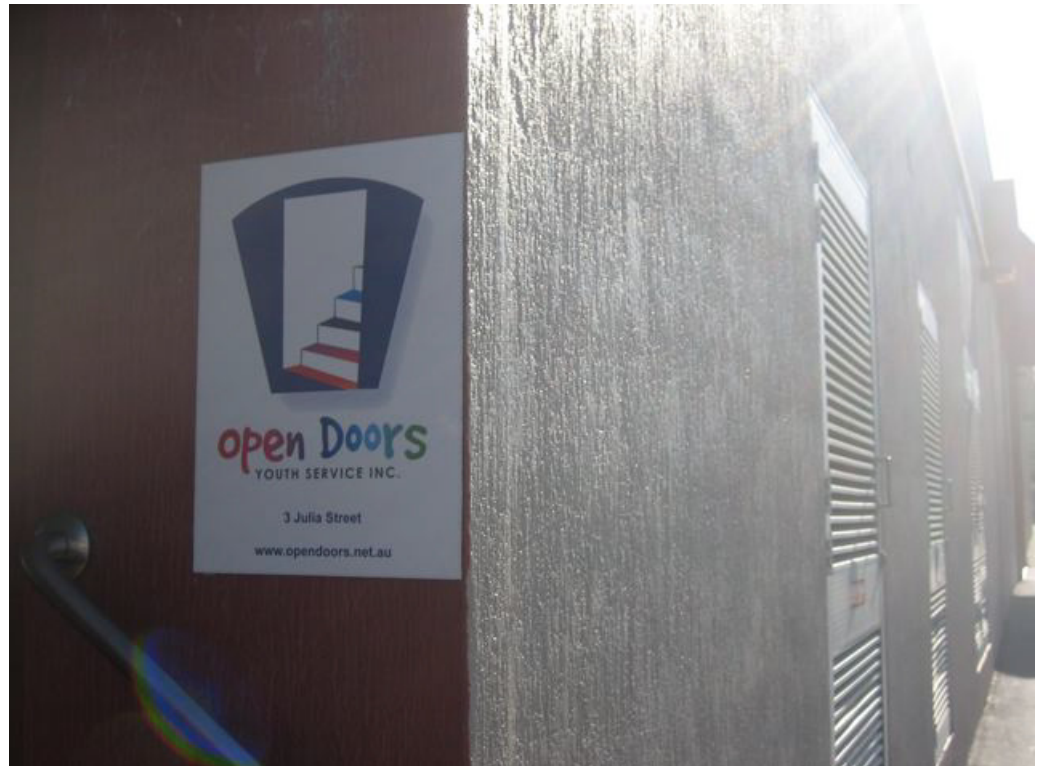
"There is no magical gay lobby and change will only happen if people make it happen...I saw last night that Argentina had legalised same sex marriage...Argentina of all places!?...Their economy is a basket



case, yet Argentina is more enlightened about it than here because neither of the major parties have the guts to stand up and say, 'We believe in equality on this issue'...

<http://lgbtlawblog.blogspot.com/2010/07/beyond-thats-so-gay-comes-to-brizvegas.html>

Observing that they themselves had to make something happen and that life can be difficult for transgender young people, Open Doors Youth Services (see Mackay et al and Brisbane Part 1 blogs) decided something needed to be done. "Joan" explains.



"The workers and managers here at Open Doors thought that whilst they knew there were many trans young people, none of them were accessing the service...They knew there were young people slipping through the cracks...Before [starting a drop-in for transgender young people] you'd be hard pressed to find a trans young person coming to [a general LGBT young people's] drop-in..."

Young trans people were also not going to transgender support organisations.

"The services that are around are more geared towards older trans people...They also are focus on a medical model of transition...They'd say, 'This is your ultimate goal. Your ultimate goal is surgery'..."

Recognising that trans young people needed a safe and supportive space to explore their gender diversity whilst at the same time not being boxed into any categories or told what surgical procedures they needed to undergo, Open Doors started Jelly Beans.



“We wanted to give young people a safe place...It’s not an automatic referral to the gender service...It’s about talking, networking, communicating and giving young people a space where they fit in...”

That they did, yet the workers were unsuccessful with two things: “a highly structured group with very little time for young people to just chat...” and “a ‘gender queer’ push” that felt more like the workers’ agenda rather than something the young people attending felt worked for them.

[more on “highly educated feminists” and “gender queer” next week.]

Joan reluctantly arrived to Jelly Beans after completing her studies in mental health. Ironically as a transgender woman who had a history of working in the LGBT community, she had been adamant she would not continue her LGBT work.

