

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'
A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge

TOUR WEEK TWENTY TWO, (GOLD COAST - EDITED)
ORDINARY, EVERYDAY LIVES:
BEYOND PLASTIC, BLING AND HOT TEDDIES

"Wow, you are SO gorgeous!..."

Of all the greetings, this was perhaps the most positive I had received on my national challenging homophobia tour. Driving from Brisbane to the Gold Coast, I was invited by my host, "Lorraine", for the week to one of her best friend's house for a roast dinner. For the record it was turkey and my host's friend, "Sarah", seemed quite pleased to meet me when she opened her front door.

"Which one are you?...Gay or married?...[Lorraine], you didn't tell me he was so gorgeous..."

I walked in to greet Lorraine, then Sarah's husband, "Laurie".

"[nodding to her husband]...Don't mind him..."

I could tell I was in for an entertaining evening. And it would be. Originally from the UK, Sarah, Laurie and son had purposefully moved to the suburbs of the Gold Coast rather than Sydney or Melbourne where the lure of higher paying jobs had beckoned.

"You can decide to go for the money or the lifestyle...We chose the lifestyle..."

As Laurie explained, "You are 20 minutes from everything here...You have the beach that way and the hinterland out the back..."



Over post-roast cuppas, the conversation about my national tour continued and led to stories of Sarah's family and it's first open brush with sexual diversity. Sarah's father had not been impressed by her close friend, "Sam", being gay.

"My dad...Dad was a man's man...Me and [Sam]...Look, if you stick me in a room with 500 men and one of them is gay, guaranteed me and him will be like that [fingers crossed]..."

Over time though, her father would soften his hard-line stance against Sam.

"[Sam] is so flamboyant, he could take out a campsite...But do you know he was the first gay man that dad ever invited to Christmas...?... He decided he looked after his daughters..."

Sam had broken through the pink glass ceiling. Yet according to Sarah, Sam wasn't just influencing change in her family home. She explained Sam's connection to a painting on the lounge room wall.

"There were only two non-Aboriginal people in Australia at the time who were allowed to paint ...He spent three years in an Indigenous community, and that was his thing...I couldn't believe it, he was usually so worried about his hair and his skin, but he did it..."

Interestingly I asked where this Indigenous community was, and Sarah eventually pin-pointed it to an area south-west of Alice Springs.

[N.B. In my Alice Springs blog I introduced "Amber" a transgender "lady" who spoke of her work in remote Indigenous communities and their love, in this very region, for flamboyance, energy and uniqueness.]

I sat back and marveled yet again at something I have found everywhere I have been in Australia, and not just in the past 22 weeks: with the smallest of prompts, everyday Australians invariably have fascinating stories of sexual diversity in their families and lives. Too often, these stories have not been shared through fear. By merely talking about my work, I am entrusted quite quickly with personal experiences that everyday Australians have told few people, if any. It's not something I take lightly and I am often left wondering why it takes a virtual stranger explaining his work to prompt such sharing. What might change if everyday Australians felt able to share such experiences and stories?

Such stories of how sexual diversity weaves it's way through ordinary, everyday Australian lives continued with my host for the Gold Coast, Lorraine.

I got to know Lorraine through her sister, "Pam". Pam was my



former manager at Kids Help Line, where I spent a few years training teachers and health professionals across regional and rural Victoria and Tasmania. I am in no doubt that what I learnt during those years through the wise guidance of Pam was significant in me being able to undertake this national challenging homophobia tour, although she is more modest about it.

Indeed it was Pam, now a trusted mentor and friend, who challenged me at the beginning of 2009 when I was fighting a nagging feeling that I could be doing something more. She was aware that my work in male family violence, seemingly never-ending quest to get my manuscript published and projects in international lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) education could continue for the next few years.

“Look Dan, you had an impressive 2007 and 2008...For anyone to repeat that in 2009 would be enough...But you’re not anyone...You would never be satisfied with repeating a year...”

Ouch. That hurt. That also frightened me. Pam continued.

“What’s something big?...It’s gotta be big...Come on...”

I knew it right away. I dreaded it. The rest can be explained by my tour launch speech in Geelong.

