

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK THIRTY, (BALLARAT)
NOT AT THE PACE I'D LIKE: REFRAMING,
GREEN TEA AND FETCHING BIG NANNA

*"Well I'm f*cken set, aren't I?!..."*

My sister, Helene, was recounting her feelings when she realised her lecturer at university was lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) friendly. Her lecturer in Certificate IV Community Services, "Malcolm", had used examples of LGBT people and their struggle for equal rights during some of her classes.

"I'd heard him say a few things about homophobia here and there, so I just knew..."

Weeks before Helene had decided that for one of her oral presentations on a community project that she would use her brother, me, and the Beyond 'That's So Gay' National Challenging Homophobia Tour.

"I decided a few weeks before that I was doing you..."

I found that out on a Saturday night in Canberra. Moments before the commencement of the AIDS Fundraiser Trivia Night Helene called to

ask some questions of clarification. She laughed that calling her little brother was "research". I laughed because my sister was doing a PowerPoint presentation about me on a Saturday night!

From Helene's account, the class was impressed by her presentation on a challenging homophobia project. Referring to me only as "Daniel", Helene says her classmates were amazed by what they were hearing. At the end Malcolm congratulated her on the thoroughness of her presentation.

"Thanks...I had to ring him to find out a few things, but the rest I found on the internet..."

Malcolm was impressed.



"Wow Helene...That's impressive to actually call him..."

The class murmured and nodded that it was impressive that she'd called me. Bursting, Helene finally let the cat out of the bag. Being my sister, she chose to sing it.

"He ain't heavy, he's my brotherrrrrrrrr..."

A few weeks later I was sitting in a tearoom with Malcolm. It turns out that Helene and he had more in common than Helene realised. I asked Malcolm about why he felt so comfortable and confident in referring to LGBT people and their campaigns for equal rights during his classes.

"My brother's gay...He's about 10 years older than me...He came out when he was a teenager...And he talked about ACT-UP, so that's how I know about that..."

[Founded in the US, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) was a movement campaigning for direct action and changes in legislation. www.actuporalhistory.org/]

Malcolm explained that there are opportunities include LGBT people and the issues that affect them early on in the Certificate IV Community Services.

"In the early units we run sociology and community development... What we include in that is we talk about the UN Charter of Human Rights...We talk about genocide and different kinds of discrimination... People must work to make sure they are not abusing people's human rights and matching that with the standards in their own places...I include gays and lesbians who were murdered in the Holocaust... There's also a unit called 'Systems and Advocacy' which includes things like gay rights...I always talk about ACT-UP in the 80s and marriage equality as a current example..."

Admittedly there is not a great deal of depth.

"But that's as specific as it gets, just as we do for refugees, youth... So there is some, but not a bit..."

But it is there. I was keen to talk to Malcolm to better gauge something that LGBT educators have observed for years: in their training, teachers, health professionals and others do not get any LGBT content.

So often this is leveled at universities where the majority of undergraduate students are thought to be young and fresh from secondary school education. At TAFE's though, this is not always the case. Attached to the local university, Malcolm says his course



attracts a different demographic.

“Our students are typically female, approximately in their 30s or 40s, occasionally in their 50s and 60s...It can be mum’s returning to work, people making a career change...We have people from trade backgrounds, admin, real estate agents, fitters and turners, the whole range...We often find that people who come to study may have been users of community services themselves...”

And sometimes the course contact can hit close to home.

“We warn people that a lot of the material covered can be very confronting and for people with issues that are unresolved, then they need to consider that...”

My sister, Helene, came back to study as a mother returning to work. Yet this was much more than just retraining. And that she was doing so in Ballarat had even more significance than most could realise.

Growing up as children, my sister and I, along with my mother, her twin sister and her children, would make the drive most weekends from Geelong to Ballarat. Our reason for doing so was to visit my grandmother, my mum’s mum, Muriel Estelle Duffin.

