

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWENTY-FOUR, (SYDNEY) A BUS RIDE AWAY: BEYOND PRISONS OF PRETEND

"I realised the fairy stories were not fairy stories..."

On a wintery Sydney evening I found myself sitting amongst about 30 people in the basement of ACON, formerly known as the Aids Council of NSW. Each Friday night people from Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical faith backgrounds gather for Freedom 2 b[e] meetings. I was invited along by the charismatic and pioneering Anthony Venn Brown.



I'd met with Anthony for two reasons. Firstly, in my support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people over the last 12-13 years I have identified that an inability to reconcile faith and sexual identity has been a major issue that rears its ugly head time and again. Secondly, every person I spoke to about Anthony and/or Freedom 2 b[e] talked openly about the impact of Anthony and his work.

"It saved my life...It's the reason I am alive today..."

I wanted to meet with a man who many believe is not only an Australian leader in bridging faith and sexual identity, but also a world leader. In his bestseller, *A Life Of Unlearning*, Anthony outlines in great detail his own journey. This in itself has helped countless others that Anthony will probably never get a chance to meet.

His website sets the scene:

“Formerly a high profile preacher in mega-churches throughout Australia and overseas, for 22 years Anthony tried every possible means to change his homosexuality through psychiatric treatment, ex-gay programs, counselling etc. Although a happily married father of two for 16 years, he eventually had to admit that nothing had changed and since 1991 has been living as an openly gay man.”

www.anthonnyvennbrown.com

Anthony is clear why Freedom 2 b[e] is having such an impact.

“It’s a chance to talk to people for the first time that understand the [faith based] language... You can’t have those conversations in a gay bar...”

Freedom 2 b[e] also has a youth branch which is leading the way in supporting young people. On my travels it has become clear that LGBT projects and organisations are often at a loss as to how support young people from Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical faith backgrounds.

As I write in *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools:*

Quite seriously, assisting individuals to reconcile their sexual identity and their faith is one of the biggest challenges I have found in supporting gay and lesbian young people. Alas, most see this as ‘impossible’. Unfortunately for most young people this has been a challenge too great, with the majority of young people refusing to engage with the church as a formal organisation, or even refusing to engage with their faith.

This represents a challenge for the Catholic institution, for those within the gay and lesbian community and for young people themselves. Reconciling faith and sexual identity is possible. Yet having to stumble across a religious mentor, access a non-existent language and framework in the absence of any formal process is a less than ideal situation. At the time of writing, this seems a hurdle too great for most. For the sake of the well-being of young people, and gays and lesbians of all ages, we must face this challenge together and get it right.

In an age where so many LGBT young people find solace on the internet, Freedom 2 b[e]’s website – www.freedom2b.org - boasts countless stories shared by young people from Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical faith backgrounds.

Anthony points out that LGBT people from these faith backgrounds might have a point of difference.

“LGBT people experience [a range of negative life experiences] but we experience it with greater intensity, because it has eternal consequences... That’s pretty heavy...”



Perhaps fittingly, I arrived Friday evening to find a group of people politely seated and ready for the meeting to commence. Anthony observed this.

“Ooo, it’s like a little congregation actually, isn’t it?...[laughs]...”

After a warm welcome to all from the convener of the Freedom 2 b[e] youth group, Anthony asked me to talk about my tour before I got to settle in and watch him in action.

Presenting on ‘Self Image, Self Esteem & Sexual Identity’, it was easy to imagine Anthony, as he once did, preaching to a huge congregation at a mega-church. He humourously recalled his dress sense in years gone by.

“I was the trendiest preacher in the Assemblies of God...But there were limits...”

Yet coming out in 1991 led Anthony to accept and something inherent.

“I’m a flapper... [demonstrates with limp arms and wrists as he speaks]...”

Although frequently drawing laughs from the audience, this was much more than a comedy routine. Stories were told of LGBT people, such as someone involved in the ‘ex-gay’ movement.

