

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge

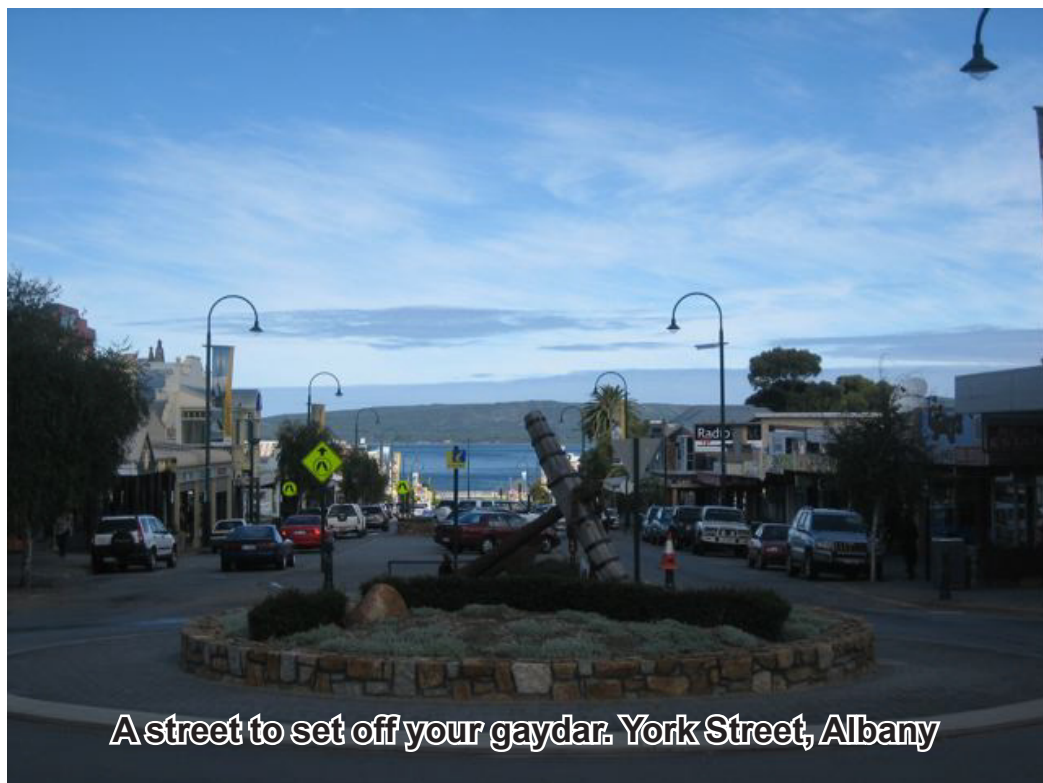
TOUR WEEK SEVEN, ALBANY, WA:
WHEN THERE ARE PLENTY OF WOMEN
WHO LOOK LIKE DYKES, BUT AREN'T...

"...you know not to put your head above water...you keep your head down..."

And with those words "Larry", an older gay man who had lived and worked until recently in Albany for 8 years, summed up the likely experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) folk in Albany and it's surrounding region. According to him, it's "fairly conservative...[and] tends to be dominated by retirees and retired farmers..."

This last point could have an upside if allies in Albany were to be believed. Local ally, "Nathan", a well-connected men's health advocate explained that Albany benefited from having such an apparently wealthy population.

"Once a week I go to an arthouse movie...Tonight I can go to one of 60 cafes or restaurants...There are so many art galleries here and a disproportionate amount of media for a town [~30 000 inhabitants] this size..."



A street to set off your gaydar. York Street, Albany

Certainly when I arrived in Albany, a comfortable 5 hours drive from Perth, I felt like I had driven into a town many more times its size, given the aesthetics, quality of retail outlets and "traffic". Perhaps not coincidentally on arrival I got out of my truck on the main street and felt like I was being sized up favourably by a passing giggly young man, who set off my gaydar, and his female friends. Maybe I would find some LGBT life here after all.



Albany's "unique demographics" also means that there is "a plethora of health and social services". The town, according to Nathan, is "highly serviced". The implication I felt was sometimes it was overserved. Nathan believes that locals are not accessing all those services anywhere near as much as would be expected, one reason why he is so passionate about his role in linking, connecting and referring people in the region.



