

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

**LGBT Postcards from the Edge**

TOUR WEEK TWENTY-THREE, (LISMORE)  
LESMORE: GAY NIRVANA, TINY TEDDIES  
AND LIGHTBULB MOMENTS

*"Granny [Sheila], why are they here?...It's disgusting!..."*

At her recent 65th birthday party, "Sheila", one of Australia's most progressive grandmothers was confronted with her distressed grandson.

*"He's one of these surfie boys from the Gold Coast...20 years old..."*

Unlike her own children, of which she has four, "Sheila" explained that having around 20 gay male friends at the celebration was something her grandson wasn't expecting.

*"I had to get my son and a gay friend and say, 'Look, go and sort [Jake] out'..."*

At the end of the night "Jake" would return to Sheila a different grandson.

*"Wow Granny [Sheila]...They're so cool...Like really cool..."*

Observing that her grandson was often concerned with what his friends thought, she gave her grandson a huge Ottoman for his 21st birthday. She made sure it was in front of all of his friends.

*"Here [Jake]...I bought you a bloody big poof for your birthday..."*

His friends, and Jake, were said to have fallen about with laughter. The change was seemingly complete.

It was an "accident" that I met Sheila at all. After a class at a Lismore gym she was passing and noticed my ankh necklace.



*"I go to Egypt every year..."*

Excited that someone knew the symbol and had actually been there, I got talking to Sheila about her annual pilgrimages that invariably involved her joining impromptu "digs" at any number of locations. We compared notes and I heard of her discovering her past lives whilst sleeping inside one of the Great Pyramids; after bribing one of the caretakers of course.

Then, out of nowhere, it came.

*"Oh I miss my gay friends in Sydney..."*

Well that was random. Was Sheila telling me this because she thought I was gay? Or was this something she dropped into conversations to anyone?

My jaw dropped when Sheila told me she was 65, because she could clearly pass for 15-20 years younger, despite having lost 10 kgs recently whilst sick. (She didn't have 10 kgs to lose.) An ex-aerobics instructor, Sheila began to tell me stories of her time leading aerobics classes in the heart of gay Sydney through the 1980s.

*"I lived in gay Sydney through the 1970s and 1980s...Believe me I saw it all...I used to go out dressed up like a drag queen...Guys would come up to me and I had to keep saying, 'No love, I'm not a drag queen, I'm a mother of four from the suburbs'...They loved it, I had the muscled arms and everything..."*

At the local Police Boys Club in the 1980s, Sheila packed them in to her aerobics classes, making for great business. The only problem was the participants were all gay men and the Sergeant in charge

*"He'd say, 'They are all going to hang around and look at the young boys'...I used to tell him he was crazy..."*

Perhaps the Sergeant was projecting, because he was said to be famous for cheating on his wife with all the young female staff. Sheila eventually got sick of lying when his wife called about his whereabouts. One day it boiled over.

*"He made some comment about some of the gay guys coming in and I just lost it...I screamed at him, 'Who fucking cares, it's all the same, it's just love. They stick their bits where they do and you stick your bits in all of those young girls. Get over it!'..."*

The outcome was swift.

*"I got the sack straight away...I was so angry...I had to wait but he was finally fired for taking money from the Boys Club...It got really ugly for him...I had to wait but karma came around..."*



Sheila turned to landscape gardening, which she loves, yet found the pace of Sydney through the 1990s too “crazy”. She did what so many others have done and moved to the Lismore region for a change in lifestyle. It clearly appears to be working for her.

Like Sheila, “Marg” has responded well to a move from Sydney to the Lismore region.

*“I left Sydney 10 years ago...I just had to get out, it got crazy...Literally not a day goes by when I don't think how lucky I am to be here...I feel blessed...”*

Marg, a lesbian mother of two with her partner, “Teri”, loves Lismore.

*“This is a fantastic place to live...The thing I love about Lismore is that it has all the diversity of a big city, but it's all in your face...But when I was in Sydney, I lived in the north, and I was kind of protected...”*

Without the cultural precincts of Sydney, Lismore's diversity is not to everyone's tastes.

