

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWENTY-SIX, (BATHURST)  
WINNING SEMI-GAY BATHURST TRIVIA:  
PASSING TO PAY "LAST [DECADE'S] RENT"...

*"But the fact is who we are, including our sexuality, is shaped by the places and the communities in which we live...And those places and communities are shaped in turn by us...If, because of homophobia, a young person has no choice but to leave the place which has shaped them and in which they feel some sense of belonging, this is a form of violence, not only against their sense of self, but against the integrity of the community from which they have been wrenched..."*

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

The date was the 4th May 1999. Rodney Croome was launching the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Outlink network at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.

*"But beyond all this the project aims to allow young lesbian, gay and bisexual people and the communities in which they live to benefit from and enjoy that sense of integrity, of place and of belonging which my friend Matt so misses, and which ultimately is so important for our happiness..."*

[For more of Rodney's launch speech, see:

[http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other\\_more?id=168\\_0\\_2\\_0\\_M](http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other_more?id=168_0_2_0_M)]



Chris Sidoti, the then-Human Rights Commissioner, spoke soon after.

*“These young people face serious difficulties and hardship in many areas...That hardship includes discrimination, violence, family conflict, lack of privacy, lack of support and in some cases mental illness and suicide...They experience all of the problems that confront young people living in non-metropolitan areas, with an added layer of pressures associated with their sexual orientation...In my work in rural communities I hear constantly of young gay men, lesbians and bisexuals whose self-esteem has been undermined and who feel the future holds nothing for them...The alarming figures on suicide of these young people attest to this...”*

**[For more on this speech by Chris, see:  
[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/human\\_rights/futures\\_health\\_forum.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/human_rights/futures_health_forum.html)]**

Just over a decade later, I was adamant that I would return to the site of Outlink’s launch. Had it not been for Outlink (see Mt Gambier and Cairns blogs), Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ might never have happened; the book or the national challenging homophobia tour. Admittedly I knew nothing about Bathurst except for two things: 1. Outlink was launched there; and, 2. There is a big car race there that Peter Brock seemingly won every year at one stage.

I remember Peter Brock because my mother used to work as a production manager for a company that made the car seats that went into Peter Brock’s cars. I still recall my mother coming home one day to tell me he was “the most arrogant prick” she’d met. A year or two later she came home having had a photo with him on the factory floor and all was forgotten. She seemed annoyed when, as a young boy who retained “too much” I recalled her first impression and dismissed me.

In any case, Outlink and brumm-brumm cars was all I knew about Bathurst.

Many would tell me how Bathurst, about 3 hours drive west of Sydney, was fortunate because it has a tertiary institution, Charles Sturt University. As a rule, the presence of a university is thought by many to increase the likelihood of open, visible lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) life. For example, the University of South Australia’s Whyalla campus is thought to do just that in South Australia’s “Iron Triangle”.

Back at Charles Sturt University’s Bathurst campus, I met with members of the Queer Collective (QC). According to an organiser of the QC, “Wade”, the university remains an LGBT haven of sorts in Bathurst, but not only for students involved with the QC.





*“A big issue [here in Bathurst for LGBT people] is employment... Being employed and being queer...University employs queer people and if you can’t get work with the university you’d struggle a bit... The number of people who are queer who rely on the uni for their employment is really high...”*

The Queer Collective aims to blend the social and the political.

“It’s a social group that is built around queer people being able to get together and it’s a little bit of political action...It’s about being around like-minded individuals who understand the issues, who you don’t have to explain things to and just being involved...”

As a social group, this echoes what LGBT young people have said across the country about LGBT youth groups. Knowing that everyone’s definition of “political” is different, I pressed Wade on what he believed “political” to be for the QC.

*“It’s about visibility on campus...That’s the basic thing that happens... Queer Week [an annual event] is a big part of it...”*

One of the opportunities to be most visible on campus, says QC member, “Isabel”, is during ‘Club Week’. ‘Club Week’ happens at the start of each year and involves clubs competing for the participation of students. Isabel says this year they had a unique way of drawing attention.

