

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK TWENTY-NINE, (MILDURA ET AL)
A FAIR WHACK OF HOMOPHOBIA: HUMPTY REVISITED,
EROTIC HANDSHAKES AND BEING DISCREETLY OPEN

"Nope, sorry, Humpty was sold and now lives in Queensland..."

I stared at the middle aged woman at Mildura's Tourist Information Centre for a while not knowing what to say. Perhaps I'd passed Humpty Dumpty by on my travels in the Sunshine State? When I opened my mouth again to ask the question, she was quick and clinical.

"No I don't know where in Queensland..."

I had arrived in Mildura hoping to retrace my childhood steps, of which I remembered two very clearly. The first was a tourist attraction where my older brother, older sister and myself played amongst things like a giant dinosaur, upside down boot and the old woman's shoe. I'm told that many children were placed on Humpty Dumpty's shoe for photographs. The reason I remember it so vividly was that after this happy snap was taken, my family walked to the car and teased that they would go to the sultana factory without me. It's safe to say I was very unhappy and may or may not have thrown a tantrum.



[As a point of interest I would meet the son of the man who built the brickwall on which Humpty is seen to be sitting. For the record the son is a strapping personal trainer and squash champion.]

"You said there was a second thing...What was it?..."

OK, so maybe you can still visit the sultana factory.

"Not allowed for health and safety reasons...The Sunbeam Factory closed to the public a while ago...But now they have a shop in town?..."

Oh the days when I could run through all those sultanas and cough and sneeze away, reach in to grab them out.



Although not immediately successful, I was excited to be once again in my home state of Victoria. After 28 weeks on the road, some 7 months, I found myself on the home stretch after covering South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory and, now, New South Wales.

With only 3 hours to drive from Broken Hill, I set out early and found myself crossing the Murray River to Victoria sooner than I expected. It might have been the very early morning, it might have been moving on from yet another warm, hospitable host or maybe it was getting back into Victoria, but I felt emotional. So when I heard on the news that a member of 1970s sensation Electric Light Orchestra (ELO) had been killed in a freakish accident by a stray hay bale as he was driving by a paddock, and then they played a song that whisked me back to my childhood, I started shedding tears as the first, vulnerable line played in a tribute.

"Hello, how are you?..."



Yet I was not here to blubber, nor revisit my childhood. What I was most interested in was how Mildura responded, or not, to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) locals, old and young.

"[Anita], I was told you would be a great person to talk to, given your great work as a local Principal and now working across the region..."

Cue a modest giggle on the other end of the phone. Yet flattery would not get me over the line when I floated the idea of us talking about LGBT young people in local schools and challenging homophobia. "Anita" currently works across the Sunraysia region, which includes Mildura.

"I'd like to help you but my project doesn't take in that particular group...I'm sorry, but..."

I didn't even take a breath and jumped.

"And what particular group does your project cover?..."

Even though I knew the answer, I asked. Her response?

"Well my project looks at young people disengaged from the education system and..."

Breathe Daniel. It's a reality that people don't necessarily know. So breathe.

"Well research evidence shows that same sex attracted young people are overrepresented in that particular group..."

Yet it still wasn't biting.

"Well I don't know that research evidence and I..."

OK, we can solve that.

"Well I'm happy to come right now and place that research evidence on your desk to consider..."

And so two days later I would be sitting having a cuppa with Anita and discussing the research evidence and the educational landscape of the Sunraysia region. After a reluctant, defensive start, it turned into a pleasant, informative conversation.

"The population and it's needs have vastly changed in the past 5 years and schools need to respond to contemporary situations, and not something that was the case in the past..."





When getting a sense of a region's LGBT climate, I find it useful to get the context for any projects, or lack thereof. Anita was certainly well placed to give that very context.

"Because of the social structure of this town and the big changes rapidly they've been a lot of programs established for youth issues here..."

Unfortunately Anita believes that there is a lack of coordination, communication and success.

"It actually needs to get joined up more...There is a huge suspicion [amongst local services] and competition for resources because there is no common youth policy...There are lots of programs, like [popular program] we've identified that some of them can do more harm than the kids doing nothing at all...There's also a bit of cultural change required...I call it pass the parcel...When it becomes too hard or too much they pass a young person on...'I've done my job, I've passed it on'..."