[more on “Joan’s” story and her work on the Gold Coast next week]

With the recommendation of her psychologist and supportive staff at Open Doors, Joan soon found herself facilitating the Jelly Beans drop-in space.

“It’s basically a social group...Let ‘em come, let ‘em talk...I’ll be there if they need anything...”

Through trial and error Joan has found that having about half of the drop-in focused and structured works well for the trans young people attending.

“That evolution has been about trial and error...We were probably too regimented and that turned the young people off...”

I was invited along to a Jelly Beans drop-in, sitting and talking with Joan ahead of the arrival of the first young people. One young trans person excitedly told of coming out to their step-mother.

“I just came out to my step-mother on Wednesday night...We had like this hour and a half conversation and it was really good...”

Joan points out that this is a rare situation.

“The main thing [for trans young people] is usually coming out to parents and parental reactions...Far too many young people end up with nowhere to live...Finding homeless accommodation for trans young people can be a nightmare...An absolute nightmare...”

The same trans young person would tell a story of coming out on Facebook.



“Everyone was really cool about it...All except for, like, one person...”

Joan says this is common.

“When they come out to their friends, their friends are mostly OK with it...It’s usually interacting with the adults where young people have the troubles...That is also reflected with agencies when I’ve been advocating for [trans] young people...”

One agency, for example, refused service unless that young person stayed with their previous gender and went to church. Joan explained that this would be a problem given that young person had been raised in the Pagan faith.

“Interestingly in the trans community there are a high number of practicing Pagans...It’s about the acceptance...The basic thing of the Pagan faith is that you do what you do and don’t harm others... You’re not hurting anyone so it’s all OK...”



Advocating for trans young people is something that Joan takes seriously, yet she can also see the humorous side occasionally.

“When I’m supporting young people and I’m out and about, in a number of places I’ve been asked if I’m their mother or if I’m related...”

Whereas it seems that it is easier to be gay or lesbian than transgender in metropolitan Australia, according to “Connor”, the opposite might be true for remote Indigenous communities.

“[Sistagals, or Indigenous transgender women] are clouding gay men in the community...It is easier to be Sistagal in many communities... I’m one of the few guys who’ll stand up and say, ‘I’m gay’...”

And Connor would know, heading up the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Program with the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities.

“When I go home [to the islands] I take on the woman’s role...I have 42 nieces and nephews...”



This “clouding” of the gay identity that Connor talks about becomes clearer when Sistagals arrive in metropolitan Australia.

“They drop the Sistagal identity when they come to the city...”

The QAHC workers refer to this as men having a ‘Transitional Suitcase’, where they have one identity that they carry back to their communities (i.e. Sistagal) and another that they take to the city (i.e. a gay man).

Despite it being a challenge, Connor still mixes it with the men in his community.



“I’ll go hunting with the boys and stuff...They might slip in the odd joke, but it’s hard for them too...”

To make it easier, Connor believes he is being pushed into an identity that doesn’t fit.

“They are trying to put people into boxes...I’m struggling to fit into my own clothes, let alone other people’s expectations...”

I spoke to Connor at QAHC’s Brisbane offices along with three other QAHC workers. Their

time, expertise and the cuppa we shared at such short notice were very much appreciated. I noticed Connor for two reasons. One, I wondered if he was the real “Condoman” that I had seen since first starting LGBT work in the summer of 1996-7. Two, he was almost falling asleep as I talked about my project and what I’d found so far. (To be fair I sometimes send myself to sleep when I’m talking).

This changed when he finally asked, “If you don’t mind Brother, can you tell me if you have spoken to any Indigenous communities?...”

After explaining my time with the ATSI workers in the Northern Territory, recounting my trip to a remote Indigenous community (and invite to another) and the conversations I’d had with various workers his body language changed and so did our discussion. Clearly I was not a white gay boy driving around the country just talking to other



gay white boys. But I did feel it was a fair enough question.

Sitting with all four QAHC workers provided a perfect opportunity to ask about the name change from the Queensland Aids Council to QAHC. Throughout my time I'd heard mixed, and mostly negative, reviews of the name change. Some thought that this was a missed opportunity to promote awareness and prevent HIV transmission.

"Pauline", a regional and rural worker for QAHC, explains.

"We only do prevention now...We don't do post-HIV stuff...If people want HIV services, we refer them elsewhere..."

QAHC's Training Coordinator "Jackie" continues.

"Basically that was taken away...It was very rocky at the beginning because [a Christian organisation] now has the funding to provide HIV services..."

[N.B. All reports are that this organisation does an excellent job at rolling out these services.]

Connor explains the fallout.

