

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK FOUR, PORT LINCOLN: MY LIFE AS AN AMWAY SALESMAN...

"Mate, I want to know where the association is for white heterosexual blokes."

Certainly it was not the first time I had spoken with an older, white heterosexual male who felt they were somehow missing out, whilst having little or no concept that the only thing they had missed out on was the point.



Port Augusta, between Adelaide and Port Lincoln

The former Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO) for the Eyre Peninsula had warned me he would be frank. Almost 60 and intending to retire, Michael explained that homophobia had always been a part of police culture. "I've lived with homophobia in the job for years, but I'm leaving so be prepared..."

Michael was acting as a GLLO whilst a colleague was on maternity leave. Now that his superiors in Adelaide had ruled that only police with a higher rank than him could take on the role of GLLO, he was pessimistic about it continuing. Knowing his superior's views on the role of GLLOs in the police force, Michael told him he had to do a GLLO training course.

*"Oh, what was the response again? I believe it was 'f**king queers' or words to that effect. See? I told you I wasn't holding back mate."*

A known and hard working identity amongst young people in the region, he made it clear why he took on the role.

"I am here for the kids. I have my phone on 24/7, during holidays, but

I don't care cos the kids are important to me."

Rather than sit at the police station, Michael drove me to a Port Lincoln Roadhouse for the "best coffee in Port Lincoln". I appreciated his hospitality, frankness and, in some strange way, his swearing. After the briefest of phone calls to introduce myself and explain why I wanted to talk to him, we both got into a police car for a drive I suspect wary of the other and what exactly was going to transpire.

Once in the car we both attempted to break the ice. I would attempt to let him know that this was nothing special, given I grew up with a father as a policeman in Geelong. This entailed plenty of walk throughs and time in police stations, drives in police cars and socialising with policemen (given there were no policewomen who worked with my father when I was growing up). Heck, I had even mowed the lawns for one police station for extra pocket money.

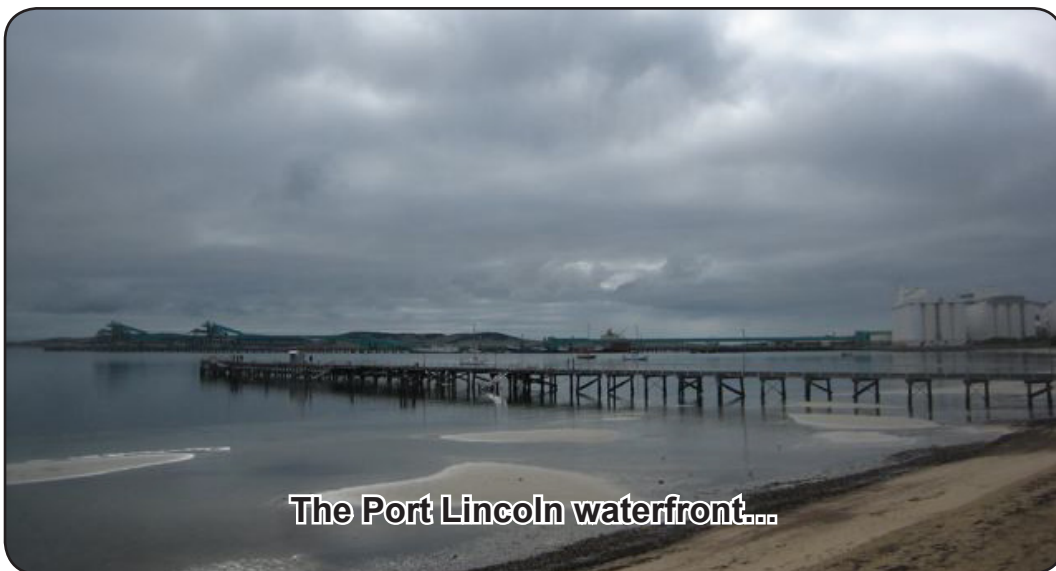
Michael for his part would attempt to make it clear that he was gay and lesbian friendly, which I believe largely he was, although occasionally he would miss the mark.

"Oh, have I told you that I'm a lesbian? I have lesbian friends and I ask them what they do. When they tell me, I say 'I'll have what you're having!' See? I told you, I'm a lesbian."