It was a "cheesed off magistrate" that actually identified all of this and planted the seeds for Anita's project.

"She called all the schools and agencies together to find out what was going on and basically couldn't get a straight answer because everyone's been working in their own silos...Basically he bailed up our regional director..."

It seems a cheesed off magistrate means you can jump queues and get funding relatively quickly. The fact that Mildura pushed buttons in



key social indicators (e.g. childhood accidents, hospital admissions, domestic violence, etc) did the rest.

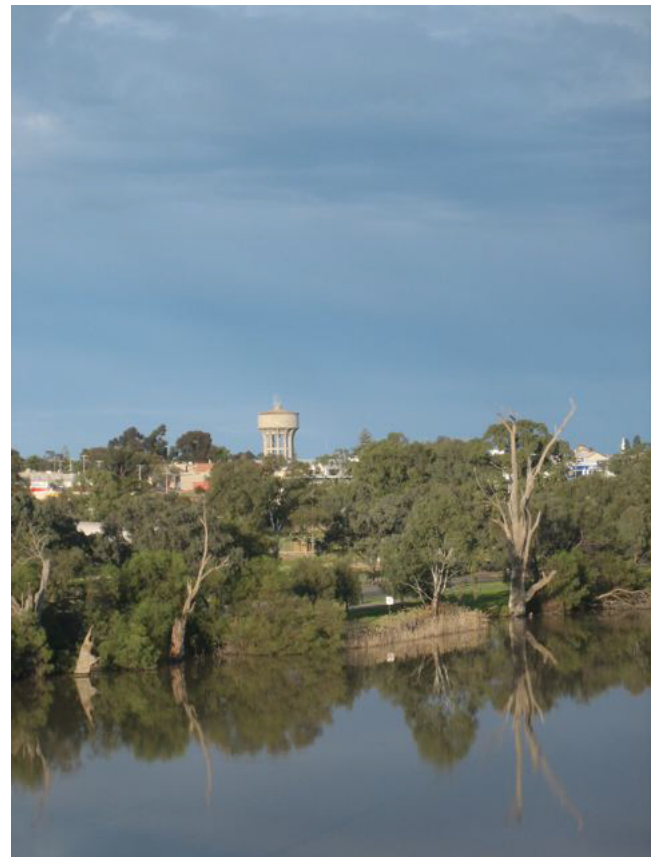
“Increasingly we’re finding we have kids coming to [primary] school with the speaking and listening levels of a 2½ year old and not a 4½ year old...They’re already behind the eight ball...”

In this light, one might think that it would be easy to believe that LGBT students and challenging homophobia might not register. Yet as they said in Jurassic Park, “Nature always finds a way”. Anita believes student welfare staff in schools are responding, given her experiences as Principal in one of the, according to locals, “roughest” schools in Mildura.

“Over the years I’ve found it’s much more likely that [LGBT young people would] discuss it with student welfare staff... They’d go because they were teased, put under the spotlight a bit...But usually it was associated with other issues...It was never simple...Life isn’t that simple...”

Using “that’s so gay” and “faggot” happens in the Sunraysia region too.

“There seems to be a groundswell over the years of young people using them as ‘power buttons’, whether it’s accurate labeling or inaccurate...”



Perhaps this groundswell has led to more discussions.

“In the 15 years I was Principal I saw a big, big change in people’s preparedness to talk about homosexuality, but there is still a lot of work to be done...So I guess each generation does it’s bit to move things on...”

Later when we talked about policy and legislation, Anita expanded on this idea.

“There’s still work that needs to be done...I guess all the legislation that comes through, it actually takes a lot of years for it to affect



community...”

Without going into great detail, Anita and I discussed a number of broader ways to get LGBT young people onto the agenda locally, regionally and at a state level. Yet like myself, Anita is limited in her project.



“I don’t even have money to buy paperclips...All I have is my mouth and my keyboard and that’s about it...”

With humble resources Anita is uniting and motivating locals.