“In Warsaw I had been asked to guest present and facilitate a worldwide meeting with expert academics and practitioners from every corner of the globe (believe me, that’s intimidating)...During a break I was asked about my impressions of Australia, whether it was homophobic and what I would national project I would do if I had the chance and the unlimited resources....Instinctively without much thought I said, “I’d jump in a truck, drive around the country talking to LGBT people about their lives and share the strategies and resources that have worked over the last 10 years.” ...Fortunately or unfortunately depending on your point of view, this idea came back to haunt me time and again...”

About twelve months later, in late February 2010, I was launching my book, *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, on the rooftop of Melbourne’s City Village. In the crowd of 75 people was Pam, who had brought along her sister, Lorraine. At some stage during that whirlwind evening, Lorraine had given me her business card and told me in no uncertain terms that I would be staying with her on the Gold Coast. It’s safe to say that, although appreciative, I really couldn’t envisage 22 weeks later.

After so many weeks on the road I started feeling dizzy from all the good hosting I had received, and this was no exception. The good people of the Northern Territory and Queensland were looking after me as if



they were taking part in a reality TV Show called “MasterHost” where they were competing to make a traveling challenging homophobia educator’s stay as easy, comfortable and productive as possible.

With Lorraine my week involved invitations to dinners as well as free lunches at one of her growing empire of Subway stores. On the first night I found in my bed a hot water bottle with a teddy bear, complete with love heart, in my bed. A few nights later I excitedly told Lorraine how I had not had a hot water bottle since I was at home with my mum and would be gifted with it before I left the Gold Coast.



If it was the little things that had started to make such a difference to my whirlwind regional and rural life in the past few months, it was something else that continued to keep me warm.

From the moment I arrived Lorraine was admirably open, reflective and candid. Coming from generations of women ahead of their time and ahead of the pack, at times I felt like I was sitting with the woman who had so quickly, easily and warmly taken me under her wing, Lorraine’s sister Pam.

One night, not realising I was thinking exactly the same thing, we both laughed at how the hours had flown by after a meal.

“Damn you...You are so easy to talk to...”

It would be too easy to find out that Lorraine’s youngest daughter is a lesbian and conclude that this was her motivation behind welcoming me into her home and life for a week, as well as to donate generously to my fuel campaign (see www.thatssogay.com.au). Had I concluded



this then I would not have discovered that Lorraine has had a history of affirming sexual diversity well before her daughter came out to the family.

One story Lorraine shared with me was of her two daughters and their friends, both male and female, in their teenage years. A consistent group of 12 or so young people, Lorraine was very clear in why she had a house full of teenagers, possibly more than she would have liked.

“It was a deliberate strategy...I wanted to know where both of them were...”

It became clear that Lorraine’s house became a haven of sorts. Something in her outlook on life and warmth drew in one of the young men in her daughters’ circle of friends.

“One of the young guys...He was gorgeous...He asked to sit and have a coffee with me one day when everyone else was not there...”

She cannot remember whether it was the 2nd or 3rd cup of coffee, but finally it “came out”.

“He told me he thought he might be gay...”

And after talking it through and supporting him through coming out to his family, Lorraine’s warm haven proved important.

“He spent quite a few nights on our couch...”

This is not to say that Lorraine, from a strong and practicing Catholic family, was not challenged by her own daughter’s coming out; in terms of her daughter “being gay” and her letting go as a parent.

“It was tough because I had all these pictures in my head as she grew up...Then they were gone and I had to build new pictures...Then I had to relax and let her do it herself...”

To this day, as a fast food magnate (what’s the female version?) where the majority of employees are teenagers in their first job, Lorraine continues this support of young women who love women and young men who love men.

Recently there had been a young man, “Matt”, who worked in one of her stores. Taking time to get to know these young people, Lorraine became concerned when Matt took some time off work and came back with one of his arms heavily bandaged. He told everyone that it was “a bad burn”.

When the bandages came off it was apparent that Matt had been self-



harming. It's said he clearly had not been "mucking around".

As Lorraine does, after much nonchalant loitering on her part and gentle conversation, Matt would share that he was questioning his sexual identity and that his life in a strictly Mormon home. It was only a matter of time before he headed off overseas for his 2-year mission. Funnily enough when Lorraine rang Pam, an experienced counselor and social worker, the first question Pam had asked was, "Is he gay?".

