

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK THIRTY-THREE, (SHEPPARTON)
TALKING ABOUT OUR KIDS AGAIN: LGBT FISH 'N' CHIPS AND
BEING TRUMPED BY A PUPPY AND A FLUFFY DUCKLING

*"Now I have to remember how to be a youth worker again...
[laughs]"*

That would make two of us.

Now CEO of Uniting Care-Cutting Edge (UCCE), Ro reflected on how long it had been since she started at UCCE as a youth worker. She and I had been asked to facilitate UCCE's 'Diversity' program, a support group for local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people, for the first of three hours, something we were both happy to do.



Diversity facilitator Damien had an unavoidable clash with some charity commitments, interestingly only because two same sex attracted young women had suggested Diversity get behind that very cause. This meant that for the first hour Ro and I were going back to our youth work roots, some ten years ago.

I first met Ro in Sydney whilst attending a meeting for Outlink (see Mt Gambier blog), the Rodney Croome-led, Australian Human Rights Commission's predecessor to the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour. Like myself, Ro had been asked by Rodney to be on Outlink's Management Committee of LGBT young people and LGBT service providers. Keen to have representation from every state and territory, as well as gender balance, Ro and I represented Victoria.

The original Outlink class of April 2000 has gone on to many a great and varied thing, and Ro's story has been impressive professionally and personally.

Ro has grown UCCE into a remarkable organisation (www.ucce.org.au) that rightfully describes itself as "a frontline rural support agency, working with marginalised communities of disadvantage in the North-East [of Victoria]". A regular for years in chairing such peak youth organisations as the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and state government committees in employment and training, Ro only just recently retired as the chair of Victoria's Ministerial Advisory Committee for LGBT Health. Personally, Ro has also built a home for her partner and her daughter.

In the years following the Outlink project, it was Ro who helped navigate it through waters of broken funding promises and a need to re-strategise. It was UCCE that auspiced Outlink when the Australian Human Rights Commission wanted to pass it to a regional organisation.

When I needed a means to drive around the country for this national challenging homophobia tour, it was UCCE who provided a nominal lease on the vehicle now known as Bruce Ford. It was UCCE who also auspiced Beyond 'That's So Gay' so that individuals could make tax deductible donations to put diesel into a thirsty Bruce Ford. Then it was UCCE staff who have supported me remotely over the duration of the tour whenever I had questions about my vehicle for the year or matters of donations.



Years on Ro is still the same person I met when she was starting the first regional LGBT young people's support group in Victoria, Freedom, in conjunction with Family Planning Victoria, and LGBT young people's support pioneer, Ian Seal. Now making pita-bread pizzas with a small group of LGBT young people, this would be Ro's and my third dinner together for the week and yet again a thoroughly enjoyable one.

After Damien's return for the second and



third hour, and Ro's departure to complete a report for her board of management, we all sat around rather content from our pizza making efforts. I was interested in hearing about local LGBT young people's experiences as well as their time with Diversity.

Each told a different tale about coming to the group. One young man found out in a neighbouring town to Shepparton.

"I found out through the [local] fish and chip shop...[The woman serving] saw I had a spray on tattoo of the gay male symbol and asked me if I knew about [Diversity]..."

Some took their time in coming to Diversity but talked about finding solace in it's existence.

"I knew it was there but I didn't feel comfortable coming because I wasn't comfortable then..."

For most it was a simple formula for success.

"Because it's fun...You get to meet nice people and eat lots of food..."

I put to the young people that some would question the need for an LGBT young people's group given that things were better these days. One young man was clear that Diversity was vital in his development.

"I needed it when I was younger because I didn't know anyone else who was gay...I needed to meet people who were going through similar stuff to me, being gay and in the country...Because not every gay person is going to use the internet...And it's a safe place to be gay, so you're not picked on for being gay..."

When I asked young people to describe their place, Shepparton, I got a similar response to the one I've heard from across regional, rural and remote Australia.

"It's crap...I'm sorry but that's the first thing that comes into my head when you ask that...I think it's a bit of a boring place..."



Echoing the comments of young people across the country, one young man highlighted a seeming lack of things to do.

