

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWENTY-EIGHT, (BROKEN HILL)
F*CK WE'VE MOVED ON HERE:
SNAIL PENISES, SOFT DISCRIMINATION AND PRISCILLA

"What's that?..."

When I spoke to "Mike" in Broome (see Broome blog), he told me of a story in Broken Hill. That was in May and at the time I felt like Broken Hill was a lifetime away. I knew my parents had been to Broken Hill for an anniversary one year, but that was not the reason why I could almost picture the scene Mike described.

"Mum and I were in the car...I was about 11...We were in Broken Hill on the main street and she looked over and said, 'What's that?'..."

"That" was a trio of drag queens: Hugo Weaving, Terrence Stamp and Guy Pearce. Mike saw the exact moment they got off Priscilla, the Queen of the Desert for the famed scene in the movie named after that bus. It's said that there was only one take for this scene, so as to get the real reaction of Broken Hill's locals. It just so happened that on that street an aspiring gay was seated with his mother in the family car.

I've thought back to that story time and again and wondered how that might have impacted on Mike's journey to embracing "gay" as his identity. I had even more cause as I stood on that street, Broken Hill's Argent Street.



Later that night I would go into "that pub", Broken Hill's Palace, or Mario's Palace as it's known to the locals. No longer in the hands of

Mario's family, a group of locals has bought the local institution and is slowly encouraging the old girl back to her glory days. One of those people is Esther, who "Marie" from Newcastle (see Newcastle blog) recommended I speak to whilst I was in town.

It's at The Palace that I would have a Friday evening drink with, arguably, Australia's most famous photographer, Robin Sellick (www.robinsellick.com.au). Robin is a minor local celebrity, as much of a celebrity as you could actually be in Broken Hill, easily talking with any number of locals.



Robin, like other gay men I spoke to in town, felt like he shouldn't be there.

"I said I'd never come back..."

And he could be forgiven for not ever coming back. At 14 years of age Robin picked up a camera and never looked back. At 20 he left Broken Hill for Adelaide, for many a reason, not the least of which was his sexual identity. Interestingly Broken Hill, according to locals, has a closer affinity with Adelaide than Sydney given that the former is five hours

drive away (i.e. the closest). This seems to suit the locals, who have a similar view to Robin.

"The first thing is that's it Sydney which thinks it's the centre of the universe..."

It was winning a significant photography award that encouraged Robin to use that money and "go for it". The goal: the USA. Once in New York, he made his goal to "meet as many photographers as possible and learn" just as much. After learning a great deal Robin found himself without money yet he knew he wanted to work with Annie Leibovitz.

Back in Australia Robin's time in New York, persistence and research paid off. He consistently "sent stuff" until finally he was given the chance of an interview to work for Annie. Knowing that it takes someone dying for a position to come up Robin took a chance: he



sold everything he owned and got himself to New York. As he touched down he had \$US1000 to his name.

And the rest is history. Celebrities, parties, money, firstly in the US and then in Sydney. Many good times were had with many people we'd all know. Robin told me several stories that I can't repeat, although I'd love to share them. If ever you meet him, ask him about the relationship between a space shuttle and a horse's arse.

Twenty years after leaving Broken Hill and vowing never to return, Robin found himself back and not fully understanding how and why. Yet back on home turf, much of what had been swirling since his departure suddenly made sense. This is a theme of so many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, but particularly gay men, I have spoken to throughout regional and rural Australia: a reluctant homecoming yielding so much more than they could ever have imagined.



For Robin, this manifests itself as an invigoration of his ideas about Australian photography.

"I'm trying to create an Australian style of photography... Every country has a language... We have Australian cinema, architecture, music... Well what's Australian photography?..."

Too often Robin believes Australian photographers merely attempt to copy the style of photos they have seen in Europe or in the US. Long frustrated by this, Robin is now putting his money where his mouth is. Next year he will release a book of photos of Broken Hill locals in their everyday settings, matched with some landscapes. And there is good reason for Broken Hill being the location. As Robin suggests, Australia could be shaped by all things Broken Hill.

"I think Australia is becoming more and more like Broken Hill everyday... Look at the issues we are facing right now: water management, a better deal from mining, etc... These are all things that Australia could learn from Broken Hill..."