Muriel resided for most of my childhood in a mental institution called Lakeside Hospital. Although the family doesn’t know quite what was wrong, it’s safe to say it was schizophrenia and bipolar depression along with a touch of pyromania and kleptomania. There is no doubt that these weekly drives impacted on our childhoods, yet this could not be compared to how this impacted on my mother and her siblings. For example, my mother and her twin sister were periodically in orphanages before having to leave school to support themselves at 14 in an era that could not understand what was happening with her institutionalised mother.



It's funny to me now that my sister and I have not really discussed what these trips to Lakeside Hospital, now a housing development, meant to us. I find it remarkable that I somehow enjoyed the trips to the eerie majestic old stone building with the huge iron doors (it would be a must on film sets). It meant family time and seeing "Big Nanna", named for her size and how it was relative to her own mother, "Little Nanna". I also experienced "fetching" Big Nanna with fascination.

My mother recalls taking other family members to Lakeside Hospital only to find them vowing never to return. For me, fellow patients of Big Nanna clutching at me and saying that I was their grandson or son was amusing and interesting. My mother still occasionally, and unnecessarily, worries that she has scarred me for life.

Yet it was only this year that I realised how deeply these visits affected my sister. Deciding to volunteer once her youngest child was school-aged, Helene was moved during a stint at a Geelong organisation working with people struggling to maintain good mental health. Seeing first-hand that few people worked for significant stints in such organisations, Helene knew what she wanted to do.

"They're just like my grandmother..."

For Helene there was a very personal reason to come back to study, even though it was a challenge after leaving school disengaged and disinterested and after three children.

Like her brother, personal experience drew her to her work. Now it was also important that real life was reflected in her studies. Hearing about LGBT people makes sense to Helene, just as it makes sense to Malcolm to include them. Yet during my cuppa with him, Malcolm had cause to reflect.

"That's me...I know what I do in my classrooms, but I don't know if other teachers are giving those examples and how they're teaching it..."

When I asked Malcolm if there had been any opportunities to discuss this with his peers professionally, he said there hadn't.

This is not just about Malcolm's course, it happens with most Australian teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others, especially those in regional, rural and remote areas. Professional conversations invariably do not happen, which is why I start every professional development session I run with just that. The level of energy I observe in these conversation tells me everything I need to know about the LGBT climate: the more energetic, the more they've needed that very conversation.

Now, Malcolm sees some opportunity in the short and longer term.



"I think maybe some kind of [professional development] for teachers should be on offer...It probably needs to be a conscious issue of TAFEs to make sure that teachers are having a discussion about 'Are we having these conversations? What do you do? How do you do it?'..."

As is the story across regional, rural and remote (and let's be honest, metropolitan) Australia, again it is the individual, like Malcolm, rather than the organisation or institution leading the way on LGBT content.

In a local secondary school across town there might be a rare example of an exception to this rule. In contrast to most other educational institutions, [Ballarat-based] College seems to have a safe and supportive school environment that is a collective effort. Teacher, "Phoebe" explains.

"As a school our objective is to teach the skills, model the skills, and restorative justice is a priority...You look at the impact that you have on others...Whenever there is an issue with a student it gets back to the whole student...The emphasis is on developing people who care about others and their community..."

Phoebe rattled off an impressive list of professional development the school staff had undertaken in recent years. Whilst a list of people that just about any school would envy, too often I have seen schools that "talk" a lot, yet fail where it matters most: ensuring students feel safe and supported. So how does this school fare? Phoebe says LGBT students are a part of the school community.

"They're out and they're obviously saying it's a safe place to be... Other students are even being encouraged by LGBT students to come to the school...I don't think they'd see themselves as being labeled or picked on, but I don't exactly ask them or say, 'How has your day been?'..."

During our conversation, Phoebe considered if the demographics of



the school played a factor.

"I don't think it's seen as much of a big deal...Maybe in a way the kids are desensitised because they have so much going on that they don't see it as a big deal...I actually think there has been a big change and for me racism is probably a bigger issue in the community..."

Staff are said to feel comfortable in challenging homophobic language.

"We do challenge the way in which they use the word 'gay'..."

Phoebe thinks that 'gay' might be a 'softer' option that students believe they can get away with.

