

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK THREE, ADELAIDE: SIMPLY HOLDING THE HAND OF THE ONE THEY LOVE WITHOUT FEAR

Thwack...thwack.....thwack!

The lean, athletic young dancer stood with his reddened back to the audience. Over and over again he struck himself with a cat o' nine tails. Despite the dramatic start to this Fringe Festival performance there was a hint of apathy with each "thwack".

It was pure coincidence that I would be in Adelaide to see a dancer friend, newly returned from Berlin, debut a highly personal, experimental and energised one-man show. Despite what followed the performance's opening (including nudity and a large black sex toy), the seemingly unconvincing "thwacks" would follow me for my entire stay in Adelaide.

When I planned my 38-week national challenging homophobia tour, I did so taking into consideration school holidays and Australia's varying seasons. I'd hoped that my tour might coincide with festivals and events in each place, yet little did I know that I would arrive in Adelaide in perhaps the biggest week of the year where Adelaide's Fringe Festival, Womad and an event that almost every woman reluctantly named with a sickening shudder – "Clipsal" – all collided (some people are not sure if it is this, Adelaide's horrendous tasting drinking water or its early decriminalization of marijuana and homosexuality which sees it with a disproportionate number of serial killers). Not only that, but political calamity seemed to be taking place in the lead-up to a state election. Adelaide appeared to all to be at the height of her powers, and understandably a little distracted.



Radio Adelaide, The Aqueerium host Dame Nibble

In what would be the first metropolitan stop on my journey around Australia, competing for the attention of the inhabitants of Adelaide was going to be an uphill struggle. What surprised me most though was that it was not for reasons of Adelaide's entertainment calendar.

The non-heterosexual folk in Mt Gambier gave me every reason to believe that my Adelaide visit might very well be the most lively, inviting and instructional of my national tour. Even their body language noticeably changed whenever they mentioned the state's capital.

"Not like in Adelaide..."

Sitting to talk to one of two groups of young same sex attracted and trans women, I was told why Adelaide might be as gay and lesbian friendly as it was:

"Adelaide is gay because the balls touch in Rundle Mall..."



They all laughed. Their welcoming, relaxed and skilled female worker cringed with embarrassment whilst checking to see how I'd react. For the record I chuckled.

Yet the laughing stopped when I asked why these young women came to a program called 'The Girls' Lounge' at Adelaide's The Second Story Youth Health Service. All the young women I spoke to would tell me it was

because 'The Girls' Lounge' was "a safe space" where they could come every fortnight to be with other young women like themselves. Most described it as "the only safe space" they had.

Spending about an hour with 'The Girls' Lounge' I could get a small glimpse of what made it a place that young women wanted to return to. For a split second I even caught myself wishing I could come every fortnight. I spoke to two groups of young women after they had shared a communal dinner with gossip, laughter and catching up, trying to work out what this program meant to them. It was clear to all the young women in attendance that there were "rules to abide by", including that it was "not a pick-up place".



It was clear that structure encouraged “great friendships” to form and even “learning”. Referring to a great toilet paper comparison, one young woman offered an example, “like tonight I learnt the difference between scrunching and folding...I’d never heard that before.” For the record she did not share which side of the fence she “sat” on.

As I’d expected it took some time before I got a sense of the young women’s experience of ‘*The Girl’s Lounge*’. Some talked of “mutual understanding”, “being on the same page” and appreciating that “some things you don’t have to say”. One young woman spoke of “feel[ing] united even though there is only one thing that brings us together”. Others described a “comfortable” environment free of judgment that allowed them to “be free to be” themselves and “express [their] sexuality”.



Moving outside of The Second Story’s walls I heard more of the young women’s lives in Adelaide’s schools, homes and on it’s streets. It became clear that ‘*The Girl’s Lounge*’ was “one of the few safe spaces” available to them. A young woman talked of things being “better” at her school only once she came out given that her being lesbian was “more of an issue when it was a rumour”. One young woman had been “kicked out of church”. Another described how her mother “swore and stormed out” when she came out. Most agreed that they monitored their behaviour unless they were walking the streets as a large group. “I’m very careful with my girlfriend in public”, explained a young woman who had real concerns of discrimination and violence. “You have to know when to be public, and when not to be public.”

