

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK THIRTY-FOUR, (GIPPSLAND) A RETURN TO SILENCE: THE LITTLE LGBT GRAVY TRAIN THAT COULD, AT LEAST FOR A WHILE...

"They all looked shocked, as if I was from another planet..."

Yes this was about sexual diversity. Yes it was homophobia. Yes it was in rural Australia. No it wasn't a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) person young or old involved. This was "Carl", a regional coordinator of partnerships between the education and youth sectors in a region of Gippsland.

Many years back there was an all-day training in two local secondary colleges, one government and one Catholic. That training outlined the latest in research evidence around LGBT young people and their experiences in schools and beyond. "Pauline" was teaching at the government school at the time.

"Half a dozen people got up and walked out..."

Carl was also there that day in the audience and was fuming.

"I spoke to the principal...I thought, 'I'm really angry about that and I'm going to follow it up..."



Hearing this story made me fume. In my book, Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, I discuss the reasons why such "acting out" could happen, how to prepare for this ahead of time and how to remedy it. The more I heard about the full-day training, the more I bit my tongue.

Over at the Catholic school a similar full-day training took place. Again Carl had been in the audience. The success of that professional development could be measured by the Catholic school staff attending Mind Matters professional development a few days later.

[Mind Matters = is a resource and professional development program supporting Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the mental health, and social and emotional wellbeing of all the members of school communities.

www.mindmatters.edu.au

“We did the sexual diversity walk...”

The sexual diversity walk is a standard challenging homophobia activity. It requires participants to line up beside each other and take on an identity, based on a card they are given. For example one card could be, “I am a 31 year old bisexual man” or “I am a 23 year old heterosexual woman”. Then a series of questions are asked where participants take a step forward for a ‘yes’ and backward for a ‘no’. With an emotionally safe and prepared group it can be powerful and insightful, allowing people to see how different people are affected by homophobia. Yet if not, this can lead to a worsening of the situation. Hence when I train teachers and health professionals I stress the importance of good process rather than just content (i.e. not just an activity thrown in).



Back at the Mind Matters training, Carl continues.

“As soon as this [male teacher from the Catholic school] announced from his card, ‘I am a gay student’, it started...All the jokes started up...”

Carl immediately acted.

“I had to stand up and say, ‘You can’t do that’... They all looked shocked, as if I was from another planet...”

“Carl” coordinates all things He has done so for well over a decade.

Carl, like many of his peers across other Victorian regions has fought hard to keep LGBT young people on the agenda of local schools and organisations.



A decade ago there was much cause for optimism. There was an unprecedented amount of LGBT dollars being thrown around from unlikely corners. Many asked if this was the start of the mainstreaming of all things LGB and T. I recall a prominent LGBT worker of the time emoting, "We are going to be just like drug and alcohol, we're going to be everywhere!"

I was thought to be a bit of a pessimist when at that very time I warned of slippage. Around me I observed a complacency that slowly crept in: there was momentum on the LGBT gravy train and nothing was going to stop it. Therefore many took their eye off the ball. I could continue with the analogy and say many swung thereafter and missed, but that would be overstating it. Most stopped swinging. Seeing this happening, many thought I was fear mongering.

Whilst in Bairnsdale there were training sessions for teachers, rainbow stickers and information in all of the schools, that was then.

"It's gone off the agenda since then..."

A local student welfare coordinator, "Pauline" agreed that the LGBT gravy train had stalled.

"The school was quite, it promoted sexual diversity very well, but it seems to have dropped off..."

What I heard during my week in Gippsland is the story of regional, rural and remote Australia: if you are lucky there was a local LGBT conversation happening, but it happened so long ago that locals cannot remember what exactly was said or who was involved. Sometimes there are examples where it got exciting there for a while, but now there is a return to silence.



So many have asked about what the outcomes of my 38-week national challenging homophobia tour are. Whilst there are many, there are two basic ones: to start local, everyday conversations where there have not been any before; or, to reinvigorate local, everyday conversations that haven't happened for a while. One gay man driving around the



country in a gay truck is about providing an excuse and permission for those conversations to take place. No more, no less.