Despite the occasional off-jokes, Michael's commitment was clear. He had proactively supported both lesbian and gay young people in the region. One he described as young, gay and indigenous. "He cops it from the kids at school. Then he goes home and cops it from his family." When I asked if "copping it" meant that he experienced physical violence, Michael answered, "I honestly don't know mate, he won't tell me." Posing that many would say that being gay and indigenous do not go together and if this was his experience, he was clear, "yes, basically this is why this kid's head is f**ked".

The reason for Michael's support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people was simple.

"I'm afraid they'll go into their own room and I'm afraid if we are not careful we'll lose 'em."



The Port Lincoln waterfront...



Yet Michael openly questioned whether there needed to be a GLLO role. Whilst he could acknowledge that all his colleagues were homophobic to the point of hostility, he failed to see that a “gay and lesbian friendly” port of call at the local cop shop might therefore be important. Perhaps this reflected in his attitude to such an initiative in the police force.

“If you throw it down people’s throats they’ll choke it back up. You need to stop throwing it down people’s throats...”

Asking if any LGBT people had come forward during his time as GLLO, Michael again was frank, “not one”. Having walked into the police station to attend a meeting, not being a victim of crime and getting the reception that I did at the counter I found myself thinking that I was not surprised.

*“Look there are no gays and lesbians here. They all f**k off to Adelaide.”*

Part of my reason for coming to Port Lincoln, or “Lincoln” as the locals often refer to it, was for this very reason. In South Australia, the predominant thinking is that if you are not heterosexual you flock as quickly as possible to Adelaide. It was this thinking that led Bfriend, an LGBT organisation specialising in support and mentoring for LGBT people, to work briefly in Port Lincoln a decade ago. A major reason for this, according to former Bfriend worker, Desmond, was a “proactive and progressive youth service”.

When I met for an afternoon cuppa with West Coast Youth Services I would find a similar kind of organisation. Originally requesting 20 to 30 minutes with any worker in the organisation, I would be joined by six youth workers who all sat to hear about the national tour, my challenging homophobia work with young people and what I had found so far. The workers, for their part, were generous with their time – we would end up talking for 90 minutes – and their experiences.



Pre-meeting, West Coast Youth Services



All the workers had observed the prevalence of “that’s so gay” and “gay” as common language in Port Lincoln for those under the age of about 30 to 35 years. In contrast to most other teachers and workers, they were clear that it was not only young people using “gay” as a putdown and derogatory term. Like challenging homophobia workshop participants in Adelaide, these workers were initially pessimistic about what could be done. Part of my reason for staying longer with them was to run them through some basic strategies and ideas to use in their own work with young people.

Understandably a few more experienced workers asked “but does it work?” This is a common question and one where I can answer definitively. The educational package I developed for teachers in 2002, *Pride & Prejudice*, has been evaluated in 2000, 2006 and 2009. Not only does it show that students’ homophobic attitudes significantly change after the six week program, whether I deliver the program or trained teachers do, the results more recently show that students’ homoaggressive behaviour (i.e. physical and verbal violence towards gay and lesbian students or those perceived to be) significantly changes – even in a student population incorrectly described before the program by their teachers as “progressive, supportive and not homophobic at all”.

Other workers were concerned about how to work with young people outside the education system. These concerns were soothed by a brief, impromptu training session where I took them through one example activity I use with young people and adults alike to challenge their thinking around LGBT stereotypes and the impact of language on LGBT young people’s everyday life. My goal in these situations is always to make the impossible seem quite possible and relevant, rather than allowing people to hide behind statements like “but they aren’t in schools”, “yes but they are adults and not students” or “they are from a different background”. The message: challenging and interrupting homophobia is almost always possible.

Yet no matter how progressive the workers at West Coast Youth Services were, they were still pessimistic about life for most LGBT young people in Port Lincoln. Not being heterosexual was said to be “a huge taboo” in Port Lincoln. People are said to believe or “pretend it doesn’t exist”.

“Young people keep it very quiet and hide the fact that they are gay in school. It’s probable rather than possible that they will experience abuse, harassment and discrimination.”

Despite one worker saying she knew gay and lesbian people who resided in Port Lincoln, most believed that most LGBT young people will leave town, head to Adelaide and come out. There were, and are, exceptions to every rule. For example, one worker told of a young effeminate gay student in another South Australian town who “had a secret relationship with the macho school footy star at high school” before coming out and staying in his community.





