

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWENTY-FIVE, (NEWCASTLE) MISSED CONNECTIONS: ON BEING SLIGHTLY BATTERED, RATHER BRUISED

"Someone just said to me that once you know the strategy [of Roller Derby] it's really interesting and you can get into it...She said, 'It's like chess'...I said, 'Yeah, it's like watching chess and not knowing what's going on!'..."

"Michelle", a local lesbian born and bred in Newcastle, was not enjoying her Roller Derby experience.

After hearing a great deal throughout my tour about the latest sensation, Roller Derby, I found myself at a local contest in a VERY cold Newcastle sports stadium. Attending with Michelle, a local gay man and a straight couple, I was eager to find out what it was all about. Just why did so many lesbian women flock to this female-only sport?

Driving to Newcastle's outskirts I was unsure of what to expect.

Unprepared for a cold sports stadium and shivering, I watched two groups of women roller skate around what looked like a masking tape track. There is strategy, fine examples of skill on wheels and even lots of hard knocks and spills. What encouraged me is that women were central, celebrated and in charge. Self-expression also seems to be encouraged, and I wondered how many of these women had few, if any, other outlets.

Whilst watching women of all ages, shapes, sizes and temperaments, Michelle explained her experience of Newcastle's Same Sex Marriage Rally earlier that afternoon. Due to an inbox explosion I missed an e-mail alerting me to the rally, and was ironically sitting clearing that very inbox as the rally took place.

Michelle lamented that Newcastle's rally attracted 25 people, whilst Lismore had 150 people and the major cities had thousands. I



asked if it was, in part, because of Newcastle's close proximity to Sydney.

"Nut..."

Apparently it wasn't always that way.

"Twenty-five people to a rally!?!...Twenty-four years ago we had a gay nightclub in town that would get 3-400 people every week...You couldn't get that now, and there are more gays and lesbians than twenty-four years ago!..."

For Michelle it's very much a lack of cohesion.

"Just a case of 'non-care'...There is not a sense that we're working together for anything..."

I would reflect on the "non-care" that Michelle described in the week leading up to Roller Derby.

Daniel Witthaus wakes to the annoying news that his Newcastle accommodation has fallen through...

(Day 170+: www.thatssogay.com.au)...

Daniel Witthaus And Sydney rain...

August 10 at 7:42am

Daniel Witthaus And I don't care if we need it...;)...

August 10 at 7:43am

[Facebook posting by Daniel Witthaus]



Spoiled beyond my expectations during my stay with “Jai” and “Peter” (see Sydney blog), what would normally be a logistical blip took on more annoying proportions. My annoyance and frustration gave me a clue to what I would have to admit by Newcastle’s end: I was feeling tired and lacking my usual ability to roll with what the tour threw at me.

I’d met a gay couple from Newcastle during my stay at Turtle Cove (see Cairns blog). Over dinner one night they asked about my tour experiences and relayed their own story of having a commitment ceremony. Both had endured a great deal of rejection and hostility from their parents, yet after a decade of togetherness both their mothers would proudly attend their son’s commitment ceremony.

I still remember one of the men crying as he spoke of the vast change that happened within his own family and him asking for a long hug. Both men implored me to stay with them on my long trek down the east coast.



What none of us planned was a family medical emergency exactly when I did get to Newcastle, meaning I was suddenly looking for somewhere else to stay. Ordinarily perspective would have reminded me that I had been hosted every night for the last two months, but as rain bucketed down on Sydney, for that moment I didn’t care. I wanted to just stay still, not drive, not meet new hosts or book into a backpackers and be a blob on the couch.

Yes Week Twenty-Six of my 38-week Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ Tour didn’t fill me with excitement until one of my 687 Facebook friends



came to the rescue. It had been “Nick” who had approached me following my book launch to give me feedback on the event.

“I used to work on the Central Coast of NSW and had to leave...I realise that I have not felt a sense of community since I left...Tonight I felt like I was a part of something again...I want to thank you for that...”

Although busy at work, a short time later Nick had organised for me to stay with his parents, who he added were great people who loved a visitor. On the phone with Nick’s dad, “Clark”, I was pleasantly surprised by a warm, almost playful voice.