*“Here it's all in your face, and that's what a lot of people hate about it...It's not Pleasantville...”*



Lismore, or as the local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) folk say: Lesmore, is the capital of the Northern Rivers Region that includes Byron Bay, Nimbin and Ballina, where I was staying for the week. It's said, by everyone in Lismore, to have the largest concentration of gay and lesbian people in rural New South Wales.





*“I’m out at work...I’m the only gay in the village, and that’s big for them, they are a rural [organisation]...Even if they have the largest numbers of gays and lesbians outside of Sydney in a rural area...I don’t know if you know this, but it’s gay nirvana...It’s fucking fantastic...”*

For Marg, Lismore is mostly a safe and supportive place.

*“If you are just coming to [well known gay owned and friendly café] or coming to Tropical Fruits, you’ll have no problems...But if you are out there, it can be pretty difficult at times...”*



It’s not individuals that provide everyday barriers for Marg, it’s institutions.

*“It’s about institutional homophobia, and that’s so hard to address... There might be stacks of individuals who might not be homophobic, but it’s the institutions that silences people and can make it hard for people to be open-hearted...It’s almost like they are in the closet as well...If it’s not your battle, it’s easier to not say anything than to go against the institutional homophobia that’s there...You’re more likely to stay silent...”*

**['Not Round Here' Manual: Institutional homophobia (or heterosexism) refers to the many ways in which government, businesses, churches, and other institutions and organisations discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation.**

**These organisations and institutions set policies, allocate resources, and maintain unwritten standards for the behaviour of their members in ways which discriminate.]**



Thankfully for others, Marg is not staying silent. She recalls attending an event in Lismore in the lead up to the 2004 Federal Election.

*“Years ago when Mark Latham was Leader of the Opposition and doing the election, it was only a couple of months after the Play School thing, when he’d spoken out against it, and only just gone to bed with the Howard Government to amend the Marriage Act to make it only between a man and a woman...Basically there was a lot of bum licking going on, and he was puffing himself up...”*

Marg would go to the microphone when the floor was opened to questions.

*“Big mistake...Once you give me the talking stick, I won’t shut up...I went on to say, ‘I want to say how much I respect how much you wanted to protect your family when you asked the media to respect your family’s privacy’...[laughs]...He was puffing himself up...‘So could imagine my surprise when you decided it was not OK to respect and protect other people’s families, families like mine. I’m talking about same sex families’...”*

Marg would tell her story just as all hell broke loose.

*“Quite a lot of audience members started booing me, and didn’t stop... So they weren’t even polite enough to not boo...They were saying, ‘Shut up! Sit down!’...”*

Whilst Marg and Teri have encountered more than their share of institutional homophobia as parents, the same cannot be said for the children who go to kindergarten and school with their own children.

*“Kids will ask, ‘So why do you have two mums?’...We say, ‘All families are different, and isn’t that interesting?’...The pre-school that both our kids have gone to have been great and framed it in difference...A lot of kids go, ‘I wish I had two mums’...”*

Not that there are not moments of tension, like recently.

*“I tend to over talk things, and one of our daughter’s friends asked the question and I [said the usual spiel]...He just zoned out...I was doing the whole big blah blah and he was more interested in his tiny teddy that he’d been given...He’d zoned out...[laughs]”*

I had the pleasure of meeting Marg and Teri’s two children a few nights later. Invited to join them for a roast, I was treated to an impromptu concert and acrobatics display by Marg and Teri’s son and daughter. There was much energy and laughter. Marg had told me how much her family meant to her.