“He said, ‘I realised I lost my 20s’...”

Anthony’s message is that, in our own time of course, we must come out.



“When we choose to live authentically, we chip away at others’ prisons of pretend...”

Working tirelessly (“I manage to burn out once a year, which is not a healthy state to be in...”), Anthony believes in an everyday approach.



“Change won’t come from an activist telling them anything, it will come from someone like them sitting them down and saying, ‘Hey, I want to talk to you about something’...”

This seemingly ordinary approach might just work a little LGBT magic.

“Change will come, I know it...I know these people...They are good people...They’re not evil people...”

For Anthony it’s all about misconceptions. During my time in Sydney I had to challenge some of my own misconceptions. It would be fair to say that until now Sydney and I have had a relatively uneasy relationship. Try as I might, I’ve always been left feeling like I don’t fit in, that after a few days I needed to get home and shower (and not in a good way).

In terms of my national challenging homophobia tour, arriving in Sydney was, to me at least, like climbing an LGBT Mt Everest. In the past I had felt that my challenging homophobia work had been overlooked north of the Murray River. A formally evaluated educational package for teachers that worked seemingly didn’t matter. Was it because I was not from NSW?

When I first talked to people about going on my tour, I was urged to check if this was OK with particular individuals and organisations. One Sydney colleague warned me.

“[LGBT organisation] won’t like it...”

Another long-time LGBT mentor also warned me.

“Just be prepared for the backlash...”

Although not the primary reason for the logistics of my tour (and not because of the inevitable and tiring Priscilla references either), this played a part in me deciding to cover ground in SA, WA and QLD before coming to the east coast with “fresh eyes”. I figured rather than starting in Sydney or Melbourne and speculating on what I’d find, I’d instead listen to the non-east coast of Australia and then share this with east coast folk.

One of my Sydney hosts, “Jai”, related my LGBT experience of Sydney to his own experiences in the corporate world.

“They don’t care what you’ve done before...It’s all, ‘But what have you done in Sydney? Have you done anything here?’...”

Jai had moved to Sydney late last year with his partner, “Peter”, who I had known when he was a “baby gay” in Geelong. Peter came



to watch the then-televised Sydney Mardi Gras with my mother and some other friends before he'd come out to his own family. Peter not only swore my mum to secrecy about himself, but also asked that my mum not talk about me being gay; my mum worked with Peter's mum at a nursing home and they often had a cuppa together during breaks, and Peter feared "gay guilt by association". Later, my mum would be able to "come out" once Peter had come out to his family. I even took Peter on his first Melbourne excursions to gay establishments.

So now it seemed the shoe was on the other foot. Living right off Oxford Street, on my first night Peter and Jai suggested they go out with me for a drink on the famous gay strip. At one stage I looked over to Peter.

"Do you sometimes..."

Peter knew exactly what I was going to ask. He too often reflected on his journey from Geelong's suburbs to Sydney's inner gay ghetto.

"Absolutely...[laughs]..."



Going to a major gym chain only required a walk to the end of Peter and Jai's street. After coming home from the gym I shared my observations.

"I have been to gyms all over Australia for the last 24 weeks, and it's guaranteed that all the hot guys are straight...Here at [said gym chain] I can safely say that it's the opposite: ALL the hot guys are gay...I'm not coping..."

If I needed an antidote to months of relative LGBT deprivation, inner Sydney provided an overdose. For a few days I looked around and thought about removing most of my body hair (and those who know me would know therein lies a big challenge), actually thinking about what I wear and sucking in my stomach, before relaxing. Using my hosts as a base, I surprised myself by beginning to enjoy myself. It also helped that I had known my hosts for many years, and therefore was able to have atypical and frank conversations about my tour as well as non-tour related conversations.



With such a comfortable base, it would have been easy for me to not venture out of Surry Hills and Darlinghurst. For example, ACON's building was 500 metres from my door.