Echoing the comments of young people across the country, one young man highlighted a seeming lack of things to do.

“I’d say it’s a dump...There’s nothing much to do...There’s shopping and coffee, but that’s it...”

Young people report from across the country that they have two options to pass the time: sport and drinking. I knew that Shepparton had a strong regional tennis competition having made an annual pilgrimage to the town’s Easter Tennis Tournament with my gay doubles partner and lesbian mixed doubles partner for six years. I also knew that everyone was more interested in drinking than playing tennis (which incidentally, despite my lack of alcohol consumption, still hasn’t helped my playing record there :-)).



One young woman talked about how she felt the city and the country differed.

*“You have no idea, the city is so different...In the cities it doesn’t matter, you can blend in...But if you are different in the country... When I go to Melbourne it’s amazing...People dress the way they want and do what they want...They just don’t give a sh*t...”*

Despite hearing about what was less than ideal in Shepparton, I also observed and heard many reasons why young people loved, sometimes albeit begrudgingly, their place and the people around them.



"I don't think it's as bad as people make out..."

One young man saw the irony of his comfort levels in Shepparton after a recent experience in Melbourne.

"I can walk down the street here and not get anything...But I was in Melbourne the other day and some guy wound down the window and yelled out, 'Faggot!'...So there you go, Melbourne is more homophobic than Shepparton..."

As always I ended my time with local LGBT young people by asking about their hopes for the future. Here are a few.

"I want the same rights as my brothers and sisters...That I can do everything that they do..."

"No discrimination, full stop...And I'd be very happy and the world would be a better place..."

"I don't believe we'll get world peace or anything like that...I hope to figure out what to do with the rest of my life..."

"A job, my own place, travel, to find someone..."

"To be really rich and to have a partner..."

"To stop homophobia..."



In the same space where Diversity met, I'd sat a week earlier talking with local parents for the monthly Parents and Friends of Lesbians



and Gays (PFLAG) meeting for Greater Shepparton. It would be fair to say that those gathered could have been parents from anywhere in Australia. Stories were shared of a variety of reactions to their sons and daughters coming out at LGB or T. One mother described her reaction to her son coming out as gay.

"I wasn't bothered when he came out as gay...I was more shocked when he came out and told me he smoked...Just think, all those times I needed a smoke and he had them hidden all that time..."

I was lucky enough to have a cuppa with a tireless, no-nonsense PFLAG mum, "Phyllis", who has been instrumental in seeing PFLAG through it's first year.

Phyllis' road to PFLAG started when her own son, "Alan" came out to her and her husband, "Bob".

"We handled it pretty well when [Alan] came out...We found out that he was gay, he had just finished uni...I'd come home from tenpin bowling on a Wednesday night...He said, 'One of my friend's has committed suicide'...I said, 'Did you tell your dad?', and he hadn't...I went and got [Bob] and [Bob] said, 'Your friend wasn't gay, was he?'... And he was was...It was pretty horrifying...There was a group of maybe 2 or 3 young guys who had committed suicide...We took him the next day to a family counselor..."



Soon after, Alan came out to his father.

"[Alan] told his dad he was gay on a Saturday night...I'd gone out...I know now why [Bob] did stay home, because it was his way of finding



out...He just came out and asked [Alan]..."

According to Phyllis, Bob needed an answer from Alan.

"[Bob] is the sort of person who digs to find an answer, he's an [tradesman]...He wouldn't have been satisfied unless he found out... And he knew if he did confront [Alan] that he would find out and perhaps that's why he wanted to do it without me there..."