If I'm led to be correct, Broken Hill can also give us some clues about transition from LGBT-hostility to relative friendliness. I got a sense of that transition when I met another minor celebrity who brought to mind another iconic image of my teenage years, like Priscilla: spaghetti, red wine, eggs and other food staples thrown onto a carpet to make artwork for a television commercial.



I arrived at Pro Hart's art gallery to meet his son, "Harry", and his partner of 8 years, "Rick". Harry was clear that Broken Hill had changed dramatically.

"I had a pretty tough time...[Broken Hill] was full of rednecks, ex-miners...You couldn't walk down the street without having someone yelling, 'Hey you fucking poofa'..."

It didn't help that Harry's parents were part of the Assemblies of God.

"You're behind the eight ball because you have, you know, 'Sinner, no salvation until you die'...I don't think that's a healthy way for a kid to grow up..."

Now deceased, his dad's fame and eccentricities that cast a large shadow over him.

"There was 'This Is Your Life'..He'd drive around town in the Rolls Royce...I didn't want to...I think when you're young you want conformity..."

Being gay in Broken Hill 20-25 years ago seemed hidden.



"Everyone here was pretty much in the closet...You'd have the dinner parties in homes and be totally outrageous, but keep it low-key everywhere else..."

Then Harry came out.

"I came out of the closet so fast that everyone got hit by the shrapnel... Because my father was so famous I probably copped a lot more because I was so visible...I fell in love, that was the only reason I came out..."

Coming out was not the only challenge.

"That was before the whole AIDS thing happened...That was terrible when it all broke loose...I had a partner say to me about the 80s, 'It was just becoming trendy to be gay and then the whole AIDS thing hit'..."

It turned out to be more than just your average hindrance to broader acceptance. For Harry, there was no question that it was a call to arms. Volunteering with friends, Harry recalls looking after AIDS patients when there was still community hysteria and misunderstanding.

"All those poor bastards who were abandoned by their families...There was one guy where they were leaving food outside the door...You wouldn't treat a dog like that..."



At this point Harry had to stop. Harry, Rick and I sat in silence.

"Yeah...I'll never forget it..."

What helped heal Harry's relationship with Broken Hill and reconcile the experiences he had was Harry and Rick moving back to Broken Hill to care for his then-dying father. Now they're not moving.

"[Broken Hill] had changed...I'd changed...But because the mines have closed down and a lot of the rednecks had moved away... People who are here wanted to be here..."



This was certainly my impression talking to locals, LGBT and otherwise. They tell me that when the mines closed, there was no longer the reason of employment to stay. Nobody gave me the impression they were trapped. Not that a similar “cabin fever” to places like Mt Isa and Alice Springs (see Alice Springs blog) didn’t take hold (i.e. people needing to take a break from Broken Hill periodically). Still, the bigger cities seem to call LGBT locals, or at least the Gs.

“Most of the gay guys tend to move to Adelaide...”

Still healing from growing up, Harry is trying to integrate the new Broken Hill and the new Harry in Broken Hill.

*“I’ve been here 10 years and not heard of anyone having any issues... F*ck, just in the space of 20 years!?!...F*ck we’ve moved on here...”*

So too thinks “Dorothy” (see Sydney blog) from The Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Associations of NSW (P&C) who I met with in Sydney. I found out she was a Broken Hill resident.

“Twenty years ago men went to the mines and then the pub at night... Women didn’t work, were barefoot, pregnant, all of that...Now it’s different...There are same sex teachers in relationships that are well known...Ten years ago it wouldn’t have existed just because of the nature of the community...”



Over at Broken Hill City Council Youth Services, “Vic” agrees that Broken Hill has moved on and is changing.

“We’re a shrinking community....We’re in a holding pattern of about



20,000 with an ageing population...

Vic says that tourism has taken over from mining as a major industry in town. He gave the example of all the art galleries in town. Another local said, "I don't understand it, but someone must be buying all that art".

I myself went looking for art in Broken Hill, yet not to buy it. In Sydney weeks before I had met a young gay artist, "Christian", in Sydney. From my beloved Berlin (see Canberra blog), Christian had entered an Outback Open Art Prize Competition. He had wowed me and others with his profession: drawing snail penises for the NSW Museum.

Residing in Sydney, Christian had to make a mad dash to Broken Hill, having already lived there for a period, to "save" his painting. Those moving the painting had slipped hanging it and ripped the canvas. Broken Hill is a VERY long train ride, after which Martin quickly patched up his painting and jumped straight back onto the train back to Sydney.