His parents' response to his self-harming?

"Oh you are just being silly..."

Silly!? Not sure of what to do, Lorraine did what she and her friends often do: solved it over a walk and a coffee. Each morning Lorraine rises at 6am to walk with her friends, following this up with a coffee.

"We call ourselves The Brains Trust because we often solve the world's problems..."

Another of her walking group was saying her husband, recently incapacitated, was looking for help around the yard. A lightbulb went off for Lorraine and soon Matt was assisting the couple. But we all know it was never about the help itself.

"They were like surrogate grandparents for him..."

Lorraine admits she gets involved.

"I'm a rescuer from way back...[laughs]..."



Arriving on the Gold Coast I had been eager to find out everyday stories like this and explore it's depths because I was led to believe that it didn't have any. With no exceptions, when I told people I would be heading next to the Gold Coast I was met with "what plasticville?" or "plastic" and, invariably, giggles.

Over a post-roast cuppa I asked Lorraine, Sarah and Laurie about this perception. All of them were quick to point out that although the tourist centre of Surfers Paradise was all plastic, bling and polish, in the suburbs it was a different story (which is no different to many other parts of Australia). In many ways it seems to me a place where people come to chase or follow a dream. All had found it hard to find true locals.

"It took us 3 months to find someone who was born here!..."

A volunteer, "Mariah", from the Gold Coast at Open Doors Youth Services in Brisbane (see Mackay and Brisbane blogs) explained to me on a road trip to the Sunshine Coast a bit more about the Gold Coast.

"It's very conservative, but strangely conservative...Like glam and gross, trying to be like LA...But at the same time it's very right wing..."

One school support worker from regional Queensland, now on the Gold Coast, elaborated on my question about whether it's people were really as materialistic as people made out. She had just been in charge of sunscreen at a school event where no-one was interested in protecting their skin.

"I'm like, 'Sunscreen. Sunscreen anyone'...[The students] will all be there and cold but some still want everyone to see their bodies...It's so different here... It's so cliquey here..."

In a way that seems even more heightened than elsewhere, this focus on outer layers impacts on young people like Mariah.

"I feel very stared at and very uncomfortable when I walk around there...I feel like I have a wall around me...There's quite a substantial gay and lesbian community there, but it's pretty superficial...There's not enough subculture there within the Gold Coast..."

Mariah pauses.

"It's a special place...[laughs]..."

Where appearance is seemingly everything and a monoculture is said to pervade, it's counterintuitive in some ways that one of the most progressive transgender support groups seems to be thriving



and attracting folk from as north as Brisbane and as south as the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

As “Joan”, facilitator of Open Doors Youth Services’ transgender youth support group, Jelly Beans (see Brisbane Part II blog), explains, appearance is crucial in the everyday well-being of transgender people.

“For trans people there is usually a period, a transition period, where you don’t fit into either gender, and that’s usually where people cop it...”

After meeting Joan in Brisbane, she invited me to join her at her home in the north of the Gold Coast, nestled in the shadows of Mt Tambourine. On an overcast afternoon with the temperature dropping I sat on Joan’s back verandah and shared a cuppa. The night before the verandah had been full of people celebrating her birthday.

I wanted to find out about the seeming success of the Freedom group. One of the key people behind Freedom’s formation, Joan explained it’s evolution.

Freedom partly started through Joan’s observations about some of the existing transgender support organisations which were pressuring young trans people to make decisions about their medical future too early or unnecessarily.

*“When the old bats start that type of sh*t I get in between them and the younger people...I don’t believe it that [gender binary] sh*t...I believe people should make up their own bloody minds...I tell them, ‘It’s your choice, it’s your body, do what you want to do’...I don’t take sh*t from the old bats...Just because you’re old doesn’t mean you’re right...I knew if I was upsetting the old guard that I was probably doing something right...I liked that...The hierarchy has been there for too long and are very set in their ways...”*

Joan was not the only one who was frustrated.