*“I love my beautiful children and I’m proud of them and what we’ve all*

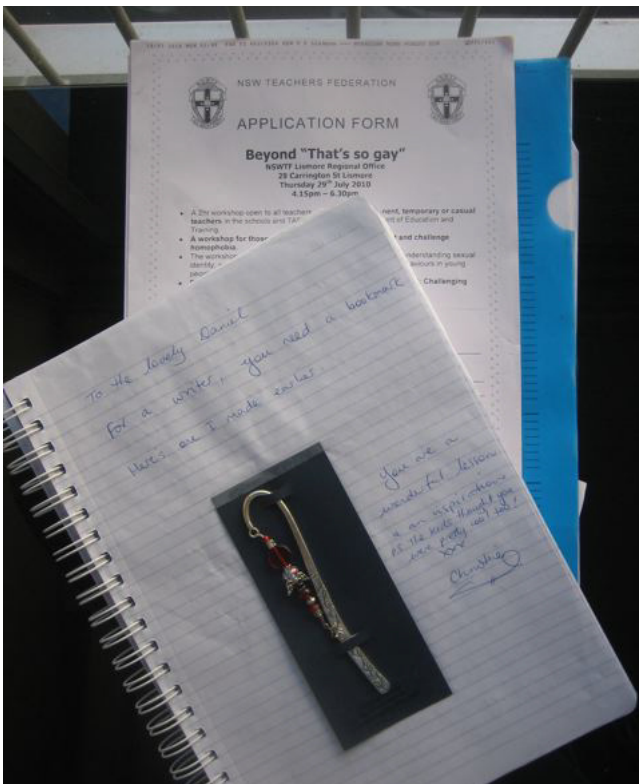


*achieved to get here..."*

Dinner with Marg and Teri proved a refreshing pitstop on my tour, and I thanked on behalf of my mother who calms considerably when I share how warm and welcoming people are with me as I travel.

*"Every time I eat a roast on this tour my mother sheds a tear in Geelong..."*

I left Marg and Teri's to drive home, with a container full of delicious roasted leftovers, before receiving a text message to tell me I'd left my notebook behind. I returned to get my notebook and left once more for my home for the week. It was not until the following day that I opened my notebook to find that during the 10 minutes I'd first left Marg's, she had got to work and left me a surprise. It is yet another example of the lengths that people go to in order to make me feel as lucky as I do.



The text says:

*"To the lovely Daniel. For a writer, you need a bookmark. Here's one I made earlier. You are a wonderful lesson and an inspiration. P.S. The kids thought you were pretty cool too!..."*

I was left wondering about Marg's reflections on institutions being the issue and what could be done about it. Marg had one solution.

*"You know, I can go on, but that gets in...It does at times get in...Whereas*

*individually Lismore is an accepting place for gays and lesbians, institutionally it's not...But we are creating our own institutions..."*

These include same sex parenting groups, a gay and lesbian choir, a youth group and, of course, Tropical Fruits. I even was invited to a gay tennis night in nearby Bangalow, but unfortunately it was washed out.

On it's own website, Tropical Fruits describes itself:

*"Tropical Fruits Inc, established in 1988, is the Premier Gay and Lesbian Social Group of the Northern Rivers in NSW. It is a not for profit, incorporated association that holds regular events for it's*





*diverse members and guests. It is a self funding, independent and voluntary organisation.”*

[www.tropicalfruits.org.au/](http://www.tropicalfruits.org.au/)

Known primarily for a dance party it runs each and every New Years Eve at the Lismore Showgrounds, Tropical Fruits is an impressive regional institution. Former driving force of Tropical Fruits, “Chris”, now a prominent youth worker, explains it was this party that was pivotal in his move to the area.