Despite the vast distances, Christian recalls his time living in Broken Hill fondly. If not for drawing snail penises, he might still be there.

Vic knows only too well how Broken Hill can seduce and ensnare you. I got a clue of this when he discussed options for local young people.

"If you want to go do tertiary stuff then you have to leave Broken Hill... Which is not a bad thing...It's easy to get very comfortable...I know, I came here as a teacher 30 years ago...[laughs]..."



I jumped at this opportunity.

“So you’re not an A Grader?...”

In Broken Hill there has been an informal social grading system ever since the mines were around. “Bob” from the Department of Education NSW explained the grading system.

“A Graders are born and bred local...B Graders are from away but basically grew up here, or married in...C Graders?...You basically just came into town...”

Like many places I’ve been to this year, locals immediately ask where you are from. In Western Australia it was almost a hopeful anxious question, ‘You’re from WA, yes?’ Knowing about the grading system helped break the ice. I joked with people that I was not even a C Grader because I was passing through. Yet knowing about the system and asking locals where they sat or grading them myself, “So you’re a B Grader?” often made people believe that I myself was a local.

Yet like so many systems and quirks, this grading system was anything but a playful icebreaker. It’s history is in protectionism. Bob, a former miner, explains.

“Broken Hill culture was built from across the road [a former mine site]...That’s where it started, right there...It was tough...You hear stories of strikes going for three months and people standing by their mates...It’s a Labor stronghold because it’s about unions and standing by your mates...That’s the fabric of this town...Broken Hill has a strong history...The union...The mines...[The grading system] was about people coming in from out of town...They were coming to



takeaway local jobs...It was simple, if you weren't local, you didn't get a job...It's about looking after your own..."

This was a time unlike today where mines in WA and QLD are more than happy to take outsiders on, such is the lack of people willing to work in the industry.

Bob now works across a vast amount of NSW around Student Welfare.

"We're not dense in terms of student population but we do have distance..." Being LGB or T doesn't seem to be coming up across his region. Yet he is working mostly with Principals and Deputies. Perception of "priorities" might also be at work.

"The everyday demand is huge...Delivering content, managing student behaviour, day-to-day welfare of kids is a huge thing...Teachers feel flat out all the time and the demand that they're put under, well..."

Yet in terms of curriculum and supports, Bob is like so many others in regional and rural Australia: he suspects it could be OK, assumes that there is enough being done and is hopeful of how it would go if someone came out as LGB or T. Then there is it being OK because people talk about buzzwords.

"Tolerance...Equity is obviously a priority in NSW with Equal Opportunity...Each student has a right to an education regardless... And obviously there's all these things in place to assist their needs... I'd imagine there'd be something in the [health and physical education curriculum]...If an issue came up we'd address it..."



Back at Youth Services, Vic paints a picture of a homophobic environment in local schools. "That's so gay" is commonplace in Broken Hill too. Yet Vic observes what so many others have tried to say, but couldn't.

"I'd say amongst young people there's what I'd call 'soft discrimination'...A couple of young people might be sitting around



and they use [that's so gay]...I don't think it's a good thing...A lot of young people are using the word gay...It might be just a perception on my part but it's used in a negative way...It's not quite as hard as when the word 'poofa' or 'faggot', not as harsh but it's still a problem... It's not a good indicator of tolerance and inclusion and that concerns me...And it's particularly evident in high school students..."

Vic does attempt to challenge it, but realises it's not always straightforward.

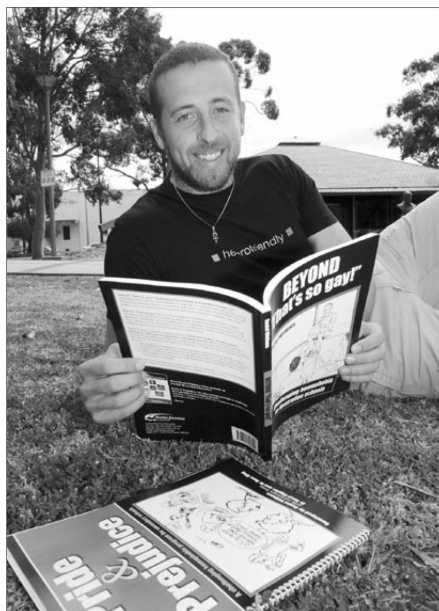
"You'd be battling to call it vilification...It's not quite shaming, but it's a put down...It's like the other day with a few young guys here I said to them, 'In NSW vilification is illegal so just be careful with how far you go'...They were bandying it about quite recklessly..."

