

# BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

## A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

# LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK THIRTY-ONE, (WARRNAMBOOL)  
JUST AS HARD, IF NOT HARDER: MAN CRUSHES,  
GRAND FINAL REPLAYS AND CHAIN SAWS AT 80FT

*"I'm not going 38 weeks without sex!...Can I take my partner?..."*

Seated in a Youth Café In Warrnambool, just past the end of the Great Ocean Road, I had encouraged a group of local teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others to start talking with one another ahead of a little professional development Beyond 'That's So Gay' style.

The three questions I wanted people to talk about in pairs, or in threes, were:

1. What would you be doing if you were not here this afternoon?
2. If I told you that you were going on a 38-week national challenging homophobia tour, what would be the first thing/s that popped into your head?
3. What is one expectation you had about the time we'll be spending together this afternoon?

The second question provoked the most energy and discussion.

*"If it was all being paid for I'd say, 'Beauty, pub crawl!'..."*

*"I'd want to take my kids..."*

*"Is it already organised?..."*

*"I don't want to go to the schools...Can someone else go to the schools?..."*

*"I'm arrogant, I'd say, 'Let's go'..."*

Understandably, upon reflection, people had some questions.

*"I needed some qualifiers...I'm a nester, but I would love that...I wouldn't start it from scratch, but I guess you've already paved the way..."*

Others were busily doing some good humoured self-assessment.

*"Oh god, that would be exhausting...I like an adventure, but 38 weeks is a bit much...I'm not*



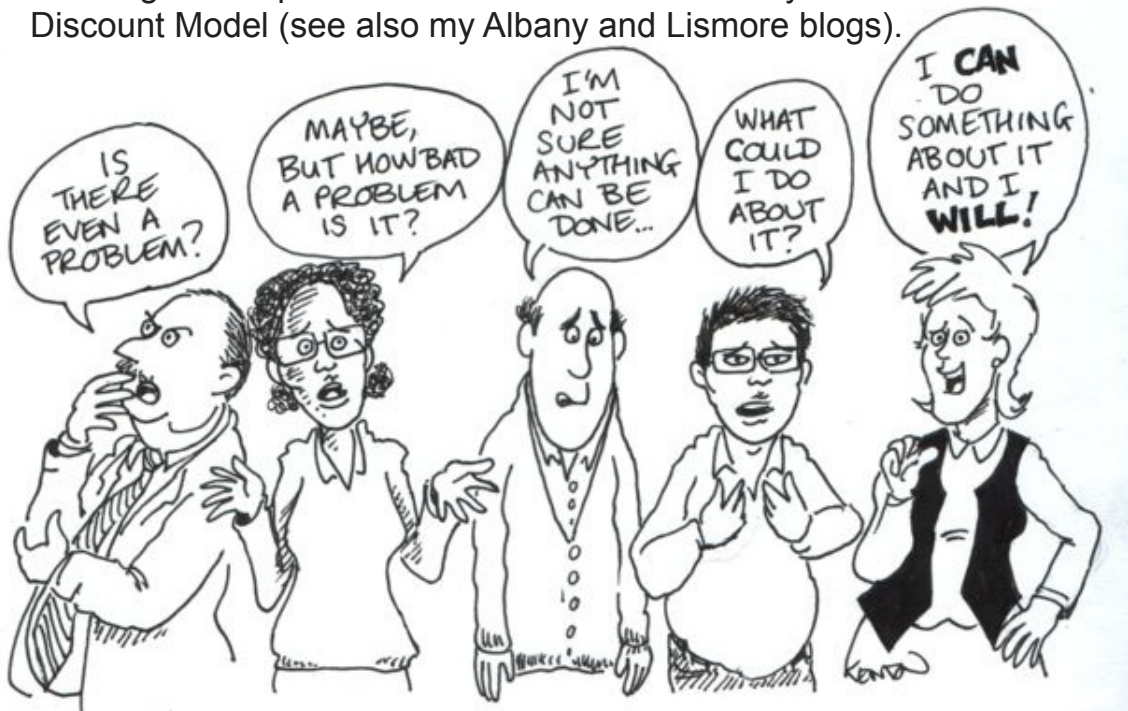
*dependent, but 38 weeks is a really long time...[laughs]...*

It was fortunate that I had participants talking, because the local newspaper arrived to do an interview and photo of the afternoon. Whilst I enjoyed the brief interview, I had some attention diverted to the reporter's colleague. I can honestly say I have never met a more alluring, cheeky and flirtatious photographer. Had I not been about to commence professional development I would have asked him out "for coffee". Yes all of that talk of how LONG 38 weeks is was not lost on me.