*“We had someone dressed up as a superhero...Supergay or something like that running around handing out condoms...”*

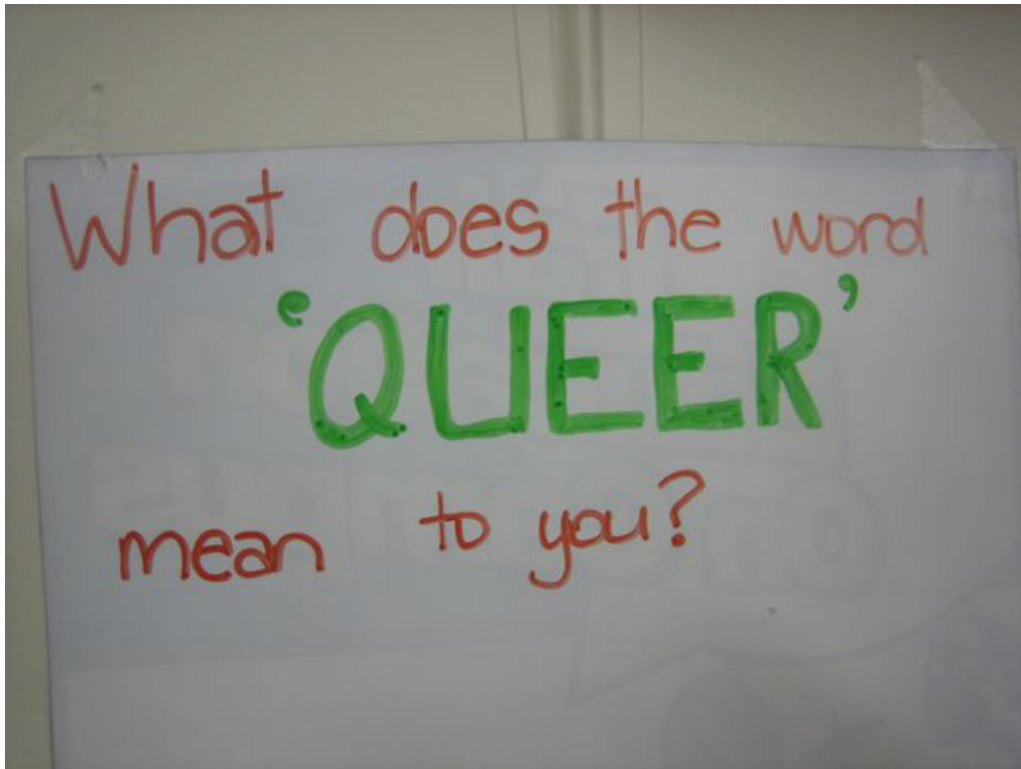
Both Wade and Isabel admit that during their first year at university



they were too scared to approach the QC. It took them time.

Wade: *"From the moment I saw them, I was too scared to go up... There were people I was living with who I didn't want to come out to..."*

Isabel: *"I was too scared to go up to them in my first week..."*



Both Wade and Isabel came to be involved in the QC for very different reasons. For Wade it's more about providing something for others and the impact his own identity has on others.

*"Just being involved, that means a lot to me...I'm proud of myself for coming out...I have a little brother who is the least queerphobic person and that has a lot to do with his interactions with me...How he talks to his friends and other people is reflected in that...I've also had friends come out to me and I've felt proud that they would come out to me...[QC gives] a sense of community and trying to form a community has been important to me..."*

For Wade coming out is bigger than his own experience.

*"I think the more of us that are out and visible, it's an education for people about what queer looks like...I think we should be proud there are so many of us, and different kinds of people who aren't afraid to stand up and be counted..."*

For Isabel, joining the QC was more about her own journey.

*"Basically that's when I started to come out to my friends...I thought*



*that this would be a quicker way...I'd come out to a few close friends and started feeling more comfortable about it, and coming up to Club Week was a way to come out publicly...And I didn't know anyone I could talk to about what was going on..."*



The QC is struggling after a mass exodus of the university, and Bathurst, of students to Sydney. Traditionally the group relies on a particular kind of student says Wade.

*"People generally don't join up in their first year because they don't have the confidence...And in the final year of their degree, that takes up a lot of people's time, so it's really the middle part of people's degrees...It's really hard to get any collective, organised energy for a long time...For example, last year the fire burned hot, but then everyone left this year..."*

Isabel believes that safety also stops people coming.

*"I know there are people who feel unsafe coming here..."*

For that reason, Wade is conscious of people leaving the Queer Collective space at night (a building quite some distance from carparks with a lack of adequate lighting in between).

*"We're very aware of safety because we are on campus...I generally drive carloads of people home after meetings..."*

Despite a recent dip in numbers and energy, the QC remains a haven for many who don't feel safe and supported "in town".



*“There are mainly issues in town, but most people don’t go into town anymore...”*

Wade then brought up a key to surviving in many regional and rural areas: “passing” as heterosexual.

*“But I haven’t experienced that but mainly because of my ability to pass...I think in Bathurst a big thing about your experience to pass, whether people think you’re queer or not, and how queer...I’ve done fine because I pass, but people who don’t pass probably wouldn’t get work...”*



Demonstrating self-awareness, Wade seemed to be uncomfortable with the very thing that, in his view, made him safe.