According to Vic, 'soft discrimination' has to be challenged.

"What was it with one of the great philosophers?...He said, 'If you control the language, you control the thoughts and if you control the thoughts, you control the people...That's why it's so dangerous...By not challenging it, from there it's a springboard to other inappropriate stuff...It's setting a platform up..."

It was only then that Vic asked if I'd found it anywhere else.

Beyond "That's so gay"



* Daniel Withaus is on a national tour to change the way gay and lesbian students are treated.

An author on a national tour to challenge homophobia in schools has visited the city.

Daniel Withaus has spent about a week in Broken Hill as part of a 38-week tour that takes in every state and territory in the nation.

He is introducing his book, *Beyond "That's so gay"*, to teachers, health professionals and youth workers to change the way classrooms and schoolyards deal with gay and lesbian students.

Mr Withaus said research from Deakin University showed the book could change attitudes in very short periods of time.

"Within six weeks students' attitudes had changed significantly."

Backed by the United Care Church and armed with the Deakin University data, Mr Withaus uses the book to begin conversations with groups and individuals about changing the way young people think about and treat gay and lesbian students.

In the city he met with the NSW Teachers Federation, the Department of Education, the Greater Western Area Health Service, City Council and a number of individuals.

So far Mr Withaus has driven 26,000 kilometres across five states on a mostly self-funded tour to start a national discussion with staff, parents and students, usually in that order.

"Schools inevitably say 'well we haven't had any gay kid have their head kicked in' so they think there's no homophobia," he said.

"So I ask has anyone said 'that's so gay'?"

"Then I use the book as a conversation starter."

He said his book had been a revelation.

"It... changes attitudes and it also changes what we call homo-aggressive behaviour (which is violence towards people who are gay and lesbian or who are believed to be so)."

The tour is an expanded repeat of an Australian Human Rights Commission project that took place 10 years ago establishing a national network of support and advocacy services for young lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender people living in rural Australia.

"I wanted to repeat that but I wanted to go to all the places where people said don't go (like) Kalbarrie, the Pibara and Mt Isa (and) get a modern day snap shot (of where we've come)."

But, unfortunately, he said we have not come very far.

"Things haven't changed. But what we do know is that there has never been a better time to be about - to be gay and lesbian in Australia," Mr Withaus said.

"But until young people are linked in with services and support they're having the same experiences as 10 years ago."

He will visit Victoria and Tasmania, before ending his odyssey at his home in Geelong.

Touring to challenge homophobia in schools



"So it's not peculiar to Broken Hill?..."

No.

"I've really noticed it in the last two years, it's really been over the top..."

Vic doesn't believe teachers are equipped or supported to challenge homophobia and affirm sexual diversity.

"Generally high schools avoid the issue...It's a hands off situation...Teachers have fairly strict boundaries around what they can say...And if [students] were going to want to talk to a teacher about sexual stuff then it would have to be with a counselor...In that case it would have to be with a parent's knowledge and permission..."



Realistically, Vic isn't too excited about LGBT supports, especially since the local LGBT social group folded recently.

"I believe young people would use the net..."

Accessing a local service, if it did exist, might still be a challenge.

"It's a nightmare to even go to a specialist service people can see or even speculate..."

Despite this, Vic, like others, still believes Broken Hill in general is tolerant. Not that there aren't apparent limits.

"I think that Broken Hill is a harsh environment if you step outside of what's acceptable sexually... People aren't backwards in coming forward in calling people a slut or something else... Generally in Broken Hill gay people have been fairly accepted... When people come out loud and proud then it's a different story..."

Strict boundaries on social behaviour is a familiar concept to a lesbian couple from a nearby remote community. I'd originally met "Elaine", a young

teacher in this remote community, at my Sydney event with the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF; see Sydney blog). Elaine had said that I was welcome to stay on my way to Broken Hill. Breaking up a rather large drive from Canberra to Broken Hill, I took her up on the offer.