Known for more than fishing (Makaybe Diva)

Leaving Port Lincoln soon after high school, “Carl” would head to another place to “come out”. Carl left for the Northern Territory because he did not want to come out as gay in what he felt was a Liberal and conservative community. Examples of “poofa bashing” were common and this fear drove his decision to leave town.

“I knew I could be assaulted, a fear of mine, or even killed. You just don’t really know and to be honest it was not a chance I wanted to take. Lincoln can be a very mean place.”

Carl’s former boyfriend, who was keen for them to move from Darwin, ultimately wooed him back to Port Lincoln. He reluctantly came back and has decided to stay. What struck me was Carl’s passion for Port Lincoln. His own circle of family and friends, the people, the economy and the possibilities for his own community were all things that Carl could talk about at length with genuine energy.

Yet this love of his own place is not enough for some. Carl describes losing “80-90% of the friends I made here” after coming out as gay to those around him. He describes, “I put my hand out and most men refuse to shake it, although some of my girlfriends were more open”.

This and the fact that “Lincoln is small but just big enough” means that many don’t feel able to come out. Carl describes most gay men in town as “married or in the closet”. “Daddy doesn’t like it so I better not do it and get married.” He would describe one married man who is said to have never had sex with his wife and that he visits his male lovers periodically. Port Lincoln seems to be similar to other towns I have visited in that men describe the danger of being seen too spend to much time with the same male. This makes any relationship difficult, with the best that many men can hope for being living with



your partner as “a good mate”. Yet the lengths that these men can go to in order to hide their relationships are great.

And this is not just about regional and rural Australia. One Adelaide mother explained how her son, “Brett” lived with his hyper masculine partner for many months in a highly altered apartment. Although Brett himself was out as gay to those around him, his partner was not. So paranoid was he about his own family, friends and even the neighbours finding out about the relationship, that he forced Brett to soundproof the door and put padding on the windows to prevent any noise escaping. Adelaide, 2010.

It would appear that religion played some part in this example, and certainly religion was behind the concern of a senior education department official when I asked if she had any contacts in the local Catholic school.

“Mary” had spent most of our first 15 minutes together looking at me suspiciously and displaying with her body that she was, at least, slightly repulsed by my presence in her humble office. “Well if you go don’t tell them I had ANYTHING to do with it. No, I didn’t say anything.” I assured Mary, as I had constantly done in the preceding 15 minutes that I was merely asking a question.

Mary came recommended by a colleague in Mt Gambier, which I think was the only thing that got me through the door. When I explained my national project and how I was interested in what was happening to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia across the many schools she worked with, she immediately assumed I was there to trip her up, judge her and get something from her. Whilst I inevitably encounter anxieties from most people along the way (e.g. “I’m not sure I’m the right person”, “I don’t think I’ll have much to say”, “I don’t think it’s my role”, or “I’ll probably be a waste of time”), these can be typically calmed relatively quickly and easily.

Not so with Mary. At least 5-6 times in 15 minutes she seemingly



recoiled physically and asked, “but what do you want from me?” Time and again I answered that I wanted to get her observations of how schools were supporting gay and lesbian students, if at all, and what was and wasn’t working in schools to challenge homophobia. At one point I stopped and thought, “I’m an Amway salesman. My whole life, all my work and everything I’ve done has come to this moment, I’m an Amway salesman”.

Mary made it clear that schools were time poor and expected to do so much. Why did schools have to do this when it’s up to individual families to “do this with their children”? Um, have you seen the current evidence?

I asked Mary what she felt the typical gay or lesbian student’s experience in local schools might be and her face almost turned grey. “I really wouldn’t...like to say. I just wouldn’t. I mean, of course it’s going to be diffi... No I just wouldn’t want to say.”

That two thirds of same sex attracted young people face abuse and harassment, with most of it happening in schools, makes it relevant. That over half of all bullying is homophobic in it’s nature makes it relevant and that most bullying programs and training don’t even mention homophobia makes it relevant. That the term, “that’s so gay”, is so commonplace, harmful for LGBT students and not challenged or interrupted by most teachers makes it relevant.