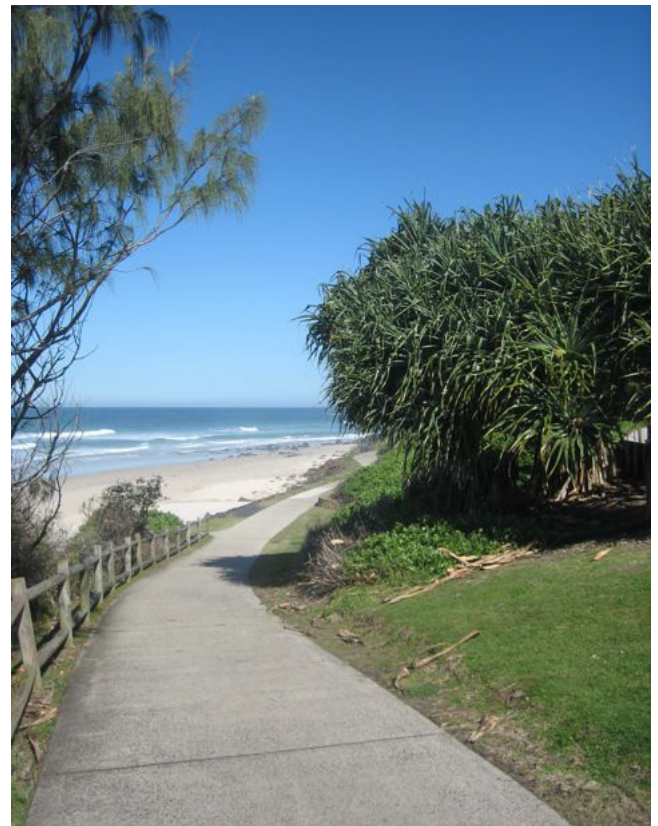
*“I came up with a boyfriend...Part of the reason for going up [here] was that there was a fairly prominent social group...I came up and experienced Tropical Fruits...I wouldn't have considered coming to any other regional area...”*

Not that Tropical Fruits was thriving at that stage.

*“[Tropical Fruits] was basically falling over when I arrived...For the first couple of years we worked our guts out to build it up again and get people involved again...We focused on creating opportunities beyond the dance parties and the drugs and the alcohol...Tropical Fruits [since] has been a perfect example of community development...”*

Tropical Fruits has spawned an LGBT youth group (which I will get to soon) as well as a family day: Fruitopia, later this year. In recent years, Tropical Fruits has returned to it's glory days, yet it has done so without assistance from local or state government. Myths are part of the problem according to Chris.

**[this all changed the week that I arrived when Tropical Fruits received local government funding for the first time, along with a Roller Derby group heavily populated by lesbian women.]**



*“One year we got a \$5000 net profit, but it's a big turnover, and we're turning over half a million...There is a misconception that we are a low priority area...That pink dollar myth...I think it has worked against us...”*



Despite the flow of dollars, for people like Chris it's more about the coming together of community.

*"We have 300 volunteers for a week before [Tropical Fruits]...I stand back sometimes, look around and think, 'I don't believe this'..."*

This sense of community is something that Chris felt hard to find in Sydney.

*"It's quite good...I'm quite lucky that I get to flit between Sydney and here...It gives me a good sense of the difference between the two... It's much better here...I have a very strong network of people that I can turn back on..."*

"Marcus", a health promotion worker with the ACON, formally the Aids Council of New South Wales agrees for the most part, yet still laments the challenges of regional and rural life for LGBT people. For this reason, Marcus is working to make non-metro life better for LGBT people.

*"Just putting it on the f\*cking agenda really...I'm quite passionate about keeping people in the places that they want to be...[Lismore] is an alternative to the city, which is a few pubs and some greedy promoters really..."*

When I asked Marcus, who many of you would know as his alter ego, about his background in his words, he showed his humour, wit and modesty.



*"I'm originally from Sydney, but don't hold that against me...Prior to this I was just a public loud mouth..."*

It's clear that Marcus is proud of the work of ACON locally, as well as Tropical Fruits.

*"It's the only perennial gay organisation that's not a pub..."*

Part of Marcus' role, which for him is quite new, is to engage local schools.

*"My job is basically just trying to get every school in the f\*cking region on board..."*





Talking about my work and the seminar I would hold in Lismore for teachers, Marcus believes it's a model that could work for him (and he would attend).

