

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK FIVE, GOLDFIELDS (ESPERANCE, KALGOORLIE), WA: THE DAY I STARED DOWN HOMOPHOBIC TRUCKERS...

"It's just really frustrating that I didn't know about this before..."

I looked across a relatively large school nurse's office to one of three school psychologists and asked, "can you tell me why?"

"I wish I'd known about all of this because we need it..."

I found myself in Esperance Senior High School after a recommendation by a local worker. After meeting with local youth and mental health workers it seems I got the thumbs up. An endorsement by one of those workers had me seated in the school nurse's office the very day. Notoriously overworked and under resourced, that the support staff of Esperance Senior High made time for me at such short notice said one thing: affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia was important to them.

To my surprise the lead school psychologist, "Tanya", would convince two other school psychologists from the regional office, the school nurse and the school chaplain to join us. But wait there's more. Tanya had immediately got off the phone to me after arranging the meeting and walked the school grounds asking health and physical education teachers if they addressed homosexuality. All those asked would say that yes they did look at homosexuality in relation to values and discrimination: *"Everyone has the right to be homosexual and if at any point we encroach on that, that's a problem."*

To cap it off the school principal even dropped by, shook my hand and wished me well with my travels.

Tanya and her colleagues were clear that they could support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students and provide them with safe spaces within the school. Self-harm was thought to be the most common presenting issue with young same sex attracted women; alcohol and drug use amongst same sex attracted young men. All the support staff observed that the word "gay" as a derogatory word was "commonplace". "It's tough."



The frustration that Tanya expressed was about the lack of knowledge, such as research on same sex attracted young people's experiences in schools, resources, such as the Pride & Prejudice educational package, and strategies, such as those outlined in *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*: how to challenge and interrupt homophobia in students without being disciplinarian.

After the fifth week of introducing the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour, sharing resources that teachers and health professionals find useful, and talking to schools and organisations, there is no doubt in my mind that most, if not all, teachers and health professionals lack training and resources outlining practical strategies they can use in their everyday classrooms and workplaces.

With a small investment of time and some discussion, immediate, small yet significant changes can be made. Tanya and the school nurse, "Betty", seemed quite focused on supporting "out" students. I challenged this focus, referring to research by Nicholas & Howard (1998). Nicholas & Howard looked at young people's thoughts of suicide and their attempts, finding that not only were same sex attracted young people much more at risk than their heterosexual peers but that gay, lesbian and bisexual young people would attempt suicide *before* they came out to anyone. I asked Tanya and Betty what they could do to demonstrate their support before students came out.

Without the time to reflect on their own practice, I would ask Tanya and Betty if they did introductory talks about their roles with new students at the school. "Yes." I asked if they talked about examples of what students might come to them for. "Yes." I asked if they could add something like, "and some students come to talk to me if they think they might be gay". Both looked at one another in a sort of disbelief that they had not thought of this before. This gave way to excitement about other ways that they could demonstrate their support for sexual diversity.



Esperance, a small town in the south-east of Western Australia, was not an original destination for the national challenging homophobia tour. Originally I had planned to spend the entire week in the mining city, Kalgoorlie. Instead I took a chance and headed to Esperance first, knowing that the high school best friend of an ex-boyfriend, “Lisa”, knew some local LGBT young people who were interested in sharing their stories.

Yet we are getting ahead of ourselves. To get to Esperance, Western Australia from Port Lincoln, South Australia takes around 22 hours and 1800km. That drive involves crossing the famed, perhaps infamous, Nullabor Desert.

It was with some anxiety that I prepared myself psychologically for the biggest drive I had undertaken. Throughout my childhood my parents would talk of their retirement plans, which involved them slowly making their way around Australia in a 4WD. With my parents no longer together or retired, it was with some discomfort that I contemplated the drive. Somehow I had thought that I would not drive across the Nullabor until I myself was retired. Why was I doing this and not my parents?