“We Googled you and we have some questions...”

Really?

“Yes, we know all about you...It’s very interesting...Of course we wanted to know who was coming to stay at our place...”

On the first night I was welcomed by Clark and made dinner, which we sat and ate together. This gave us a chance to meet, discuss my tour and to get to know each other. I certainly felt better for the “dad energy”, reflecting with Clark that I had not spoken with my own father in over 16 years.

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father in over 16 years.

Soon after Nick's mum and Clark's wife, "Ellen" would arrive home and I would get a chance to get to know her over a freshly made mug of Milo. Despite my disappointment at my original hosts falling through, I did catch myself thinking how lucky I felt that I got to experience the hospitality of Clark and Ellen instead.

With a feeling of family as my foundation I set to exploring all things lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), LGBT-friendly and not in Newcastle. Yet the stumbling blocks continued.

From a prominent LGBT community member, mover and shaker at the University of Newcastle and recent author of a book on homophobic [Alan's book *Speaking Out*]:

E-mail: "The timing is unfortunately not good because I am leaving the country on long service leave..."

OK, so how about a colleague who has had considerable involvement in LGBT-ifying university life and curriculum?

E-mail: "I've heard about your work from [said colleague], and it's great that you're coming to NSW, but unfortunately I can't connect with you this time, because I'm on study leave too, and will be in Adelaide at the time of your visit."

Fair enough. Her colleague, prominent in university equity and diversity management? Voicemails after e-mail contact.

[sound of silence on my mobile]

Local teachers, lecturers and prominent lesbian couple?

Sms: "...sorry for the short notice but we have a bit of a family crisis here and I'm going to have to cancel..."

How about the local LGBT support group?

Sms: "Unfortunately due to a recent tragedy in our group of friends.... So sorry for the late notice..."

Whereas I would ordinarily find myself having missed connections and cancellations, rarely did it happen more than once. It took a week and a phone conversation with "Viv" (see Brisbane Part II blog) to understand why it was all hitting so hard: I was taking all the missed connections, cancellations and other hiccups personally; I was feeling like it was my fault that everything was "going wrong". If only I'd picked a different week or scheduled the meeting earlier or later or...

With this feeling of optimism, I met with the main organiser of all things LGBT for the NSW Teachers Federation. It was "Gina" who first contacted me in March about the five NSW events that are currently taking place. Gina had driven from Tamworth to attend the third of



five NSW Teachers Federation hosted Beyond 'That's So Gay' book readings, and we were enjoying a cuppa only hours before it was set to kick off.

"Gina" said she'd received positive feedback so far from both the Lismore and Sydney events, however she was not expecting big numbers to attend the reading that night. Sensing she was concerned at how I might take this, I assured her I'd read to two people before, so the four who had RSVP'd would feel like a significant crowd. I was reassured that Gina and her organising counterparts in NSW locales had worked hard to ensure teachers knew the event was taking place and also knew to wait and see who actually turned up.