“A bit over a year ago I had a longtime friend, a trans woman, who had been saying continually that we needed an alternative to Brisbane [i.e. transgender support organisations]...We both felt that the two groups in Brisbane were not fitting the needs of all the community, that a lot of people were being left out...We also felt there were a lot of girls on the [Gold] Coast who were not wanting or able to get to Brisbane...There was a big gap on the Coast and a lot of us had been burnt by the Brisbane groups...”

Then Joan’s friend planted a seed.

“She kept saying, ‘If I win lotto, I’d [start an alternative support group



on the Gold Coast]’...

Joan stepped in.

“We don’t need to win lotto to do this...”

With “advice and moral support” from Open Doors Youth Service and many trans hours, Freedom began.

“We decided we are just going to be open to everyone outside of the gender binary...For the most part, people find an accepting atmosphere...We don’t care how you identify, as long as you’re under the [trans] umbrella...The appeal of Freedom is if you don’t really feel like a girl or a boy, you can be in between...”

Joan uses her famous analogy.

“I don’t care what you identify as...You can identify as a can of coke for all I care...I’ll add bourbon and see where it goes...”

Friends, family and other supporters of trans people are also welcome and do attend.

“It’s the opportunity to meet other people who are on the same track or meet friends and family who are in the same boat...”

In a short time Freedom has seen people’s everyday lives changing.

“We’ve had young trans women who live only a mile apart and now they meet a few times a week for coffee...We’ve had young trans men who have been chatting online for 12 months and they come to Freedom and finally meet...That’s the biggest thing that people get out of it...The building of community...I think that aspect is why I think we get people from so far a field...”

The key to a great atmosphere is straightforward.

“We’re not big on rules...It’s a very easygoing atmosphere...The only rules we have are basic commonsense...We have a code of conduct, but we’ve never had to use it...”

The results speak for themselves, with Freedom even bucking a trend of other transgender support groups and attracting transgender men.

“We also have seen a lot of trans men, which is rare...”

This dispensing of rules helped one Brisbane-based trans individual. “Jo/e” immediately felt at home at Freedom.

“I’m accepted there...”



Jo/e doesn't fit any of the labels that were provided by a Brisbane-based group. Right now Intergender Androgyne is the best label for Jo/e.



"I'm someone who is neither male or female exclusively... Some things about me are male, some things about me are female... I don't switch between both, I'm in the middle..."

This was not accepted by everyone in a Brisbane trans support group.

"For a long time they just assumed I was in the confused section... Basically [the group] is for males transitioning to females and all gender queer people are seen to be confused... Things were said to me that

were rather nasty... Most of the people in the group were reasonably fine with me... They'd be pleasant, but wouldn't engage in normal conversations with me... One of the ladies running the group sort of said a lot of things about gender queer people... I don't want to get into what it was, a lot of it was very hurtful..."

For Jo/e the choice was simple when he heard about Freedom. He attended and hasn't looked back.

For Jo/e the road to being himself has been a long and tough.

"I always knew I was different, I never fit in with the other boys... I never really fit in with the girls either... When I was a teenager I started questioning all the stuff that teenagers go through... I never felt like a straight guy guy, but I never felt attracted to males either... So it was a very confusing time..."

Finding out he had a brain tumour at 15 provided only temporary relief.

"It was almost a case of, 'This is why I've always felt different'... But talking to other people with different forms of brain tumour and cancer, I was still very different..."



It was not about sexual orientation for Jo/e.

*“Knowing I wasn’t straight, but not being gay, I thought, ‘What the f*ck am I?’...I thought I might be bi but that didn’t fit either...And for a little while there I thought I was a male lesbian, but that didn’t go down well with anyone I told...”*

As too many LGBT people know, Jo/e decided to hide.

“I basically just tried to keep it to myself...I tried to fit in with a lot of different groups, and whilst some were accepting, I never felt I was really part of the group...”

Unfortunately school did not provide a safe and supportive environment.

*“I changed school twice because I didn’t fit...I was constantly picked on...I changed from a co-ed school to an all-boys Catholic school... That was a bad move for me...They tried to toughen me up...Then when I changed to a co-ed Catholic high school, I didn’t fit, but I wasn’t, let’s just say the sh*t wasn’t as thick...At the all boys school it wasn’t just the students that made it clear that I didn’t belong by what they said and their attitudes...And when dad went to the school to complain about bullying, it was a case of, ‘We need to toughen [Jo/e] up’...”*

Hours of “going almost crazy” on the internet and a group like Freedom have led Jo/e to feel closer to himself than ever before.