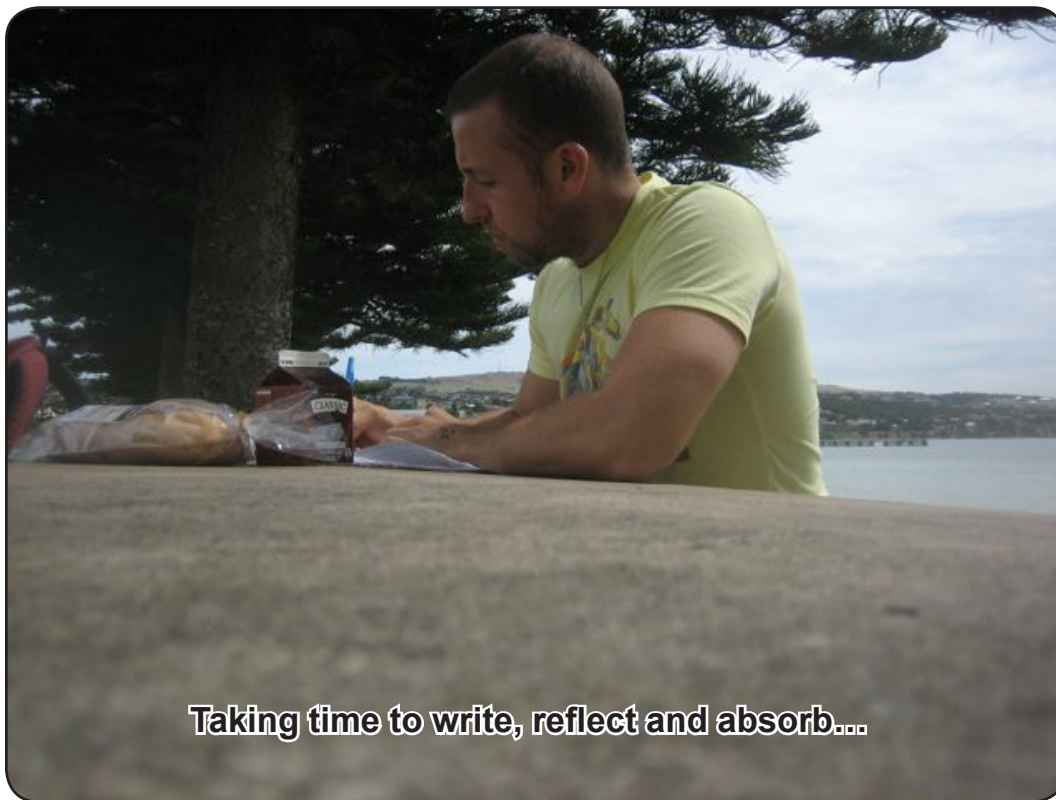
I felt I won back some credibility when I mentioned my new book, *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*. Mary said she had heard about that somewhere. When I mentioned my publisher, she confirmed she subscribed to their mailing list and that it had been featured that month. This calmed her temporarily.

Thankfully the meeting ended with a win-win situation. Mary wanted me out of her office as quickly as possible, or at least I assumed that based on her squirming. I did not take this too personally, especially as I was slightly amused by her lack of self-awareness in this situation. In order to get me out quickly, Mary offered up names of other people I should talk to in the region. Indeed these turned out to be great contacts, and again demonstrated how regional and rural areas are best broken into by recommendations of “good people” here and there. Without these contacts it would be a week for me of pushing sh*t up hill. I appreciated the shortcuts and would soon be off to talk to Port Lincoln High School.

Yet before we get to that. When I was warned off going to the local Catholic school, I brought Mary up to speed on my tour thus far. In Geelong, where the tour started, I was taken to dinner by the Principal and Deputy Principal of an all-boys Catholic school. In Mt Gambier I was welcomed for a long cuppa and chat by a progressive student



welfare team at a co-educational Catholic school. In Adelaide I had a student welfare leader from a large Catholic school attend my book reading and challenging homophobia workshop. I have since been asked back to deliver some training to the entire staff. It was a myth that such matters could not be discussed with Catholic schools.