“Ideally I’d like to see a vision for young people...Regardless of their issues, let’s get them to the best place possible...”

And it seems for Mildura it’s not just about warm and fluffy ideals.

“The people in this town are aware of the financial benefit for this town if we get these kids engaged...”

However talking to locals there has not been a great deal for disengaged LGBT young people in the Sunraysia region, yet this does not mean there were not the usual supports.

“The main sources of help and support are the well-being staff, and part of that would be the help lines...I’m not sure what’s available in Mildura...”

Down the road at Mildura Rural City Youth Services, “Therese” knows what’s available.

“There are no support mechanisms for young gay and lesbian people in Mildura...”



When I ask why not, Therese is clear.

“Because the people who hold the power and the money for services are heterosexual...So it’s not a priority for them...The people who create the programs and have the funding don’t even think about [LGBT young people]...It’s not in their paradigm of thinking...”

It seems that being openly LGB or T is only OK in certain ways.

“Most young people in this city don’t want to be publicly identified...In general there’s a social reluctance of people being out...”

Therese should know, given her own experience.



“I’m an out lesbian and I moved up 3 years ago [from Adelaide] to be with my partner...My personal experience is that there is a fair whack of homophobia here in Mildura...It’s kind of like 10 years ago in that there are a lot of couples who are together, who everyone knows are together, but the couples themselves don’t say anything...”

Not that Therese took this approach herself.

“I know that I stick out...I said to my partner, ‘You need to know that I’m pegged [as a lesbian]. I’ve been pegged long ago before I even knew. You are immediately going to be pegged’...We’ve been out and proud for 3 years...There are a lot of people who are out...It’s not like in the city where there is that banner waving...They’re discreetly open...People know that they’re lesbians, but there’s no gay pride marches, no gay bars and no support organisations...”

Homophobia for Therese seems to be more subtle.





"[My partner who came out late in life] hasn't been touched by that hatred that can be spat at you...There's a lot of people in Mildura who are homophobic who do their best to hide it...There is low exposure to alternative lifestyles here so it's inevitable that you're going to come across people that will discriminate..."

Those locals hiding homophobic attitudes don't seem to always be successful in doing so.

"There's a lot of passive discrimination...They don't want to be seen by other people as homophobic and then their attitudes seep

out over time...And they think that I'm stupid and don't realise...I've been on the outer my whole life...So I know when people are putting me on the outer, even if they are being nice to my face..."

It's LGBT young people that Therese is concerned about. When I float that some people have said they believe that things are "better these days", a bucket of cold water gets poured.

"You forget the awkwardness, the intensity of all that once you've been accepted [by family, friends, work colleagues]...When you're young and you don't have that bag of tricks of experiences, it can be very confronting..." Therese has her own approach in her work with young people across the region.

"I don't come out to them myself because I keep it on a professional level...I always like to think I'm doing my bit by being out professionally...When I promote [the work she does] I talk about my target groups: culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) and same sex attracted (SSA)...I sort of normalise it through my programs that SSA young people are one of my target groups..."

Challenging young people's language is also on Therese's agenda.

"And I do challenge [that's so gay]...The word faggot is sometimes used..."

In discussions with locals, Therese notices that being gay is not that acceptable.

"I ask, 'How would you feel if your daughter came home and said she was



a lesbian?’...A lot of people say they don’t care if you’re gay but once it’s a member of family then they have to face up to it and it’s not about the social mask they put on anymore...”

In the future there might be the possibility of a local LGBT support group for young people. But it won’t necessarily be easy.

“I personally would like to start up some LGBT support group...But when I’ve approached people I know about it, there’s not a lot of support for it... Because there’s a fear of persecution if you become public...”

Not that Mildura doesn’t have its good points.

“Coming from Whyalla I kind of knew what to expect, but I’ve been quite surprised...Mildura is extremely multicultural...It’s very dynamic in that sense...I’ve been very accepted by [partner’s] family, her siblings, her children...”

Still Mildura, like Broken Hill, seems to be torn between its assumed capital and its practical capital.