When confirming to all those who asked if I was indeed taking the “big drive”, I was met with a low-level hysteria. “Really!?” It was similar to the hysteria I experienced when I shared my plans to undertake Tasmania’s challenging South Coast Track. I would complete this 6-day wilderness trek with one of my best friends, Andrew (incidentally one of the young people on the Pride & Prejudice educational package DVD), despite people warning it was incredibly difficult, rather dangerous and perhaps beyond my capacity.

I decided to break up the drive into two days, both around 10-11 hours of driving, not including breaks. Starting at 6am both mornings, both days ended around dusk. Wearing a long-sleeved shirt to prevent “trucker’s arm” (i.e. a sunburnt arm through the driver’s window), I enjoyed ABC radio when in range and my own thoughts when the radio went dead (for the most part). With petrol stations anywhere between 100 and 150kms apart, there was much time to reflect on



what I had experienced so far on the tour, what lay ahead and about the drive itself. With Paul sleeping from the heat, the lack of anything to do and perhaps the waft of masculinity from my sweating body, I found the drive remarkably peaceful, if you don't count foot cramps and concerns of hitting kangaroos, wombats, emus and camels.



I kept myself partly amused with acknowledging those driving in the opposite direction. In regional Australia there is a custom of waving or lifting a finger or two off the driving wheel as a friendly "hello". Whilst not compulsory, I found myself feeling strangely more at peace when a fellow driver returned my wave or, as I got progressively tired, raised fingers. Equally I would find myself feeling somewhat miffed when my gesture was not returned. It became clear that drivers from

Victoria and women were highly unlikely to raise, or give you, the finger. The most likely to raise their finger those driving trucks and vans, or retirement villages on wheels, and of course my favourite: men in *really* big hats.

A feature of the Nullabor is road trains (i.e. very long trucks) that travel in both directions. The drivers of these intimidating, imposing and, at times, inconvenient vehicles are another. Eating amongst these men at the South Australian-Western Australian border, I observed their "safe" interactions. Their conversations stayed on safe topics: the road, the weather, the food.

Safe territory would also appear to include winking, nudging and lewd gesturing every time the waitress had brought their meal, invariably a burger and chips, and walked away. From experience I concluded that homophobia would not be too far away. It was the next morning that I would personally experience this at a roadhouse in a place called Caiguna (1100km east of Perth).

Walking into the roadhouse to pay for fuel I was taken aback by a rather attractive young man behind the counter. After weeks on the road, a lot of time to think and a lack of physical affection he was a welcome sight. Waiting to pay I would watch him politely and



efficiently serve customers. Seeing a sign that said they sold fresh milk broke my daydream about him, which was getting progressively intense, and I looked around to find the fridge. I would give almost anything for something other than UHT milk.

As I did I looked down the roadhouse to the diner, catching the gaze of two truckers talking at a cheap looking table. They were sitting in front of the fridge housing the fresh milk. One, Tweedle Dum, was motioning at me with his head whilst saying something to his breakfast companion, Tweedle Dee, a rather large unattractive man with many tattoos who could be cast in one of your nightmares as the cellmate you didn't want to have if you went to jail. Both did not follow social etiquette and stop talking about me now that I was looking directly at them. Instead Tweedle Dum kept motioning, more aggressively now, and Tweedle Dee kept looking and laughing.

Suddenly I became self-conscious. I immediately wondered if somehow they had guessed about what my daydream about the young man at the counter had entailed. My reflex reaction was embarrassment, like I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't. Then, realising they were unlikely to have read my mind, I checked my stance, my clothes... My clothes. My last pair of clean shorts was a pair of black shorts with tiny white stars on them. In a sea of plain, dependable and safe Hard Yakka gear, here I was wearing some shorts with flair. Were they laughing about my shorts?