As they continued, Adelaide’s walls seemed to close in on the young



women. Whilst being “arty” and “open”, most young women agreed that the city suffered from “small town syndrome”: “in some ways it felt smaller and safer” and in others “you feel unable to escape, worried about being ‘outed’”. Some explained that “once you come out in Adelaide, then everyone knows” and that “gossip travels at the speed of light”. This had a direct impact on many of the young women’s comfort in being themselves and being open about their identity. For example, one young woman showed concern about her reputation and safety, “You hear about other people [who are lesbian], even if you don’t know them”.

In a one-to-one interview the next day, this young woman gave further examples of the scrutiny, insinuation and safety concerns for a number of women who were out beyond their own circles. “Venus” said that her hope was to be able to “walk down the street holding [her] partner’s hand, knowing [they] wouldn’t be beaten up down a dark alleyway and that [her] partner would feel safe enough”.

If holding hands is one sign of how OK a place is with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) folk, then Adelaide might very well be more OK with lesbians than gay men. Whilst interviewing “Markus” he would observe: *“Adelaide is more lesbian-friendly than gay-friendly....Lesbian friends have said that Adelaide is for lesbians what Melbourne is for gay men....I cannot say I’ve ever seen two men holding hands in Adelaide, yet in the time that we’ve been sitting here three lesbian couples have walked by holding hands....Had you noticed?”*



I asked Markus, a young gay man (who had been out as gay in high school) whether he experienced Adelaide as “arty”, “open” and “OK”



with gayness. “No....Look, OK we are doing better than Whyalla, but that’s irrelevant...”

This was an answer I had not expected. My impressions of young gay and bisexual men’s experiences in modern-day Adelaide had been coloured by my dating “Shane” in recent years. Shane, a young gay man from the southeast of Adelaide, grew up on a farm with his mother and older brother. Before high school his mother had started dating women. Traveling longer distances to high school in a bus everyday, at 15 Shane was approached by a matchmaking young woman. She explained that her slightly older male friend, “Peter”, liked him and wanted to start dating. Shane and Peter would become a known, out gay couple at their area school – a specialist school for academically gifted and oriented students. Shane can only remember one negative comment in his entire time at school.

Shane would “come out” when his mother came upstairs to check on him and all his friends. Amongst the crowd she would find Shane kissing Peter. Rushing downstairs to her then partner, Shane’s mother would excitedly reveal that he was gay and made plans to buy him a double bed for any expected sleepovers.

The acceptance and support of Shane and his relationship to Peter on the rural outskirts of Adelaide gave me the impression that such a life was more the norm for everyday gay and bisexual young men. Yet talking with Shane’s peers further in Adelaide’s borders, I wondered if perhaps his experience was the result of circumstances. Shane’s mother was out within her local community, something Shane grew up with. She came from a strong, loud and proud matriarchal family that celebrated family members’ strengths and individuality. Shane was, and is, an intelligent, confident and physically talented circus performer who went to a “very nerdy” school that valued intellectual abilities and character.

In my work with teachers, health professionals and “homophobia-curious” others over the years, most have been very focused on students being “out” in their schools. If a student is out as not straight in their school, then the thinking is that everything is OK and “things are much better these days”. At my book reading for *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools* I talked about this, as it is a common theme of my work in education.

Markus’ experiences as an out gay student at his high school highlight the two main problems of the “out students mean it’s OK here” model, the apparent gold standard. The first is that such a model relies more heavily on the student than the school environment. The second is the assumption that one out student’s experience is an indicator of other “not out” students’ experiences.





I heard of a pivotal moment in Markus' high school career that would be a turning point. In hindsight he believes this could have made him or broke him. In the early years of high school, not so long ago, he explains he "was the effeminate student who got chased...kicked" and targeted for other forms of intimidation. Yet in Year 10 he was one of two people required to make a presentation at a year level assembly to his entire year level, teachers and the principal. Already "shitting [him]self", Markus stood at the microphone. When the crowd settled and went quiet, Markus moved to speak. As he did so, a voice broke the silence. "Fag!"