“I’ve basically been trying to be me...It took a while for me to accept it...”

When I spoke to Joan about schools, she was clear that teachers could “save a lot of grief” if they were proactive in supporting students like Jo/e.

“There’s a big thing at the moment with bullying...Young people who are gender diverse cop a lot of aggression in schools...That’s something where teachers should be more proactive...With teachers I think sometimes they can get lazy...I know through talking to kids now, you’ll get some really great [teachers] who really care about their kids and look after them...Then you get some who have probably been in the profession for a little too long and are just punching their time cards...”

Someone who could be forgiven for slowing down and just turning up is “Jodie”, an openly lesbian school support worker in a Gold Coast school with a large student population. Given two days a week to support all those students and staff, Jodie has made a difference. Despite many years in LGBT and mainstream organisations and



institutions she remains energised, motivated and upbeat about homophobia and transphobia in schools. Jodie believes the staff supporting students is doing well. Outside of that area, things can change.

“There is no homophobia in this part of the building...Teachers here say things like, ‘He is too effeminate, he’s asking for trouble’...There is no option for girls to wear anything other than skirts...But there will always be people who are homophobic...80% of students couldn’t give a rats, but 20% will always be yobbos...But these hassle everyone...I suppose they’re a mirror of society...”

Jodie challenges and interrupts students whenever she hears “that’s so gay”.

“I challenge them when I hear them say ‘That’s so gay’...I ask, ‘So gay people aren’t nice?’ and they say, ‘No, that’s not what I mean’... ‘Well don’t say it then...’”

When I ask Jodie and a colleague if other teachers would do the same, she believes it would be mixed.

“I’d say 50% would be fine, 50% that wouldn’t...I’d say some of it would be about gender [i.e. more women than men would challenge homophobia] and some of that would be their own level of comfort, knowledge and understanding in challenging it...”

She points out that there is room for improvement.

“They tell them it’s not OK, but not why it’s OK...”

Based on my conversations across the country, it’s still ahead of the pack.

I’m glad to say that Jodie snapped up a copy of *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, and was eager at my recommendation to read Chapter 15 on interrupting and challenging homophobia and seeing it as an educational opportunity. She also showed interest in Chapters 3 and 4 on how to run a professional development session for everyday teachers.

In her office Jodie has countless rainbows and LGBT-friendly posters but recognises that not every student will understand what the rainbow means (a common mistake of many educators new to LGBT-friendly land), so she tells them all.

It’s no surprise then that Jodie is referring more students than anyone to QSPACE, a Gold Coast based support group for LGBT young people.



A facilitator of QSPACE, “Lesley”, knows how hard it is to get word out in schools of the group, let alone get a good response.

“The [Gold Coast] schools are really quite homophobic I guess... The only way into the school is through the principals, and it’s their individual decision...That’s why we go through the school health nurses...”

Not surprisingly, young people attending QSPACE identify bullying at school as their biggest issue. Her experiences supporting LGBT young people echoed my own some 13 years ago in Geelong and it’s surrounding region.

“That’s pretty huge...Almost every young person has been bullied at some stage...The drop-out rate [from school] at QSPACE is pretty high...A lot of them have done alternative education programs like TAFE...”

Sadly there are plenty of examples of LGBT young people not faring well in local schools.

“One of the young people was on the phone the other day and a boy came out, knocked it out of his hand and into the gutter and kicked it down to some water and called him a faggot...”

“Another young person was in class and a teacher was present and a boy said she should just take a pill to cure her homosexuality because it was wrong, a disease and a sickness...The teacher heard it and didn’t say anything...”

“Another young person was suspended from school for kissing his boyfriend even though his straight friends kiss all the time...He was told that same sex relationships were not allowed at school...And this was a state school...”

Outside of school it can also be tough.

“One trans young person, his mum is very unsupportive of him and saying it’s just a phase...He’s even had a letter from the Gender Centre and been to Medicare...He’s even had people in the LGBT community say to him, ‘You don’t belong here’ and ‘You’re just a freak’...”