*"They won't say 'That's f*cked' because they know they'll get in trouble..."*

For Phoebe, challenging homophobia is about more than homophobia.

"I will have conversations especially with younger students where I'll say, 'That may be the view of your parents or your friend but it doesn't have to be your view'...It gets back to, 'If that was you, how would you feel'..."

And for Phoebe, she's in for the long haul.

"Immaturity might kick in there for a while, but eventually they start to get it...Well, it's a long term proposition..."

At school, LGBT students don't just rely on one teacher for support.

"If I think of the gay students I know they all have a significant person in the school who they can go to...That can be quite diverse...It can be any number of people, not necessarily the English teacher...It could be the woman running the 2nd hand book shop..."

And there are examples within the school curriculum.

"I know too that homophobia is tackled in our health curriculum... [Students] get it across a number of areas which I think is important... We see it as something that is important and to be discussed and taught about...It's not a topic that's shied away from by staff...If it comes up, you talk about it..."

Examples of LGBT friendliness are numerous.

"We've had male students take male partners to Valedictory Dinners... And we don't cancel, postpone or prevent...There are no judgments



passed on who you are with, you can bring a date that is female or male...We also have a few parents who are now in gay relationships and they're quite open about it and coming in to support their kids..."

I ask Phoebe about her background and she describes coming to the secondary school after starting as a primary school teacher.

This reminded me immediately of the praise that my former Kids Help Line manager, Pam (see Gold Coast blog), used to heap on primary school teachers, especially the respect they showed students as well as the time and care they took. Something tells me Pam would not be surprised at the role Phoebe is now playing at this secondary school.

For Phoebe, her move was a question of influence.

"What I found for me, I feel I'd have more of an impact with young people in influencing their transition from education to work...Kids who are happy and who are accepted do well and achieve more..."

Yet Phoebe is not professing that the school is perfect by any means. She made this point when I said that everyone reading about her school would want to go to school there, work there and visit there. Although not on 60 Minutes, there is a lot to learn from the experience of this school, including the lack of feeling that they have all the answers.

"It's not utopia..."

At this Ballarat school there is the gender divide that I have found across regional, rural and remote Australia.



"I'd say our girls are really out there compared to our boys here...Our boys probably come out later, the Year 11 or 12 mark...Our girls are probably the Year 9 and 10 mark...The girls are fairly dramatic and swapsy amongst their group...Maybe that's because there are more of them...[laughs]...I'd say that their behaviours are more concerning...It's about pushing boundaries...The boys like and encourage it, whereas the boys not so much...I think [the boys] relationships tend to be more outside of school...I think they're probably more stable...They kind of hold off a bit longer in making it public knowledge...They more come out to 1 or 2 people whereas the girls come out to everyone..."

I encourage Phoebe to give herself and her school a pat on the back, given that such teachers and schools are often surprised that they are an exception in regional, rural and remote (and again, let's face it, metropolitan) Australia. Yet as with the progressive school I discussed in Lismore (see Lismore blog), Phoebe had cause to reflect on the real impact for students.

"You have got me thinking though...Are we providing what they need?...Maybe we do need to have a chat and rethink...Ask them, 'Was there anything that we could do differently to support you?..."

One way that the school has been demonstrating support for it's LGBT students is through it's connection with local LGBT young people's support group, Zaque.

On a sporadically drizzly day in Ballarat I sat for a cuppa with "Karl" who heads up Zaque.

"I guess that Zaque is a well established program that schools are aware of...I think it's important to have links with the schools, whether it be through the school nurses or the Department of Education...It's important..."

Zaque, like most LGBT young people's projects took a while to hit it's stride.

"It was started 8 years ago...It was worker driven...There were two separate groups at that stage: 12-17 years, 17-25 years...As far as I know that only lasted a little while, I don't think it had the numbers, before it was given the heave ho...And then it started again 6 years ago...And it's evolved into the awesome program that it is now...[smiles]..."

The model is simple yet effective.

"We hold weekly meetings...We have a regular attendance of 12-15 young people...One week is our social activities, the other is our community development week where we work on community



awareness projects...Last night for example we talked about World AIDS Day...We're gonna try and turn the town hall red which I'm excited about...And it all comes from the young people..."