Naturally taken aback, Markus looked around wondering what to do. The principal and the teachers did nothing. With everyone's eyes upon him, Markus recalls he was "forced to continue". As the assembly finished the Year Level Coordinator stood and asked the offending student who yelled out "fag" to see him after. That student would eventually be given an internal suspension for disrupting proceedings rather than what he said.

Markus feels that this assembly changed school life forever. He "started getting positive attention" such as students asking if he was alright and telling him the offending homophobe was "an arsehole". Comments followed like, "hey you are actually a nice, funny guy and not a bad person".

Seemingly out at school from this point, Markus describes a life of spending a lot of time in the library for safety, "I never hated school, I just hated the bullshit...I spent my lunchtimes in the library because no-one ever went there and I liked to read". Despite the support of the library staff, he still did not "feel OK to read [gay-related] books as there was still 'schtick'" and he felt it was "not entirely safe". Despite this some girls were supportive, sometimes dramatically so. One



day a homophobic male student walked through a group of girls that Markus was in, purposefully bumping him. He laid the blame on Markus, “watch it fag”. The homophobe did not realise that his girlfriend was in the group, but that quickly changed. She would publicly announce to her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, “he’s my friend.... we’re done”.

Home life was pressure-filled for Markus, a young man of Roman Italian Catholic stock. His father could not accept his effeminate son’s ways and took to trying to improve his coordination for soccer. Not only that, from about the age of 10 Markus recalls his father didn’t like the way he walked and tried to teach him a more masculine stride whenever they walked together. His stepmother entered the process by mocking him and ensuring he only had clothes that were more masculine. This meant Markus would eventually start hiding tighter fitting t-shirts and bracelets in his bag so that he could change when he left the house and was around the corner.

Markus describes the pressure that faced him at school and beyond: “From 5-10 [years of age] I was called a girl. From 10 I was called a fag”. Once out at school, he felt the pressure intensified. “I had to be happy, to be flamboyant”. He describes being known for singing. But students and teachers expected Markus to be out in a narrowly defined way. “If I came to school and I wasn’t ‘up’ and ‘out’ on any given day, then it seemed intervention was required”. Markus would be asked if he wanted to go to the student counselor. He tells this with something that resembles frustration, resentment and anger.

The pressure for Markus to conform to a lighter, happier and more flamboyant image seemed to send a clear message about being out and gay at his school. He felt expected to entertain and brighten other people’s day. Being out at school did not result in Markus feeling entirely safe and supported to be himself. Being out did not mean that he did not experience bouts of depression. Being out did not mean he fully embraced his sexual identity.

In this case the out model meant that it was more about Markus than the school environment he was educated in.

The impact that Markus’ outness had on other students at his school became clearer much later. Whilst his defining moment, a very public and homophobic comment during a year level assembly, changed things for the better, an incident for a fellow student changed things for the worse. Another student, around the same time, is said to have had his name and “dirty fag” emblazoned in graffiti on a school wall. He left school immediately and did not come back. “It turns out he was gay...but I was gayer than he was.” Markus shared that a number of students have since come out as gay, but did not feel safe to do so at school, partly because they were not like him and didn’t want a narrow, pressurised definition of themselves.





The *Beyond 'That's So Gay'* Adelaide Headquarters

“Venus” identified as straight at high school, but painted a grim picture for the out gay students she knew. One young man “was [genuinely] convinced he would burn in hell”. Another had a father who “was physically abusive towards him”. Venus felt entirely unable to be out as same sex attracted at her school.

So if the out model is not the answer for schools, then what is? If things are really better these days, what can we hope for from students, teachers and the school environment?

For one, things are better if young LGBT people feel safe and supported regardless of whether they are “in” or “out” as non-heterosexual, including not retreating at lunchtimes to safe spaces. Another would be that all students are aware of the options for support, both within the school and outside of it if they are not feeling safe and OK.

Homophobic language and the fact that teachers do not challenge and interrupt it is clearly a major factor in the homophobic school climates students find themselves in. All young people I spoke with were concerned with the use of “that’s so gay”. The prevalence of ‘gay’ as a derogatory word also concerned the teachers, health professionals and “homophobia-curious” others who attended a challenging homophobia workshop.