*“I’d like to express myself however I want without any regulation by those around me...Not feeling inhibited, which is how I feel now when I go back home and in my workplace...”*

Therefore the QC’s function in Wade and other people’s life was providing an outlet for self-expression.

*“It’s a space where you can represent yourself where you don’t have those restrictions...”*

I left the meeting with Charles Sturt University’s QC with Sydney Louis (see Sydney blog). Given that Twenty10 were looking to come to Bathurst later this year to deliver their training program on young people with diverse gender and sexualities, Sydney Louis saw my Bathurst leg of the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ Tour as a great opportunity to “piggy back”. Both Twenty10 and myself saw the obvious benefits for everyone.

Given that Sydney Louis was coming for business meant that it made practical and, for me, economic sense to stay together. Now friends for years, this also gave us an opportunity to relive our infamous trip to New York’s Fire Island where we had “accommodation challenges”.



On his first night in Bathurst, not wanting to brave a torrential downpour, Sydney Louis and I decided to dine at the bar attached to the motel we were staying at. Truth be told I wanted to return to the bar because of the staff.

Only hours earlier I had turned up at the Panorama Motel for the fourth of five book readings organised and coordinated by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF; see Lismore and Sydney blogs). With the reading starting at 4.45pm, I arrived around 4.15pm, partly to check into the same establishment with Sydney Louis for convenience.

At 4.30pm the Panorama Motel staff told me they had no event for teachers booked. I'd been assured by the Bathurst organiser that a gathering of teachers at the Panorama Hotel was already organised for other purposes, and that I was guaranteed good attendance with a captive audience.



The receptionist said that if they said Panorama Hotel, then maybe they meant a hotel up Mt Panorama? With rain falling outside, time ticking and Bathurst peak hour building I chanced it

and raced like Peter Brock up Mt Panorama, completing a 10-minute drive in a little under 10 minutes, Sydney Louis coming behind at a more reasonable pace.

When the receptionist up on Mt Panorama looked at me blankly I got that familiar sick feeling of "Oh sh\*t". After getting the voicemail of the NSWTF and driving randomly into the CBD, I rang my only Bathurst contact and was told the Panorama Motel and Hotel were the same thing.

Deciding that either I was going to hit pay dirt or be close to my motel room if it failed I arrived and finally found the Panorama Hotel downstairs. Tucked away in a secluded room were 7 earnest looking people who I assumed were teachers. The time was 5.15pm, 30 minutes after my expected start.

The gathering of teachers was actually a NSWTF meeting and they



were still talking business as I sat to stop my head spinning from all the rush of confusion and adrenaline. Eventually I was acknowledged by the organiser as Sydney Louis arrived.

I realised immediately that this would not be anything like my book readings in Lismore, Sydney and Newcastle (see Newcastle blog for an overview of a reading).

With the order of business wrapping up and me to be announced people were starting to shift in their seats and look at their watches. Before I knew what was happening I was seated before the awaiting group not knowing what was expected from me. It was clear that this would not be a 90-minute Beyond 'That's So Gay' extravaganza.

*"You've all been meeting for a while now...Before I start, would you like 5 or so minutes to grab a drink, check phones and go to the toilet?..."*

Nods came quickly and the suggestion was clearly appreciated. I confirmed with the organiser that this would not be the 90 minute Beyond 'That's So Gay' extravaganza. With everyone seated again I did what I was taught during my time working across Victoria and Tasmania for Kids Help Line: if I was in doubt I asked the group for their expectations.

When one older woman scoffed and rolled her eyes when I suggested I'd only be 10-15 minutes I was transported back to any number of staffrooms over the last 12-13 years. Ladies and gentleman we have an involuntary audience, fasten your seatbelts.

Keeping it low-key, I explained the context for me sitting before them, namely my 38-week national tour and my association with the NSWTF. Soon I noticed an observable relaxation.

One senior teacher at a local high school talked about how two gay young men were faring very differently: one was incredibly popular with "no-one" caring, the other was struggling with a number of other issues and being gay seemed to be icing on the cake for bullies.

One primary school teacher, "Mary" started arguing that "that's so gay" was not a problem and that people needed to realise that it didn't mean anything. Sticking to her guns it was clear that no amount of logic was going to sway her. Noticing the reactions of her colleagues and a smile on Mary's face suggesting she saw this as sport, I took my conversation with her away from the meeting and continued it after. Before I did, now slightly annoyed at the whole non-book reading and the subsequent situation I was in, I pressed 'Pause' by saying:  
*"Now it's clear to me that you are just enjoying arguing and that you are not interested in what I'm saying..."*





Sydney Louis would say later there were smirks and nods from Mary's colleagues at a local primary school when I said this.