Zaque held a successful International Day Against Homophobia Homophobia (IDAHO; see Darwin blog) event this year.

"We held an IDAHO event earlier in the year, we had local sport clubs, members of Council....We had Greg Adkins from the [Anti-Violence Project] come up...It was good because it got the kids out of their comfort zone, like with the sports people and the high professional council members which helps break down those stereotypes, for both the Zaque guys and the guys that attended..."
antiviolence.info/]

Like many other LGBT projects, Zaque's online community is larger.

"[Zaque] has 130 on Facebook, 170 on MySpace and there's the small group of people that keep in contact via e-mail because they're not comfortable coming out yet..."

Almost inevitably our attention turns to the use of 'gay' amongst young people.

*"It's not tolerated in our space [i.e. Council drop-in space for young people], but it's everywhere...If I quiz them on it they'll be like, 'That's sh*t' and so I question them and they'll say, 'No I didn't say that'...I don't know if people understand what they're saying almost... Young people will say it and mean 'That's so dumb' or 'lame'..."*

Given the impact "that's so gay" has on a general LGBT-climate, I ask Karl what life is like for local LGBT young people. His assessment is sobering.



"Isolating...Depressive...Homophobic...Intolerant...It's definitely moving forward, but it's not moving forward at a pace that I'd like... There are still young people here that are abused and harassed at school and on the street..."



The list goes on. As a local who is born and bred, Karl can also talk about local changes.

*“Growing up in Ballarat, it’s changed from when I went to school to now...Whereas when I went to school you just beat the sh*t out of them without asking...Of course now they have their bullying policies which are good...But then a lot of schools will deal with the bullying but not the homophobia and not see that there is a difference...”*

There are plenty of stories that are as difficult to hear in Ballarat as anywhere else in regional Australia, yet there are good stories as well.



“The Zaque kids are so strong...I look at some of them and wish I had their strength when I was their age...They’re out at school and they put up with sh*t and deal with it in such a mature way... It’s great...I’m proud of where they’re at at the moment...I look at where they’ve come to in the last 18 months and it’s amazing...”

For Karl the key is community acceptance and, in particular, how schools handle LGBT students and homophobia, or not.

“I think some schools are doing great jobs and some schools are shoving it under the carpet and pretending it’s not there...And the bullying stuff is not always necessarily from kids, it can be teachers...I know a couple of guys who have experienced that, and some that still are now...”

Given Geelong’s proximity to Ballarat and the early regional Victorian interest in the Pride & Prejudice program, I know a little about teacher attitudes and approaches to homophobia in the region.

For the last five years I have been waking early on cold winter mornings to drive to Ballarat Grammar for an annual presentation to Year 9 students. Like other elite schools, Ballarat Grammar see Year 9 as a pivotal moment in a student’s academic life. Given brain development and hormone surges, Year 9 is seen to be a time for



less focus on the academics and more on emerging independence, relationships and community engagement.

Arriving at 8.45am each year having braved black ice, I stand before 150 students to start a 90-minute workshop that draws on such things as Kids Help Line, Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, The Simpsons and Challenging Homophobia 101. For years I declined offers for such presentations, given they were done in isolation (i.e. no other LGBT material was covered at the school).

Yet Ballarat Grammar impressed me. Rather than me presenting in isolation and without context, lead teacher, "Lisa" agreed with me that staff could use my visit as a springboard to further discussions. After 150 students have completed discussions, laughed a few times, self-reflected, answered and asked questions and heard from me, they then break up into their home room groups. Home group teachers then lead discussions thereafter, often with these continuing and/or being picked up on in the subsequent days and weeks. Lisa believes my time with the students is an icebreaker or warm-up for staff to then affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia.

In the lead-up to my Ballarat week I failed to account for Ballarat Grammar starting their school holidays one week earlier than government schools, and hence I missed a chance to have a cuppa with Lisa who has done so much for her students and their LGBT awareness over the years.

Last year I fielded questions from students, yet encouraged them to generate even more to discuss with their teachers and each other. These questions included:

Is it difficult being gay? What is it like?