“In some ways I think that Mildura is estranged from Melbourne because it’s closer to Adelaide...We’re like a step sister because we get all our funding from Melbourne, but when people go to capital cities they’ll go to Adelaide because it’s only 4 hours drive and Melbourne is 5 or 6 and a lot more traffic...A lot of the time we’re told we have to do things the Victorian way even though it’s not what people want...”

Locals, like other residents of regional and rural Australia, experience great frustration when trying to access even the most basic of services.

“It’s the extra mile you have to walk when you live in a country town, even if you’re part of the majority...So if you’re part of a minority...”



Whilst LGBT young people are thought to flock to Adelaide or Melbourne, there are some who stay put or return. For those LGBT people, there is the Mildura Gay and Lesbian Support Group (www.gaymildura.com).

Operating informally since the mid-1980s, the group started as so many gay initiatives did back then according to original co-founder, "Oscar".

"There was probably half a dozen of us and we met at other people's places... It was mainly informal, friends and word of mouth at someone's place... We would meet once a month... When it started a lot of people wouldn't come because everyone knew about it and they could be outed..."

Men in Mildura seem to have the same barriers to meeting and gathering as they did in the 1980s.



"Well meeting new people... There is nowhere to really meet except the beat and you're there for only one reason..."

According to current group regular, "Fred", the group was forced to become more formal in the 1990s.

"The girls became involved... There were some clashes... A couple of dykes accused a couple of men of being pedophiles..."

Those present are reluctant to elaborate on what happened, seemingly out of respect for not getting into blaming and finger pointing. All know the impact of that period of formalisation.

"A committee of management... We were incorporated after a public meeting... We had support from Sunraysia Community Health... We then averaged 20-30 people per meeting before someone cracked it and formed a breakaway group... Then numbers dropped... The effect of that whole



period was that the group was incorporated and probably never recovered... It has struggled to attract numbers ever since...

There appears at first to have been different goals for men and women attending the group.

"Lesbians seem to have a stronger political agenda [than the gay men]..."

Talking to Therese earlier, it might be something different.

"My partner went to the group...Membership is conditional...She didn't find that group very helpful for her...If they liked you, you were in, if not you weren't, which is disappointing..."

Oscar agrees that the group has lost its way in recent years.

"It's probably where we're going wrong because it's a group where no-one can be supported at the moment..."

Yet again I found myself talking with a regional or rural LGBT social support group that was struggling under the weight of expectation. Is it a social group? Is it a support group? Does it do both and more?

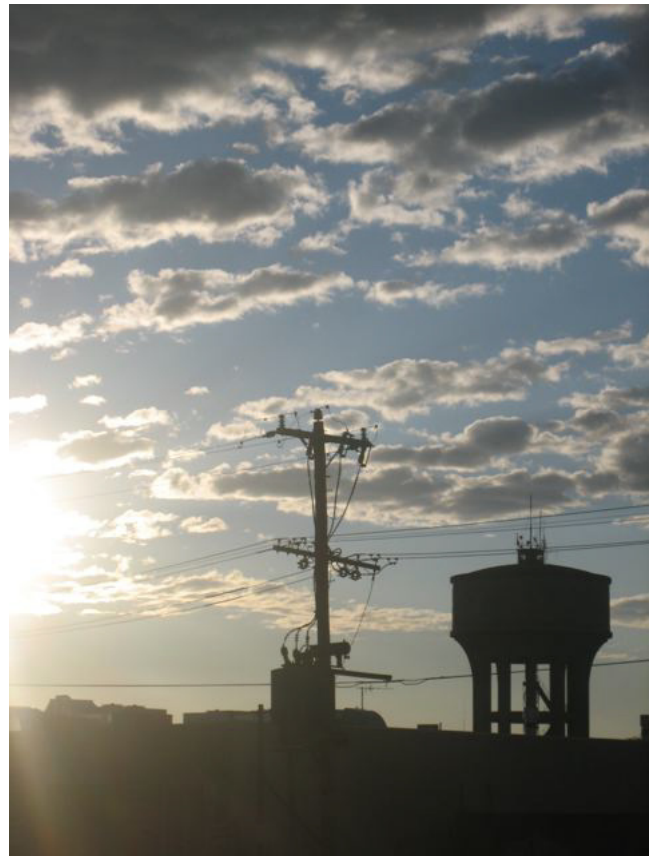
Yet again it comes down to who is driving the group. No-one in Mildura is coming forward to become involved in the formalities of the group and those present fear the group will fold. Those present are happy with the social nature of the group, and one could ask if they are the ones volunteering then should they be expected to do more?

