

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK SIX, PERTH, WA (NOT SURABAYA, INDONESIA):
HOW ASIA-PACIFIC DELEGATES MIMIC VICTORIA TEACHERS...

SMS: Dear Daniel, the situation in Surabaya is not safe. I urge you to cancel your ticket because of the terrorist threat here. I will try to get back home today or tomorrow. Peter

With just over 24 hours before I flew from Perth, Western Australia to Surabaya, Indonesia, I received the news just in time to cancel my ticket and save my international organisation considerable expense. Yet the fact that I had built my time in Western Australia around this one week – the result of a professional commitment given in 2007 – had not saved me from the costs to my national challenging homophobia tour.

Peter is Peter Dankmeijer, Executive Director of the Global Alliance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Education (GALE - www.lgbt-education.info). Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, was to be the site for some project work with the Ardhanary Institute, an organisation for lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) women throughout Indonesia.



I was lucky enough to visit a rural base of the Ardhanary Institute in October, 2007. What I found was a large, simple and open warehouse space filled with women. They were all laid out across huge sheets of butchers paper. It soon became clear that these women were from all over Indonesia, participating in a rural lesbian social mapping project. The task was to work together to create a visual representation of their communities, including the links between LBT women and opportunities for support.

Yet the magic seemed to come from the conversations that were taking place between the women. Women's stories were being shared.

The fact that this project encourages such storytelling from LBT women from all parts of Indonesia is something of great interest to GALE. The aim of this Dutch-government funded organisation is to identify, enhance and share better LGBT education practices around

the world. There is a focus particularly on developing countries, which is why the majority of my international work thus far has included such locations as Sri Lanka, Poland and Thailand.

What has become clear to GALE, after around 5 years of operation, is that one of the most powerful ways to challenge and change people, regardless of place, culture or belief system, is through the process of storytelling. Over a decade of work with young people and adults in every kind of setting backs this up. The moment of greatest shift always seems, to me, to come when the audience is ready and open to hear someone's story. The difficulty is creating an environment where an audience can fully appreciate a given story (for more on this I write a great deal about the importance of developing emotional safety in any challenging homophobia situation in *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools.*)

This past week I was to spend time in Surabaya working with groups like the Ardhanary Institute in attempts to skill LBT women to then go out and collect the stories of their LBT sisters. The learning from this project was then going to be made as close to universal as possible and shared with other projects around the world who are ready and waiting.

Although somewhat uncomfortable with leaving Australia during the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour, I understood the international ramifications of my time in Indonesia. I had also committed to following through with this very project over two years before. A few thousand dollars for my time were also going to come in handy for what is going to be the most expensive leg, fuel-wise, of the national tour: the north-west of Australia. I decided that one-week so close to Western Australia's school holidays, a time I do not plan to be able to talk to school staff, could work.

Without access to the internet and going on one sole text message left me anxious and confused. I was concerned for the safety of



the people I knew who I would be meeting, such as Sri and Poeji (seen here with me at the Closing Ceremony of the Copenhagen Out Games last year).

I was frustrated given the amount of preliminary work put into this project and the hopes we all had for what could come from it. Heck, we



knew what could come from it.

That the project was going ahead at all was an achievement in and of itself. In October 2007 I stood before a room full of representatives from all over LGBT Asia-Pacific ready to facilitate a regional meeting that was ambitiously hoping to yield a few concrete LGBT education projects. In what was to be the first international gathering I had ever facilitated, in Bogor, Indonesia, it was safe to say that I was thrown in at the deep end. My ability to move people through difficult agendas had come to the attention of GALE Executive Director, Peter, almost by accident. Peter seemed to appreciate how I read audiences, made decisions to adjust and gave him feedback that he often did not want to hear.

Now standing before this continent-wide meeting I momentarily

regretted 'turning up' to meet with Peter at a Melbourne backpackers in late 2005. When I recounted this meeting with a dear friend, David Telford, he would explain his theory on 'turning up' and why I was now flying around the world with my work, something I was finding hard to fathom:

"Look Daniel, there are some people who just turn up in life. They say yes to just about everything. Eight or nine times out of 10 it's probably not worth it, but it means they are there for the one or two moments when it matters. You turn up..."



The gathered Asia-Pacific representatives, the GALE Class of '07, all agreed that nothing could be agreed upon "about Asia". At first I felt set up. "Gee, thanks for this gig," I thought. Then I started to feel a familiar feeling. Not for the first time I stood before a group of adults convinced that something was impossible, a lost cause and somewhat of an insulting proposition for them. This could indeed be a gathering of teachers in my home state of Victoria.