*"It sounds like a great way to penetrate the Department of Education... So to speak..."*

That ACON and others are looking to work with schools is an overdue thing, according to "Donna", a local youth worker and Chair of the local Youth Interagency (i.e. a cooperative of local services and organisations working with young people).

*"There is a need for services and schools to work together... Schools have historically been closed shops... They have THEIR business... If they have to, they'll refer outside but often don't have good knowledge about local services..."*

The importance of working together has been highlighted by recent events.

*"In the Northern Rivers region we've had a couple of deaths because of bullying... So the schools and the Department were like, 'Whoa. When it comes down to it, we don't have the resources to respond to this..."*

Donna believes she knows some of the rationale for schools being "closed shops".

*"It's the personal fears and prejudices of people in positions of power and influence, especially in schools... And clearly, not far behind it, it's their ignorance of the issues for LGBT people... It's like they don't want to deal with it until these people are adults... In my conversations with schools it's all around that stuff of age of consent... 'We don't want to open up too much, a can of worms, because maybe we'll end up with egg on our faces with parents..."*

Yet like so many other places in regional and rural Australia, some schools are getting to the point where LGBT issues cannot be ignored.

*"I think there has been stuff in individual schools largely because what happens in their schools... They say, 'This is actually our business. Whilst we've wanted to say it's not, when it comes down to it, if there are tragic consequences because of what's happened at our school, then we have some responsibility as a school community'..."*

Relatively fresh from high school, "Tom" describes that he "pretty much copped it every day for being same sex attracted". At first Tom didn't think it was a big deal to be attracted to other guys.

*"I was attracted to one of my male friends... I thought it was just*



*normal...Then [at high school] it became apparent that that wasn't so widespread...I used the classic bi as a segue thing, 'I can't be attracted to males, it's just not right'...I got to the point in Year8/9 where I said, 'Who am I fooling?' and came out to myself..."*

Despite Lesmore, ACON and Tropical Fruits, Tom didn't believe that other people felt like he did.

*"It was kind of the only gay in the village thing...I thought all gay porn was 'gay for pay'...I thought no-one was actually gay, it was just a higher pay rate [for the actors]..."*

Tom would eventually find stories like his own on the internet.

*"I found a site called mogenic, and I actually found a media story where this guy in a rural American town who basically said he felt like he was the only one in the world and actually broke down in the interview about it...So that basically reinforced that I wasn't the only one..."*

Despite this, depression became Tom's reality.

*"Because I felt like I was the only person around who was same sex attracted and the feeling that I couldn't tell anyone about it..."*

Tom's trust in one friend was well-placed yet not with another.

*"[I told two friends]...One spread it around the school, the guy, and the other, a girl, was very supportive, and she was actually a die-hard Christian...The teachers didn't really say or react in any way, but the students were kind of like, 'We've heard you are gay or bi or whatever, is it true?' and I'd be like, 'Yeah'...The boys would be like, 'Oh that's gross, get away from me'...The girls would be like, 'That's cool, you're still the same person'..."*



**[This story has played itself out across regional and rural Australia: the boys spread the news, the girls keep it amongst themselves.]**

Coming out to his family came next.

*"I was watching TV and my parents were on computer and I started asking dad if he cared about gay rights and if he cared about it being in the family, like nephews, nieces...It got to the point where my dad sounded frustrated and I turned around and said, 'OK, I'm gay'... They didn't care...My dad literally said, 'Who cares, do you want a badge?'...Mum shrugged and says, 'It happens'..."*

Through getting his first boyfriend and connecting with ACON locally, Tom got involved in an ACON peer education course and was asked to help run a new LGBT youth group. For Tom it was about helping provide an alternative to Tropical Fruits, cheekily titled 'Fresh Fruits'.

*"An organisation like Tropical Fruits is seen by young people as an older gay men's dance party, so they are reluctant to go to it...There is nothing for young people to do in the area except Fresh Fruits..."*

Now Fresh Fruits, in it's ninth month, is going from strength to strength and looking to create an under 30s dance space at this New Years Eve's Tropical Fruits dance party. When Tom recently asked the LGBT young people attending Fresh Fruits what they got out of their time there, they gave similar reasons to other young people across the country.