However I wanted to get a sense of Sydney's outer suburbs. One clue came from a secondary school that I visited near Campbelltown. To get here required over an hour on a train, then a car ride. The decision to go to this school was not a difficult one after receiving an e-mail.

"My name is [Mel]. Im a [age] secondary teacher (fresh out of university) and I'm gay. The university and the schools I have worked



in are still riddled with homophobia from teachers and students. My current school in sydney's south west has a huge population of gay students who are not only not being supported but are being bullied and traumatised. The school has not system or real policy in place to support and protect these students. I have personal concern for these students- I was lucky to survive school, my first girlfriend committed suicide at 16. I understand this may be too late to organise during this tour perhaps we could meet the next

time you are in sydney or through another means? We are ready, willing and eager to create change and would love your input."

When "Mel" picked me up from the train station, she half-laughed, admitting that she expected not to hear back from the tour for months.

"I thought I'd get some standard, 'Thanks for your e-mail, but...'"

This explained in part the energy that surrounded my arrival, which included four teachers, one Deputy Principal and Mel's lecturer from university. I was asked for my hot beverage preference so that the tea ladies could have it waiting (for the record it was a hot chocolate). Mel had also brought home-made chocolate cupcakes (for the record I almost ate a whole tray single-handedly).



Like many outer metropolitan schools, this secondary school claims a diverse student population that includes Indigenous and Islander students. In some schools the reputation precedes it, as explained by one younger female teacher.

“A lot of people told me not to come here [to teach] because it’s housing commission, there’s lots of Aboriginal kids, etc...There was just this stigma attached to working here...”

Insults such as “faggot” and comments such as “that’s so gay” are said to be commonplace. Egged on by a gay male friend, another female teacher had found some success in challenging homophobia in her classrooms.

“I say, ‘My friend is gay and when you say that you hurt him and you hurt me’ and then they say, ‘Awww, sorry miss’...”

Mel herself finds an interesting dynamic in her own classroom as an arts teacher.

“I have one class where there are a few gay boys and some straight macho boys...It seems that the gay boys sit up the back and as far away as possible from the others...When we do group activities they, get, they get very conscious of physical space...Like the other day, no-one would stand behind the gay boy...Thank goodness he was oblivious to it, to the drama going on behind him...”

For Mel it’s about small, everyday wins.



“It’s about what’s appropriate and what’s not...We can talk about being gay or bisexual or lesbian, but we can’t use inappropriate words...It drives me to distraction some days...Last class we only said faggot twice...’Well done guys’...And I’m only with them 6 periods [per week]...”

“Ria”, the deputy principal approached the meeting with some caution.

“I’m here to make sure no big decisions are made and that the school is not committed to doing anything major...”

Once we all were seated, and I’d downed my first chocolate cupcake, I explained my project and what I was wanting to discuss with them: 1. Their experiences and observations with LGBT young people; 2. The challenges they face in providing great support to these young people; and , 3. What they would require to change the way they work in the immediate to short-term. I explained that they did not have to sign up for anything, and in any case, I had nothing really for them to sign up to. This led to some sighs and smiles.

After getting them to self-assess how ready their school was for affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia (revisited in last week’s Lismore blog), we discussed what steps the school could take next.

Them: “But we have, like, 50 staff...And we could only get five people here from staff...”

Me: “Think about what has happened here so far today...We have spoken for 90 minutes, and we could keep going...With only a simple framework and some simple questions, you have all come up with stories, experiences and ideas...Right?...”

Them: “Yes...”

Me: “Imagine if you times these 5 people by 10...Do you think you would have plenty of other stories, experiences and ideas?...”

Them: “Yes...”

Me: “Would it be possible to set aside an hour or two in the next 3-6 months where you start a conversation as a whole staff group, where you ask teachers to think about how ready the school is and what could happen next?...”

Them: “Yes...”

Me: “Could you get someone to come in and start that conversation if you didn’t feel confident yourselves?...”