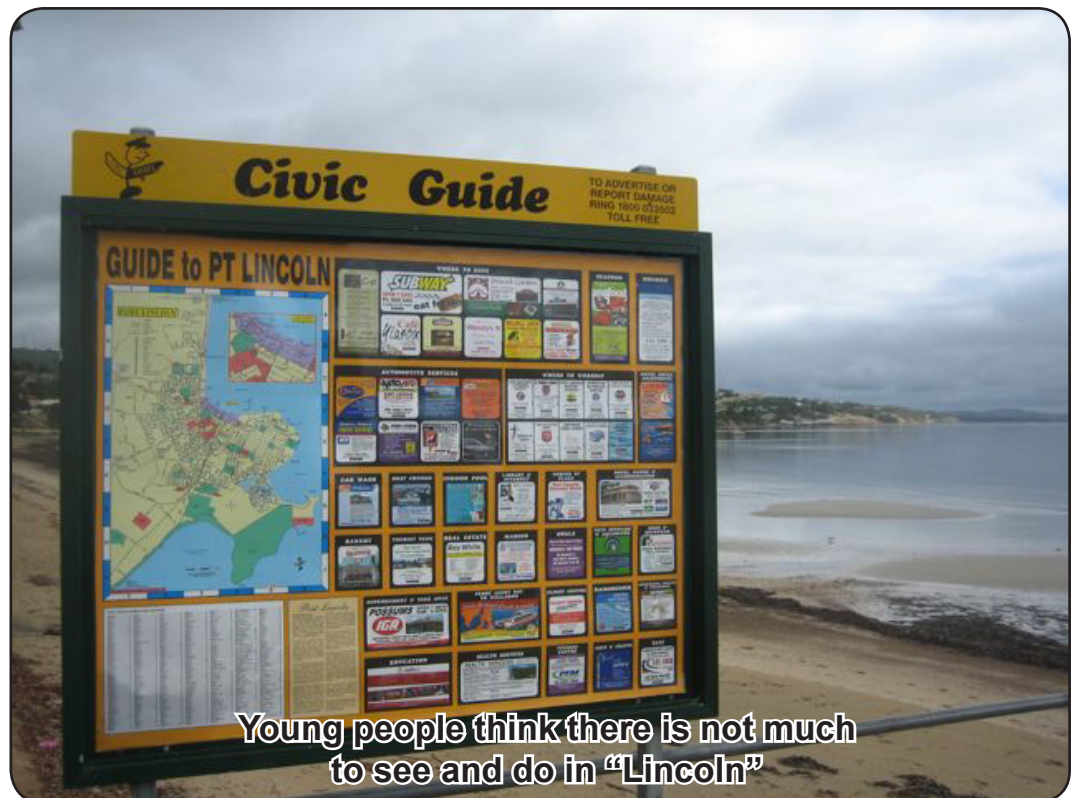
So when I left I was in two minds about contacting the local Catholic school. I realised that my motivation to do so was more because this official had got my blood boiling. Was this a good outcome for this national project, or was this my trying to prove some unimportant point to Mary? I then reflected on the time I had spent with those from Catholic educational settings. Did I want this to become the national challenging homophobia in Catholic school settings tour? Were the cashed up Catholics contributing in any way to a tour where I keep looking at the fuel gauge hoping to squeeze a few more kilometres out of this tank of diesel, or worrying about the price of a sandwich for lunch when I have back-to-back meetings in town?

I decided that I would focus on meetings with a range of other players in Port Lincoln and that the Catholic school would be a bonus.

In what would be a refreshing visit, I would arrive at Port Lincoln High School for a meeting with one of their student counselors. Not for the first time in my challenging homophobia career, I found myself sitting in the school administration area watching students and teachers going about their everyday school lives. I sat and admired the firm but fair women at the administration desk who had a tough yet calm and caring approach with the students.

I sat feeling in some ways like I was back at high school. Perhaps I





Young people think there is not much to see and do in “Lincoln”

had that look on my face when a female teacher waddled past and playfully asked, “You in the naughty books?” She would watch me break into a nervous grin and nod. She giggled and continued waddling. I had been conscious of recently having recurring nightmares where I was back in the final year of high school approaching exams. The nightmare goes that I realise I have a difficult maths exam and I am grossly under prepared, despite the fact that this has never happened. I’m certain it will be a disaster and that this will ensure I cannot leave high school. However more recently in my nightmare, in the moments before I wake, I tell myself it’s OK and just to try for a pass (despite being a semi-reformed perfectionist and workaholic).

“Sally”, one of two student counselors, would break me out of a daze and welcome me to Port Lincoln High. Within a few minutes we were walking into the staffroom. I reflected on how many staffrooms I had been in during the last 13 years, quietly chuckling about its familiarity and atmosphere. Indeed this could be any staffroom in Australia.

A proactive school that does not shy away from teaching sexual health and healthy relationships, Port Lincoln High made a conscious effort to challenge student’s homophobic language around 5 years before. A male teacher who had been subjected to student homophobia because he didn’t match the traditional masculine stereotype led staff in a whole school discussion. At a staff meeting he talked about the need to do something about it and allowed teachers to discuss how they might respond to “that’s so gay”. This led to a significant change in the school climate.