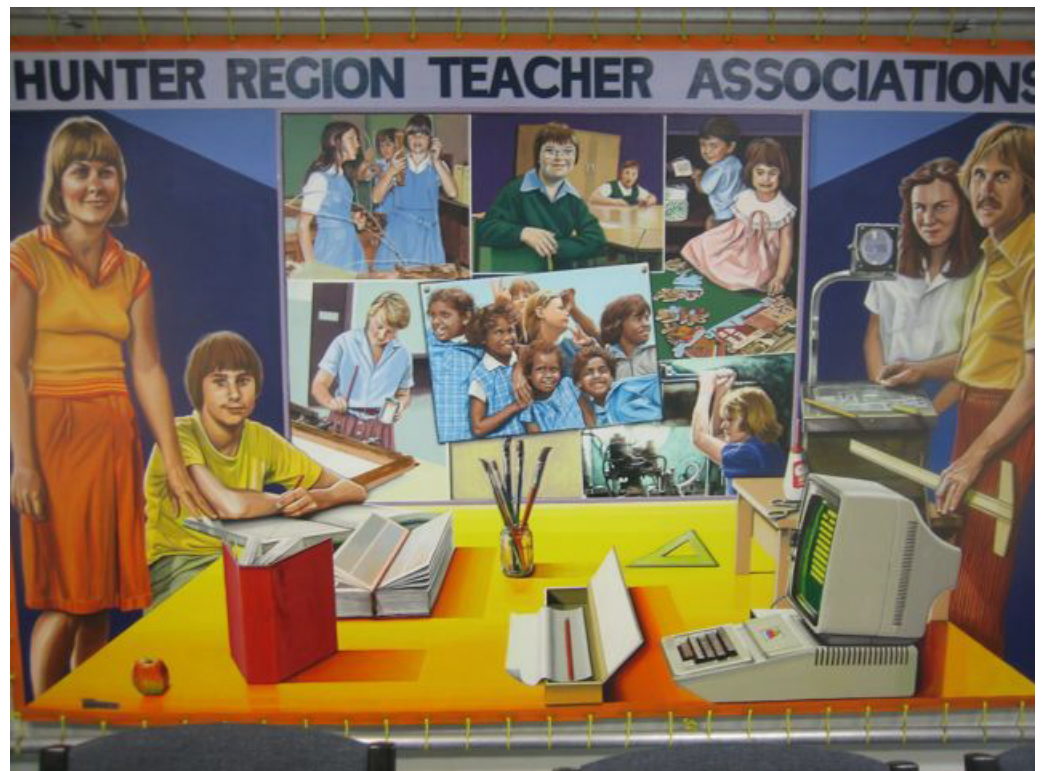
[N.B. Anyone who has watched Kathy Griffin's 'My Life On The D-List' series will understand my saying that there have been many D-List moments this year.]



When I arrived at the NSW Teachers Federation I was warmly welcomed by local organiser, "Barnie". Barnie made me quickly feel at home and updated me that there had been no additions to the existing four RSVPs.

Rather than feel anxious at how many people might turn up, I instead took in the surroundings that included an impressive banner by a local artist. It's said that until recently they could name the teachers and every student in the painting. Something about that captivated and charmed me.





I would find that the Hunter Valley, with Newcastle as it's capital, has a rich educational history. For example, I found out that Newcastle East Public School is said to be "the longest running public school in the Southern Hemisphere" (i.e. since 1816).

With 30 minutes until the reading there were four people. I thought this was a great sign, and Bernie suggested we wait until the advertised kick-off time. Then a few more arrived, then a few more. As the reading started two other local teachers arrived swelling the small audience to 13, only two off the 15 that "Gay Nirvana" Lismore attracted and the 18 arrivals for "Gay Nirvana Squared" Sydney. At short notice with teachers under great time pressures, this was a win.

In starting my book readings, I attempt to role model what the national tour is about. I immediately get people talking to one another, rather than focusing on me. It also sets a more intimate, conversational mood for the evening.

"What I'd like you to do with the person beside you or the people around you is to talk about the main reason or reasons for coming tonight...I'll give you a few moments and then bring you back..."

In reality this is possibly the most important part of the evening. For over a decade I have been surprised over and over again to find a startling fact: my promptings in workshops, professional developments and meetings are often the first time that educators have ever spoken professionally, and often personally, about sexual diversity. EVER.

If I was to start speaking immediately and to continue, then this would be a missed opportunity to "bring people into the room". This establishes quickly people's experiences, agendas and feelings about



and with sexual diversity. Checking in with the Newcastle audience, I heard similar things to my other gatherings throughout regional and rural Australia.



“It’s a giant gap in the curriculum...”

“The school is very much, ‘We have out kids, we’ll deal with it when they come out’...”

“It’s funny this is called ‘That’s So Gay’ because young people are saying it all the time...”

“My kids attend the local primary school and as a gay dad...”

Even if I had heard it many times over, it does not lessen the importance of it being said here and now. For these people, it’s the first time.

After a brief introduction to how I came to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia in Australian schools, and then write a book, I read out three sections:

1. The first time I was asked by a student if I was gay;
2. A “nightmare” scenario with parents (after an introduction of The Discount Model, e.g. see Lismore blog); and,
3. ‘That’s So Gay’: strategies for challenging and interrupting homophobic language and behaviour.