Do you have a boyfriend? Do you live together?

Does it upset you that you can't biologically have a child together?

Would you choose to have a child?

Who supports you? Who is prejudiced?

Have you ever been abused? How do you put up with it?

Why do gay people not understand sport?

Why did the classical ages accept homosexuals but modern ages don't?

Do you choose to be gay, or is it like part of your DNA?

Do you think about women in a sexual way?

Do you think that you will ever change back? Do you want to change?

When did you find out / realise you were gay? How old were you?

Was there a reason for being gay?

Why do you talk to students about being gay?

Is it different addressing straight people rather than gays?

How did you tell your parents?

What was the reaction of your parents, friends?

How often have you lost friends because you have told them you are gay?



Have you ever had problems with other students, or teachers because you are gay?

Did you get teased when you came out?

Is your family supportive of your sexuality?

Did you have any issues at school when you came out?

Are you offended by some people's homophobic views?

Are you worried that people won't accept you?

Do you ever wish you weren't gay?

Do people ever tease you when you are giving talks at school?

How did you know?

Where can I get support or information?

What should you say to a friend if they tell you they are gay?

Although unable to have a cuppa with Lisa or her Year 9 colleagues, I would have a cuppa at the home of another Ballarat Grammar staff member, "Vin". Vin's wife, "Olly", had been recommended for a cuppa by "Neil" from Swan Hill (see Mildura blog).

On an overcast morning in Ballarat I shared a green tea with Olly who had worked at a particular private school in Ballarat. Early in her teaching career Olly had decided she wanted to teach in remote communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. We compared notes and it's clear that these challenging experiences have impacted on her, and shaped the way she sees the world and her work.

Whilst talking all things challenging homophobia, I decided that this cuppa was one where I would put down the pen and enjoy. And so our interview instead became a conversation.

I had been interested in hearing about Olly's experiences of her former, recent, school given the stories I had heard over the years. One of those was the PhD student who re-evaluated Pride & Prejudice last year. His supervisor for his thesis had actually looked at levels of homophobia amongst staff and students at said school a few years ago and found it could not be any worse. Olly confirmed that it was all, unfortunately, true.

"Every single sentence has 'That's gay' in it...I had it banned from my classroom...They actually got used to it, every student knew...But it's absolutely rife, it didn't do much..."

Unlike the male staff members, the female staff at the school are open to affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia.

"All the women at [Ballarat school] are supportive of something being done..."

A number of times Olly made reference to the size and potential impact of my national tour, yet I kept bringing her back to an idea



touched on by this recent article:

www.sstar.net.au/soap-box/2010/09/02/the-power-of-one/13907

I try to remind people that it's the everyday conversations generated by the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour that will lead to change. Rather than thinking we have to do something extraordinary, instead we could think about what we can do with the people around us. For example, I asked Olly to reframe her classroom ban on "that's so gay". If nothing else, she provided one dissident voice in a seeming sea of homophobia at her former school. As someone who has supported LGBT young people since the mid-90s, I can clearly say that young people report that such dissident voices are heard louder than most could expect.

Extending that idea I used examples Olly and Vin had used of gay people they knew making a difference by being themselves and living their everyday lives as openly gay. Vin agreed.

"It's like with [Neil] and my cousins...They're blokey blokes, but they do alright with him now...They love him..."

During our cups of green tea Neil would call. Somehow (J) he had found out about my international LGBT tennis success and, being back home in Ballarat for the holidays, wanted to play tennis. After a pre-recorded interview for the ABC I found myself hitting tennis balls for the first time in too many months.

Yet before I left I had Olly loading me up with green tea. I'd been fascinated by her special kettle that had a green tea button which ensured the water would be boiled to 80 degrees. Apparently this means the green tea is not burnt and won't have that bitter taste.

According to Olly, she and others had to get thinking about how I could be funded and better looked after so that I could continue with my important work. With a ziplock bag of green tea I left with a spring in my step, a smile on my face and a feeling of gratitude.

Olly was having none of it.

"Daniel, it's an honour..."