After the meeting Mary continued with standard arguments I'd heard for years around students' use of "that's so gay", so much so that I smiled and opened my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, and asked her to read the very section she'd just said out loud:

**'They don't mean it. They don't know what they are saying.'**

*"Please read this if you want to continue arguing and only after you've finished..."*

Three times I had to ask her to continue reading as she raised her head to argue a point. Now it was clear she was resistant to anything to counter her position, but then came a moment of clarity. A fellow teacher attempted to shut down Mary's argument.

*"What, my opinion doesn't matter?..."*

In this moment I observed a seriousness for the first time. So I seized upon her words.

*"[Mary] your opinions do matter, but they stop mattering for me when it impacts on a whole bunch of students' lives...This clearly does..."*

Mary seemed to take this on board, but then continued with, "they don't mean it". For the record she had not come anywhere near to finishing the section I'd asked her to read. So I did what I sometimes do with students: I set voluntary homework.



*“OK so I have some homework that you might like to try...For the next few weeks, every time you hear someone say “that’s so gay” ask them whether they think it’s a positive thing or something that’s crap or sh\*t...”*

After some playful attempts to continue arguing Mary took the challenge on. When it was finally clear I was there to engage her and not dismiss her, Mary then offered a little more insight into her position.

*“Why can’t everyone just not be worried about it?...They are just words...I tell my kids, ‘Words can’t hurt you, they’re only words’...”*

A ha. Now I understand.

*“[Mary] if you can convince everyone in the world to take your approach and let words roll off them then I’m jumping on your bandwagon and saying, ‘that’s so gay’ doesn’t matter...But unfortunately we are not going to get there anytime soon, are we?...”*

The it hit.

*“I know...”*

The storm had passed. Had I dismissed her as I had wanted to through annoyance, and very nearly did, we never would have gotten to this point.

It was whilst at the Panorama Hotel for this conversation and more that I spied a remarkably attractive and chunky bartender who I playfully earmarked to Sydney Louis as my future husband. This made it easier to return there for dinner when we observed the weather was a little too wild. Admittedly it had been a while for me between future husbands.

Once seated we realised that the bar was in the throes of a Trivia Night and were halfway through Round One. Thankfully the Quiz Master caught us up with the questions. Over dinner we would move from equal third to equal second after I won Sydney Louis and I a schooner in a paper ripping competition (for the record I got a glass of wine to the woman I would just edge out).

In the final round Sydney Louis and I edged ahead, largely thanks to his impressive general knowledge (note the most important skill you can have for a Trivia Night is to recruit very intelligent people). Ultimately it would come down to a few questions, and then it came: *“Who starred as Sandy in the 1998 revival of Grease?...”*

Not paying attention to the year I excitedly said to Sydney Louis, “Michelle Pfeiffer!...” and started singing ‘Cool Rider’. Hearing the



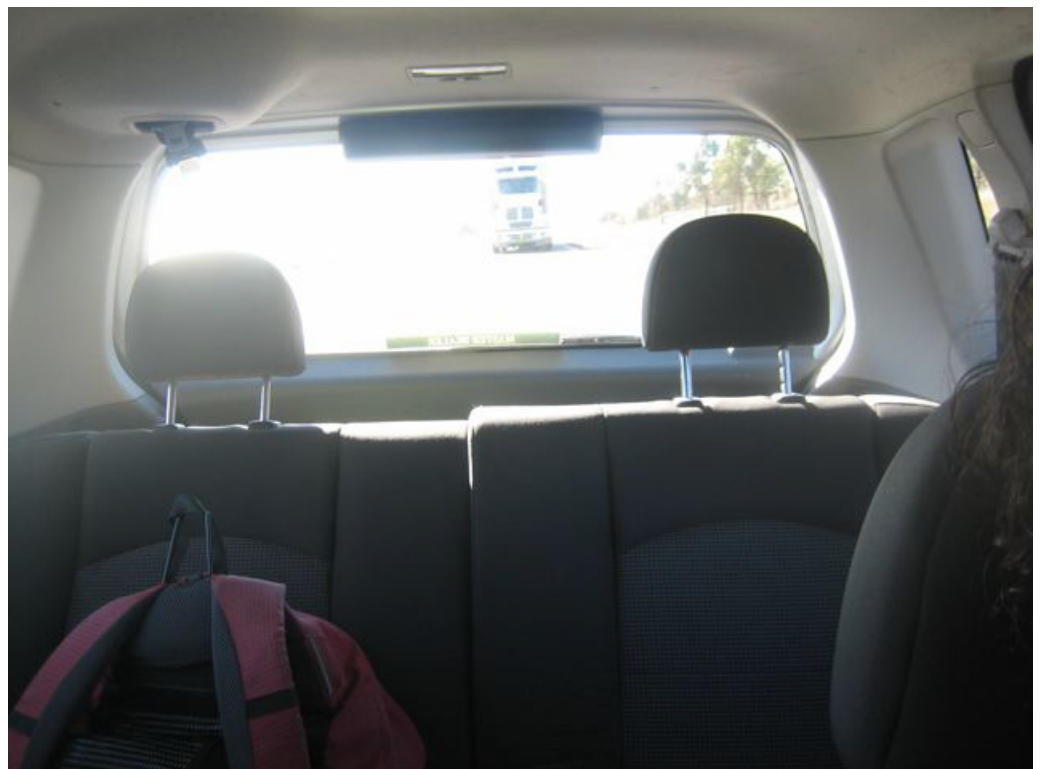
question again we realised it might be the stage musical. After trying a few names like Lisa McCune (“No, she was Sound Of Music...”) we decided upon Dannii Minogue, even though I had a feeling she could have made a great Rizzo.