Still those present are thinking ahead, of how they can raise awareness about the group locally and attract new people. One idea is putting a float in the Harvest Festival, what the locals call their annual mainstream Mardi Gras. Oscar is quick to offer a suggestion.

"We'd have a trailer with a closet on the back..."

For members like Fred and "Jeff" it's about getting a message out to local young people. Especially for Fred.

"That's why I maintain my involvement in the gay group because I do it in the hope that it will make a difference...We didn't have mobiles and



internet and phone lines and organisations but now they do and kids are still topping themselves...We have to stop people topping themselves... How do we get the message out to young people that it's OK?..."

Jeff is one man who came out in his 20s because he didn't think it was OK. Part of the reason was the hotel he was managing according to Fred.



"For a time he ran the roughest pub in town..."

Unlike in Bathurst (see Bathurst blog), Jeff feels that "passing" as relatively heterosexual was a barrier for him growing up.

"Passing can be a negative...If you're out and camp you're OK...I actually surprised people when I came out..."

Slowly male patrons found out the guy running the pub was gay. Jeff says there were some interesting reactions.

"Guys would say, 'I've never had a beer poured for me

by a gay man before'...Some guys liked coming up to shake my hand hard...It got back to me that they did it to see if I got a hard on because I've touched another man's hand..."

This was a new take on an observation I'd made over the years. Over the last 13 years it would be safe to say I've encountered many heterosexual men, and others seemingly so, who'd like to use meeting me as an opportunity to work through their homophobia. I've lost count of the number who want to shake my hand firmly or hug me, in what I've sensed is a daring, brazen challenge they have set themselves. Up there with skydiving and the like, they can say they have survived an encounter with a gay man, heterosexuality in tact.

Yet not all homophobic people are heterosexual. Oscar recounts a story earlier in the year at his workplace.

*"In the staffroom I brought up Mardi Gras at work and there were three guys...One said, 'Oh, faggots, they should be shot'...The other two said, 'Wow, we'd love to go to that'...You should have seen him sit back and shut up...I didn't say anything but I thought, 'I know whose c*ck you've been sucking'...I reckon 50% of the poofta bashers are secret closet cases..."*

Over the years Fred has had to challenge homophobia in his workplace as well as elsewhere.





*"Someone donated some Tupperware to raise funds for our group through a raffle...I took it to work and just wrote 'Tickets' and not what it was for...I just didn't feel like putting up with the sh*t...So I walked into the staffroom and they were 4 people from Ballarat and this girl asked, 'What's this for?'... 'It's to raise money for the Mildura Gay and Lesbian Support Group'... One of the guys said, 'What the f*ck do you need that for?'...'If you don't understand it then it's probably not worth me explaining it...Now do you want to win some Tupperware?'..."*

A father of two, Fred seems very protective, if not too much so at times, of his son and daughter. Recently his daughter was getting hassled at school.

"My daughter, she's quite butch and in the army cadets, was being teased at school for being a lesbian because her dad's gay...I met with the Deputy Principal and said, 'Let me tell you [Deputy Principal], I've told her if they keep coming at here that she's to smack the crap out of them because you're not doing anything about the homophobia and you try and suspen her and I'll smack the crap out of you...It was a Catholic school I might add..."

Religion is a point of contention for Jeff.

"I guess religion has made it harder for us...It hasn't made it harder for the priests...[laughs]..."

Fred was recently bailed up by a local religious minister.

"We had a 40 minute conversation about being gay...He threw around the Old Testament stuff and then said to me, 'I don't believe in what you do but you're a really nice guy and I find it hard not to like you'...And I think that's what it's all about..."