In what was thought to be a long overdue conversation, I found myself at a local college visiting a student welfare coordinator, “Sandy”, who’d contacted me weeks before. Sandy was keen for me to come and have a cuppa with her. Ahead of time Sandy called me and I encouraged her to invite other staff if she thought they’d be interested.



When I arrived for my cuppa with Sandy, rather than a 30-40 minute conversation, instead I found myself in an impromptu training session with a small group of local teachers and health professionals, including Carl, Sandy and Pauline. I would leave two and a half hours later.

Sandy quickly offered to make me a cuppa before filling me in on who would be arriving. I could not have been more surprised, albeit pleased. I nearly fainted with delight when Sandy announced she’d catered. I laughed at the modesty of it all.

“I hope you don’t mind but I’ve ordered lunch for us...I’m sorry that it’s only a few plates of sandwiches though...”

Only? I’m sure I cleaned off a plate of sandwiches on my own. This was the equivalent of the red carpet being rolled out for the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ Tour and I was savoring it.

I was especially pleased to see Carl, who had e-mailed me at the start of the year. Unfortunately I had tried a number of times to respond, ultimately unsuccessfully, because of a spam filter. Carl would inform me it was probably because “gay” was in the body of my e-mail and my e-mail address! (i.e. daniel@thatssogay.com.au)



Local school staff attending painted a relatively typical picture of local LGBT student life. There were a few local students who were openly LGB or T.

“They’ve had issues with letting family know...”

And it isn’t just in larger towns in the Gippsland region.

“We’ve had a couple of kids who’ve come out in the smaller communities...”



Bullying still seems to be a common occurrence, perhaps leading to isolation.

“They do get a hard time...More and more we’re seeing young people having, they’re just feeling so alone and like they’re the only ones going through that...And for the kids around them, they’re seeing their friends go through it...”

Like with those attending the Shepparton training for teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others the week before (see Shepparton blog), these locals left with strategies they could use immediately and a plan for what they could do locally in the next 6-12 months.

And much more needs to be done for the very LGBT young people they describe as “out” in smaller Gippsland towns.

Local regional health chair, “Eve” talked only of her small Gippsland community.



"I know of 6 or 7 young men who've left town..."

Not that the town would think there is any problem with homophobia.

"Yet if you the community, they don't mind lesbians and gays...But they just don't want to see 'em..."

Eve herself has a particular interest in the health of young women in rural areas, citing research evidence such as Latrobe University's Writing Themselves In Again (www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay) that shows young same sex attracted women are more likely to be sexually active and to become pregnant than their heterosexual counterparts.

One local young woman recently lost her job at a national supermarket chain.



"She kissed her girlfriend goodbye in [small Gippsland town]...She went to work and she lost her job...Like that..."

Although some leave, some stay and fight.

"There was one brave young man...He was at the supermarket and wore nail polish and was really out there..."

The national supermarket chain wanted the nail polish removed.

"He took them on...If the girls were allowed to wear nail polish, then why couldn't he..."

One battle however did not win the war. Ultimately he left.

"He had to leave town..."

Eve remains concerned.

"So it worries me for young people...When's it going to stop?...We know there's nothing for young people in these towns...And we think it's appalling and the attitudes are appalling..."



Attempts by people to tell Eve it's better these days fall on deaf ears.

"I have people say to me, 'But it's OK now, Ellen's openly lesbian'... So what?!...She's this rich American star and so that makes it OK to be gay?...It doesn't..."

To prove her point Eve again quotes various rural health statistics for young same sex attracted women. Education and support services are seen to be opportunities to make a difference.

"I think there needs to be some way of really massive education of people who work with young people to not assume that not everyone is straight...Within the health system because it's disgusting and within the education system..."

To illustrate her point Eve cites a personal story.