To round out my book reading I then briefly explain the national challenging homophobia tour and the context for being in their town. Newcastle were particularly interested in dealing with resistant school leadership, how to gather support for this work and how the tour is funded (once again a few jaws hit the floor when I explained it was self-funded).

As with Lismore and Sydney, not all those attending the NSW Teachers Federation event were teachers. In Newcastle I was approached by “Simon” who was currently working for a company that is best described as male-dominated. Although a resource for teachers and health professionals, my book, *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, appealed to Simon, a homophobia-



curious other. Simon wondered if he could apply what I had learnt with young people in his workplace.

Simon, a young gay man, himself had an interesting story. Born on the Central Coast of NSW, he knew early on that he was attracted to other guys.

"I had two neighbours who were both a year older than me, and probably from the age of 7 we started to fool around with each other..."

This stopped only when Simon's family moved to a larger town on the Central Coast. With a grandmother as an aerobics instructor, Simon found himself at the gym often where he would eventually become an aerobics instructor himself. It was after the gym one day, at 14 years of age, that Simon would come out to his family.

"I was down at the gym and dad found an article at the bottom of my drawer about gay and lesbian services...He came to pick me up from the gym and posed the question...I guess that's how I came out to my parents..."



According to Simon his parents didn't adjust quickly, especially with his mum.

"It all ended up messy...My grandmother spent about two days on the phone trying to find support for my parents and finally found PFLAG [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] and they started to go down to Darlinghurst [in Sydney] for meetings...When I was 15 I ended up going down to PFLAG meetings with them...I definitely



knew I was gay...That's when I started dating guys..."

Apart from his local gym, a café for young people at a local Youth Services and a local gay night at a club were places where Simon met other LGBT people.

"I heard about a local gay night at [club]...I organised with my best friend's lesbian mother that I would be 'staying there' and ended up going to the gay club at 15...Bodgied up my licence, added a few years to it [laughs]...The first night I was there I was introduced to a big group of people and those people ended up becoming great friends...They're my best friends to this day...They lived close by and they ended up taking me under their wing a bit...They were introduced to mum and made her feel OK that I would be looked after..."



Emboldened by everything that was happening, Simon decided to tell a few friends at his school.

"It seemed to blow out a bit that I was gay...That's when the trouble really began..."

"Blow out a bit" is an understatement.

"I guess the students were pretty bad...I had homophobic teachers, but the students were relentless...It was being pushed down stairs or my bag being stolen, fruit being thrown or lunches being stolen..."

Teachers provided some safe haven, but only some.

"There was one who was a hippy and an English teacher...Every



Wednesday we had journal where we wrote for a period...She asked me to start writing about what was happening and what I was doing with my life...So I would...I wish I had the journal, just to see what I'd written at the time...A bit of brain draining and a debrief of what was going on at the time..."

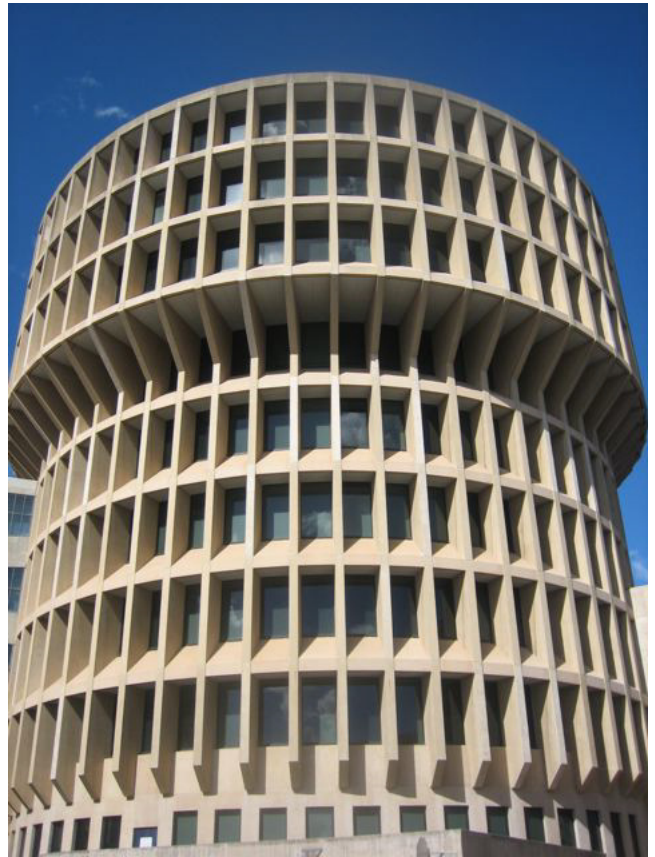
And there were others.