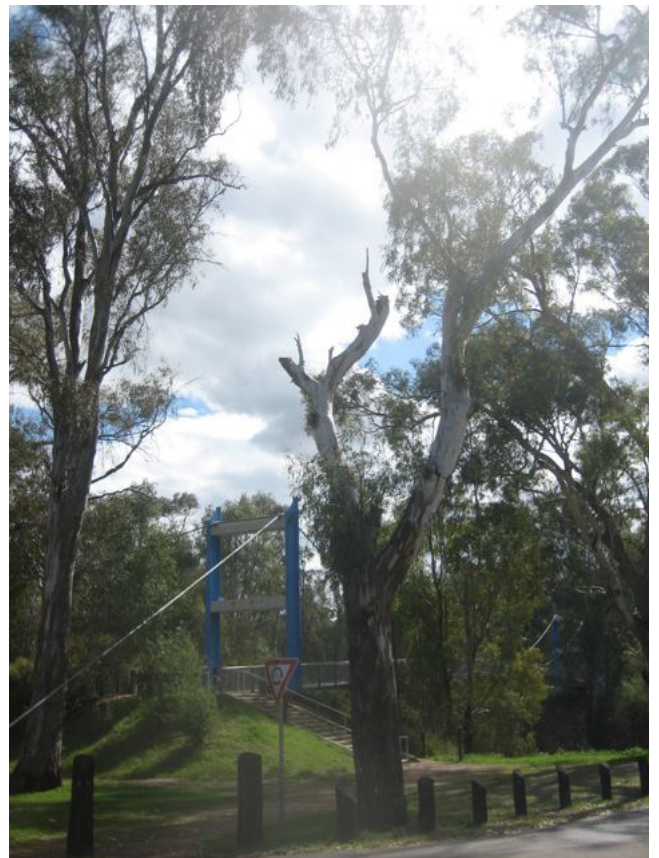
When Phyllis came home, all was revealed.

"When I came home [Bob] said, '[Alan's] got something to tell you', and 'Alan' said, 'I'm gay'...I said, 'OK'...It was really horrible, [Alan] cried...I've never seen him cry so hard...I guess it would have been a huge relief to him..."

At first, Phyllis experienced isolation.

"I suppose I felt isolated... To stay involved I joined [local LGBT group] GV Pride as a secretive member...Then [Alan's partner] mentioned about PFLAG...I said, 'Couldn't we do something here, even if it was meeting as a group to have a cup of coffee?'..."

A roadtrip to PFLAG Melbourne and a local newspaper article later, and PFLAG was up and running.



"I think we've helped a lot of people...I really think we've made a difference...I just wished there'd been a PFLAG when [Alan] came out and I would have been there quick smart..."

For their first anniversary, the group called Shelley Argent, PFLAG stalwart and celebrity, as well as Australian Story subject. It was Shelley who encouraged Phyllis to tell one of her best friends about Alan. Like many parents of LGBT young people, Phyllis and Bob had differing views on who to tell, when and if at all. Phyllis felt the strain of having only Bob, Alan and GV Pride to talk to about it.

"I've always wanted to talk to someone outside that circle...Shelley said, 'I think it's time you talked to someone else'...So I told my



girlfriend...She said she had thought [Alan] was gay...I asked her why and she said, 'I don't know, it's just a feeling I had'...It was such a relief...I didn't have to hide...Before she and I used to talk about our kids, but then I stopped...Now we can talk about our kids again..."

Whereas Phyllis can at times be reluctant to talk to others about her son, "Lydia" is not at all. Phyllis describes Lydia and the impact she has on other parents.

"She's like a breath of fresh air...The way she talks and laughs and whatever would surely make people feel like it's not so bad...I basically have to force her to come along sometimes..[laughs]..."



Lydia knows it.

"I don't think I have to go to the meetings, but [Phyllis] gets me at a weak moment... [laughs]..."

I first met Lydia at the meeting she was very blunt about who she was.

"I call a spade a spade..."

Later over a cuppa, Lydia elaborated on how she deals with people's discomfort.

*"Me?...I'm a sh*t stirring bitch..."*

Lydia actively lets people know about her son, "Colin" and puts people in their place if she smells homophobia.

"I get so annoyed when people start with all that...They ask if [Colin] has a girlfriend...I say, 'He's got [Matt]'...'Who's [Matt]?'...'Oh, you didn't know [Colin] was gay?...The later this woman said, 'Oh wouldn't it be awful if you lived up the road from a gay person'...I thought, 'Eventually it'll click in with her...'"

For Lydia, she can't understand the commotion LGBTness can cause.

"I don't think it's really such a big deal...And I think 'What's the



fuss?’...”

Colin had not come out to Lydia until he was 26 years old, although Lydia had tried to find out much sooner.