One issue might be that those people needing services might live outside of Albany's disproportionately wealthy borders. In 30 minutes you can be in Mt Barker, by all accounts a very small and challenging town to Albany's north, or Denmark, described by local LGBT worker, "Mandy" as "the Byron Bay on Western Australia".

Local workers tell me they head to Mt Barker and Denmark, all part of the "Great Southern" region, periodically to offer their services, support and information, often from borrowed rooms. For this reason some services take their "room". 'headspace', a national youth mental health foundation, collaborate with other local services to take a specially designed bus where hoards of young people can jump on board to learn more about the large number of services on offer to them.

'headspace' counselor, "Cass" sees these times on the buses as opportune times to challenge and interrupt homophobia. When I explained some of the strategies outlined in my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, she quickly saw an opportunity.

"We could probably do more of that...Often [on the bus] there are groups of boys who are using "that's so gay"...We could probably



pick up on that because it's just become a part of terminology, the way they talk...

Cass explains that it is not only in group settings that she hears homophobic language.

"In every counseling session, [that's so gay] comes up at least once, if not more..."

As a lead youth agency in the region, Cass is very keen to get me back to Albany soon to train local educators and health professionals. From my time in south-west Australia's retirement capital it would appear that such training, at the very least, is sorely needed. To be honest these requests leave me with a feeling of mixed emotions. On the one hand I am excited knowing that most regions are eager to have me return to work with their schools and organisations, which is a promising outcome. Yet on the other hand there is frustration given that I am not on this tour to market my wares, because I simply cannot go back to many of these regions, given my itinerary is yet to take me through the rest of WA, NT, QLD, NSW, ACT, VIC and TAS until November 2010.



'Bruce' waits for Daniel outside. Young House, Albany

When I first planned this national challenging homophobia tour I had naively expected that I could deliver more training and workshops, negating much of the need to back track. The idea was that whilst I challenged homophobia one cuppa at a time, I could also upskill and resource key locals to do the work themselves with support from peak state or territory LGBT organisations.

Yet the sheer logistics and nature of the tour is that invariably I meet key locals only once I arrive in town, who then realise the possibilities



and excitedly invite me back. Both fortunately and unfortunately a cuppa with me is the best promotion of my challenging homophobia work than any flyer or e-mail I send prior to my arrival. It is also clear that, so far, there is very limited capacity of LGBT organisations to do this work themselves in the metropolitan areas, let alone distant regional and rural ones. Add to that the fact that many LGBT workers have their own, often interesting (and primitive), ideas about what needs to happen and when. In reality all this means that, for training and workshop, 2011 could be busier than 2010; something I was not intending.

Echoing the sentiments of 'headspace' is Young House, another lead agency, this time in youth housing, in Albany and it's surrounds. For years Young House has been front and centre in putting LGBT issues on the local agenda. The organisation enjoys very positive reviews from workers not only from Albany, but also Perth. This reputation, Young House's great work and it being a finalist last year in the WA Youth Awards has resulted in it receiving additional funding. As I sat talking with Young House's Acting Manager, "Mia", a representative for a State Minister came through to organise the Minister's visit the following week.

I must admit that I was given a reception fit for a State Minister by Mia, who proudly showed me around Young House's facilities. Although I feel at times people afford me with a better reception than is required (i.e. a simple cuppa and an informal chat suffices), it does make a remarkable difference after the number of times I'm made to feel like an Amway salesman (see Port Lincoln blog).

Mia's take on Albany was that of an outsider.

"We have amazing culture down here, but unfortunately it is seen as a retirement village...Sometimes people forget that there are young people and young families here...When I first moved down here I found Albany a bit stuck in it's ways...Albany is quite a small town, where everyone knows everyone...There is a real lack of understanding of other people, such as other cultures...They all seem to be quite shut off from reality...It's quite frustrating really..."

Mia and others are working hard to make life easier for all young people, including LGBT young people. In fact it was Young House that led the way to make sure that LGBT young people had somewhere to go a few years ago. A lesbian worker at the service had been working with local police officers to provide support to at-risk young people on Albany's streets. A number of LGBT young people identified through this work needed something that Albany, at that stage, could not provide: "they want a safe place to go, where they are not going to be judged, to talk."