Unbeknownst to us at the time this would be the question that would seal our victory: no-one else in the bar got it. The Quiz Master made the point that no-one got it, “Oh except for [Daniel and Sydney Louis’ team] which had everyone in the bar looking over and realising that we had possibly seen Grease and other movies, like the Wizard Of Oz and other shows to meet the stereotypes, too many times.

Winning a \$40 dinner voucher meant that we would be returning the next night and had me declaring, thanks to Dannii Minogue, that we had won “Semi-gay Trivia”.

Yet it didn’t help with the barman.

But Bathurst was not about trivia spectacles and me dreaming of walking through sun-soaked meadows with chunky barmen. There was business to attend to.



*“Some of the clinicians said, ‘Well is it just tokenistic, will it really make a difference?’ ...I said, ‘It can’t bloody hurt’ ...The first day it went up the receptionist said there was one young person who said, ‘I want to thank you for showing your support for people like me’ ...”*

Knowing that Twenty10’s training will help headspace and other local agencies get a better handle on how to effectively be more LGBT-friendly, Tiffany was immediately interested in how headspace could



work more closely with Twenty10.

In a short period of time Tiffany floated a very real partnership of Twenty10 and Bathurst headspace co-hosting a local training program around young people with diverse gender and sexualities. In real terms this would ensure that headspace could organise the venue, get local publicity and promote the training, getting the word out amongst local teachers and health professionals.

For Twenty10 this is invaluable, given their limited resources to put in the local legwork required from an already overcapacity Sydney base. This was the very model that I suggested might be a national opportunity for headspaces way back in Albany (see Albany blog and Albany video blog). And by turning up well in advance of training programs to obtain all of the goodwill that comes from leaving metropolitan centres, this mirrors the approach I suggested to the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC, see Brisbane blogs).

That Twenty10 was coming back to Bathurst was a unique opportunity to get locals even more excited and engaged. I knew only too well from Rodney Croome's Outlink experiences that there needed to be something locally and state/territory-wise for teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others to connect with. For Bathurst there is a tangible, upcoming next step, one that I cannot take myself. Not that the locals weren't eagerly enquiring about if and when I'd come back.

The ability to focus local attention on Twenty10's training program came in handy a number of times throughout my time in Bathurst, and it's neighbouring town of Orange.



One example was my attendance of the Bathurst Youth Network, a bi-monthly meeting organised by Bathurst Regional Council's Youth Development Officer the morning before Sydney Louis arrived. This was the perfect example of timing falling in my favour, just as it had not the week before (see Newcastle blog). The meeting just happened to be happening the week that I was in town, a one in 8 possibility.

Having attended countless youth network meetings in a former life as a youth worker I felt like I was going home, right down to the polite, slightly nervous introductions and the uncomfortable process of getting someone to volunteer to be the minute taker. Little did he know what he was in for given that I was going to talk.

When there was space to talk about our own projects I was asked to talk about the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour.



*"...looking at life for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in regional, rural and remote Australia...Try saying that five times quickly..."*

As the audience laughed, the minute taker chimed in.

*"Well can you say that again one more time slowly so I can get it all down?..."*

I laughed.

When it came to questions and comments, one project officer for a large chunk of regional and rural NSW reflected that schools, when



asked what their major issues were, did not identify homophobia at all. This despite the fact that it was widely known that it was an issue for students.

A school counselor remarked that she thought there was still a stigma for young people to come out to counselors before asking about programs.