Getting back to Bruce, my truck, safely was the next thing that popped into my brain. The laughter and motioning was not light-hearted. There was something in Tweedle Dum's head movements and laughter that was accusing and nasty. I decided I could not get fresh milk from

the fridge in front of Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. I hoped I could walk out to my truck, close the door, start the engine and drive off.

As I turned from the large counter to the door I glanced briefly again to see what they would do as I exited. And then it began. One look at Tweedle Dum confirmed that he was still nastily laughing.



Suddenly the way his face screwed up and the way he looked at me looked cowardly. One look at Tweedle Dee confirmed that he was still chuckling along with the ride. Suddenly the way his huge belly moved when he laughed made him look comical.

As my previously shaking hand hit the door to push it open, my reflex of fear became anger. I was met with a rush of dry, outback heat, enough to wake me up from my fearful slumber. By the time I hit the truck I was fuming.

“Did you get the fresh milk?...” Paul asked, unaware and acknowledging his hunger. I replied that I hadn’t, but by the time the door had closed behind me I had known I was going back in for milk. “I’m going back in...just be ready if something happens, OK?”

“What?”

Shaking with anger overcoming fear now I tried unsuccessfully to explain in a few succinct sentences what had happened. I might have said something about “f**ing homophobic truckers” and that there was going to be “a punch on in Caiguna”. Paul, for his part, checked if I was OK and I said that I was and I just needed to say that. I laughed that if truckers hit me it would be good for my video blog, knowing it would not come to violence, at least from me.



Now with fear subsiding my stomach grumbled, reminding me that although this was a matter of principle, it still would like some cornflakes this morning. As I purposefully marched back to the roadhouse it felt like a movie, and I went back to a conversation I had with my older brother when I was about 14 years old. It had



been clear from a young age that I was not able to “handle myself” in fights. Sensing my high school experience was tough, to say the least, my older brother sat me down for some truths. The toughest kid in the northern suburbs along with our cousin, my brother taught me some secrets that I would only use once or twice in my life and unfortunately never at high school.

*“Dan, you don’t even have to always fight. It’s all about the eyes. Look, you just have to look crazier than they do, like a f**king crazy c*nt. Get those crazy Hulk Hogan eyes when he goes into a rage. Look at them like you are going to kill them. If you have to, say “let’s fuckin’ go c*nt!”, hold your arms out and get the violent shakes, do it. Look at them like that, and most people will call you crazy and walk the other way. No-one wants to fight a mad man...”*

My first step in the roadhouse saw the customary look by every set of eyes in the place, a symptom of boredom and the lack of change in an isolated place. Turning right with purpose I walked slowly towards the fresh milk fridge, immediately catching the attention of Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. Yet instead of looking at the fridge, with every step I looked at them more and more intently with a dash of crazy. Not expecting to see me again, let alone have me come anywhere near them, both did what I had not expected. Tweedle Dee was first, stopping his laugh and his moving belly instantaneously and looking at the floor. Tweedle Dum was next, following his partner in homophobic hate crimes and averting his gaze to his empty plate.

As I got closer and closer to them I kept looking, just waiting to catch their eye. Momentarily I paused, standing in the small space between their table and the fridge, both painfully aware that I was looking at them both. They both now seemed so much smaller than the intimidating men they were only minutes before. As I turned my back to them, slightly puzzled by their sudden silence (given they could both crush me, one of them literally) I suddenly felt it was almost comical if it was not so serious.



With fresh milk in hand I turned to look at them, still without them meeting my gaze or them making a sound. I turned one final time after paying for the milk, possibly the most expensive milk I'll buy in my life, to see two men avoiding confrontation.

Once back at the truck Paul checked if I was OK. "Yep, long story, I'll tell you when we are driving..." Calmly we ate our cornflakes.

Getting back into the truck, I wound down the window and noticed a young backpacker approaching the truck. He and his traveling companion were parked beside us at a petrol bowser. I'd noticed him because he was topless, and athletic with a million dollar smile.