"I went to see a doctor...I told him I was a lesbian and he put his head down and said, 'There's nothing I can do to help you with this problem'...Look me in the eye when you talk to me!...But because I am who I am [a regional health chair!?!] I could find another doctor...But what about young women, and young men?...It's the same as in the big cities, what goes on, but you can get away from it in the cities...In a small town you can't..."



Eve shows concern about the LGBT social opportunities in the region.

"It used to be centred around the pub scene...[Now] some groups are very private and would meet informally, but you have to be part of that clique...There are a large group of lesbians in their 40s, who meet and are quite closeted and don't want anyone from outside... They are just so closeted...They're in relationships...So if you were single and young then you wouldn't be welcome..."

Local school teacher, "Joel", explains that the local LGBT support group ended a few years ago after a long history across the Gippsland



region. No-one stepped in when the long-time organiser stepped aside. The outcome since has not really impacted on those LGBT people linked in with their own supports.

“The ones who were most upset at the demise of the network sadly were the most marginalised...”

Not that there are not support networks. In another town in Gippsland, “Jo” tells better stories about her experiences with local lesbian social support. Through women’s website, Pink Sofa, local women are gathering for BBQs and camping trips.

Jo contacted me off Facebook a few months ago and expressed an interest in a cuppa. On a very overcast day in a small Gippsland bakery we would meet. Not only did Jo want a photo and a signed copy of Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’, Jo also wanted to contribute financially.

Part of Jo’s motivation for supporting my national challenging homophobia tour is personal experience. Jo lost her female partner almost 30 years ago to violence.

“I’m now 49 and it’s still happening...I asked the universe, ‘Who is doing something about this?’...Surely there was someone, and then I found you on Facebook...”

As we sat connecting, a seemingly endless stream of motorbikes drove past as part of an annual festival. It was lucky that this parade of sorts ended as Jo and I left because she discovered her battery was flat. With the help of some jumper leads from a generous woman, ‘Bruce’, my trusty 2007 Ford Ranger, was soon jumpstarting a small silver Barina. To do so he had to do a 180-degree turn on a one-way section of highway. And it was lucky Bruce and I had the time given the day’s schedule.



Often people ask me about a typical day, and Thursday 14th October 2010 was a good example of a Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour day.

- 7.12am Awake after having slept in, forgetting to set my alarm because my mobile had no reception at my accommodation the night before.
- 7.29am Run past my incredibly understanding host, "Joel" having showered and packed all my things. I pause to hug and thank him, and take up his suggestion to grab a banana for the road.
- 8.03am Stop and jump out to take a photo of something resembling a brown coal smoke stack, a photo challenge from Sydney Louis (see Sydney blog).
- 8.19am Arrive in Traralgon earlier than I'd feared, check messages after being out of mobile range for 36 hours. Find a few people got very upset believing I'd ignored them, even though they are aware that sometimes I don't and can't get mobile or internet access.
- 8.30am Meet with "Eve" in a café for a cuppa interview. Eve has another commitment so we both have to get down to business.
- 9.05am Pay for hot chocolate with mobile on my shoulder, on hold before a JOY FM interview and saying goodbye to Eve.
- 9.10am Commence my weekly 'Freshly Doug' JOY FM interview. Unfortunately Doug is on leave due to a death in the family, yet I have a light, relaxed and fun interview with his stand-in.
- 9.19am Conclude JOY FM interview and receive a few texts about the interview. I think it went well.
- 9.26am Arrive at McDonalds to use their wi-fi to check for any e-mail emergencies and to update my Facebook status (which communicates to my mother that I am still alive).
- 9.50am Start the drive to Rosedale.
- 10.25am Arrive in Rosedale and meet "Jo" in the Rosedale bakery. I decide it's been too long since I've had a coffee scroll.
- 11.45am Bid Jo goodbye, only to find out a minute later that she has a flat battery.
- 11.49am Negotiate the use of a random woman's jumper leads.
- 11.53am Bruce jumpstarts Jo's car.
- 11.54am Bid Jo goodbye a second time.
- 12.13pm Pull over to take a phone call. It's from a Triple J producer who wants to do an interview. We talk about how, where and when. It has to be in the next two hours.
- 12.45pm Arrive in Morwell and head to youth mental health service headspace earlier than my 2.00pm cuppa interview. They agree to let me use an empty office.