Similarly to other regions and metropolitan areas, an individual decided that they would do something over and above their role



to get something happening for LGBT young people, knowing that nothing was likely to happen systemically. Hearing about a promising regional LGBT project in Bunbury, the Young House worker lobbied to get a local project happening. That project was, and is, True Colours, a space for young people with diverse sexualities and gender (DSG), a term gaining popularity in WA to add to same sex attracted (SSA) and LGBT(IQQA). Run by Uniting Care West, True Colours has a Perth-based coordinator and a local part-time project worker.

It just so happens that Uniting Care West is a sister organisation of sorts with Uniting Care – Cutting Edge (UCCE), a progressive youth organisation in Victoria's north east. UCCE was quick to offer to auspice my national challenging homophobia project last year given it's connections to Outlink, the Human Rights Commission's predecessor to the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour. The CEO of UCCE, Ro Allen, was a fellow Management Committee member for Outlink a decade ago, and worked as hard as anyone to ensure it survived.

I could not have had a more welcoming reception in the south west of Australia through Uniting Care West. From the outset the True Colours project has met my arrival with enthusiasm and excitement, offering me no end of in-kind support, from office space and vehicle assistance through to local contacts and much needed moral support.

Arriving earlier than the True Colours Coordinator in Albany, I would unexpectedly meet the Albany True Colours project worker, "Mandy". I had been enjoying a cuppa at the Men's Resource Centre, talking with "Nathan". At the time Nathan, formerly of Sydney with a background in film and television that was evident in his subtle, swash buckling manner (I got the impression he could have easily been in an American 80s cop drama), was giving me Albany's LGBT background.

"There is a higher than average number of gay people here, some of them in fairly significant positions... It's significantly healthy, but it's an underground gay and lesbian community..."

Mandy would walk in to quickly drop off a flyer to Nathan, only to be introduced to "Daniel".



**'Bruce' at his home away from home.
Uniting Care West HQ, Perth**



“Are you Daniel Witthaus!?”

I replied that “yes” I was. Soon after I would find myself sitting with Mandy to get her impressions and observations of LGBT life in Albany. Meeting at a thriving local café, we would share her experiences over fruit toast and a cuppa.

“Albany is very intolerant of anyone who is not mainstream...”

This despite the town promoting it’s unprecedented array of options for arts, wine and food. Mandy too believes that the local LGBT community is underground and informal. Yet she believes that this is only in adult communities over the age of 25 years. As I was told by everyone in the region, when young people leave school, “they go to Perth...a lot of young people between 18 and 25 years are not getting their needs met...” Larry agrees, “you get out quickly”.

Mandy was clear that visibility was a problem.

“You don’t walk around holding hands with someone of the same sex...I’ve never seen it happen...It would be huge for someone in Albany to stand up and say ‘I’m queer and proud of it’...What do you do with such a strongly heterosexist place?”



The owner and LGBT advocate in the making.
Vancouver Café, Albany

Not that it did not sometimes get confusing, as explained by a lesbian politician.

“In Albany there are so many women that look like dykes, you could swear they were, but they’re not...”

Amongst gay men, “Larry” explains that many gay men in Albany won’t come out, and might even be part of the problem.



“They keep quiet or are very publicly homophobic, yet the next week you’ll see them out in gay venues or saunas in Perth...It really gets up my nose... No-one really comes out to each other...You know there are gay people but you don’t know who they are...There is a fairly strong lesbian community, especially in Denmark where it seems to be tolerated...”

Yet Mandy, an ally educated later in life, is still enthusiastic even if unable to solve the problem immediately. She is a great example of what I have observed for well over a decade in teachers and health professionals: sometimes the best come from outside the sector. Some of the best youth workers I have met were originally trained as teachers or , and vice versa. Some of the best LGBT workers I have met have come from mainstream organisations, and vice versa. As an ally, Mandy seems to be doing things that other LGBT workers around the country are not doing.

The secret is that Mandy is having everyday conversations with people who would previously have never been approached. The Chamber of Commerce in Albany, the local GPs network and others are all finding themselves in conversations about local LGBT people and how they might create a better quality of life for them. Excitingly, these new connections are starting to bear fruit.