"Beyond her I had, on my side, the Work Experience Coordinator, her son was gay and the same age as me, and I also had a Geography teacher who taught my sister...He was very protective over me...He used to pull me aside, have chats and make sure I was doing OK..."

There were also safe places to hide.

"I can remember going down to the Ag farm because it meant that I didn't have to be on the playground...I used to spend my time with a rough kind of farm assistant, and he was good because he kind of knew it was giving me a break... So he used to let me work with the animals and run around on the tractor [laughs]..."

Several teachers were as homophobic as others were supportive.



"One Ag teacher would say each time I walked in, she'd go, '[Simon "Smith"] get out!'...When I asked, 'Why?', she'd say, 'Because I'm not having a faggot like you in the classroom'..."

With such open hostility from several of his teachers, it was perhaps inevitable that it would all come to a head.

"I remember being in a Year 10 Assembly and there were a few boys who were always the ring leaders...They started throwing the fruit at me, and started with, 'Poofta' and 'Faggot, faggot, faggot' and there was a Year Level teacher up the front announcing something...I remember a piece of fruit hit a girl beside me...I remember throwing it back in frustration and screaming, 'I may be a faggot but I can get



more women than you!’...”

There was a clear difference with how boys and girls responded. The boys sat and stared.

“All the females stood up and clapped me...It even went in the Year Book as a Most Memorable Moment...”

Although students saw it as a funny, memorable moment, Simon feels the whole point had been missed.



“In hindsight I look at it as a joke that no-one really appreciated just how frustrating it was for me...”

It's moments like these that can turn an entire school experience. Many times I have heard of these moments changing LGBT student experiences for the better. For Simon it didn't.

“So after that the physical stuff started to escalate from being just kicked, having fruit thrown at me or pushed down the stairs...”

Escalated from that?

“It went from being singled out to it being a group of boys coming up and giving me a hiding...It ended up I had to make sure that I had my girlfriends around me or that I was in the art room or up in the staff room...”

Justin and his mother were taking responsibility for the outcome of the violence. Justin would take himself to the doctor unless it was “serious”.

“Mum had taken me to hospital a few times because I'd been punched or kicked...”

Understandably, Simon wanted out.

“I said to mum that I wanted to leave school...”



Simon's mum said she wanted him to first hand deliver a letter to the Principal.

"The letter said, 'I'm sick of taking [Simon] to the hospital and to the doctor...I'm sick of the level of violence and I don't think you're dealing with it..."

Once he had confirmed with his boss that he could switch from part-time to full-time, Simon told the Principal he was leaving when he was told the school would not run a challenging homophobia program.

"He denied that there was a problem..."

Yet Simon was not leaving without challenging this. It was not that he was not bright.

"I managed to stay a straight A student, despite everything, apart from the few homophobic teachers that marked me down..."

[N.B. There are other stories I have not included in this blog that would suggest that this was not Simon just apportioning blame elsewhere for poor marks.]

He reminded the Principal of two complaints.

"I reminded him that there were two formal complaints made about the violence by two teachers who'd had enough...It was then that he recoiled and realised I was actually being serious..."

Going to another school was not an option.

"I can't stay here, I can't go to any other school on the Central Coast because it would be transferred that a gay guy was moved..."

In the Principal's office a deal was struck.