Not all parents are unsupportive.

“Some parents will drive their kids...There are some that have been really supported...One mother even came to [Gold Coast] Gay Day... When they drop off and pick up their kids they’ll come in and say hello...But then there have been other parents who have been pretty horrific...”



Transport to QSPACE can pose a huge barrier to young people attending the drop-ins. Stretched out along 70km of Queensland's southern coast, the Gold Coast is inconveniently spread out for anyone without a car. A parent bringing a young person to QSPACE from Palm Beach takes 30 minutes each way, rather than 90 minutes each way on a bus.

Mariah again speaking from experience.

"It takes about one and a half hours to get from one side of the Gold Coast to the other on a bus...It's ridiculous really..."

What struck me was that, like Brisbane, if you wanted to go anywhere on the Gold Coast, invariably you had to jump into a car and go on a highway. Harking back to my days running Mental Health Promotion Short Courses for VicHealth I remembered a study that said you can tell people's quality of life and state of mind by the time and distance it takes to get 1 litre of milk. It's said that if you can walk to the local shops to get some milk then life is best. If you have to jump into the car, get on a highway, fight for parking at a shopping mall and walk past lots of other shops in crowds then it is less than best.

My faithful truck, "Bruce" (his pseudonym for fear he might be identified), certainly racked up kilometres quickly.



Lesley believes that this spread of the Gold Coast makes a difference on how connected people feel.

"There's no real sense of community here...People come in and go out, even in the straight community...There is no real central hub for



the Gold Coast and for young people it's so hard...People move in and move out every two years so it's hard to build up solid friendships... Maybe it's that sense of community that is missing and that's why people move..."

Certainly this lack of ongoing friendships was something Sarah and Laurie had mentioned.

It's social isolation that is a big motivator for LGBT young people to come to QSPACE. A recent survey of young people attending showed this.

"The main thing is that they want to meet other people like them... There is a lot of social isolation here...Most people don't feel safe about being out...It's a bit of an escape from school and their families... They don't have to worry about what other people are gonna think or say...Oh and fun of course...last night we had Guitar Hero Night, that's their favourite..."

The group also has an educational component. They all watched the Australian Story with PFLAG President Shelley Argent "and they loved it..."

"They want to come and hear about stuff they don't hear from anywhere else...One of the most popular workshops was sexual health...They say, 'At school we don't get LGBT specific stuff, this is one place where we can come and ask questions without feeling weird and awkward'..."

Partnering with the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC)(see Cairns and Brisbane Part i/II blogs), Lesley has trained local teachers and health professionals on the rare occasion they are open to it.

"A lot of young people say they have teachers who won't say or do anything when other students say fag, dyke or whatever...A lot of people have that misconception that you need to be gay or lesbian to do work with the LGBT community...All you need is an open heart, to be non-judgmental and a bit of knowledge..."

It was this very notion that led me to another Gold Coast school to meet with a school support worker that Jodie had recommended I talk to. I had quizzed her about whether her colleagues would be as proactive in their schools as she was in hers.

"I don't know exactly...Whether they integrate anything into their presentations as a rule, I'm not sure...I think the barrier is that they are straight...It's not malicious, it's not on purpose, it's just that [they are straight]..."



Jodie was soon on the phone with a heterosexual colleague, Tanya.

“[Tanya] it’s all very well for me to talk about it being a dyke, but I thought it would be better for him to talk to someone who is gay and lesbian friendly...”

I was able to meet with Tanya at such short notice given her school was in the throws of an athletics carnival. We sat in a meeting room that had been vacated with leftover treats, tea and coffee. Helping ourselves, we started our conversation.

“In the state school system, we support [LGBT young people] well... They’ve actually got somewhere to go, whereas other schools I’ve worked in, which weren’t state schools, didn’t...”

Tanya had recently moved from a smaller rural school to this full-time position in a school with a very large student population.

“The two schools are very different...[The rural area] has a small rural school where everyone knows everyone...Whereas here there are much larger numbers and a couple of the students might find it easier to identify...It’s easier to identify 1 or 2 others like themselves...In the little schools I think they’d be struggling, the culture is different...I think it’s so small out there that anyone perceived as not normal would be targeted...”