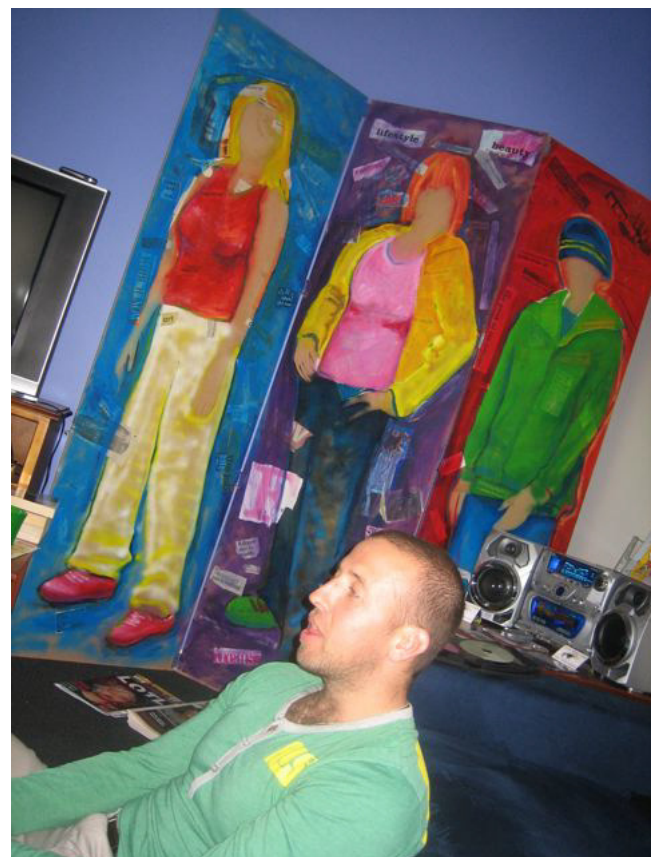
When I asked Mandy why she was an ally to the cause, she was clear.

“I’m living here, I’m committed to this city and I want to see diversity.”

Later that evening I would see Mandy putting her money where her mouth was as a co-facilitator with the local LGBT young people’s group, True Colours. Only recently coming out of a brief hiatus, True Colours is a necessary haven in Albany.

“Keely” a young bisexual woman of 15, says True Colours “shows you that there are other people like you in Albany...It’s the only place for us here...”

“Ritz”, a young gay man who moved to Albany from south east Asia, shakes his head vigorously when I ask if it’s safe to be openly gay in Albany. For him “it’s difficult when you are different and no-one understands”.



Group interview with True Colours participants, Albany



Keely hypothesises that “maybe this is because we are in a small town... It’s different in Perth because there are more people there...”

Whilst Ritz thinks he’ll move to Perth after his studies in nursing, Keely is adamant that she’d rather stay in Perth.

“I want to stay in Albany and not want to go to Perth, even though my family are there...I want to study to be a naturopath ...If I had to I’d move, but otherwise I’d stay here...”

According to Keely, she has a great group of supportive friends. There are signs of support at Keely’s school where she has a circle of friends, including a bisexual male friend “Tom”, who know about her bisexuality.

“You really get to know who your true friends are when they know one of your big secrets...”

Although at first saying that she was “out” at school, it seems that this is not widely known.

“Most people and teachers don’t know, except [teacher and Year Level Coordinator] who sees clients for ‘headspace’...”

Her friend Tom had come out to this teacher, who then referred him to True Colours. Tom had then asked Keely to accompany him to True Colours, and the rest is history.

Yet the presence of True Colours does not mean that all young people feel they can turn up. In the early days of the project, Mia explains that Young House gave important feedback to True Colours about how young people saw it. Young people who were being supported in temporary accommodation were not interested in going to a group for gays and lesbians “because they were still trying to work out who they were”.

“For example one young woman had been in and out of our service for three and a half years...We’d always known she was questioning hadn’t pushed it, just supporting her and waiting for her to share it when she was ready...”

Cass from ‘headspace’ says sharing how they are feeling for young people can be hard when they come from “generations that think that gays are the scum of the Earth” and there are “these farm boys who have grown up and been pumped with ‘gays are bad’...” She thinks that the reactions of other people and the subsequent treatment of LGBT young people can make it hard for local LGBT young people.

The majority of young LGBT people that Cass works with at the moment are young gay and Indigenous men between the ages of 16 and 21 years. She finds it difficult to link them in to True Colours because the young men think that it’s only “if you are white, have got it together and are comfortable with [being gay]...” Changing these young men’s perceptions of True Colours is a struggle, but Cass and others are trying.