"He said that there was not much of the school term left and that as long as I returned and did my English, Maths and Science exams that the rest of my School Certificate he'd have based on my [existing and impressive] marks..."

Shortly after that, Simon decided he needed to go to the big smoke. His older gay friends organised a place for him with their friends in Sydney.

"When I was 17 I decided the Central Coast was probably a little too small and that I should move to Sydney...From there life became a hell of a lot easier...I met a lot of people and found my little spot in the world..."



A few years later Simon has decided to revisit his education in a bid to not “allow what happened to me continue to affect me”.

“My sister got a 98.9 [tertiary entrance score from a possible 100] and I was earmarked for getting a mark in that stratosphere...I was very gifted, as far as science is concerned, and I’d probably be a doctor had I continued...”

Simon is now putting himself through a business degree, albeit more slowly than perhaps he’d like. Now back in Newcastle after a stint in Sydney, Simon enjoys meeting new people through local LGBT

social group, Rainbow Visions, who run monthly drinks and also a week-long LGBT festival each year.



Simon would come along to a Gay Trivia Night that runs each Thursday evening at the only gay establishment in “the Hunter” [Valley]. Situated on a street known for it’s ladies of the night, I arrived at Gay Trivia with an extra skip in my step after being propositioned by a prostitute. Perhaps she had been thrown by my hopping out of ‘Bruce’, my rather butch 2007 Ford Ranger.

Going to Gay Trivia in Newcastle was the last thing I expected to be doing, and was a welcome surprise given my attendance with friends each year to a Melbourne AIDS Quilt Trivia Night Fundraiser.

I was fortunate enough to be seated at a competitive table of local men on the night that attend week in, week out. I’d come to know about this team, and the Gay Trivia Night itself, from men’s health expert Greg Millan [website]. I would be humbly “taking” Greg’s usual spot.

Born and bred in Queensland, Greg now jokes about not really being a local.

“You’re never accepted unless you were born here...”

As someone who has been involved in gay men’s health and the



men's health movement since before most of us were born, even though he is still as young as most of us, Greg is a keen observer.

"[Newcastle's] a funny place...It has this politics of a fair go...There was a bit of a rally recently being organised against the Sudanese and they were right wing...So locals quickly organised themselves and [the rally of 20 people] found themselves surrounded by 100 others who were saying, 'You need to piss off and go home'...But it could be as homophobic as the next town...I think it's a bit scary if you're born here and you're gay...Then you'd be up against it, I guess it's like most large regional centres..."

Greg suspects there would be one option if times got tough.

"I think if you were a young gay and you were having problems you'd just head to Sydney..."

In comparing my own observations with those of Rodney Croome and others in the 1999-2000 Outlink project, I found perhaps one difference a decade on.

"We used to find that young people would move to get to the city, find it didn't work and so they then moved back and when they went back it was worse...Is that still happening?..."

I was encouraged that from most accounts I'd heard over the last six months that this had changed. Most LGBT people moving back to their hometown seemed to be doing so renewed, refreshed and ready to thrive in ways that they could not before their move. Not that moving is the only strategy for thriving in regional, rural and remote Australia.



My afternoon tea in Greg's suburban Newcastle home was an example of a conversation where I put my notebook to one side and just enjoyed the discussion, questions and ideas as we used each other as sounding boards. I also delighted in the wall heater on a cold Newcastle winter's day.

With decades of experience behind him, my conversations with Greg were different to most I would and will have on this national tour. As Greg himself had announced during our first phone call:

"If you put my name into Google you'll be there for days...I've done a lot..."

[incidentally Greg is also an ex-flatmate of challenging homophobia guru, great friend and mentor, Kenton Miller, to show how small the LGBT community world can be.]



One of our conversations flowed from the politics and opportunity of a national men's health movement to finding new capacity to challenge homophobia and affirm sexual diversity. In my discussions with a major LGBT organisation in Sydney the week before I'd been asked if I thought a national challenging homophobia conference would be a great way to build on the networks I had gathered over the course of the tour. With an upcoming funding possibility, said organisation was keen to make the most of it.