Elaine brought also brought her partner, "Sal", to my Broken Hill event with the NSWTF. This would be the fifth and final event for NSW.

Although poorly attended (one teacher said, "I thought there would be more people"), I stuck with my policy of pushing ahead. A dear friend and training guru from Tasmania, Nairn Walker (www.socialsolutions.com.au), who I'd met through a leadership gathering I described last week in my Canberra blog, once talked to me about a Pride & Prejudice Facilitator Training I ran with three people in regional Victoria.



"Daniel, I've trained rooms with three people for three days...Then people get to know you and your work...I've been back to the same places and now I'm training 300 people..."

After reading an excerpt from my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, about students asking if I was gay and my subsequent reaction, I encouraged the teachers to talk with one another about their own experiences.



Elaine explained how coming out changed harassment she faced.

"I was getting harassed by a couple of students... A lot of it was that it was a big dirty secret and they'd caught me out... [Coming out] seems to have earned me a lot of respect..."

In the original Outlink project (see Mt Gambier blog), Rodney Croome told me of a simple strategy he used in every location he visited in regional and rural Australia.

"Dan, I spend at least an hour walking around the town to get some kind of understanding about what it might be like to live there...How could I even begin to know otherwise?..."

For that same reason I have shunned CDs and iPods and listened only to what is on local radio. For large sections of the country it's only ABC radio or crackle. I want to get a sense of what people are hearing and what options they do/n't have.

When I arrived in [remote community] to stay with Elaine and Sal, I got a brief inkling into life there. No radio and no mobile reception.

Finding Elaine and Sal in [remote community] on largely empty streets on a warm evening might be harder than I thought. Elaine had flagged finding her without mobile reception in an e-mail.

"There are no street signs in [remote community], but as you come into town, you will see the school on your left. Turn right into the street with the school at the left corner and the [remote community]"



motel on the right corner and follow that street until you see two big water towers. Then stop and beep your horn."

I did all that and got no response. As Sal said later, "There are lots of people driving around hitting their horns at that time of night in [remote community]..."

So I chose the next option.



"Alternately, if your phone is working call me on [mobile number] as you come in and I will meet you on the main street so you can follow me home."

After going to the service station five minutes before it closed I found the only public phone in town and called Elaine.

What followed was a relaxed, warm evening of eating and talking. Not for the first or last time on my tour, I marveled at how people had once again invited me into their home, provided a fantastic meal and quality company that made traveling 1000s of kilometres less daunting or lonely.

Elaine and Sal's journey to [remote community] has been a long and fascinating one. Elaine had to overcome a fundamentalist Christian background.

"It took me a long time, I'm a slow learner...I became a Fundamentalist Christian when I left school at 16...I was going through some struggles...I dropped out of school, I stopped seeing my family, my friends...If you're not running your own life, it's better to join an



organisation that will run it for you..."

Relationships loomed large in Elaine's journey.

"I was in a dysfunctional relationship with a 25 year old guy...I thought something was wrong with me, like I was frigid or something, or I'm naturally socially awkward..."

There were others.



"I went out with guys who went off to boarding school...These guys were gay...I also knew they weren't interested in seeing me or having sex so it was perfect... [One guy] wanted to be an actor on Home & Away...I should have known..."

At this stage Sal joins in.

"Well my boyfriend was a Michael Jackson impersonator...I should have known...A really convincing Michael Jackson impersonator... He had the whole dance routine to Smooth Criminal down..."

For Elaine it all changed when she moved to university.

"I met a girl there who I stayed in share accommodation with and we fell in love and it was beautiful...So over 6 months I came out and lost a lot of friends..."

Church proved a challenge.

"A lot of my friends were people from the church...They were obviously very much opposed to it...I had someone come up to me and say, 'There is this rumour that you two are together' and told me I wasn't allowed to make sandwiches for their youth group because someone might find out that someone gay had something to do with it...Others were offended because they thought that they knew me and had shared their personal stuff with me...So they were offended I hadn't..."





Next came the family.

"I told my father actually on my birthday...He told the bar staff that [her female partner] had AIDS...He slammed the car door on my fingers...At least he didn't commit me...He committed his wife so I was a bit worried about coming out..."

Friend and family reactions have an impact on Elaine to this day.