*"Support, socialising, something to do, making friends, building courage, somewhere to feel secure, getting more involved, understand what's happening in the area..."*

Like so many other young people in regional and rural Australia, Tom wants to stay put and rejects the notion that he should head for Sydney, or nearby Brisbane.

*"I don't want to and I don't have to move away..."*

Although invited, I missed out on attending Fresh Fruits and meeting participants because I was due at the same time at the NSW Teachers Federation's (NSWTF) Lismore office.

Quite early on I was contacted by the NSWTF to discuss how they could help the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour through NSW. The NSWTF then agreed to hosting events at each NSW location I was visiting, with me reading from Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, discussing my tour and using this as a conversation starter for the NSWTF's review and update of their LGBT policies (by their own admission last updated in 1994) and future efforts.





For a regional area, the NSWTF and myself were pleasantly surprised to have 15 local teachers attending, with a mix of primary and secondary schools in attendance.

After the reading, teacher “Bob”, at arguably the regions most LGBT-friendly school, would approach me after to check in how his school was going. He seemed grateful that his school was taking leadership on the issue, yet felt like there was no real way of measuring whether their efforts were making a difference.



After a brief conversation Bob took great interest in a model I adapted for assessing, and measuring changes in, school community readiness for affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia (see ‘The Discount Model’ in my Albany blog). Rather than doing things in the absence of a framework, Bob was excited that there might be a way to see how where his school currently sat and how it might even do better for it’s LGBT students.

During the reading of my book, another male teacher, “Ron”, expressed great concern about how he was being supported by the NSW Department of Education & Training (DET).

*“DET doesn’t recognise or understand the impact of homophobic vilification on teachers...It’s perhaps the most confronting thing for a teacher...I had students writing on walls, ‘Mr [X] is gay’ and ‘Mr [X] sucks c\*cks’...My boss, a wonderful, wonderful man, just didn’t know what to do and didn’t do anything...”*

A colleague chimed in.

*“Actually some of your kids in class were the best at dealing with it...”*

Ron is an example of a teacher who is adored by most of his students, who don’t really care much about whether he is gay or not. The same can be said for another gay teacher who couldn’t attend the reading.



Instead all his colleagues attended for him. In a school where there are only 5 teachers, one also a principal, this was a big effort.

*“We are four teachers from a rural school of five teachers...The fifth teacher is a colleague who is openly gay...He’s an asset to the team, and unfortunately he couldn’t be here...We are here to see how we can support him better, just in case something happens...Well we know there will be no problems with the kids because they love him... It’s the parents and maybe the community that we are worried about... We’ve had no problems so far...”*

In this informal gathering, this led to a small round of spontaneous applause. Yet the principal continued.

*“I’m a bit embarrassed to say this, and I’ve been a teacher for 17 years, but I’ve just had a lightbulb moment...I’d never thought how important this really is...My whole career I’ve always felt secure, like the Department has my back, just as long as I followed policies and procedures...This makes me realise that there are no policies and procedures, and that I’m exposed, and I don’t like it...The fact that we’re avoiding this sends a clear message...”*

I cannot recall where, but I once read a sentence that said very much the same thing.

*“Having no policy is, after all, a policy...”*

Locally things might move more quickly than in other regional and rural NSW locations. Coming up is a training session for local teachers called ‘That’s So Gay’ that ACON is hosting for Family Planning NSW who have successfully worked with teachers and students in recent years. All agreed that the book reading and policy review was a great kickstart for things locally.

Meanwhile I was already looking to the next week, and the Mt Everest of LGBT efforts: Sydney.

After a second kiss and hug from Marg she paused. Not for the first time I felt what was unspoken: both of us wished that I could stay a little longer and that my goodbye was a reluctant one.

*“You must have a lot of goodbyes in you...”*

You have no idea.