Suddenly I decided that I was not going to let them give up. They deserved better and so did the LGBT people they were seemingly representing. Yet there was still the small matter of how to facilitate this. Hmm. What if I pretended they were a bunch of reluctant, scared and/or difficult teachers in Victoria? See if you can see any parallels.



Immediately I clarified why we were all gathered:

“First things first. Let’s all agree to disagree. For example, as you’ve all made clear, there is no one accepted definition of Asia...”

“Secondly, let’s be clear about why we are meeting. We are not here to define Asia, solve Asia or fix Asia. We are here to find out what we can agree on, mainly what would be the best projects to invest significant money into...”

Quite quickly I observed that there were dominant voices that were drowning out all others, including that of my Executive Director, a very tall, loud, white man from the Netherlands. By the afternoon of the first day I made him and two other men squirm by following a question with, *“and I’d like to hear from anyone who is not male, white or with a strong command of the English language”*. It became

clear that other facilitators had never dared challenge this puzzling status quo.



At first a few people giggled, given that I chose to deliver it gently and with a smile. With this consistent request that male, white and/or strong English speakers go last and some reminders, we found by the start of the second day that there was almost full participation in discussions. Full participation was achieved by the afternoon of day two when a Japanese representative began to translate regularly for a colleague. It seemed that this was less about amplifying some voices and more about quietening others.

My next point of business was to call one (white, North American) academic on his intellectual violence, best seen as inaccessible verbal monologues that take many twists and turns that cannot be followed unless you are fully focused and well-versed in whatever topic is on offer. It’s hard to challenge sometimes because the perpetrator will have you believe that they are merely sharing their wisdom and experience. This form of bullying, sometimes in the form of e-mails, encourages an intimidated silence and a resultant flatness in any crowd. After the second tirade I would observe the fallout and approach the academic during the next break, asking him to reflect



on his monologues and remind him that I would not politely wait for him to take a breath the next time.

Finally I made it clear that the success of our gathering was not resting on me. If this gathering did not result in some great ideas to challenge and change Asia's beliefs and behaviours about LGBT people then it was a combined effort. For example, when one notorious participant playfully said, "what are you making us do now?" I responded gently with, "I'm not making you do anything, you are free to sit this one out and we'll all continue without you. But you know that we'll do a better job with you."

After two and a half days of watching me facilitate through his quivering fingers, Peter sat back and saw three projects that excited the entire room. One of those was working with the Ardhanary Institute. Using their growing networks we were to train, resource and support rural LBT women to go back to their communities to collect the stories of their LBT sisters. This model would then be expanded to other regions and countries.



My time in Surabaya, Indonesia, was to follow an international Asia-Pacific conference for the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association (ILGA). Yet the arrival of groups of men "from conservative and hard-line Islamic groups" the day before and the day of the conference led to the eventual break-up of the conference. I'm told that local police could guarantee the safety of international delegates from 16 countries only to the airport and out of the country. They were said not to have guaranteed delegates safety if they continued with the conference.



Two websites that have reported on these developments are:

www.fridae.com

globalfundforwomen.wordpress.com

One example of a report on the situation is:

<http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/2010/03/26/9786.islamic-protestors-force-evacuation-of-ilga-conference-participants-in-surabaya>



If ‘turning up’ is what I do, then this time I failed to do so. My helplessness and concern for the people I knew and cared for in my time working internationally quickly turned to anger and bravado. I did not see “conservative and hard-line Islamic groups”, only men who could make big claims in large groups.

One of those people I was concerned about was Peter. As it stands I should not have been too concerned given that, stuck in Indonesia and unable to get home immediately, he headed to Bali for a few days of rest and relaxation. We will re-group.

Now with an unexpected week in Perth I faced one of my fears on the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ Tour. I shared this fear with “Ross”, the principal of an all-boys Catholic school in regional Victoria, the same school where I would pilot my challenging homophobia program, *Pride & Prejudice*. He had been adamant he wanted to take me to dinner with his deputy principal in the launch week of my national challenging homophobia tour.



“The worst thing that could happen is that I’m sitting somewhere in regional or rural Australia and I’m left twiddling my thumbs because no-one knows that I’m there or no-one cares about the work that I’m doing.”

Ross would respond in the same way he had always done, including when I was a young and inexperienced gay atheist working in his school for the first time in the late 1990s. Not for the first time, I wished he had been my teacher and/or principal growing up. With a manner that made me feel respected, supported and believed in, he leaned in.

“Of course you know that you will find yourself twiddling your thumbs... which you know is OK.”

By sharing this fear with Ross I immediately felt the weight lift off my shoulders. I smirked.