As Cass talked of her support for young gay and Indigenous men, I was



reminded of the many stories from young people across the breadth of southern Australia. It seems that a recipe for success with LGBT young people is to ensure that they have a solid foundation of support, and this is not as challenging as teachers and health professionals might believe. If young people have one supportive person in each of their most important areas of life, then it's likely that they'll fare much better than their counterparts who don't.

For example, a young LGBT person with one supportive family member, one supportive friend at school, one supportive teacher and one supportive youth worker/sports coach/workmate will be traveling better than their LGBT sisters and brothers who don't. It sounds like commonsense but for an isolated local worker in regional Australia these kind of targets in their work with LGBT young people can make the overwhelming and impossible seem that little bit more doable. After a few months with teachers and health professionals I know that they have many reasons to feel defeated.



©Group Interview with True Colours participants, Albany

Over a cuppa with Mandy she asked what I thought of the upcoming International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) on May 17th.

"What can you do and where would you start?"

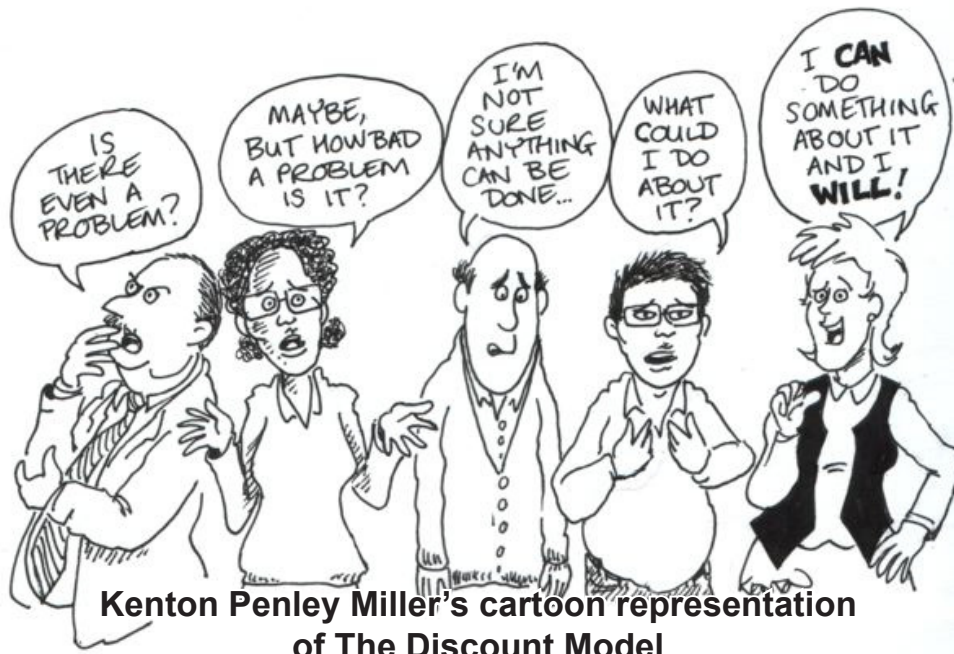
I talked to Mandy about a model I use for school community readiness and how this might applied to Albany. I suggested that it might be ideal to organise a gathering of teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others for IDAHO. The biggest barrier is often the silence that surrounds all things LGBT. Breaking that silence, giving people the permission, safety and excuse to talk about sexual diversity and challenging homophobia invariably creates more everyday conversations later.

Explaining that it was a marathon and not a race, I shared a model that I use with schools. The Discount Model, the foundation that I have built my



book, Beyond 'That's So Gay' around, says that people will only take action when they have moved through some key stages:

- Existence (it actually exists in Albany)
- Significance (it's not just one or two locals who move to Perth)
- Solvability (it's possible for us to do something to support people ourselves)
- Self (it's something that is relevant and achievable for me personally)
- Action (I have no excuses, I have to do something)



Therefore, as I explained to Mandy, it might be a missed opportunity to try and get locals taking personal action immediately when they were still not seeing it as a significant, doable and relevant issue in Albany. The good news is that these stages can be moved through more simply than most people realise.

This year for IDAHO Mandy wants to gather locals and ensure they all have moved through the Existence and Significance stages of The Discount Model. With that foundation Albany gets one step closer to having a community eager to better support the young LGBT people it loses to Perth, or worse suicide, each year.

Cass believes that there is hope.

"I really think Albany is progressing...It's starting to change..."

Let's hope she is right.