"Can I please check this in your truck?"

Asking to see if a transformer worked in our truck, I found out he was German-Indonesian. Surprising him by breaking into conversation in German, some light flirtation followed and later Paul suggested he might have been making some excuse to talk to me. I told him it was wishful thinking, yet it struck me how at one lonely petrol station I could be intimidated by truckers and disarmed by a flirtatious, topless backpacker.

The small, sun-soaked, seaside town of Esperance would provide another stark contrast to the barren plains of the Nullabor. Soon after arriving the locals would tell me that the town, no different to any other that I had visited so far, was hamstrung by it's size. One worker explained that the fact that everyone knew everyone had resulted in Esperance being called "Incest-perance".

This "small town syndrome" was evident when I spoke with a group of LGBT young people, gathered at short notice after a few sms' from Lisa's phone. When I asked if they faced any challenges in Esperance, the young people talked of living in proximity to other locals and "dodging people in high school who didn't accept [them]".



With a lack of places to socialise, these young people often found themselves sharing spaces with people that made their life uncomfortable, and even unsafe.

Mini, a young lesbian, admitted that constant comments, especially from young men, and yelled insults upset her. Whilst she tried to stay light and laugh things off, she conceded it got to her. Yet these comments trigger a feeling of “I’m in danger”.

Not long ago Mini was walking to her car after a night out at the local watering hole when she found herself alone and in the dark. As she approached her car she was grabbed from behind, one hand over her mouth and one on her crotch. She is in no doubt that the attack was homophobic. Her known assailant was reported to the police, taken to court and charged, but not before she was accused of making up the attack because she was racist: her attacker was indigenous. Already distraught from the attack, these claims would add insult to injury given Mini’s strong stance against racism. This was evident throughout the group interview where she challenged other young people’s views and language. Mini now does not go out at night alone, mindful that she is not safe in her own community, which locals describe as quiet, idyllic and conservative (perhaps quiet if you are heterosexual and male, or maybe, as Lisa calls them, “rich, white c*nts”). This also extended to her friends, with Mini taking great care, mindful of the safety of others, to make sure her friends were not leaving our evening conversation alone.

As opposed to the common view that lesbianism might be “cool” and even welcomed amongst young straight males, Mini had other stories of the boyfriends of female friends who would not speak to her. “These small-minded, retarded cowboy boys, they are so dumb.” She gave one example of one young man who banned Mini from visiting her friend in his home. When he found out Mini had visited his girlfriend in their shared home, he kicked out his girlfriend who then had to stay with her mother for two weeks. As Mini explains, “all his porn is lesbian porn, yet his biggest fantasy threatens him too much...”



The journey to identifying as a lesbian was difficult from Mini's perspective, yet full of treasured memories that she recalled with good humour and hilarious impressions.

When she was in primary school, Mini remembers vividly a dream about her female music teacher, who she admits she had a huge crush on.

*"I had a dream I had her baby and I was breastfeeding it. That's some f**ked up sh*t for a 6 year old!...But I'd always known. When I was 15 I had a best friend and I was totally in love with her. We used to wag school, steal her mum's wine..."*

One day Mini remembers that both girls went to the beach and sat talking under the pier. Her friend was complaining about her boyfriend until Mini finally said, "if you keep whinging about him I'm going to kiss you..." The friend kept complaining, and Mini describes how passersby soon must have been watching two girls in school uniform kissing passionately on the beach beside a bottle of wine.

"That was freakin' awesome! I pretty much knew from that moment. That was it..."

Mini excitedly told everyone at school that she had shared her first kiss, but admits that fear led her to use a male name when asked who it was. That and continued pressure would lead her soon after to go out with a young man.

"I kissed him and he wanted to keep going, so I stopped and said, 'buy me a pizza' and so he did."

Knowing that it would not work Mini began to ignore the boys calls, to the point where her family became "pissed" at her. It all came to a head for Mini around New Years one year.