Fred's parents were not so easy to appease. Enter Fred's son. An apparently confident, attractive young man, "Nick" is a security guard at a Brisbane gay bar. When in Brisbane, Nick takes Fred to that bar and has to stop Fred from hitting men who try to flirt with Nick. When Nick was younger there was a dinner uniting Fred's family, especially his opinionated mother where Nick was not present. The next dinner Fred demanded that Nick come along to prevent Fred from enduring another earbashing.

"I said, 'You're coming to dinner. I've copped an earful from your fucking grandmother so you're coming to dinner so it doesn't happen again'...He said, 'Dad, I've got some things I need to say to grandma and I don't want you butting in'..."

Dinner was said to be civil until Fred's mother made a couple of comments.

*"[Nick] said, 'Grandma, I have something to say to you...You'd better sit down'...F*ck he paid out on her...'Dad's gay, get the f*ck over it'...And that's what needed to happen...My 14 year old son had to get stuck into her..."*

For Jeff, change came in a less confrontational way.

"When I came out dad didn't say anything...Until one day we were walking through the paddock...He said, 'I went to a reunion. I met this woman from Perth called Sally and she has a gay son'...That was the icebreaker..."

Fred couldn't imagine coming out to his family and friends when he grew up in nearby Swan Hill. About 2 ½ hours south-east down the Murray River, Swan Hill was said to be extremely hostile when Fred was contemplating being gay.

"I wasn't game to come out in Swan Hill...Thirty years ago if I'd come out as gay I would have been killed...So I did what was expected of me and



got married and had kids...”

It was my intention to head to Swan Hill and see if indeed things had progressed from the days of such LGBT hostility. Before I did hit the road I talked with Fred. Fred had, at very short notice, gathered Mildura locals at his own home mid-week in the evening to share their experiences. Cuppas and nibbles, and for others wine, was in plentiful supply.

Standing with the door of my faithful truck, Bruce, open I again found myself torn. Once more I was jumping in Bruce, some local standing at the door, to drive to another location just as I felt like I was starting to get to know someone and get a deeper understanding of both their and my own experience. I could have easily seen this as a relaxed night of light entertainment and conversation, but for Fred and others the group is clearly a huge deal in their lives, serving to answer much larger questions.



It was with this in mind that I drove along the Murray River towards smaller towns that are, or at threat of, being engulfed by flooded rivers. After months of driving through western and northern Australia I was not used to anything other than dry riverbeds. Now I drove over bridges where water was level with the bridge and along roads where water flirted with overflowing the road.

It was in Swan Hill beside the uncharacteristically full Murray River that I met with a blast from my past. In May 2000 I was invited for an 'Up North' expedition by the then School Focused Youth Service Coordinator for the region (www.sfys.infoxchange.net.au/), "Sam". Sam organised for myself, Dr Michael Crowhurst and then-President of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG; www.pflagaustralia.org.au/), Nan McGregor, to do a series of talks with local teachers and health professionals.

I remember two comments from that trip. The first was from Sam's wife, a local health professional, in Echuca who said at the end of the workshop that she knew that I would be a politician one day.

"Just the way you put things, the way you hold yourself, I can see you doing much more public speaking..."

This stood out because I could not have thought of a worse choice of



career for myself given I'd always seen politics as a game of compromise. Although my mother taught me to share and play nicely with others, when it matters I don't like compromise.



The second comment was one that passed from my own lips. I had just talked about my experiences supporting local gay and lesbian young people in Geelong and challenging homophobia in the all-boys Catholic school. In Swan Hill a female teacher had started to dominate a group discussion and was crossing from the professional into the personal. I waited for her to take a breath.

“With all due respect this is not about you it’s about local young people...”

Semi-stunned both “Wendy” and I looked at each other. Had I been too blunt?

The answer to that question came from Wendy becoming a devotee to the Pride & Prejudice educational program to challenge homophobia in secondary schools. Wendy would attend the very first Pride & Prejudice Facilitator Training that rounded out the VicHealth funded project. I recall this training so well because it took place on Monday 10th September and Tuesday 11th September 2001. I woke up the next day and my day off was spent in front of the television absorbing the events of September 11.