*“Are there any programs for schools because it’s a gap...I went to the ‘That’s So Gay’ conference and whilst there was a lot of talk and goodwill, there was nothing for schools to run...?”*

Ladies and gentlemen may I introduce the *Pride & Prejudice* educational package (incidentally now available as a third edition at [www.hbe.com.au](http://www.hbe.com.au)). The interest in *Pride & Prejudice* and in *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools* meant that at least 5 attendees were going to try the now infamous book reading at the Panorama Hotel. They were going to try and collar other people during the day to come too that only added to my stress in trying to find the venue (I still don’t know if people arrived and had the same issues as me in finding the teachers meeting).

I also noted that they were still wanting speakers for their next meeting and suggested that Twenty10 might be the perfect October guests to spruik their training program.

After that meeting I would be taken aside by a youth worker who could have been a lumberjack. “Steve” and his colleagues work to support young people in the region who are disengaged with school. Steve was very concerned about a young man he was currently working with and wanted my advice.

After grabbing a cuppa and a seat away from people, I settled in to see what I could do. Steve was immediately up front about his own limitations.

*“I’m from Tassie and I’m ex-army so...I grew up and [homosexuality] was illegal or it was a mental health issue...I left Tassie and I went into the army and of course there are no gays in the army...And then I went to Sydney and that was the first time I knew about gay people... Gee, I must sound really naïve...”*

Many years of conversations with men like Steve have reminded me over and again that sometimes people’s underestimation of him and those like him can be a barrier to change.

After some reassurance Steve continued.

*“In Tassie there was no grey...It was black and white about gays...”*



Many people would think there is no use because Steve could not catch up, but I could tell by how this man mountain clasped his hand, leaned forward and looked at me with an anxious hope that a great deal was possible.

It seems his time in Sydney changed his life dramatically.

*“The blinkers came off in Sydney...I thought, ‘Wow, there’s a lot of Asians here and a lot of gays here...”*

Then tragedy struck. Steve’s wife and kids were killed in a car accident. The subsequent soul search thereafter made him vow to be a different man.

*“I realised I was not happy and that I had to change everything...”*

One of those things was his own homophobia.



Recently his work with a young gay man has triggered his own process of reflection about himself and the way in which he works. This young man was seen by the Principal of his school with another male student.

*“He was sitting on the boy’s lap and kissing him...”*

As a result of bullying this young man had to leave school and start attending TAFE. Whilst this ended the bullying, it hasn’t helped with his home situation.

*“He is getting kicked out of home...He gets a lot of grief from his*



*brother's about his size and his weight, about not eating...His two brothers are probably like me..."*

Nervous and new to challenging his own homophobia, Steve tried once to broach the subject of this young man and the lap/kissing incident. The young man quickly became uncomfortable and tried to change the subject. Steve took this hard, feeling he'd upset the young man so much that he should never talk about it again. Now he knows his ability to support his client is limited.

I talked to Steve about how he tried to talk to his client and he admitted that he was so nervous that it might have come out like an incoherent, barely supportive monologue. As I have discussed in this blog previously (see Mackay et al), it seems that Steve needed some clarity around the two major issues: process and content.

It will take time for Steve to acquire LGBT content, and this does not happen without time, good quality professional development and opportunities to reflect with our peers. What I wanted Steve to focus on in the meantime was process, that is, how he supported his client.

Rather than avoiding the issue, I asked Steve what might happen if he broached the subject again but from a different angle. What if he was open, and transparent about his own limitations and lack of experience and that he set himself apart from all the other lumberjacks in this young man's life by saying some supportive things around sexual diversity? We talked about how much young people can appreciate someone telling them like it is.

Within 15 to 20 minutes Steve was a changed man.

*"I'd avoided it because I thought I'd blown it so I moved as far away from it as I could...I just got so wound up because I was worried so much about being PC that I forgot to be real..."*

I wondered how many people would have seen Steve and thought, "Redneck lumberjack". Now he was sitting with me, looking into my eyes and quiet. There was no doubt he was glassy-eyed.

*"I feel like a weight has come off...I feel lighter, almost like I want to ring this guy and see him straight away...Thanks so much..."*

No Steve, thank you.

Same sex affection has also caused a stir in another local secondary school recently according to local teacher and WAGALS group member, "Carly".

I met Carly at a local soup kitchen run by the Bathurst Men's Shed. Prior





to arriving in Bathurst I was contacted by a member of the local LGBT social group, Western Area Gay and Lesbian Service (WAGALS) and invited to come and say hi. On a freezing night I huddled with three LGBT locals and enjoyed a beef stew and a cuppa. My WAGALS contact joked that they were trying to make the Soup Kitchen nights entirely LGBT.