*"I made out on New Years with the little sister of a girl who hated me from high school. That made her hate me even more! One night at the [pub] we were all drunk and she confronted me in front of everyone, saying I'd slept with her sister. I screamed back at her that I'd never slept with her sister and that it was well known that she's f**ked [female] in the [pub] toilets."*

The second incident again involved alcohol. Quite drunk, Mini, finally confessed to her concerned mother that she was a lesbian. Her mother reassured her, "you know what love, I still love you..." This is something Mini still clearly holds onto. Her father is a different story. He believes that Mini is going through some phase.

This was evident in one anecdote where Mini came out to her grandmother on social networking site, Facebook. Harangued to join



Facebook by “Nanny”. When Nanny looked at Mini’s page and saw that she had joined a gay group, she immediately rang Mini’s mum.

Nanny: “Is Mini gay?”

Mini’s mum; “Yes...”

Mini’s dad [yelling in the background]: “She thinks she’s gay!”

Nanny would send a Facebook message simply saying, “I love you.” Mini would reply, “I love you. I’m sorry Nanny.” Nanny responded one last time, “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

Mini cried.

Mini theorises that grandparents are much more relaxed with their grandchildren whilst being “more angry” with their own. At least that is her experience, acknowledging some brewing anger with her father.

“I’m 26 years old, my frontal lobe is fully developed so pretty much nothing is going to change...”

Teachers and health professionals painted a picture for gay and bisexual young men in Esperance’s schools. Reflecting, often for the first time, I heard an interesting debate. Most questioned openly if things were really that hostile for LGBT students, yet admitted that bullying was “incredible” and that “if some came out they would get their head smacked in...Definitely...”.

A regional mental health worker admitted, “it’s just a friggin’ tough lot as a kid here...It’s hard enough to have a relationship that is accepted with all the ups and downs and dramas...But then add a same sex relationship in this place and...”



Whilst the local young men and women I spoke with described a community where being anything but heterosexual meant abuse, violence and/or being “driven out of town to the outskirts or Perth”, other people experienced Esperance as idyllic, peaceful and welcoming. Enter Berlin Mäth.

Last year during Australia’s winter I was lucky enough to base myself in Berlin for the Northern Hemisphere summer. Over that three months I met weekly with Berlin Mäth for lunch to talk about life. I had met him through his former boss, Chris, one of two landlords I had whilst living for a year in Berlin from 2006-7.

I had spent that year writing the manuscript that would ultimately become my book, *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’*. I had reluctantly met Chris after a Pilates class at my local gym. I say reluctantly because I was not interested in talking to him and I was naked at the time. Naturally an introvert, Chris’ bravado and badgering of me, the Pilates class participant with the bad English and “quietly confident, young bear-like” motion had turned me off. Escaping into the sauna after the class I did not expect to see him again until the following week. Naked on a wooden bench he would close the door with purpose and sit opposite me. *“Right you. What are you doing here in Berlin?”*

Still becoming accustomed to nakedness in gyms, I was somewhat disarmed and answered that I was there to write a book, to learn German and connect with my father’s heritage. *“You are writing about what?...”*

I explained that I was writing a book about a decade of experiences in Australian schools and he burst out laughing.



“You spoilt little brat. I have never heard anything so indulgent. You have a rich mummy and daddy and have no idea what to do with your life, so here you are in Berlin...”

I explained my mother was not wealthy, that I had not spoken to my father in 14 years and that this was entirely self-funded, and poorly at that. In disbelief Chris confirmed that this was all true. “Yes.”

“Well you must come to lunch with me and my team. We need to talk more. I’m not



taking no for an answer. I am a gay man myself who came out late and I think I can learn a great deal from you for my own work. And just in case you think I am only offering this because I'm interested in your dick, I'll leave now and wait for you to give you my card."