Sally admitted that 5 years ago the staff took a very disciplinary approach to the use of “that’s so gay”. Whilst the staff at that time felt



“united and strong” to all challenge student’s homophobic language, Sally conceded that there was little follow-up and that it had “crept back in” and was again commonplace. I discussed with her the benefits of seeing challenging and interrupting homophobia as an educational opportunity coupled with occasional disciplinary action. Sally agreed that this and having a range of strategies was needed.

What concerned Sally was that although Port Lincoln High had many reasons to pat itself on the back, “many young boys still [had] a lot of homophobic attitudes...and they are just scared”. She explained that male students in junior and middle years of high school were “trying to find a girlfriend just so they don’t get called gay”. This reminded me of a recent news story of a 14-year-old boy in northwest Australia who was forced to have sex with a female prostitute because his father feared he was gay.



Port Lincoln HQ Part 2

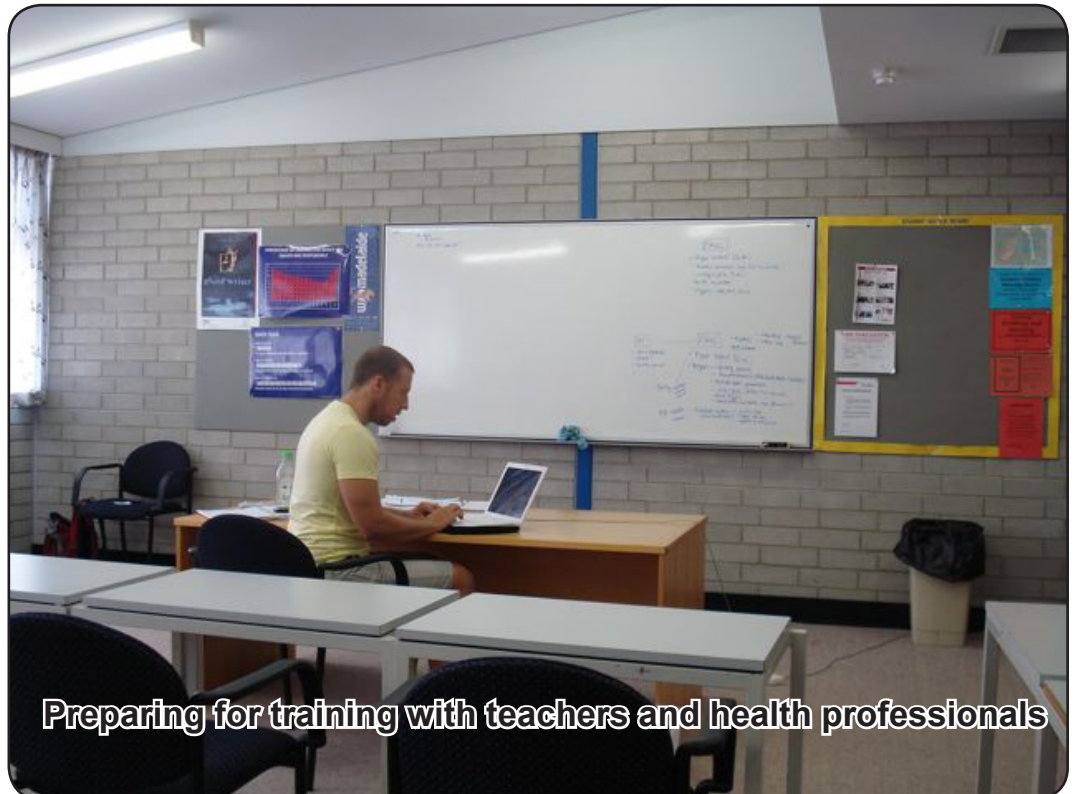
As I rounded up my time in South Australia, it became clear to me the progress that has been achieved in schools due to the work of Shine SA, South Australia’s equivalent to Family Planning. Shine SA’s ability to get many schools and teachers to include inclusive sexual health curriculum across the state is to be applauded. Yet I couldn’t help but feel dejected that this was the only foot in the door systematically for challenging homophobia work.