I joke often, when asked if I have a partner, that I do have a boyfriend: this national challenging homophobia tour. I add that occasionally he lets me see other people and that I'm sure it's not going to be a long-term thing.

In this instance my "boyfriend" whacked me on the leg and reminded me of what was important.

What was important was giving the gathered teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others a means to assess how ready their school, community group and/or organisation was to challenge homophobia and affirm sexual diversity. I introduced the Discount Model (see also my Albany and Lismore blogs).



[The Discount Model, the foundation that I have built my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay'* around, says that people will only take action when they have moved through some key stages:

- Existence (it actually exists here)
- Significance (it's not just one or two locals who move to Melbourne)
- Solvability (it's possible for us to do something to support people ourselves)
- Self (it's something that is relevant and achievable for me personally)
- Action (I have no excuses, I have to do something)]



One teacher was certain of the readiness of her school.

*“Many of our staff don’t believe [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students] exists...They just don’t believe in it...We’re pre-Existence...It doesn’t exist, it can’t exist...”*

Her colleague added that there was not a culture of challenging and interrupting homophobic language. Yet other problematic language is.

*“If a teacher in a classroom situation overheard a student saying something to an Indigenous or Asian student, they’d crack down on it...Even girls in trade classes if they get a hard time...But you hear, ‘faggot’, ‘that’s gay’, ‘suck my d\*ck’, sh\*t like that because it’s OK...”*

Not that the school doesn’t have policies around bullying and discrimination.

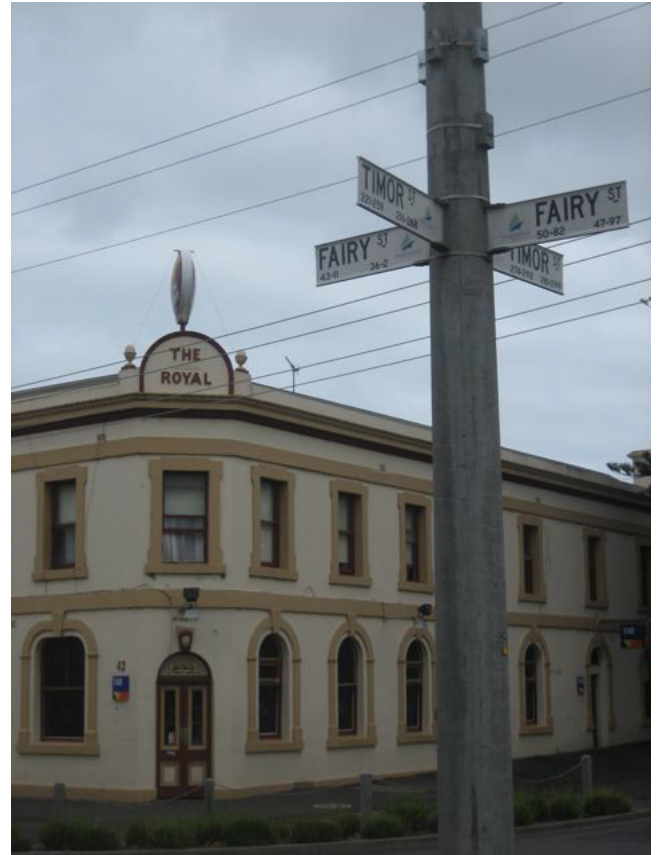
*“They say, ‘We have a policy’...They are so used to saying that at our [school] that they don’t even know if there is a policy, where it is, if it exists...”*

It seems that schools might be reluctant because of students being “pulled out”.