“I did ask him when he was 19, and he said ‘Definitely not’...

Then a family joke turned a little more serious.

“He’d been out and I asked, ‘Did you meet a nice young lady?’...I used to say that as a joke to all my boys...This time in backfired because we were sitting at the table and he said, ‘Mum, I don’t like girls. Mum, I’m gay’...I thought, ‘Right. That’s got to click in with the brain, doesn’t it?’...So we sat and talked about his life...I said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me? You could have written me a letter, or said, ‘Mum, sit down, I’ve got something to tell you’...[Colin] said, ‘I thought you might throw me out. I don’t want you to see me any differently’...I said, ‘Stand up. No, I don’t see you any differently’...”

Not that Lydia didn’t question it all at first.

“You go through a lot of guilt at first, like, ‘What did I do wrong?’...I didn’t do anything wrong, it’s just one of those things...As a child he basically did all the same things, climbed trees, broke his arm...”

Lydia felt unable to tell her husband who was dying of cancer, even though at one stage he told her he thought it was probably the case. Perhaps it was death that gave Lydia perspective on Colin being gay.



“My daughter died when she was 16, so we went through hell for a bit...When my daughter died I still had two sons to think about...Then when [Lydia’s husband] died I still had two sons who’d had a tough time because of their sister...I say to people, ‘If you wanted a gay son or a dead daughter, I know which one I’d choose’...”

Lydia sees that Colin experiences double standards, such as when he and Matt had a commitment ceremony, even if Lydia doesn’t like the name.



"The commitment ceremony...It sounds like they are being committed to a mental institution...It's a marriage...It was a lovely wedding... Everyone who went said it was the best wedding they've ever been to..."

There were some extended family members who refused to attend.

"Like my brother said he has no problems with [Colin]...Him being gay is the least of his worries, but he wouldn't be going because it's not legal..."

Some who did attend, were scared that Colin and Matt might be openly affectionate with each other.

"They don't touch each other in public, and they are aware of that... Some were like, 'Oh, what if [Colin] and [Matt] do something on the dancefloor'...They have this idea that they run around naked all the time making mad passionate love..."

Now Colin and Matt are not being invited to other extended family gatherings, which has ruffled the feathers of Colin's brother.

"He has said, 'if [Colin] and [Matt] aren't invited, then he's not going'... And I said, 'If you're not going, I'm not going'...So basically if they're not invited, it's not a family thing to us..."



Lydia's hope is that Colin will not be treated differently.

"It doesn't worry me, but it worries me that they'll treat [Colin] differently...We had family members where it was expected that he



would go around and tell them he's gay, and I said, 'Why? When did [Colin's brother] come around and tell you he was heterosexual?...'"

Lydia draws parallels with how the family treated her after her daughter died and how they now treat her after her son coming out,

"We got treated much the same as after [my daughter] died...People sort of avoid you...Well, been there, done that..."

Not that Lydia is expecting a change anytime soon.

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SHEPPARTON NEWS, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2010



La Trobe University engaging with the local community

La Trobe University offers many programs to encourage staff and students to engage with the community. Programs that foster a sense of community spirit and student engagement are:

Career Mentoring

The Student Career Mentoring Program links recent graduates and students with qualified industry professionals. The program operates across Bendigo, Albury-Wodonga, Mildura campuses and a pilot program is being rolled out at the Regional School of Business in Shepparton.

The La Trobe Award

Students who volunteer on or off campus are eligible to take part in the La Trobe Award, which formally recognises a student's contribution to their community. On completion of a university qualification, students receive official recognition of volunteering activities and your completed training modules issued.

Intelligence Peer Mentoring

Designed to get to the heart of science and mathematics, La Trobe students are placed in local primary and high schools to work as peer role models and to support students and teachers in the classroom.

Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) Mildura

SIFE is a volunteer-based organisation originally formed in the USA in 1975. Recently La Trobe Mildura students have educated their community with projects at both primary and secondary schools in Victoria and New South Wales. The program aims ensure sustainability and feasibility with their projects. There are plans to roll out SIFE in Albury-Wodonga and Bendigo.