I think I actually saw relaxed, excited smiles. The biggest smile was on Mel’s face. This had been on Mel’s agenda even before she stepped into her current school, which is all the more remarkable given this was only her third (yes THIRD!) week in the school; her first school.

“Carol”, Mel’s favourite university lecturer, explained how much of



a stir Mel caused when she presented to all her fellow teaching students about her assignment: an anti-homophobia kit for teachers. Mel herself found it hard to believe.

“You should have seen it when I stood up and said, ‘I’m doing an anti-homophobia kit’...I swear they didn’t know where to run...They couldn’t get out of the room fast enough...”

This and other experiences led Mel to encourage and challenge Carol to include more LGBT content into the course. As an Indigenous woman and effective head of the unit, ‘Diversity and Social Justice’, Carol brought a long, subversive history of change.

“I photocopy the current research [e.g. LGBT young people’s experience of school] and put it on the tables in the staffroom because staff will think that it’s for a PD they have to prepare for...They are



never sure where it came from and not sure if there is PD coming up...It helps having common knowledge areas...There is a lot to be said about coming in early [to distribute said photocopies] and going out late...[smiles]...”

On the way back to the train station, on my fourth or fifth chocolate cupcake by this stage, I heard more about Mel’s own story.

“The first time I came out my dad said, ‘No you’re not, eat your dinner’...The second time I was kicked out when I was in the first year of uni...I was in wet bathers and shorts and that night I slept in the park...”



When Mel apologetically gave me a box of chocolates as a thank-you for coming to her school I started to understand how much my visit had really meant. Momentarily speechless, I accepted the chocolates as Mel explained she had wanted to donate a tank of fuel. I reminded her that this was part of my tour, that it was my pleasure to make the time and that understandably after 5 years of study her finances could be channeled into any number of areas other than my tour.

“You have done more than enough in three short weeks for your school...”



Hoping to see speedy results in the schools they are working in, 18 teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others gathered at the NSW Teachers Federation for the second of five events they are hosting across the state.

Before the event I met with The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW (P&C) who was unable to make my Sydney book reading. A suggested person of interest by "Sydney Louis", who I will get to soon, it was

thought that P&C's might be an underutilised force in the fight to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia in schools. Newly appointed to the executive, "Dorothy" explains that potential.

“P&C's are different to school councils in that schools run school councils that have some parent and citizens as representatives... P&C's are a representative body where there are some school representatives...There are 2200 schools in NSW and 1900 schools have P&C's...”

More recently the P&C's stance on challenging homophobia in schools came to a head during the annual P&C conference.

“It was the same weekend as Mardi Gras...We left it too late so we went in under the auspice of PFLAG...There was a group who walked, a dozen or so, and the response from our Council was, ‘This is fantastic. If we are going to do something about discrimination. It's



no good just saying it. This is putting our money where our mouth is...

Not that everyone from across NSW was supportive.

“What we found out was, there were people who were really offended and wrote offensive e-mails...Disgusted would be the best word...I think some of them were country people...I think the notion is that it doesn't happen in the country, it happens only in the city...The actual reaction from the [Mardi Gras] crowd and people on the sidewalk, we had kids say, ‘Oh my god, the P&C is here!’...”

Previewing the book reading that she would miss I updated Dorothy on the Lismore book reading. When I recounted the reflection of the Principal (see Lismore blog), she agreed.

“I think a lot of Principals think Department policy is strong, and it's not...When you actually read them, there is not a lot of depth to it... They think it's covered under the Anti-Discrimination Policy...Until something arises, people don't often think about these things...”

Perhaps it was because of a constant flow of things arising that brought a bunch of like-minded individuals together in the Sydney office of the NSW Teachers Federation.

Like Lismore, ACON (see Lismore blog) staff were in attendance, particularly staff in youth and policy. The following morning I would meet with these staff, and the head of the Anti-Violence Project.

Arriving with my notebook eager to take down their ideas, observations and experiences, I was instead taken aback when I didn't get to write a single word. Ninety minutes later I realised I'd experienced a first for the tour: the tables had been turned and ACON staff were interviewing me about the tour.