*“They look at all the problems rather than the problem of young people being vilified for being gay...[They] would be worried about students going back and saying, ‘We’ve talked about gay sh\*t in class’...That [they] would be concerned and pull them out...They wouldn’t, but that’s the fear...”*

Yet some teachers in Warrnambool have had better experiences with their schools.

*“I’ve had parents say they’re glad that their boys are [at my school] because they can be themselves...There’s a lot of those words used, but I’ve also heard teachers pulling kids up on it...[The school staff] would like to be as supportive as they can...It’s a positive place, but there is a lot to be done...”*





Bucking the trend of most schools, it was this teacher's Principal, and not welfare staff, that circulated information promoting the Beyond 'That's So Gay' professional development to all staff.

However it must be said that this was held in school holidays. Way back in the first week of my 38-week adventure, I had delivered a one-day training session for teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others. One of those attending was the manager of Brophy Family & Youth Services who persuaded me to head to Warrnambool on the other side of my tour.



Originally not on my itinerary, I decided to venture to south-west Victoria during a natural downtime in the tour: school holidays. Hence any attempts to engage local schools and teachers was going to be a challenge.

This was perhaps reflected in the numbers, which local LGBT project worker, "Rose".

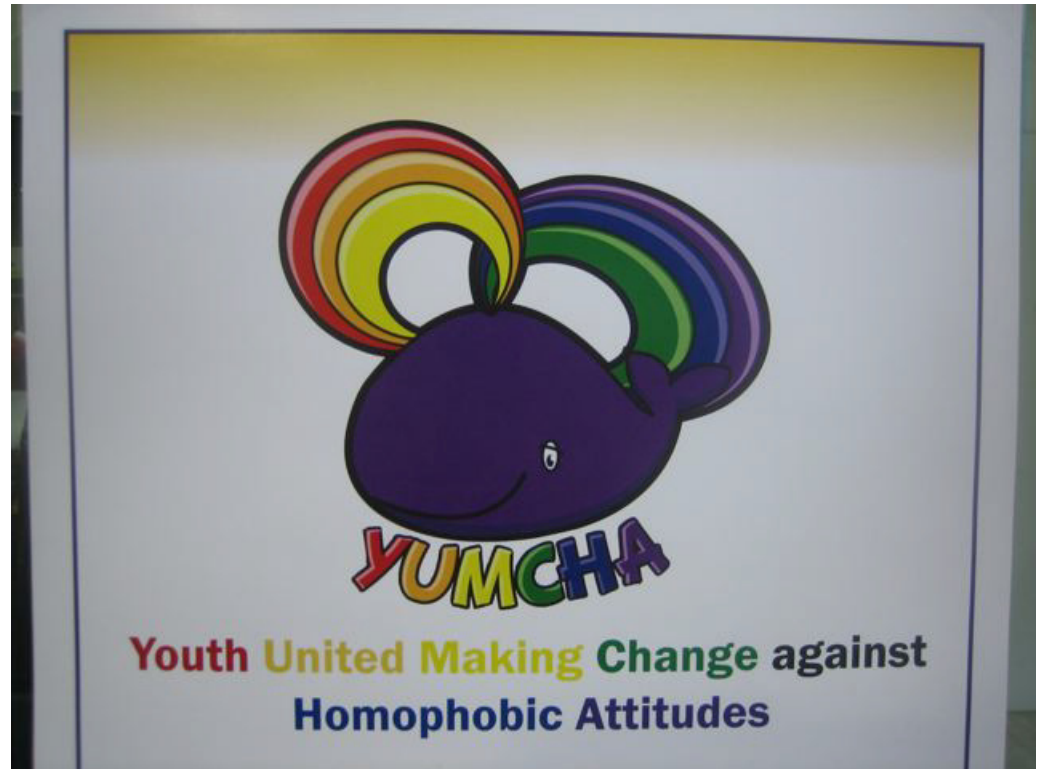
*"I thought there would be a room full of [welfare teachers], ready to go help counteract the homophobia that is so absolutely rampant in south-west Victoria..."*

The truth is that there rarely is unless you are holding something in a metropolitan area on the east coast of Australia. And then, comparatively given the number of schools and teachers in those cities, it's still a small yet significant crowd. That means two things to me: 1. Make sure what I do with those teachers and schools that do come is as high quality as possible and encourages them to talk with their colleagues and peers thereafter; and, 2. On this tour I need



to go to schools and teachers more often than not (see almost every blog :-)).