When I asked Carly on how she thought LGBT students experienced her school, she gave an example of a female couple.

*“It’s hard to say because a lot of them are hidden I guess...We do have a young lesbian couple, about Year 10, they’ve decided that they want to show their affection publicly...There has been a bit of teacher backlash...”*

That backlash has come from a few vocal teachers who are using an unspoken personal space rule.

*“There’s nothing written down...There is kind of a rule that each student must be 30cm away from other students, so technically that’s true... These girls are being threatened with suspension if it continues...It’s difficult because there is no policy there...”*



When I asked Carly if there were heterosexual couples who were publicly affectionate and the teacher approach, it was clear there was a double standard and a very clear school policy.

*“Teachers just walk past...”*

Some students are reacting to the young lesbian couple.



*"I hear kids saying, 'Miss, miss, those girls are kissing over there'...I say, 'Well they're not kissing you so move on or don't look'..."*

Being relatively new to the school and on contract, Carly is wary of rocking the boat too much. Not that she isn't doing plenty with staff and students, even if it's not clear how much the school might support her.

*"I've never spoken to the Principal or Deputy about it so I don't know whether I'm allowed to talk about it...At the moment because I'm not permanent I kind of figure once I'm in a school and settled and there for a long time, then I'll come out..."*

It could be a concern for the well-being of the students on the part of some teachers.

*"I think it's more concern that they are going to be victimised and bullied I think...Because just speaking to my students, the general feeling I get is that they are not accepting of [LGBT] people..."*

Carly has come out to other teachers.

*"I talk about my partners, I talk about gay events I go to, I haven't had any issues, no-one's stopped talking to me...I've taken partners to school Christmas parties..."*

With students it's slightly different.

*"I'm not [out to students]...They ask and I guess I think they kind of know because I say, 'Does it matter?' and they sit back and think about it and say, 'Well we guess not'..."*

In her classes, Carly is very clear about homophobia comments and behaviour: it's not OK.

*"In my classrooms if the kids say 'That's so gay', I say, 'It's not really gay, is it?'...They say, 'Well that's not what we mean'...I then say, 'Well say what you mean'..."*

In contrast to a lot of other teachers, Carly thinks it's better for students to say "crap" or "sh\*t" than "gay".

*"I'm happy for them to say sh\*t or crap, whereas other teachers are saying, 'You can't say crap because it's a swear word'...I ask, 'Do you know why I tell you that? Because if you say that you're basically saying that gay people are crap and that's not OK..."*

Sometimes students protest.

*"We're allowed to say it in so and so's class..."*



Carly is quick to respond.

*“Well we’re nice to each other in our classroom...”*

There are talks behind the scenes to run some professional development with staff around challenging and interrupting homophobic language.

*“Because even some teachers use ‘That’s so gay’...I feel comfortable [with what to do] when a student says it, but when a staff member says it I feel offended...”*

In the meantime Carly wants to get some clarity.

*“Just more acceptance and consistency...If the rule is no public affection, then that’s the rule...But if it’s OK for all straight kids to hold hands, then it should be the same for the gay kids...Teachers have a big influence in these kids lives and they should put aside their own personal beliefs and teach kids... Even if they don’t accept they should be teaching acceptance...I don’t know, is that unreasonable?...”*

Perhaps one step is reading *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, which Carly recommended I bring for her to an end of week performance of Rent.



I’d first heard about this production of Rent from “Rich”, a local health educator with Kite Street Community Centre in Orange, about 45 minutes drive north-west from Bathurst. Rich explained that there were going to be 520 students from local schools attending and that at the end they wanted someone to get up and speak about homophobia. As is my approach I said ‘Yes’ without knowing what I was doing or what I’d say.

Once Sydney Louis hit town I roped him in to get up with me and talk about the great work that Twenty10 does with young people.



Meeting with Rich and some of his colleagues at Kite Street, I heard about a gay couple who recently broke up at a local secondary school.

*'They said about WAGALS, 'Look it's mostly for people in their 40s'... They were trying to set up a group for young people...They've now gone their separate ways because they've had a big blue and it's now folded, but they reckon there were more [LGBT young people]... They were saying off the top of their head that there were at least 20 other young gay guys who they know of...They said, 'There is a lot in school that would probably be uncomfortable with identifying as gay'...'"*

Rich finds a significant amount of his time is dealing with an adult LGBT community.

*"We get a lot of people moving out from Sydney, some of it's work... It's an easier lifestyle...Bathurst is a growing population...We've got a lot of employment..."*

If you pass that is?

There is also said to be a high number of men who have sex with men (MSM) who don't necessarily identify with the LGBT community. This has caused problems at times between the two groups.