Instead, I suggested a step before something like a (nother) conference. What if we were to hold a weekend summit that involved the key LGBT stakeholders around the country as well as key members (and allies) within mainstream and philanthropic organisations? What if the goal was to look at how mainstream and philanthropic organisations could incorporate more LGBT and challenging homophobia education into their existing work? What if another goal was to look at ways for key LGBT stakeholders could work with mainstream and philanthropic organisations, both immediately and in the longer-term.

It's clear in my travels over the last six months that:

- LGBT organisations, projects and groups are invariably underresourced, under threat and stretched with little, if any,



- capacity to take on any new work;
- Mainstream and philanthropic organisations can be, and often house, LGBT allies; and,
 - Talking to both invariably highlights quick, easy and helpful ways that all can work together for the benefit of LGBT (young) people.

An example of an organisation that might hit the ground running in such an environment is ACON Newcastle, the Hunter Valley arm of a leading LGBT organisation. “Marie”, in a community development role with ACON, would attend my book reading. I quickly found out that Marie and I had two points of commonality: 1. She was a friend of Nick’s, and Nick had recommended I contact her the day after I had spoken to her on the phone; 2. Marie had delivered my formative challenging homophobia program, *Pride & Prejudice*, in schools (!?).

“Well we run things that work, and it does...”

Whilst discussing responses to “Are you gay?” during my Newcastle book reading, Marie pointed out that students she presents to invariably assume she is a lesbian.

“When I’m at work I just assume people will just think, ‘This is her work, so she must be a lesbian’...I expect that and that’s OK...If people ask me, I’ll tell them...”

Marie came to work at ACON whilst on work placement whilst studying.

“I knew the previous person in the role...She’d actually spoken to me about the job...So I actually got to finish my placement whilst doing my new job!...”



Certainly when I arrived at ACON I felt that staff were quick to warm to and welcome new people. The manager of ACON Newcastle invited me to use desk space and other facilities, allowing me to potter in a semi-organised space for one afternoon and one morning.

When I asked if Marie felt some reluctance in working in such a role, given it was a regional area in which she lived and how relatively high profile it might be, she felt she didn't.

"I'd been involved in lots of women's organisations, student politics... It wasn't daunting, it was more, 'I really want this'...I didn't think of any negatives...I knew the community and the services...It was an easy decision..."

Marie understands that now everyone thinks and feels the way that she does, and gets surprised at times.

"I see things how I would like them to be...I get surprised when people don't see things like I do, that they can be done...Sometimes you do get surprised, remembering that people are different and come with different experiences and won't always come along with you... Sometimes when you are constantly surrounded by like-minded people everyday it's easy to think it's all OK until you are confronted by people...It's a reminder of why you do what you are doing..."



For Marie a big gap is something for those aged 18-25 years.

"There's not a lot of organised things outside of the pub..."

For Greg, a big question is where all the men aged 30-50 years are.

"The bit that we can't find is the 30-50 group...I suspect they don't socialise here, they'll go to Sydney...They just head off to Sydney every weekend and we don't see them..."

This might have some truth to it, if Simon - although not yet 30 - is anything to go by.

"Sometimes I need to stand in a room of gay men...I can get a bit



cabin fever...It's this primal need to just stand, knowing that there is no question about anyone who is there...It can strike at any time... On your way to work I've found is not a great way to start the day... [laughs]..."

It was with mixed feelings that I ended my time in Newcastle, heartened by the people who generously hosted and sheltered me, reassured by those things that remained over long periods of time and encouraged by some of the things that showed promise (i.e. Roller Derby). Yet I also felt a little bruised, tired and vulnerable, and only fully aware of this for the first time.

What am I doing again? Have I missed something?

Again it was Facebook that came to my aid as I moved onto Bathurst and wondered what had happened in Newcastle. From Simon reflecting on his interview and our conversations:

"I felt incredibly indulgent having you here over the weekend, as i took so much away from it. It's comforting to know there are committed people out there working towards a better go for young gays and lesbians. Additionally i realised that i'm not looking for a mythical gay creature - i met you, so others must exist, I just have to keep looking..."

Yes there are more of "us" than you think. But I can't blame you for sometimes doubting it.