Student Exchange

La Trobe University has over 100 international exchange partners (http://www.latrobe.edu.au/international/colleagues/exchange/partners) in over 30 countries. Student exchange is available to both domestic and international students who are enrolled full-time in a La Trobe University degree program.

To be a part of or learn more about programs offered at La Trobe visit: latrobe.edu.au/studentengag-ment

Powell wants Medibank store to stay open

State Member for Shepparton Ianette Powell has written to the general manager of Medibank Private asking the company to reconsider its decision to close the Shepparton store.

"This decision has caused a lot of concern, and angered many community members," Mrs Powell said.

"Many residents have contacted me raising their disapp-

ointed about the removal of local access, as they prefer personal contact rather than an online service.

"Many complain they have no internet access, are elderly or frail, and are unable to travel the 240 km round trip to Bourke to seek face-to-face service and advice from the nearest Medibank Private office."

She said the closure meant

Shepparton customers had lost the ability to receive on-the-spot referrals and many would be out of pocket for a period of time.

"In my letter, I reminded Medibank Private that their statement of corporate intent details the customer-first perspective which states Medibank will continue to build a future business model that focuses on customer service and

unlocking management expenses savings, and advises Medibank is implementing a number of initiatives over the next three years which seek to make claims easier," she said.

"There are excellent objectives on customer service, but I noted that these should include face-to-face services as well as online services — not instead of."

Challenging abuse

TEACHERS GIVEN STRATEGIES TO COMBAT BULLYING OF GAY STUDENTS

By Chloe Warburton

With two-thirds of young gay people experiencing abuse or bullying at school, Daniel Withman believes it's important for teachers and health professionals to know how to stop homophobia.

Mr Withman held a workshop yesterday — beyond 'That's No Gay' — Challenging Homophobia — looking at the difficulties young homosexual people face and how teachers could help stop any bullying at school.

The workshop offered strategies and frameworks for understanding sexual identity and challenging several homophobic attitudes in young people and adults.

Mr Withman said many teachers felt they were unable to speak up when they saw homophobic bullying and he hoped the workshop would help them feel more confident about the situation.

"I'm training local teachers and health professionals in challenging homophobic attitudes, in particular



Fighting homophobia: Daniel Withman speaks at a gay workshop in Shepparton yesterday. Photo: Iwan Ingram

towards young people in school," he said.

"If we look at recent Australian research, two-thirds of young people who are same-sex attracted will experience abuse. The other one-third who say they don't experience abuse tend to say it's

because people don't know they're gay."

"The biggest barrier we have in everyday conversation — breaking the silence. What I find, travelling around regional and rural Australia, is once you give people the chance to talk about it, they say

they do know someone who is gay or lesbian,

but don't always know how to talk to them.

"For teachers, many say they don't feel confident enough to inter-

vene. They also worry about how parents and other teachers will react if

they do speak up."

Mr Withman has been challenging homophobia in Australian schools for more than a decade, producing educational packs and books.

For more details, visit www.thatsnogay.com.au

Folly keeps eye on little fluffball

By Chloe Warburton

It's an unlikely friendship that seems like a movie storyline, nevertheless a dog has befriended an orphaned cygnet.

Shepparton woman Libby spotted the nine-week-old on the highway, stopped near Heymans 10 days ago and picked it up to save it from traffic.

When she got it home, she noticed her twelve-year-old Folly had taken a liking to it.

The little fluffball, still unnamed, has a mind of its own and Folly has been taking care of it while Libby has been at work.

"It was running into incoming traffic and I was worried she was going to get hit by a car," she said.

"It was so odd how that I've had it in a box on an electric blanket, but now she's smart enough to be outside all day. I know I can't lose her now —

the first day I had her, I went out for a coffee and knew Folly would take care of her. It's a good thing too, because when I got back she had gotten out of her pen, but Folly tackled the seven and found her down the back of the yard."

Now it's just a matter of what will happen to the cygnet when it turns into a swan — Libby said she's hoping to release it on to Victoria Park Lake.

"She originally thought it may have been a goose and Dad had a man who was going to give it to a goose family, but now I'm not so sure — I think it's a swan and a goose family won't want it," she said.