*"There are some closeted guys who use beats and bash the openly gay guys...For example there was one trying to take the focus off himself when he was in front of his mates...I saw him a few months later and asked him why he did it...He said, 'He gives the rest of us a bad name. You and I are discreet'...I said to him, 'Well I had my reasons [for being discreet] but I didn't go around bashing guys'..."*



Sharing his own journey of coming out whilst in a managing role in a local timber mill, Rich now feels strongly about getting the message to guys when they are younger.

Enter Rent. Having agreed to speak at the end of Rent to 520 students, I had to think about what the content of the show was. An ex-boyfriend had dragged me to Rent when it first hit Melbourne telling me it was the hit of New York. Not a show kind of a guy I went along and it's safe to say I couldn't remember a thing about it. I shared this with Sydney Louis.

*"If I recall correctly it had a token gay, a token Asian, a token lesbian, a token everything really..."*

With about 7.5 minutes to play with I decided that I would only try and focus on three things. I'd been told to expect loud homophobic reactions to men kissing, but this didn't eventuate, so I was searching hard in the second half for what to do. Sydney Louis helped clarify at intermission.



*"Hi I'm Dan and this is [Sydney Louis]...You've all been sitting for a while so they first thing I'd like you to do is to stand up...[the audience stood]...And shake it out...[lots of laughing as Sydney Louis and I shook on stage]..."*

As is always the case I thought a great outcome would be young people talking with one another, rather than listening to me for too long.

*"Now did anyone notice any same sex kissing in the show? You*



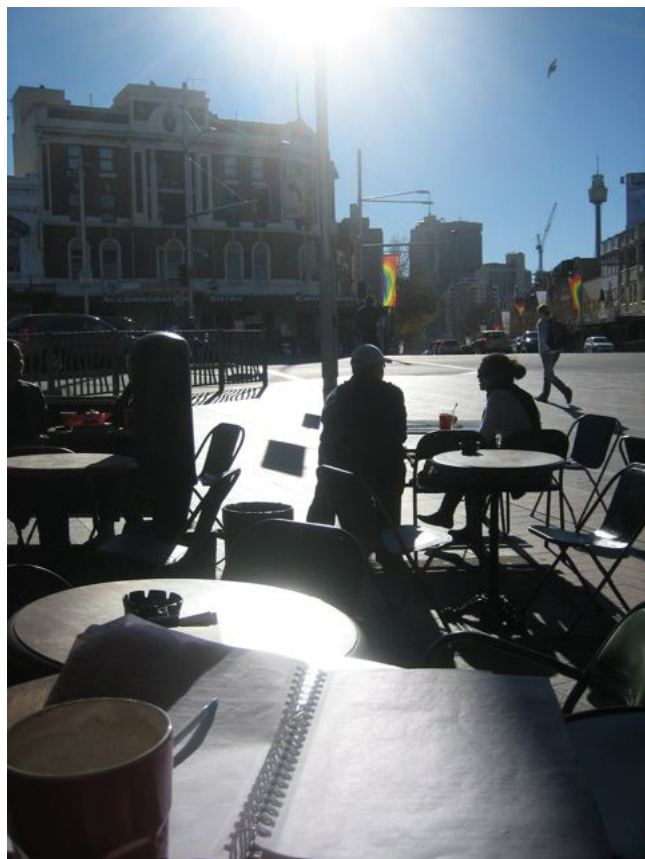
*might have noticed that in the show people who were gay, lesbian,, bi, trans, were all accepted for who they are...I've spent the last 6 months driving around country Australia talking to schools and students about what it's like at their school...What I'd love you to do is to talk to the person beside you or the people around you about if it's OK at your school to be gay, lesbian, bi, trans, whatever..."*

After a few minutes I asked for a show of hands. Most students thought it was OK at their school, less didn't know or said it depends and less still believed it was not OK.

*"What you have all said is what I've found as I've driven around the country...A lot of people thought that because I'm an openly gay man in a truck that I might be bashed, killed or have my tyres slashed... But in most places most people say it's OK...What young people are saying is that the most important thing to them is to be able to be themselves and to have people they can talk to...In NSW, lots of young people talk to Twenty 10..."*

Sydney Louis handled the "being yourself", including examples of "That's so gay", and I followed up with "people to talk to". The lead actor came up and shook my hand and said, "I wish you'd come to speak at my school in [small rural town] when I was there..."

After the show all that was left were some photos with the cast, although my new future husband, a strapping local actor, for that day stayed backstage and didn't join in.



I was invited by the lead actor to come back for their next production in Orange. When I asked what the show would be he didn't know.

*"I actually don't know, but it's gonna be GREAT!..."*