*"It was a sh*t fight at the start but it was really positive in the letting the community know about what we now did, the changes...We've opened ourselves to diversity, we've had no choice...The evolution has to do with the medication and people living longer and experiencing things differently..."*

Yet it was not just funding changes and medical progress behind the evolution of QAHC as a renamed organisation. Jackie explains.

"When the funding changed [QAHC] was where lesbians went to pick up [LGBT] magazines and newspapers...QAHC was doing more... The community kept feeding back to QAHC that it needed to do more, to be more...One of the strategic goals of [QAHC] now is to be the leading LGBT organisation in Queensland...[But] we're not funded to do LGBT work..."

I was not only at QAHC to hear from them, they were also eager to



hear about my experiences in their own state. What did I find? Who did I speak to? What could they learn for their own work?

One example of our conversations was about QAHC's periodic delivery of training in places like Mt Isa. The last time they were in Mt Isa, 12 local workers registered. On the day, three turned up. Yet this contradicted what Mt Isa folk told me about training. Their observation was that quality training rarely came to "The Isa" and that when it did, it was booked out.



As a regular training provider I asked lots of questions about how best to promote training in that area and how to get as many bums on seats as possible, which was valuable from QAHC's point of view (e.g. going through a local training provider network that everyone in town is linked into). This is not to say that QAHC were not providing a quality training product. People were simply not turning up for other reasons. Some were human nature as Jackie explains.

"Many people would prefer to go do a training in Townsville or Cairns on a Friday and then stay for the weekend..."

But I suggested it might have to do with locals not being comfortable with the perceived training content and, most importantly, the training providers.

"Mark", an experienced worker in regional and rural Queensland with QAHC, sensed this and had his own strategy when registered training participants did not turn up.

"It was funny because no-one turned up to the training, but we did have all their names and the addresses of where they worked...So we thought, 'We're here anyway'...So we went around to all their



organisations, knocked on the door and dropped off our resources... Then they were like, 'Oh, we didn't know you were coming!..'."

I explained that my experience in every regional and rural area during the last 21 weeks had been the same. I would knock on doors, have cuppas with people, tell them about my work and then get told about all the opportunities to continue my work if I stayed a little longer or returned. Much of this work was about providing good quality professional development. Once people had met me, realised what my work entailed and decided it was not too scary or bolshy then they were eager to get more involved. It made sense to me, as it did the QAHC workers.



Rather than focusing in the first instance on getting people to training, I suggested a preliminary visit to somewhere like Mt Isa to have a round of cuppas, introduce themselves and drop off resources might get them closer to a full house at their next training.

I pointed out that dropping off resources was vital. In every regional and rural area I have visited, and Queensland is no exception, teachers and workers did not know of resources or appropriate LGBT support organisations. The best answer I got?

"I tried to find something on the Internet once and it was a nightmare... I put 'gay' into Google... All I got was porn... I kept searching for the first non-porn thing so that I could click on it..."

Basic research into the experiences of same sex attracted young people, resources for young people questioning their sexual and gender identity and basic information about statewide support organisations are all largely missing across regional and rural South



Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland (I can talk more definitively after my remaining weeks in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Tasmania).

It is not a leap to suggest a project that is begging would be for workers to go to regional and rural areas with a carload of resources and a lot of teabags and jars of coffee. Nationally it would not cost a great deal.


Chatting to the QAHC workers would be the second time I would visit the QAHC offices in 24 hours. The evening before I had been a guest speaker at a series of training sessions for trainee telephone counselors for Queensland's Gay and Lesbian Welfare Association (GLWA).

One of the trainers for GLWA, "Vic", explained that telephone counselors were often stepping stones to other services, projects and organisations, with sometimes their most important role being to just check in with callers.

"How has your week been?..."

Arriving on a cool Brisbane evening I was offered some food provided for the trainees, a hot cuppa and a warm introduction. I spent just under an hour sharing what I'd found in the first 20 weeks of my 38 week national tour, what teachers and health professionals had found useful and what "thriving" LGBT people in regional and rural Australia seemed to have in common.

It was clear that the GLWA team had worked hard because the atmosphere was warm, welcoming and conversational. I felt relaxed, which unfortunately for them means I'm even more verbose than usual, and appreciated their questions which were more than 'So what are you driving?'.





One question that stuck out was if there was anywhere that I found challenging upon arrival and how I responded. I recounted my Mt Isa experience where a bowl of home-made pea and ham soup single-handedly saved the first part of my week (see Mt Isa blog).

I left the evening feeling slightly guilty after having a meal, two cuppas, countless toffees and then being loaded up with pens, badges and a generous donation towards my fuel for the tour (especially given how organisations like GLWA often run on the smell of an oily rag).