An international expert in neuro-linguistic programming, hypnosis and sexual therapy, Chris asked why I was writing a book and if I really had much to say. Over lunch I told stories of my work to Chris and his team, one of them Berlin Mäth, to the point where Chris was roaring with laughter and saying, "this is incredible, you should write this down!"

"As I said, that is what I am here writing about..."

Sensing my living situation was not working out, Chris would make me an offer on the eve of his annual three-month holiday to escape the Berlin winter.



"Stay in my [penthouse, opulent] apartment. I'm gone for three months, my room is free. My 19-year-old son is going to be here by himself, and he needs a strong role model. You'll be perfect, your energy will be good for this apartment."

We had spent 4-5 hours talking over tea about our lives, our work and what we were hoping to achieve. Chris, in his early 50s, would tell me he had not had a conversation as intense as this for over 20 years. "I feel like I've just had a night of sex, I'm exhausted." Exhausted myself, I would accept.



As a result I would spend a lot of time with his team, particularly Berlin Mäth. Comfortably heterosexual, he would come to the gym and ask advice on exercises, take me for drives to his favourite spots near his outskirts home and come early to Chris' apartment to have breakfast with me. I received a long, warm hug each morning and he branded me as "Sunshine". He said I was the first person he had ever met "who worked on his work every day...that was incredible... your focus..." Yes, it was a Mad Bromance that caused us great pain when I left Berlin for Australia. I would learn more about myself and how to express deep affection for men who I loved and cared for, yet was not in a relationship with.

In Berlin last year during our weekly catch-ups Berlin Mäth floated his plans to come to Australia with his girlfriend, Ramona. Assuming we might meet at best on the East Coast, I was taken aback when I walked through the local Esperance supermarket and spied Berlin Mäth with Ramona buying ingredients for a cake. That cake would be for his birthday the very next day.

Berlin Mäth describes his heart nearly jumping out of his chest. After some much needed hugs, a shared meal on the foreshore and catching up (he had not heard that I was published, a much discussed dream for me over too many breakfasts whilst in Berlin with him), I confessed to him that I had arrived in Esperance feeling heavy and flat. With few contacts and his unlikely to change I was feeling pessimistic. With a small smile, a warm hand on my shoulder and a hopeful look came Berlin Mäth's reply.

"Come on Pumpkin. Have you decided already how this week is going to be?"

And so I made a few phone calls and suddenly Esperance looked very different. Somehow fate offered up exactly what I needed to reinvigorate me. Indeed my national challenging homophobia tour continued to be one of pleasant surprises.



Thankfully Esperance would yield unexpected contacts for my late week trek to Kalgoorlie. Apart from being the coastal getaway for Kalgoorlie's residents, Esperance also is in the same "Goldfields" region. This means that teachers and health professionals are in relatively close contact.

"Mandy", a local youth mental health worker, was the first to share her Kalgoorlie connections. A former "Kal"



resident, Mandy grew up with very different views to now. She recalls, “I was racist, homophobic, you name it...” Formal education, learning and “having fantastic friends” are credited for her more liberal stances in life now. Mandy describes one friend who took time to “gently challenge” her which led to change over time.

“I used to say things like, “they shouldn’t have kids”. But you can change, and I feel free to admit that I was racist and homophobic. It all comes through fear. Like I used to be scared of Indigenous people, and laugh at them...”

Everyone from my mother to friends to Facebook friends had demonstrated concern for my safety. On my Facebook status, for example, someone had written, “Come back in one piece please!”

Once in Kalgoorlie I met with Mandy’s counterpart, “Donna”. Donna confirmed what everyone had told me before my arrival.

“It’s difficult because it’s a mining town. You get that macho element around town. There is drinking and drugs. Everyone works long hours and shift work is really tough.”

Local school psychologists agreed, suggesting that perhaps there was a different experience for men and women.

“Kalgoorlie is harder for guys. It has this impression of a mining community: rough, manly and stuff. I think it would be harder because of blokey blokes.”