"I'm hoping to put it on the lake as soon as it gets big enough. I'd like to see it go into a swan family, but I don't think it will be easy to find one."

But for now the headstrong little cygnet will stay in the safety of her backyard with the curious Folly.



Fostering friendship: Folly the cocker spaniel takes care to have control in the orphaned cygnet.



"Everyone does know everyone else's business...But no-one is going to come up and say anything to my face...They might say it to each other, but not to me...It would be a bit rude...Everyone tells me down in Melbourne it's completely accepted, but it's not completely rejected [here]...[Matt] lost all his friends when he came out...He had to start from scratch basically...[Colin] didn't have that many to start with...I don't think [here] is gonna change much..."

Still Lydia is happy with her family.

"I have two grandchildren, two grand step children and two granddogs..."

It was a dog that stole my thunder in the local newspaper, the Shepparton News, when they reported on training I had conducted with local teachers and health professionals. In what I titled, 'The story of my life, trumped by a puppy and a fluffy duckling', news of my visit to Shepparton hit the broader public. Whilst I stood awkwardly and uncomfortably under a blossoming tree, below was a picture some adorable puppy licked his lips with a fluffy duckling in the foreground. Alas, not many Shepparton folk would be reading about challenging homophobia.

The Shepparton News had been interested in what the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour was doing locally. Thanks to the tireless efforts of UCCE's Diversity facilitator, Damien, I would find myself training, at short notice for them, 13 local teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others.

The training participants who were about to undertake a full day's training with me were curious about the challenging homophobia tour themselves. I got them to reflect on what they would think if they were told they were to go on such a tour.

"Why a truck and not a bus?...Is there a tow ball so I can tow a boat?..."

"How far will I be going"..."

"I'd go but I don't want to drive, or worry about the accommodation..."

"I must have a hair dryer..."

"I'm worried about ignorance outside the training...Being attacked by people who didn't agree..."

"We both crapped ourselves and said, 'Bloody hell'..."

"How do you recruit, engage and get people into rooms?..."

"Would be fun but I'd be worried about the possible violence..."

"I'd be worried about leaving the kids behind, otherwise there would be a lot of, 'Are we there yet?..."

During an afternoon break I was asked by one man about how I found Broken Hill. He explained that he was secretary of a national Rolls

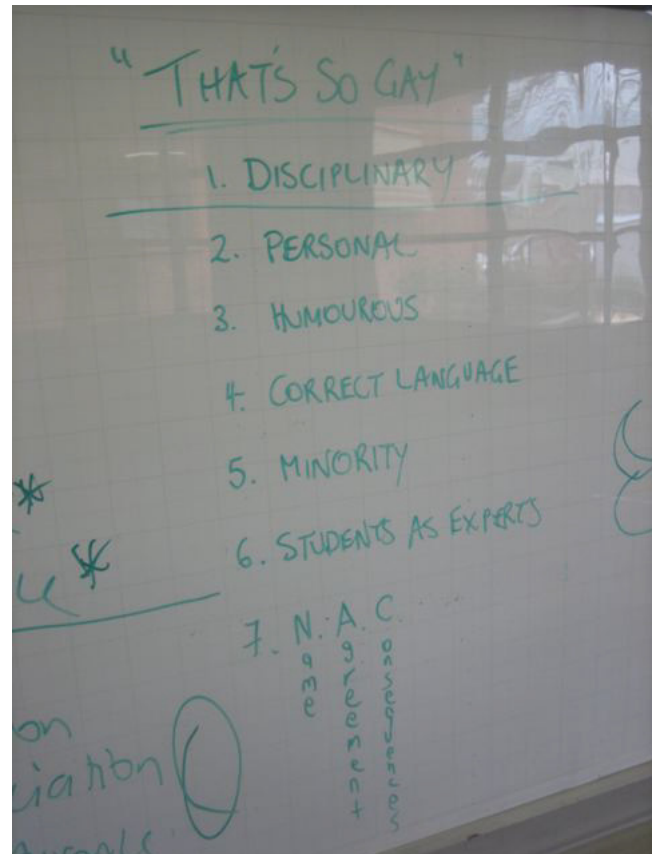


Royce club and that they were all due to drive up there from around the country. I said he should get in touch with "Harry" (see Broken Hill blog), the son of Rolls Royce-loving, Pro Hart. I said to explain that I'd said to contact him and also to mention his own roots, in nearby town to Shepparton, Numurkah, as Harry's partner, "Chris" is actually from Numurkah. I discovered this when talking to Harry and Chris. Noting Chris' age, I took a stab in the dark.