If anyone was going to get a crowd, it was going to be Rose. As the facilitator of Warrnambool's YUMCHA group (Youth United Making Changes against Homophobic Attitudes), Rose has worked as hard as anyone in regional and rural Australia to support LGBT young people and engage local teachers and health professionals.



According to Rose, some people believe that YUMCHA is just for LGBT young people. Not so.

*"[YUMCHA] is probably perceived as a gay group, but it's not... We don't discuss anyone's sexuality...I don't even know members' sexuality, nor is it anyone's business..."*

**[In the coming weeks I will discuss WayOut, a regional and rural Victoria project challenging homophobia that works with several communities, including Warrnambool.]**

YUMCHA is based on a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), a US model gaining popularity in Australia, where the focus of any grouping or project is challenging homophobia, rather than the support of LGBT young people. Not that this doesn't happen of course. It just negates a need for self-identification.

Rose has had to re-evaluate her beliefs about how much homophobia young people are experiencing.

*"Before I started this job I thought that they did have it better these days*



*because of the role models, the media, the internet...But in fact I find they've got it just as hard, if not harder because of the technology... They can't always escape it...In my day if I was bullied in high school at least I knew once I got out of that environment I knew I was safe... Kids these days can have it 24/7..."*

Not that Rose is getting too caught up in who had it worse when. There is always the bottomline.

*"I guess it's apples and oranges...Any form of bullying: estranged from your peers, feeling awkward in your formative years...I thought it would be easier but having worked with the YUMCHA crew on their issues and supporting them, they're still getting kicked out of home, beaten up on the street, harassed at school...The terror they must go through..."*



Rose offered just one example.

*"[A young man] recently said he was terrified of [his parents] finding out because his mother is always talking about when he gets married... His father openly ridicules anything gay on the TV..."*

Perhaps the rise in examples of LGBT people on the small screen is not automatically a reassuring thing for all LGBT young people.





What does reassure the young people involved in YUMCHA, the YUMCHAians, is what they can do to challenge homophobia locally. Rose lists examples.

*"We've had YUMCHA wristbands, 5 or 6 local newspaper articles, no homophobia at all youth events pushed, a short film: A World Upside Down..."*

**['A World Upside Down' plays with the idea of a world where 90% of people are gay and 10% are heterosexuals.]**

I was fortunate enough to have lunch with the YUMCHAians, when they visited their counterparts in Colac. They explained a project to put rainbow stickers.

*"We'd ask for the manager or owner and explain what we were doing... It was really good..."*



There was the occasional resistance.

*"There were a couple who said they would and still haven't put it up... There were a couple of flat out 'No's..."*

Yet the real story is that the YUMCHAians achieved a mostly positive reaction from local shop owners. In their explanation it was clear that the clearly positive reaction from most was what young people were focusing on rather than a few less positive reactions.

It's small wins like this that make a difference, especially when those around you are not so accepting. For young man, challenging



homophobia in a trade course was not something he was contemplating anytime soon.

*"It'd be pretty hard to stand up to everyone..."*

Sitting for lunch with the YUMCHAians in Colac, I mentioned that my first boyfriend actually came from Colac. I explained that we used to take it in turns catching the train between Colac and my hometown of Geelong each weekend for stolen moments.

*"Awwwwwwwww..."*



In the times before the internet I was home alone soon after turning 18. Yet to finish Year 12 I was flicking through Melbourne's tabloid newspaper. Each week I looked at a section in the classifieds titled 'Seeks Same'. I almost dropped the paper when I saw an ad for an 18 year old guy in Geelong seeking the same. "Jake" lied about being from Geelong, he was from Colac, and being 18, he was 17, yet we ended up meeting and becoming boyfriends.