As Tanya and I warmed up, me sipping my tea, we were interrupted by a Executive Teacher, “Nora”. Nora was sneaking a bite to eat on her way out to the athletics.

Tanya: “Daniel is here to talk about what we are doing for GLBT students in the school...”

Nora: “Oh, that’s great, pleased to meet you...GL, what?...Which ones are they again?...”

Tanya explained and I continued to explain about my project. With her mouth still full Nora sat down and had suddenly joined the meeting. It’s safe to say that from that point Tanya found it challenging to get a word in. Later she admitted that it was much more interesting than the other meetings she had been avoiding.

Nora outlined her observation of student insults.

“I know that particularly with the boys...The biggest insult that you can chuck at a boy is ‘faggot’...For girls it’s ‘slut’...‘Faggot’ I find is the one...‘Gay’ they’ll accept, but ‘faggot’ they won’t...”

According to Nora, most of her staff will respond to ‘faggot’. Yet ‘gay’ changes things.



*"Of course there are some that won't, but they will walk past anything... 'Gay'?...No, they probably throw it around themselves... 'F*ck'?...No, they throw that around to... Most teachers will draw a line in the sand and work on what crosses their own line... Ten years ago 'f*ck' was on the other side of the line... Not now..."*

A theme that came through was parents, or to specific, parents who practice particular religions.

"Parents are quite concerned that their values are going to be turned on their heads... You're still dealing with kids that can't come to ANZAC Day, or birthdays or celebrate Christmas... And I'm not talking about our Muslims or Hindus... They love it... They love Christmas, they love birthdays, they're fun... It's still a thorny issue... And being in a secular school and being dictated to by the department [State Government Department], you just have to do it..."

An example of this is a current plan to repeat a school health day that has been repeated every year.

"The [school health day], where we get the experts in, has already gone to the District [State Government Department] Office all because of one parent... One parent out of 400 complained... One... And it went to the District Office..."

It seems that parents can trigger mass hysteria.

"You would still find pockets of fundamentalist Christians, not the Catholics, I find them quite open... But fundamentalist Christians drive the agenda... But boy oh boy if you get that word [homosexuality] home, then wow, they come straight in... They frighten the system like crazy... 'You're teaching my kid to be gay. I don't want my children hearing about those things'..."

Recently Nora even had her neighbours getting worked up about the matter.

"I have a friend next door... She searched all the high schools to find a safe place for her girls... She said, 'Our Pastor has said we need to find places where this evil practice [homosexuality] is not spoken about'..."

Tanya did get the odd word in.

"As a [non-teacher] I'm constantly fighting to get things on the agenda... If it's not mainstream, it's even more difficult... I consider it mainstream, but other people don't... So whilst I would see it as justified to talk about GLBT, the powers that be might not think that..."

Judging by our time together in that meeting room I got a glimpse of



the daily reality. Nora was soon collected for a curriculum meeting, explained to her collector hat we had been talking about and asked how she could get a copy of my book. The collector seemed impressed.

“That sounds much more interesting than what we are going to be doing...”

Once Nora had left, Tanya leaned in concerned for a number of reasons.

“Was that OK?...Sorry...Usually on a typical day that wouldn’t happen, they might not have the time...You know I was sitting there thinking about you whilst all that was going on...You must get that every day in schools...I was thinking, ‘How do you listen to resistance day in day out?’...”

I rested my hand after 90 minutes of writing down “gold” that I won’t elaborate on here or now (later, definitely).

“To be honest, that was perfect...[Nora] is a huge part of the demographic in schools across Australia...What she said in a few sentences sums up what so many others are thinking and feeling...I need to be talking to the [Noras] in schools...She sat engaged for that long, is thinking about how to start more conversations in the school and now she’ll be reading [Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian school]...”

I left the school chuckling to myself.

“What just happened?...”



As I left the Gold Coast, I knew I hadn’t completely worked out how a tourist hot spot, in any other part of regional Australia a guarantee of LGBT friendliness, was not entirely that. Yet I had a teddy hot water bottle and I was going to see Viv (see Brisbane Part II blog).

Mariah perhaps sums up how some, yet not all, feel about the Gold Coast.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with the Gold Coast... maybe it’s trying to be too many things...”