"[Chris], this could be completely over your head, but did you go to school with [one of my best friends?...]"

Chris had. Yet another crazy coincidence had come my way.

Back in Shepparton, by the end of the day of training it had started to rain. As people left, all reported that they felt they had the skills and confidence to return to their schools and organisations and challenge homophobia and affirm sexual diversity the very next day. In addition, all felt that they had a plan for what they could do collectively over the next 6-12 months to change the places where they worked.



I have been asked many times how I maintain my energy and motivation, and this is one part of what does. Yet it was also with frustration that I logged on to Facebook that night to find invites to 3 different campaigns to raise awareness about "a recent spate of gay teen suicides in the US". I was asked to wear purple, to give a damn, to tell people it gets better, to say no bullying and so on.

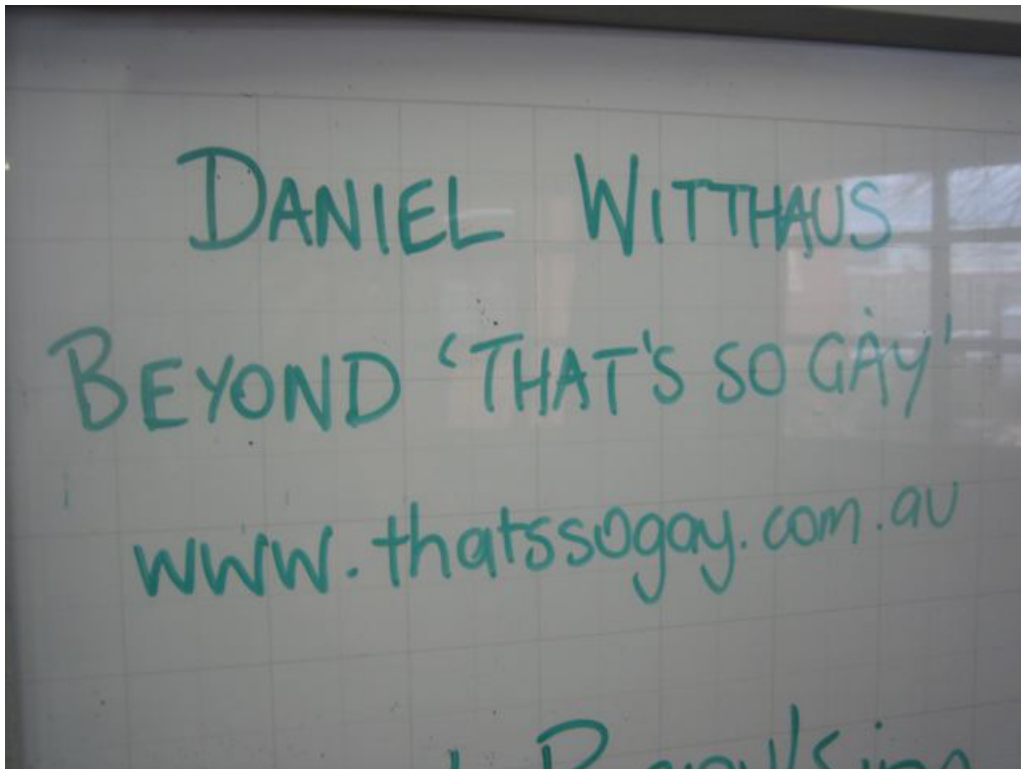
I applaud people's energy and motivation, yet I felt deflated that a familiar pattern was repeating itself: there were about 5-6 awareness campaigns competing against each other for attention and people's time and energy. As someone who headed up a statewide campaign for men to get involved in the prevention of male family violence, I know only too well the "campaign fatigue" in the broader community.