What continues to concern me is that challenging homophobia is too often confined to sexual health. I need to be clear that this is not Shine SA’s issue. Schools need progressive, inclusive and clever approaches to sexual health that they competently provide across the state. They have done as much as anyone, if not more, to challenge



homophobia consistently and competently across an education system.

Yet homophobia is an issue that moves beyond the realms of sexual health. It has foundations that feed off those that are different, boys that aren't macho and girls that aren't feminine enough. It was the fact that my first challenging homophobia program, *Pride & Prejudice*, was not about sexual health that calmed a regional all-boys Catholic school and led to my delivering it there. Many schools, Catholic and not, are concerned that my program is "six weeks of anal sex". It makes sense to them that this is about more than sex.



Preparing for training with teachers and health professionals

The other issue is the way that sexual health is dealt with in schools. Not every school will do sexual health. If they do, not all undertake inclusive sexual health programs. It's also known that teachers will censor out those parts of inclusive programs they see as controversial, too challenging for students or things they don't feel comfortable discussing. Mary would admit this between bouts of uncomfortable fidgeting on her chair. "It depends entirely on the individual, if they want to do it, if they have had those experiences..."

It would be too easy to dismiss Port Lincoln as a place where LGBT young people cannot live feeling safe and supported. I left Lincoln with the feeling that it, more than any other stop on my national tour thus far had the biggest and most immediate potential for great change. It seems that this sleepy seaside town, built on the fishing industry (see tuna and prawns), has done many things right. A progressive youth service here, a well-meaning though occasionally misguided policeman there, a local high school committed to challenging homophobic language and implementing inclusive sexual health curriculum just might have all made a difference.

The staff at West Coast Youth Services would admit that "you can be gay in



Port Lincoln, but..." What followed were all the conditions: you must not be open to anyone but your close family and friends, you must not talk, dress or act in a certain way, you must be a part of the everyday workforce, etc. In my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay'*, I write about how the success in my work in regional (and metropolitan) schools might be largely in part to my being a "palatable poofa", or as an Australian academic terms it, "the good gay". I describe with some disappointment that my vanilla-ness might have actually worked in my favour, despite the fact that in some ways wishing I was more exotic.



Post-meeting, West Coast Youth Services

If it's all about fitting in and being like, then perhaps LGBT young people can eek out a relatively safe and supported existence in Port Lincoln. Enter "Jack", a young man who left school and later came out, both relatively recently. When I asked Jack how he identified himself, he responded, "I'm not gay but my boyfriend is". He laughed and said that he identifies this way even though he doesn't have a boyfriend. When I asked him why he likes this label, he paused and went serious.

*"I can't dress for sh*t, I drive cars and I'm messy. That's not how people personify gay. The gayest thing I do is wear pink, but every guy pretty much does that these days. My best mate, who is straight as they come, probably wears more pink than I do."*

Although Jack has heard that Port Lincoln is "one of the most homophobic towns in South Australia", he doesn't really experience it that way. Admittedly he has a gay uncle, who does not live in Lincoln, but it is clear that Jack's family and friends accept him because of who he is as a person.

"I am who I am, I'm not hiding myself. I've always stayed the same, I'm pretty much a regular guy."

Jack's sister and friends discovered some "evidence" in his room on New Years Eve (Jack later admits this was a series of gay erotic stories). He arrived home on New Years Day to admit that he was gay.



“One week later she told mum in the car, then mum told dad.”

Asking about his relationship to his uncle and whether he made things easier in some small way, Jack makes it clear his uncle is his “least favourite family member. We are 90% the same and I get annoyed by him easily. We clash.” Asked about the 10% where they differ, Jack was clear.