Most did not believe that much could be done, firstly because of teacher apathy and secondly because it seemed a near impossible task. Kirsty, a project worker coordinating challenging homophobia in Adelaide’s northern suburban schools, observes that most teachers do not think that homophobia happens in their schools, “because they don’t see gay bashing”. Those that do identify homophobia as an issue see it as “too controversial” and add “they do not have time



to do it". A Catholic school teacher echoed this, saying "they are all too busy...and happy as long as someone else is doing it..."

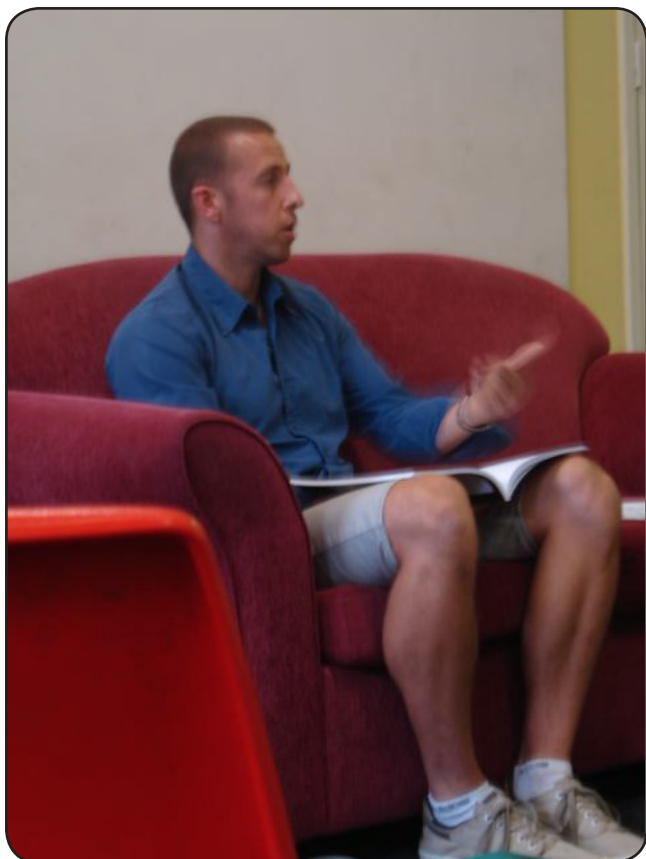


At my book reading I was asked by a young lesbian woman about "that's so gay". She observed that it was used widely and often, and wondered what could be done in schools to respond. I talked about the importance of challenging and interrupting homophobic language, how not doing so helps create a hostile environment for students and the impact this has on all young people. I gave some examples of strategies that teachers can use to challenge and interrupt student homophobia, which I first outlined in an article, 'Beyond 'That's So Gay' (2006) that was the predecessor to my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*.

As I gave a few quick examples of how to make change relevant to young people and to see it as an educational opportunity, smiles and looks of wonder rippled across a small but committed crowd of teachers, health professionals, parents, young people and "homophobia-curious" individuals. It seems that how to actually do something about "that's so gay" has most baffled.

A reminder of this came the following afternoon when one young man attending challenging homophobia training reflected on what he found most powerful about the workshop. "Alfred" would share that as he watched and heard about key activities, discussions and strategies to challenge and interrupt young people's homophobia relatively quickly and effectively, he would experience a powerful shift. Something inside of him felt that there was nothing that could be done to respond to "that's so gay", yet now he realised there was. Another woman, the relative of a well-known indigenous AFL player said she would





walk away confident and able to challenge and interrupt the homophobia of the young men she worked with, something she hoped for but didn't expect.

Yet judging by my conversations with young people, health professionals and parents, homophobia is not just confined to Adelaide's schools. Workplaces posed a problem for most of the young people I spoke to. One young man, according to his mother, had "received death threats". Through

"Marie's" own contacts in the health industry she had heard about how some staff responded to working with her son, "whenever I'm rostered on with [him] it makes my skin crawl". This from educated health professionals in metropolitan Australia.

Marie herself faces questions from her educated, social work colleagues that assume she has "done something wrong" in raising her gay son and listens to them describe things as "a bit poofy".