Having focused for so long on collecting the thoughts of others, I left feeling some guilt at the missed opportunity of not interviewing so many staff from a leading



Australian LGBT organisation. I also left feeling like I'd had a great time and having had a fascinating chat.

My reason for leaving my meeting with ACON staff was to meet with the other organisation in attendance at my Sydney book reading, Twenty10. Arguably the leading LGBT youth organisation in the country, Twenty10 has been leading the way in supporting LGBT young people since the 1990s.



“Twenty 10 is a community based, non profit state-wide organisation. We work with and support young people of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities, their families and friends. We aim to be a beacon of strength and acceptance - supporting young people to build resilience and achieve their potential.”

www.twenty10.org.au

Before the NSW Teachers Federation generously agreed to host book readings at all five of my NSW locations, Twenty10 had offered their support when the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ National Tour was a fledgling idea. It was support of organisations like Twenty10, and in particular “Sydney Louis”, that made that fledgling idea soon become a reality.

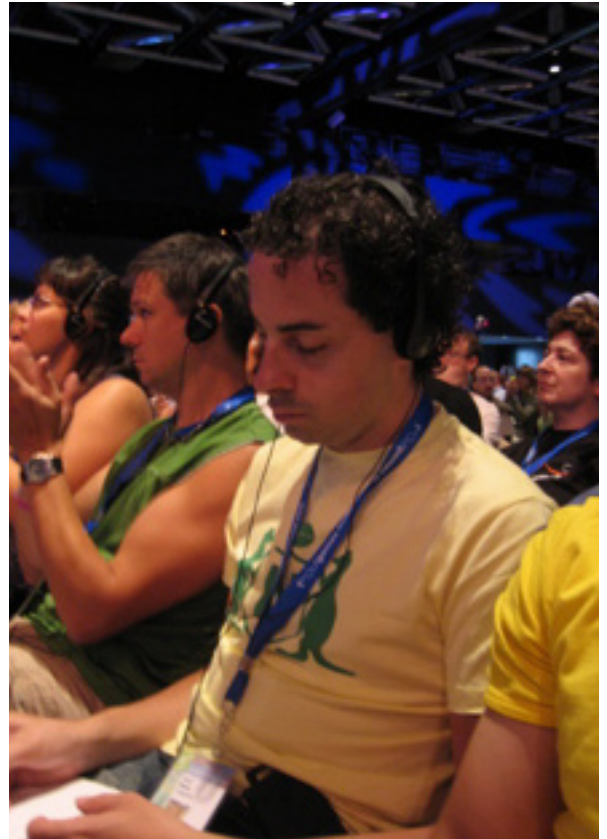
In my mind I had first met Sydney Louis, labeled as such to distinguish him in my mind from all the other “Louis” I knew and talked about, at the 1st World Out Games Human Rights Conference in Montreal in 2006.

Sydney Louis and I would meet whilst scurrying for the free champagne that flowed prior to the conference dinner. It became apparent that I had met Sydney Louis 18 months before, following a presentation I gave at a national LGBT conference in Melbourne. It would turn out that not only was Sydney Louis a colleague, but also that he would be turning up at dinners (he grew up with the daughter of former Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti and was at Chris’ dinner



that included the Hon. Michael Kirby) and parties I was invited to, and he quickly became one of those people who feels like “an old friend”. When he did turn up, it was unexpected and pleasant, with a calm, chirpy voice behind you at a train station for example. His unassuming manner and strategically added intelligence and humour were things I was drawn to immediately.

I really got to know Sydney Louis the night after I had won two gold medals in tennis. Sporting an ankle injury from, to that point, the most romantic evening of my life with an Italian Human Rights lawyer (long and, I believe, funny story) and exacerbated by long semi-final and final matches on North American hardcourts, I was unable to move very far. So whilst all of my friends and teammates were at a dance party with 15000 athletes, I found myself perched on a stool in a quiet bar, foot on another stool, and passing an evening getting to know Sydney Louis who decided to keep me company over joining the throng. This and an infamous, hilarious trip to New York’s Fire Island cemented an enduring personal and professional friendship.