"I guess the attitudes when I came out were so universally negative that I'm reluctant to come out...Even today I'm still quite nervous about coming out...Now as a teacher I feel that I have to because there'll be kids...It's my duty of care...And the suicide rate at my school...Plus in a small town you have no choice..."

I asked what brought Elaine to teaching.

"One of the lecturers [during her teaching degree] told me I shouldn't be a teacher because I'm gay...He also told the guy who had tattoos he shouldn't be a teacher because he had tattoos...Because I'm stubborn I decided I was going to be...Sometimes people opposing me is the thing that gets me through...[Teaching is] the thing that 'makes a difference'...Doing something to make it better and teaching is something I can do for 12 hours a day..."

In Australia, remote communities are literally almost dying in the hope that young, vibrant and visionary teachers like Elaine will teach in their schools.

"I guess that's the good thing about being in such a dysfunctional school...You can only make things better..."



Not that Elaine knew where she was being posted according to Sal.

"You didn't know where it was...She had to Google it and I thought, 'Oh no, where is she going?'..."

Both felt pressure when Elaine was posted to the remote school. Elaine because of the opportunity.

"I was a targeted gard and I thought if I didn't go that they could miss out on someone...I didn't want the kids to miss out on an English teacher... And the Principal said it had been three years... So that did it for me...I decided to try it out for 12 months...No-one was twisting my arm to do this..."



Sal had different ideas.

*"I decided I wasn't going to go [from Armadale, NSW]...Then I felt like sh*t...I went through a week where I thought I was the worst girlfriend in the world...The reputation of the place proceeded it..."*

A few years on Elaine is out at school, and now that Sal has moved to town, they are known throughout the very small community. Whilst they are largely left alone, and slowly gaining respect and trust, there are still major obstacles.

*"Most [students] think that it's wrong to be gay...For example one said that he'd kill [Sal], swears at me and throws stuff at me...But that's not the worst...Then it's white c*nt or fat f*ck...It's a point of weakness they can exploit...I do have lessons where for an hour I'm sworn at..."*

If that wasn't bad enough, then there's teachers.

"It hurts more when you have to put up with kids and then go into the staffroom and put up with it from another staff member...It gets to you..."

Or how about the community?



"I've had some community members who I've developed respect with who have supported me, shown respect...Then there are some parents...I got spat on when I went into town and went looking for [a student's father]..."

Sal: "You what?...You didn't tell me that!..."

"I didn't tell you about it..."

Sal: Who?..."

"By one of the women...I get called names occasionally but the rest are pretty supportive... I'm sure it's as much about me being a teacher looking for kids...To them I'm white, I have a job, I'm rich and I'm gay and I'm trying to make their kids go to school..."

But slowly Elaine is making a difference, in ways that can only happen over an almost painfully long time.

"I guess I have a hope that the [remote community] kids that are different, that are struggling, will get outcomes for the first time...Whether they're Indigenous or not...Often for me it's about, 'I want to see this kind finish Year 12'..."

Recently Elaine showed a Powerpoint slideshow about the same sex marriage debate. The response from students was simple.

"Why can't you just get married?...Really?...Why not?...They just assumed that you should be able to..."

Not a teacher, Sal's own experiences in challenging homophobia in rural NSW come through her involvement at university.

"I was part of a local queer group...[A local health service] would get us to tag along to do a meet and greet...I was the token lesbian to prove that we don't bite people..."

At first Sal was reluctant to be a part of any panel in organisations.





"I had a problem with panels...There were questions...And so many people had horror stories and psychos and I thought, 'I'm not the best person to do this'...My family was fine, I don't come from a religious family...I wasn't gonna get smited from above... Maybe I'm not the best role model...The worst that I got was, 'This makes me uncomfortable because at some stage I'll have to talk to people about it and explain it'..."

There was one opportunity to go to a local school.

"It was fine...I think it was a Year 10 health class and I was expecting people would say 'we know you'...For some reason that year, and the year after, there was this very big group of baby dykes...[The session] kind of backfired because they said, 'We know it's OK. Mostly the issue is that it has become 'so cool' that all these non-gay people are pretending to be so they can hang out with us and they end up being try hards..."

Now in IT, Sal has her own hopes for the future.

"I'd like to see proper equality across everything, and that it actually is backed up and enforced...I'd like to be a grumpy feminist who says that no-one remembers that there was a struggle...But it would be nice...That will give me something else to be grumpy about..."