"God what one's that?...There are so many different coloured ribbons..."



People regularly spoke of the challenge to keep up with such campaigns and admitted to really giving up trying and noticing.

Not that this is a reason to stop, but after over 33 weeks of talking to people in regional, rural and remote Australia, everyone is clear: they are over awareness-raising. For them they just want to know what to do. Not in a few years when educational utopia hits. Not when legislation is finally changed. Not when all the homophobes die out or are finally drowned out by an LGBT-friendly majority. They want to know what they can do NOW.



In 1998 I was speaking to the head of a peak young people's organisation.

"What will you do in 6 months Daniel when everyone has moved on? This is a fad. Things are better these days..."

When I decided to undertake this tour last year, I was asked, "Do you really need to do a national challenging homophobia tour? Maybe in the bush, but really things are so much better these days. We have x, y and z..." It was also implied by some that I was looking for homophobia where there was none (interestingly by people who didn't work with young people, nor in schools). Some thought maybe I had nothing better to do with my time.

Now all of a sudden many seem shocked and appalled that young LGBT people might want to end their lives. I have said time and again that there has never been a better time to be LGBT and young in Australia. Yet until they are linked in with new and improved supports, have internet access with privacy and no restrictions, come



out to supportive people and develop their self-confidence, young people today are still reporting the same level of abuse, harassment and discrimination that they did a decade ago.

In the late 1990s in Geelong when I supported LGB young people they too had a support project, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on free-to-air TV along with LGBT people in popular culture. Like LGBT young people today across regional, rural and remote Australia (and, let's be honest, in metropolitan areas too), they faced similar challenges and hurdles until they connected with this support.

Interestingly it was in the late 1990s when I met "Ian", who has since moved up to a property outside of Shepparton with his partner, "George". George was the boss of my then-boyfriend, and invited us as a couple to watch a new series called 'Queer As Folk' from the UK. With an excited gaggle of gays we all sat and watched all six episodes back-to-back, with people dropping off one by one as the gay marathon wore us down.



Ian and I would cross paths professionally and personally for years to come, so it was with some excitement that I met him for a cuppa during my stay in Shepparton. Ian glowed from his life in rural Victoria. I appreciated greatly a friendly face and conversation that explored 33 weeks on the road in the context of my broader life, as well as hearing about someone and something other than my tour!

With the end of the tour drawing near there has been an increasing amount of questioning around what I'll be doing "after". In Shepparton I had even more reason to reflect when I attended a cancer charity fundraiser screening of Eat, Pray, Love. As Julia Roberts' character



concluded her “year” of self-discovery, I too considered what I had discovered myself whilst undertaking a year of discovering more about LGBT life in contemporary Australia. When her eventual handsome partner burst into a flood of tears when his son left for home, I too found myself crying and was not quite sure why.

Perhaps it had been a week of pondering the end. Shepparton was where I had picked up Bruce Ford in February, and here I was again. I would do a photo slide show of sorts of my tour thus far to local LGBT community members and their families, showing photos from each location and telling stories, whilst at the same feeling disconnected from them (have I really been all over the country?). My week was also spent being hosted by Damien and his partner, Chris, and I could not have been more comfortable (nor could I have needed it more). Damien and I talked at length in ways I rarely get to do about how LGBT life and work interact, the blurring of the professional and the personal. It was a blessing and a curse to experience such a satisfying taste of comfort and reflection.



Once again I wanted to stay longer. Once again I wanted, at the same time, to take someone with me.

And it could be that people are now noticing. Seated in a comfortable armchair during a break in my training with local teachers and health professionals, I sat and spoke briefly with a woman teaching art who admits she should be in retirement. She was persistent in quizzing me about what the tour meant and what could follow, gently pushing past my attempts to be ambiguous, evasive and low-key. She was having none of it.



Later, looking into my eyes, and perhaps staring into my soul, she grabbed my hand with both of hers before she left for the day. I've had many well wishes, but this was somehow more focused. Smiling warmly but searchingly she offered her final thoughts.

"Good luck with your life..."

'Thanks', I thought, 'I'll be OK, but I'll certainly need it...'