Jake was gobsmacked by the number of guys in Colac and Geelong who left messages on the telephone service attached to the classifieds. He says that I got the nod because I left two messages. I'd called back because I thought my first message was not comprehensive enough. For once my teenage awkwardness got me over the line in affairs of the heart.

It was with fondness that I returned to Colac, in the years after Jake and I were no longer together, to support local LGBT young people who had no other option than to access the Geelong-based support





project, GASP! (see Geelong blog). A few years later I was speaking with whole year levels at local schools in a model similar to the one I described last week (see Ballarat blog).

I also worked with local teachers and health professionals to build their confidence in delivering the Pride & Prejudice program locally. One teacher who attended that training in 2005, and training I delivered for Kids Help Line thereafter, dropped into the lunch to excitedly report that Pride & Prejudice was still being delivered each year in Colac schools. Go school based nurses.

Back at lunch I asked whether all the YUMCHAians were born and bred in Warrnambool. One young woman said she was not.

*"I'm from Laidley, it's like forever outside of Brisbane..."*

*Me: "I actually was in Laidley for two nights when I was in Brisbane... My Gay Queensland comes from Laidley and I was invited to come out to stay there by his family..."*

*"You know Laidley!?...Oh my god!..."*



All in all the lunch with the YUMCHAians was an enjoyable one. After talking about my project and hearing some of their experiences, Rose put on a DVD they'd made and then loaded up a recent 60 Minutes segment about homophobic bullying in schools that had only aired the night before.

It was clear that Rose and the YUMCHA participants get along like a house on fire.

*"I think I get along well with them...I talk to them like they're adults... Moreso like a Mother Hen [laughs], but in a funny way, they know I care about them...I also drummed into them that I am not a counselor...If they want one of those they can go upstairs..."*

Brophy Family & Youth Services in Warrnambool is an impressive building that houses a range of youth and community organisations. "Upstairs" is the local headspace office (see Albany blog). The



opening of the building could very well go down as a small place in LGBT history. The visiting Australian Governor-General would meet some young people from YUMCHA.

*"She came to open the building and met some of the YUMCHA crew and was so impressed that she wore her rainbow wristband for the next 3 days of her tour [of Warrnambool]..."*

**[As an aside I did meet one of the staff from Government House in Canberra whilst in a sea of gay men looking at their iPhones in Canberra (see Canberra blog). It's safe to say that, as with the Queen, the Governor-General likes male staff who enjoy the company of other men.]**



Rose feels that her most important role is mentor.

*"The role that I'm playing in Warrnambool is being a paid mentor... This matters, and it still matters and we need to do with it the best we can..."*

And it seems she is not alone in wanting to make a local difference. In contrast to most other regional and rural areas, Warrnambool seems to have a local adult LGBT community that is directly supporting local LGBT young people financially.

*"I've been involved with the Warrnambool Gay & Lesbian Party Network, I've lived in a regional area and I know what it's like to not have opportunities to meet and gather with peers...Older, stable poofs and dykes who are settled and financially stable know that and have the time and money to put in to make these events happen..."*

Not that it's just local adult LGBT people.

*"I go to the footy club every Friday night to do the meat tray raffles... Yes I do...[laughs]...And each week they ask me how YUMCHA is going: the success stories, any problems, things they can help with, donations they can make...These are old cockies, potato farmers and the like...They are absolutely horrified that any child should be kicked out of home for any reason because they love their children*



and grandchildren...”

Despite being involved in events to raise funds for YUMCHA over the years, Rose has only recently taken on the group as project worker. She first had direct contact with YUMCHAians as a guest speaker.

*“I was invited to talk to YUMCHA four years ago...I was very open about my sexuality at work...I was asked because I grew up in a regional area and to talk about my story of growing up gay in the country...And plus I wrote a gay and lesbian soap opera called Gaybours, basically my thoughts on being out and what worked for me...I have about 60 episodes written...”*

It took an invite to PRIDE March as a chaperone with YUMCHA for Rose to decide how much she wanted the role.