Certainly this seemed to be playing itself out in local schools. For example one young indigenous man had been caught by his friends “in a sexual act with another boy”. That formerly close-knit group of friends has now ousted him. He has reportedly been beaten up a few times by those friends and others and “his mother is worried he is going down the path of self-harm”. The mother of a friend of this boy is said to be trying to intervene, telling her son and their friends that it is like their acceptance in the group of a disabled young man. *“You accept [said young man] and he cannot change that, and [young same sex attracted man] cannot change the way he feels...”*

Teachers and health professionals describe not knowing where to start. “Sam”, a local school psychologist, senses that “teachers don’t know how to approach [students saying “that’s so gay”]” let alone look at other ways to affirm sexual diversity.

As has been said before, this tour is a repeat and expansion of the great work undertaken by Rodney Croome for the Human Rights Commission over a year ago. I always remember Rodney describing a simple technique to gauge the LGBT climate in a town or city. *“I make sure that I walk around the place that I am in for at least an hour.”*

Taking this walk around Kalgoorlie, I did not get a sense that it was as hostile as some had led me to believe. I was surprised how my gaydar



and lesdar were pulsating as I walked the streets. This was not only during the day but also the nights, when I was warned of men coming up from the mines to drink. For example, one seemingly same sex attracted young man jumped excitedly around with a group of young women at one of the biggest watering holes on town, surrounded by apparent miners. The prevalence and acceptance of camp gave me a clue that perhaps Kalgoorlie might not be as hostile as others had warned. And I have to say Kalgoorlie was surprisingly, for me, one of the campest places I can recall visiting.



Taking this walk around Kalgoorlie, I did not get a sense that it was as hostile as some had led me to believe. I was surprised how my gaydar and lesdar were pulsating as I walked the streets. This was not only during the day but also the nights, when I was warned of men coming up from the mines to drink. For example, one seemingly same sex attracted young man jumped excitedly around with a group of young women at one of the biggest watering holes on town, surrounded by apparent miners. The prevalence and acceptance of camp gave me a clue that perhaps Kalgoorlie might not be as hostile as others had warned. And I have to say Kalgoorlie was surprisingly, for me, one of the campest places I can recall visiting.

Just why this might be so was suggested by some Perth friends.

*“Kalgoorlie has such a long history of brothels that no-one gives a f**k about what other people do sexually. I can understand that things seem camp there.”*

Sam explains that the nature of people flying in and out of Kalgoorlie meant that “a lot of people are anonymous and keep to themselves”.

This seems consistent with the experience of “Drago”, a young bisexual man from Kalgoorlie now living in Esperance. Drago, known to bikers as “Nugget”, described living in a Kalgoorlie bkie bar, apparently one of the



most notorious after being documented as one of the most dangerous bars on Earth on a reality TV show, not so long ago.

“They all knew I was bi and they were OK with me. I was always “Nugget” to them. They knew I was a strange young man, and they found out I was bi and they thought it fit. If I was gay I would have been an outcast, if I was straight I would have been accepted. But I was bi and it was OK....I was accepted in a bar where people were punched in the face for saying ‘get fucked you fag’...”

Despite signs of LGBT life, Donna is pessimistic about what can be done for LGBT people in Kalgoorlie.

“There is a lot of bantering...It can be quite judgmental....They are pretty tough...Young people don’t come out as gay or lesbian in school, and I find that cause for reflection in itself...”

Asking Donna what is challenging, she was clear.

“Mainly that the group who is homophobic would be too big and too strong. There is just enough of them that they can support their own views and drown you out...”