Arriving to meet a Twenty10 Coordinator, “Alex”, I found a “busy” organisation.

“Based on our funding, we are functioning about 164% of our capacity...”

Whilst unsurprised, given that this is the case with almost every LGBT organisation I have met and worked with, I was pleasantly surprised and encouraged that Twenty10 had, by implication, been documenting their actual vs funded capacity. Alex says it’s relatively new and about burnout prevention.

“It’s partly about awareness-raising with staff...We ask, ‘What is your capacity. What is Twenty10 here for?’...Because burnout has an impact on the service, the young people and yourself...”



Twenty10's experiences explodes the myth of so many throughout regional and rural Australia who believe that life in Sydney schools might be different for LGBT young people.

"This week I had a call from a counselor from an all-girls school... She is counseling 5 students who are being directly influenced by bullying...Homophobia in particular is leading them to counseling... [The school] have said that they need specific training for the Year 10s but around general acceptance and not naming it as homophobia..."

A few days later I saw one of Twenty10's main functions: direct support for LGBT young people. In an impressive upstairs space at Twenty10's headquarters, I spent time with those attending the Saturday drop-in. I explained that in my travels through regional and rural Australia that many LGBT young people spoke of Sydney, at times in awe at what everyday life might be like for LGBT people. A mix of Sydney-siders and young people newer to Sydney watered down these fantasies.

"Sydney is not magical...It's actually just a small portion..."

However that small portion is loved by most.

"I walk up Oxford Street and I'm home...It's ours...[smiles]..."

Two young men from regional and rural NSW reminded everyone of non-Sydney life.

"I wasn't openly gay in [rural area]...If someone was known to be gay then the local gangs took it upon themselves to re-educate the gay person...And I mean bashings...My only understanding was that gay people were hunted down..."

The second young man found local support in a coastal town in the form of an LGBT youth group, yet still felt different at school.

"[My boyfriend and I] were watching heterosexual couples growing up in a country high school...I used to think, 'Why can't I do that?'... We were in love, but we couldn't show it...And that had a serious impact on our relationship...When [your boyfriend] denies you in public because of what people might say..."

In Sydney examples of same sex couples and public displays of affection (PDAs) seems to be more common and visible, at least in certain pockets. It's the knowledge and accessibility of these "certain pockets" of LGBT-ness and LGBT friendliness that perhaps distinguishes Sydney from most other locations, but doesn't necessarily exonerate it.

"After all, we're just a bus ride or a train ride away from a friendly place..."



I put it to the participants of Twenty10's Saturday drop-in that many LGBT young people across the country would be surprised that a service like Twenty10 would be needed in Sydney and that they would be interested in why they came along.

"Everyone was treating me differently: my parents, my friends...I just needed someone to understand and treat me as normal..."

"Being more active...To just feel like you're contributing, whether it be in conversation or whatever..."

"I don't fit in [Sydney suburbs]...I like friends..."

"To meet other young people who are going through similar things..."

"Coming from a country town...The amount of people that come here...Coming from no gayness to faggotry...Going from nothing to Carnivale...It's interesting to go from nothing to everything...[Another young person: 'Kind of like a lottery']...[laughter]..."

"It's easy to become friends with people, get people's experiences and stuff...It's fun!..."

"I like the idea that...If I come here that there are other people like me...I think I feel different where I come from and I don't feel that here..."

"For most of my life I was the only gay in the village..."

Before I ended my time with Twenty10, I asked young people what their hopes were for the future, which ranged from the delightfully ambitious through to the simple things in life.

"I hope for utopia...I'm a dreamer...I'm a writer..."

"Super powers!..."

"Meet someone, settle down, get a house and a cat, keep my job..."

"I want a boyfriend and I would be happy..."