*“I remember being at PRIDE March and thinking, ‘This would be the best job in the world, god I’d do this for free, don’t tell anyone I said that...[laughs]...I hadn’t wanted anything so much in my life...I lusted after this job...[laughs]...”*

When the former YUMCHA project worker left and asked Rose to apply, she did so. Receiving the news she’d been successful was a big moment.



*“I think I burst [my manager’s] ear drum because I screamed...”*

I put it to Rose that it’s rare for any LGBT project worker, especially in regional, rural and remote Australia, to see this work as ‘just a job’. Rose agreed that working with YUMCHA is so much more than a job, and perhaps this comes partly from her own story.

*“I grew up in Ballarat...I went to high school up until Year 11...As far as my sexuality was concerned, I didn’t know what the words were but I knew I felt different...I knew I was attracted to women, I fantasised about living in a relationship with a woman, but I had no peers...I knew no-one...I knew no gay people...The only gay people I knew were two old gay guys who ran the local restaurant and basically they were the joke of the town...They said that they used to have orgies*





*up there and were ridiculed..."*

Like so many women in regional and rural areas, sport, and in particular women's AFL football, proved to be an important avenue for coming out.

*"I loved footy as a kid and was pissed off I couldn't play...I didn't even know there was a Ballarat footy team...There was an article in the paper..."*



I asked Rose to elaborate on the appeal of footy to women who love women.

*"It's not girly, it's not netball, it's not heterosexual...50-75% of the women were lesbian or bisexual...It's rugged, it's masculine...I guess it's what attracts the inner dyke...Even though there are some stereotypes, I do believe some stereotypes are true...We have to send very clear signals to other people that we are what we are..."*

The subject of football, and meeting Rose in the week of the (first) AFL Grand Final seemed almost prophetic. Twenty years ago when Collingwood won the 1990 AFL Grand Final, Rose had her first kiss with a woman.

*"I met women from other [footy] teams, especially in Melbourne, so I started spending a lot of time in Melbourne and led a double life... Almost 20 years ago to the day when Collingwood was in the Grand Final, a few of the girls and I went out to celebrate because they were Collingwood supporters like me...One woman I didn't even know was a lesbian, because she had kids, but apparently she fancied me...I was at the bar and turned and she kissed me...I got tangled up in a bar stool and fell into the ashtray...It was the most wonderful time of my life...At that stage..."*

Rose's search for the non-conventional led her to work in a trade.

*"I did a non-traditional program that was an all-female class...We learnt a lot of trades, that's how I became a horticulturalist...I used*



*to climb 100ft pine trees around Lake Wendouree with chainsaws, knives and secateurs...I was terrified of heights but I had to do it...I was in an all-male class and I had to prove something to them, and myself I guess..."*

Before long respect was achieved, Rose had proved herself and joined the men doing all aspects of the job, including becoming the first woman in Victoria to receive a qualification to allow her to work around power lines. But success did not negate how her job affected her personally.

*"The amount of times we'd be up 80 feet and start the chainsaw... You'd start the chainsaw and there would be a family of possums and you were destroying their home...I had to get out of it because it went against everything I stood for...And I like a bit of safety..."*

Following her heart to Warrnambool has reaped benefits for Rose both personally and professionally. Working with YUMCHA fits with her view in life.



*"If it ain't right then you've gotta fix it..."*

I was fortunate to spend enough time with Rose to start missing my lesbian friends (I joke with people that I was raised in my formative gay years by lesbians). Sitting with Rose, her partner and one of their best friends for lunch I delighted in the company of women who were not overly concerned, apologetic or delicate about being women who loved women (incidentally this best friend told me she had been a former Youth Director with the Old (Sydney Gay & Lesbian) Mardi Gras and on a committee that produced 'Not Without My Doona' a key document in creating Sydney's Twenty10).

And so yet again I left a regional, rural or remote area of Australia wishing I could stay a little longer. Rose might have felt the same way as she embraced me goodbye.

*"I think I've developed a man crush..."*