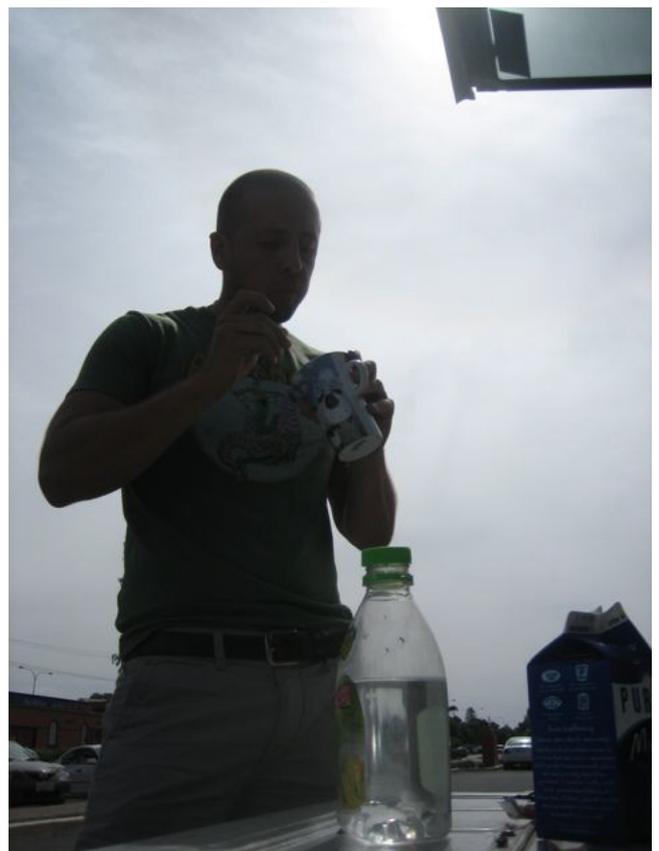
This fear of being an overwhelmed minority voice is a common theme that I have heard time and again, yet with a relatively brief conversation, some resources and questions about what could make a difference there was soon signs of LGBT life in Kalgoorlie’s teachers and health professionals.

In both Esperance and Kalgoorlie I was taken aback by the feedback of the young people, teachers and health professionals I spoke with. Esperance’s Mandy made a point of it.

“This really works, what you are doing...it’s great! You are open, friendly, you have personality and energy and it just works. You just seem so familiar, but who do you remind me of?”

Partly this seemed due to the anxiety people felt at the prospect of sitting down to talk to me, one of the reasons why I ask for 15-20 minutes and to “share a cuppa”.

My familiarity and that I reminded people of someone was evident whilst talking with some of Esperance’s LGBT young people. Mini again.



“You seem familiar, I’m not sure....It’s not just how you look, it’s your manner, your voice. It’s almost like your voice, is just comforting. I just feel really relaxed and comfortable talking to you. Lisa said it was going to be relaxed and it is...You’re so clever...I have been coming here for years, yet suddenly tonight the [pub] feels different...For the first time the [pub] feels nice...”

This comfort seemed apparent when a group debrief happened.

“That’s only the [second, third, fourth] time I’ve ever told anyone that...”

Drago chimed in.

“This is freaky, I had a dream that this very conversation, this moment would happen...”

The group then talked about dreams, with Drago saying he never hits the ground in dreams where he is falling, citing the urban myth that one will die if they do hit the ground in their falling dreams.

Lisa would have none of it.

*“That’s bullsh*t...I always hit the ground in my dreams. Man, I hit that dream hard...”*

I will also give Lisa the final word, given that she encapsulates the aspirations of this national challenging tour. As much as I can hope to talk to as many young people, teachers and health professionals as possible, it will be the ensuing conversations of locals with other locals that will mark the success of this national project.

Elise would talk at a weekend taekwondo competition to a 13 year old boy who admitted he’d had sexual experiences with another boy. Her being open about herself would mean he felt safe to talk about this for the first time in his life.

“You coming has started so many conversations. I’ve had conversations with people at work, with [her housemate] about my sexual identity and with my neighbour who said, ‘I didn’t know you were queer’. It’s been so good!”