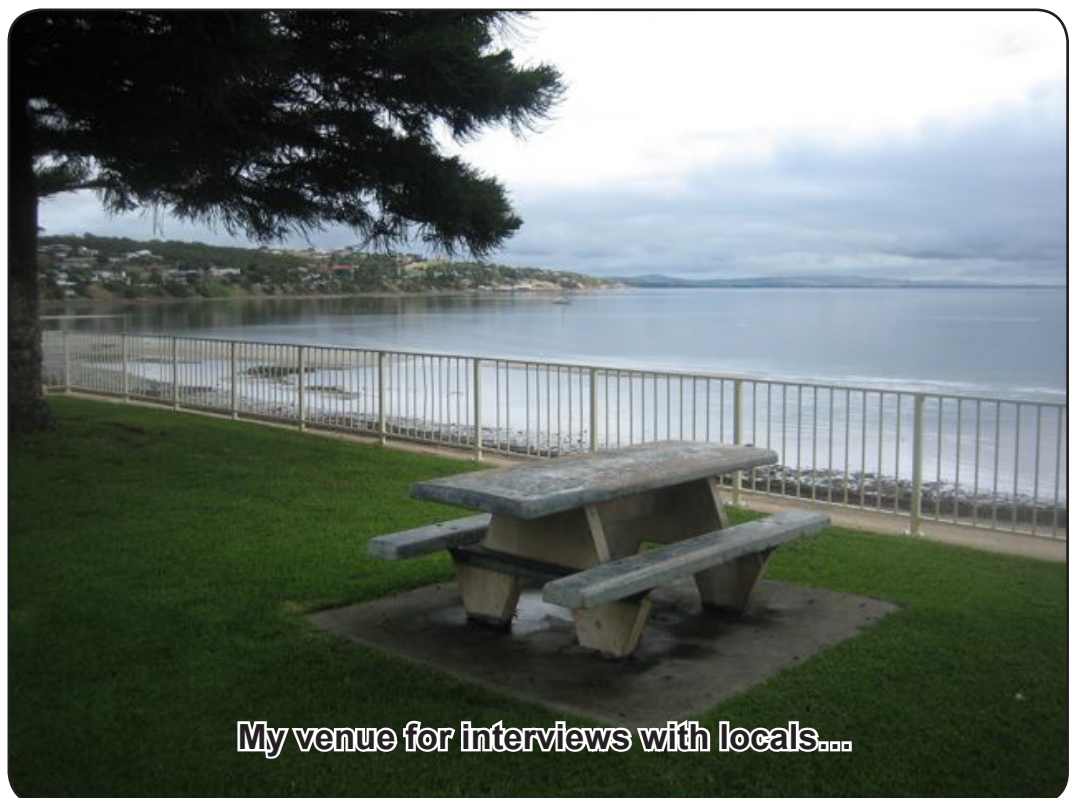
“I don’t want to be classed as him junior. He’s almost bitchy. I’m not. He seems arrogant and stuck up. I’m known as a know-it-all but I’m not arrogant and stuck up. He’s in Sydney now.”

Jack admits that his family is further along than others. His father has an openly gay brother, his mother is a well-known, and apparently well-liked amongst younger people, health professional who has completed “some gay counseling course years ago”.

It was at school during a sexual health education class that Jack realised he was gay.

“I can pretty much pick the day I realised [I was gay]. I can remember exactly what we were talking about, exactly what was on the video....They just showed males...just half naked...shirtless”

Jack says he experienced obvious arousal and never thought much about it again. “I’m not attracted to females in the slightest. They sit on my lap, some try and touch me when they’re drunk but nothing happens.” At high school Jack “was teased for being gay by other students”. He explains, “there is always that kid that gets teased for being gay. I was that kid. I didn’t always hang out with the guys and play sport. But I didn’t get bullied and I didn’t get bashed.”



My venue for interviews with locals...

The reactions of those around him played a major role in Jack’s development. He has many stories of young people who moved away without letting people know that they were gay or otherwise. Most have felt that they did not have the choice.



“I don’t know. If I’d had bad reactions from my friends, then I probably would have moved. But most of my friends are modern.”

Jack is very clear on where he wants to be. “I don’t want to move away. I have my family, I have my friends and I have my dream job.” Whilst he is not out at work because his boss is in the army reserve and has told a few gay jokes, Jack is clear that he has almost everything in life that he could want. Well, except one thing.

“I wish I could find a boyfriend here...but that’s harder than you would think in this town. But even though it’s hard, I don’t want to move. It’s just a lot harder because there are no guys here, or at least guys here who like me.”

I had heard something similar only the week before in Adelaide. “Markus”, who I introduced in my Adelaide blog, would tell me, “I can’t say I have confidence in finding someone here...” Yet in contrast, Markus added, “I can’t say that I want to stay here”.

Jack is having none of that.

“I just want to find someone nice. I’m not really into being messed around and I don’t like heartbreak....As sorry as it seems, I think I’m one of the nicer gay guys in town. Most of the gay guys here are not nice. There are not many nice looking gay guys here. There are 1 or 2 my age and I wouldn’t go near them. I’m not a mean person, but I would just never go there, even if I was desperate.”

“I just want to be happy.”