1.00pm Commence Triple J interview.

1.09pm Conclude Triple J interview.

1.12pm headspace manager asks if we can do the cuppa interview early because something has come up.

1.21pm Commence cuppa interview with headspace manager, local youth worker and LGBT group co-facilitator.

1.47pm Sigh with relief when some leftover sandwiches from staff training are placed on the table for me to plunder.

2.45pm Conclude cuppa interview.

2.51pm Call ABC radio producer about another interview.

2.57pm Use headspace's internet to again check for any e-mail emergencies. Respond to the most urgent in no particular order.

3.41pm Move Bruce so that I don't get a parking fine.

3.50pm Hang with the receptionist ahead of the start of headspace's Open Day (4-9.00pm) to celebrate Mental Health Week. Get introduced to a male psychologist, female youth worker and male nurse. This sparks much interest in my tour and ultimately leads to them talking to each other. I strategically disengage and leave them all talking with one another for the first time about sexual diversity and challenging homophobia.

4.00pm Meet with local LGBT young people and health professionals and others who wander in.

5.45pm Partake in the BBQ out the front of headspace, enjoying hamburgers and sausages in bread. I remark to a few people who ask about my impressions that Gippsland is much like the Gold Coast in that it's a cluster of towns spread out yet forced to be "as one", without the beach focus, fun parks (with all due respect to Gambaya Park) and car culture.

6.12pm Talk to the headspace manager's son about his recent trip to a remote Indigenous community that I had visited in May.

6.30pm Enjoy seeing a dance performance by a group of young women and LGBT group co-facilitator. This is followed by a little boy doing an impromptu dance performance that holds the diverse audience's attention for an entire song.

6.40pm LGBT group co-facilitator informs me his hope to show a TED (www.ted.com.au) talk on the big screen will not happen due to technical difficulties. Looks like I'm on.

6.42am Introduced to gathered audience and talk about the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour, an abridged photo journey that I had presented the week before in Shepparton (see Shepparton blog).

7.45pm Conclude presentation to

7.46pm Commence my goodbyes.

7.49pm Talk to a young trans person about their experiences. Meet that young person's partner. They try to convince



me that I'm a celebrity and they can't wait to tell all their friends in the US. I try to convince them I'm far from a celebrity.

7.59pm Sit in Bruce setting the GPS for my mum's.

10.33pm Arrive at my mum's for hugs, a catch-up and to again check my e-mails.

As set out in this "typical day" of the national challenging homophobia tour, I would finish my time in Gippsland visiting local LGBT young people's group, 'Whatever' at the Morwell branch of national young people's mental health service, headspace.

I looked forward to it because it meant I could finally meet Jack, a local young gay man, who was on ABC's Bush Telegraph program before me back in February (see Geelong blog). Jack came to the ABC's attention after reading a moving piece he wrote for website Heywire – regional youth telling it like it is. Now Jack is studying community services and co-facilitates Whatever with local youth worker, "Moira".



[read more of
Jack's story at
heywire.abc.net.au]

I sat with Jack, Moira and local headspace manager, "Zoe". Zoe is quite outspoken about the challenges of even providing something like Whatever locally.

"Whatever is restricted to the Latrobe Valley [but one of Gippsland regions]...This is the only area that has a formal project for LGBT young people...There are no generalist youth services and I think that is a real issue...So that makes it really hard for there to be any focus on these issues..."

[Given it's vast distances and similarities to the Gold Coast, I asked about public transport (see Gold Coast blog). I was told that to get to 'Whatever' from where I was staying in Mirboo North, a young person would have to catch a bus at midday, wait a few hours and attend 'Whatever' from 4.00-9.00pm, and then catch a bus back the next day at midday.]