The next day I headed up the road to Relationships Australia to hear about their “Rainbow Program”. On my travels down the Queensland coast I had repeatedly heard about “David”, who was running the initiative.

Like GLWA, Relationships Australia Queensland (RAQ) partner with QAHC. In my quest for how mainstream organisations can meaningfully take on LGBT work, I was eager to talk to David and find out more.

It's clear that David's arrival at RAQ led to the Rainbow Program's birth, an LGBT specific counseling service run out of QAHC offices once a week and a series of professional development opportunities across the entire organisation.

“A couple of staff members had dabbled over the years in this area...But it kind of died because the energy wasn't there...I came in with a lot of passion and energy...”



David and his boss agreed that he had a lot to offer the organisation in this capacity and that it would otherwise be a waste. He has since been steadily delivering 2 hour workshops across Queensland to all RAQ staff where they get to “dip their toes in” the LGBT waters. A more advanced 3-day intensive training is delivered to those RAQ staff identified as “Rainbow Representatives”.

“It's been a really positive experience, particularly because [Rainbow Representatives] were identified as wanting to work with LGBT



clients...Their roles are three fold...One, to peer educate within their own [RAQ] venue with staff that work there...Two, to network within the local LGBT community...Three, to give direct service provision to the local LGBT community..."

The biggest challenge with Rainbow Representatives and their training, according to David, is personal.

"It's people's own exploration of their own identity and people's discomfort with boxes and labels...[Rainbow Representatives] had all been initially attracted to this work by an otherness...What we found most powerful was people's own exploration of gay and lesbian people's experiences...All the stuff they hadn't been exposed to very much..."



Despite great training, the Rainbow Program, anecdotally, has understandably been slow to get going.

"In some areas they haven't had that many clients, and some areas they've seen no-one... There was a high level of energy and enthusiasm after the training, but that's been hard to maintain [in the absence of high numbers of clients]..."

Observing that such a slow start might make a mainstream organisation like RAQ second guess

it's investment in the program and asking about how linked the Rainbow Program was linked with him (e.g. what if he were to leave tomorrow), David was clear.

"As an organisation RAQ has been surprisingly, for me, supportive of me and my role, and it's gradually becoming more and more enshrined in the machinery of RAQ to the point where I'd be confident that it would continue when I left..."

Pleasantly surprised and enthused, I pressed David on RAQ's seeming point of difference. Whilst the rare mainstream organisation that did anything LGBT tended to focus outward, such as providing a project or a service, few, if any currently, were making a concerted effort



to do something within their own organisation, such as professional development for all staff. David says that it helps that he is older and wiser.

“It gives me a good feeling to be contributing to work that has been under resourced...That’s the crux of it...The passion and the commitment [he’d had in his 20s] is still there, but it’s more about filling a gap than a clear personal connection to the work...It just feels good to be providing a service that is much needed...”

For David it seems that picking something that he can do well has given him new energy and purpose.

It was perhaps this thought of the everyday and doing what you can that led to a personal anecdote I’ll sign off with.

On a warm Brisbane afternoon in the middle of winter I found myself walking along Southbank, a focal point for tourists, arts and local folk. As can happen some romance blossomed and I was walking hand in hand with, arguably, Brisbane’s most loved barmen.

My beloved vintage Toyota racing bicycle in one hand and “Viv” in the other, I would walk by a bench where a father and his two sons were seated. As tends to happen with homophobes, they waited until we were a few metres passed them with our backs turned before it came.

An audible wolf whistle.

I immediately stiffened, let go of Viv’s hand and swung my bike around and started to walk back. Viv appealed to me, “Daniel...Leave it...”

Within a few seconds I was standing in front of three seated people. The father and his youngest son, around 10 or 11 years, both looked away and down the river away from me. The eldest son, perhaps 17 or 18 years, looked up with a pleading look for mercy. I asked with what I hoped was an urgent, curious tone.

“Is there a problem?...”

“No mate, no...No problem at all...”

“No problem...You sure?...”

“Yes...No problem...”

“That’s great, I’m glad...”

I walked back to Viv, found his hand and continued walking.



“He was wolf whistling you [Viv] because he thought you were hot...”

He laughed.

The next day Viv made a confession. He explained how he'd objected to me approaching the whistler and had sincerely wanted me to leave it be. Then later he said he thought about the young man's face and response.

“You know you have probably changed the way he'll think about this for the rest of his life...Really...”

I looked with a slight smile and crossed my upheld fingers.

And then I went in for a much needed hug.