"Venus" says at her job in the public service, "you are not allowed to discriminate, but you know it happens". Not out at her workplace, Venus hears her colleagues describe her openly lesbian director as "the f**king dyke" and "that man-hating bitch". Since cutting her hair short, Venus has been told by most fellow workers that she "now looks like a dyke" and that she "used to look so pretty with [her] long hair". She feels that in her hostile work environment she needs to give masculine names for her female partners. At one stage Venus admitted that she is "scared of slipping up". "I've been lying for so long that I feel trapped..." She is clear that there would be real professional ramifications if she was to come out, saying "it would start impacting on my relationships with my clients" and that some colleagues would refuse to work or talk with her.

That workplaces like Venus' still exist in metropolitan Australia in 2010 shocked some participants in the Adelaide challenging homophobia training. Borrowing from an activity in Not Round Here, a challenging homophobia manual for rural service providers, I would ask participants to rate their schools and workplaces along a continuum of



8 homophobic attitudes spread across the training space. The most homophobic attitude is “repulsion”, the least, “nurturance”. There were audible gasps from those standing at the “nurturance” end that there were people standing at the “repulsion” end. One man reflected at the end that he would no longer take for granted just how positive his workplace, a gay men’s centre, actually was.



Hearing many stories of challenge on my travels, I always keep the interview process very constructive, focusing on what has helped young people overcome challenges and feel connected and supported. To end I always ask young people, “what are your hopes for the future?” Time and again in Geelong, Mt Gambier and, now, Adelaide, the young people were all unanimous. What they all hoped for, without any prompting, was to be able to hold the hand of their partners in public. Not only to hold hands, but to do so without fear, concern or anxiety of something happening to them or the one they love. After hearing for years about how LGBT people want special rights, flaunt themselves and/or are asking for more than they should, to hear a chorus of young people hoping for one simple public display of their love hit me hard.

I sat and waited at a café in Adelaide’s Central Markets. Former Kids Help Line Manager of South Australia, Kerry, took me to Lucia’s in 2004. I instantly and sincerely declared their hot chocolates to be the best in the Southern Hemisphere. It was during this conversation and one that followed that Kerry planted the seeds for the structure of my book, Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’. Impatient for Kerry to arrive, I breathed a sigh of relief when she warmly embraced me and asked how my week had been. Openly I spoke of being so moved by the common theme of young people’s hopes: simply holding the hand of the one



they love without fear. As I mouthed the words the tears flowed. After several weeks of stories I finally realised how this simple fact had played over and over in my head, driving me to continue. Now it was time to stop, talk with a mentor and friend and release the emotional build-up.

Despite the young LGBT people of Adelaide faring worse than I had expected and had been led to believe, there were many reasons for hope and celebration. Venus described being “independent for the first time in [her] life”. Walking home from the challenging homophobia training she was called a “fucking lezzo” randomly on the street, and knew that if she felt safe that she could start to engage the man who was twice her size.

Another young woman felt excited at the potential applications of my work in her life, likening my signing of her recently purchased copy of my book to getting her book signed by lesbian author extraordinaire, Sarah Waters.

One Catholic school in Adelaide’s outer suburbs has invited me to a whole staff professional development day in May to train all teachers in how to challenge and interrupt homophobia.



Markus, previously too self-conscious to pick up the local gay and lesbian newspaper, Blaze, or read gay-related material in public, would sit on the train and calmly read my book after my book reading. *“It’s the first [gay] book I have been able to read on the train, and I know it’s ‘big’. People sniggered at me and I don’t give a f**k quite frankly. I have the right to read and know [about challenging homophobia and affirming sexual diversity]. Previously I would have put it away.”*



My visit to Adelaide seemed to coincide with, and complement, an awakening in Markus. According to Markus, reading about a homophobic type called 'The Almost Ally' in my book "put [him] in tears for a while". Reading how subtle homophobia from those we call our allies can chip away, he suddenly felt angry with comments like "things are better these days, you should consider yourself lucky". He continued, "people have not stopped being homophobic, I think they are just being quieter". Markus spoke of wanting to stop being "a gay island", "to share [his] story" for the first time with other gay men (see this interview), to find and be a role model as well as to contribute.

"When I die I'll die knowing I was a part of making [change] happen. I don't have to be integral or revolutionary, but I'll know I was a part of the process..."

For Markus, it seems there is no turning back.