So if there is a lack of generalist youth services, why is headspace partnering with a local youth organisation to keep Whatever up and running?

“It’s because [Moir] and I have decided it’s important and have lobbied our organisations to do the work...We’ve done that because nobody else is, not because we have particular knowledge and skills...”

Even then it is not resourced. Yet again it’s individuals going above and beyond their actual role (see any blog, for example Ballarat). As usual, it’s about people’s time, rather than there being allocated funds.



“There is no funded LGBT work in this region...”

And as is the case throughout regional, rural and remote Australia that pressure falls on the local LGBT young people’s project to think about what it can do more broadly for the local LGBT community.

“The adult community spend a lot of time complaining about nothing happening, and they start looking to the welfare sector...I feel the weight all the time from the adult community saying, ‘You do all the stuff for gay youth, what about the gay adults?’...”

Moir explains about the adult LGBT support group’s demise.

“We’ve tried doing this for two years, and said, ‘If we can’t form a committee, we’re going to fold [the LGBT group]...People said, ‘No, you can’t’...But when they were asked, ‘Well why not come on the committee?’, they all said, ‘No’...”



Yet whilst not being all things to all people, Whatever has had success in it's short history.

"Having the Whatever project for 5 years has really helped...It really has put it on the agenda..."

Zoe plays down her's and Moira's role.

"It's youth led, youth action...It's the best social work we do, by hanging around and doing nothing...We just barrack from the sidelines...It's a group that they own and they direct...And yes they whinge when nothing happens too...But nothing happens out of that group that we own..."



The results are encouraging.

"We have young people who had dropped out [of school] and had jobs at Maccas and now they've gone back to uni to do social policy because they want to change the world...Sometimes they know more about stuff than we do..."

There are plenty of great stories. For example, one young same sex attracted woman came and introduced herself to me during my visit. She had recently won Latrobe City Council's Young Person of the Year Award for her efforts in challenging homophobia at her school.

Kerryn explained how her school launched a new code of conduct for students that included 'acceptance'. The final draft was released and the code of conduct failed to name sexual orientation. When quizzed on this omission, school staff said that Kerryn should just assume it's "included". After asking a few of her friends, Kerryn collected



200 student signatures (with 600 students at her campus, this is 1 in 3!), LGBT and not, who demanded there be an inclusion of sexual orientation in the code of conduct.

Yet Zoe, Moira and Jack don't assume that the 15-20 young people they see each week are representative of all local LGBT young people. Zoe explains.

*"The young people that we know are faring well, but what we know is that it's the ones who we don't know who are the marginalised ones...It's not the kids that are out...It's the kids who are sitting in the back of the classroom hearing that Maths is 'gay' and that such and such is a faggot...Year 8 and year 9 are still some of the harshest places in the world, especially for young men...I bet [it's] still as sh*t as anywhere..."*

For this reason schools, as with many other regional, rural and remote areas, is a focus.



"We've had good success in some state schools...We haven't had any success with any of the private schools, but then again we haven't tried too hard..."

It seems locally there is some promise.

"I think we've got really good individual advocates in the schools, stickers, brochures, posters..."



Yet Zoe keeps an open mind about how well this works.

"It's all very well to have posters around, but I think that young people are swamped by that visual material...It still takes kids going to talk to somebody about that...And there's still that, anything that you tell them at school they have to report to their parents..."

The parent community might not be so receptive (not that I'm condoning young people's confidentiality being broken).

"I think there's a whole lot of people in the community who don't think it's an issue...In their mind they're not homophobic so they can't understand how anyone could be...You need to loudly shout the messages to drown it all out...If you don't have any personal connection to it, you'd be annoyed how many people say they don't know any gay people..."

Despite the challenges, people like Jack, Moira and Zoe are focusing on what they can do, and doing it well. Meeting Whatever participants and hearing their stories, it seems they are doing just that. This clearly excites Zoe.

*"We love that sh*t..."*