At the launch of the Pride & Prejudice launch at VicHealth in March 2002, Wendy starred on a video that was made by her students and sent for the occasion.

“The importance of Pride & Prejudice, the power, lies in what we are able [as teachers] to get across to the kids...It’s desperately needed in schools, it’s desperately needed in rural schools...The format is already done, the structure is already there...We just need to go into the classroom and deliver that message, and we can deliver that message...”



Yet as one teacher going back to a rural school Wendy and I learnt a sobering lesson about how changing an entire environment can sometimes be too much for one individual, however motivated and resourced.

Both Wendy's and Sam's interest in my inclusion in the 'Up North' project was due to what they believed to be an LGBT-hostile climate in Swan Hill. Two incidents stood out. The first was a local gay restaurant owner who floated the idea of a gay pride march down Swan Hill's main street. Wendy explained this to a colleague who met with me too, "Neil".

"He had a restaurant and he wanted to do a gay pride march...It was astounding...He was run out of town by the [church]...No, that's right, not the Catholics...He was so brave and he was run out of town...His restaurant completely closed down...The [religious] minister was on the news saying, 'We don't want those people here'...It was really terrible...It was pretty nasty..."

I recall sitting with that man's mother as she told of the impact on the family and her husband's business. Defiantly she told us how she was not going to leave, because that would be too easy, and it was her home.

Wendy believes, like Therese, that it's about being discreetly open.

"It's alright if you are just as long as you don't say it, speak it, stand up...I think it's the same in many country towns...It's like in the US military, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'..."



The other incident that stood out was a story I was told in a workshop of a local student. I wrote about that incident in my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*.

"Invited to discuss the success of the GASP! project in a small Victorian



town, a teacher told a story of a local young man, Luke. At an interschool sports carnival between a government and Catholic school, a group of young men from both of the local schools attacked Luke, for no other reason than he was thought to be gay. At the peak of the attack Luke was said to be on the ground and surrounded by a group of young men kicking him. Attending ambulance officers and police concluded that had he not been wearing his bike helmet, Luke would have been killed. Luke was moved to a larger regional area, and in doing so was separated from his family. It was decided he could no longer live safely in his own community. For the perpetrators of the attack? Nil, nada, zilch, zero, zip.”

Talking with “Luke’s” mother I heard of how he was moved to Bendigo. Luke had to live and attend school alone in Bendigo. She and everyone else thought this was a great outcome.

As Anita observed.

“Our region is very Bendigo-centric...It’s getting better but for many years we were just seen as cowboys from the west...”

No-one spoke of Luke’s attackers. The message?

“I guess boys will be boys...”

As I say in my book, it was a series of these incidents, stories and other anecdotes that led me to the decision that I could not sit back and cross my fingers that the education department or local schools would do something.

“And so I developed my not-so-secret gay agenda...”

Ten years on I asked Wendy and Neil what life was like now in Swan Hill. Was it better than Fred’s experiences 30 years ago, and Luke’s?



"I suspect that if a kid was to come out that nothing overtly violent would happen to him but their lives would be made so miserable that they would leave or commit suicide...Life would be relentless and merciless with the other kids...It's hard enough as it is...I don't think there's any difference in how they treat the gay kids now than they did 10 years ago when I met you..."

Wendy believes there are gender differences.

"We had two girls, they identified themselves, it was admittedly only to a few friends, but...The boys, never at all...Not when they're at school because it's not safe...I live in a town where if anyone comes out, it will be long after they've gone, or if they do it's when they're comfortable coming back...Some of them feel comfortable coming back..."

Doing her best, Wendy let's her students know that homophobia is not OK.

"There are three rules in my class that have always been that way...No racism, no sexism and no homophobia...And the fourth is treat others how you'd like to be treated, which is always with respect...The fifth is don't speak when I am but that's a different story...[laughs]..."

Before she left Wendy made sure she had my details. Although we had only seen each other four times in a decade, each time was seemingly powerful, insightful and enjoyable for us both.

"I've gotten older and know now that you need friends...And I've always had a soft spot for you...[warm embrace]"

And me you Wendy. You have no idea.

