

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK EIGHT, BUNBURY, WA: TOO CLOSE TO PERTH?: GAY IMPERIALISM AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

"...the gay lifestyle promotes lavatory sex..."

If ever you are fortunate enough to receive hate mail, this is the kind of thing you can expect to read. I say fortunate because of an African-American advocate from the US who I sat with on a panel at a conference in Montreal. Accustomed to hate mail from the religious right, she referred to it instead as "fan mail". To Sylvia, "fan mail" from the religious right meant she was on the right track.

A local advocate for LGBT rights started receiving such "fan mail", including the above line, in the aftermath of the "Bunbury Pride Parade controversy".

Late last year, following the 20th annual Pride Parade, a former Pride President questioned its modern day relevance in the heart of Perth. Blogging that perhaps the Pride Parade was preaching to the converted every year in Perth's gay heartland, Daniel Smith suggested that heading out of Perth might do more to advance gay rights (Stage next year's Pride Parade in Bunbury, www.gayinwa.com.au).

Rather than encourage a dialogue, from all accounts it resembled more of a quick and heated debate. Local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) project worker in Bunbury, "Renee" summarises the response by Bunbury City Council's Mayor:

"He said, 'Bunbury doesn't need [the Pride Parade] because we are beyond discrimination here...He is a privileged white man who has no idea..."



Renee explained that one Bunbury Councilor attended a Council meeting soon thereafter and proposed that they conduct a cost analysis on the likely impact of the Pride Parade on Bunbury's local economy. Without debate, that Councilor was "shut down".

At Edith Cowan University, "Tina", a vocal LGBT advocate and ally received a rather elegant, handwritten letter. That letter, as Renee paraphrases, suggested Tina "should be so careful because [she] is around so many impressionable young people" and reminded her that "the gay lifestyle promotes lavatory sex".

Tina's response at the time?

"I'm a straight married woman and I've had 'lavatory sex'".

The untold story is that locally the suggestion, as it was never actually proposed, of a Bunbury-based Pride Parade created many unexpected conversations in everyday situations. Not only were there letters to the editor in the local newspapers for 10 weeks (!) after their first reports of the matter, the suggestion meant that Renee and others had been involved in unsolicited discussions with people they had not expected.

"I didn't bring it up most of the time...most [discussions] were positive, apart from the people who ran the church service in a park right before the council meeting [described earlier]...which was quite terrifying..."

Sadly, Renee feels that the result has been a focus exclusively on "Pride Parade vs No Pride Parade".

"A dialogue never opened that Bunbury might not want a Pride Parade and that there were other [Pride] events happening which people don't even know about..."

An example of this was a screening of 'The Laramie Project' in Bunbury. This screening happened through a partnership between Edith Cowan University and True Colours, described in last week's (Albany) blog. Around 40 local, predominantly LGBT, people attended that screening with very positive responses. It seems that this and other events are forgotten.

Yet despite the local LGBT community feeling left out of a conversation and being clear that a Bunbury-based Pride Parade is not what Bunbury needs, Renee realises the impact of it's instantaneous rejection.

"People have started to realise what it might mean to reject [the Pride Parade] and how that might actually mean a rejection of a whole lot of young people...some now realise it could be their son, their daughter..."





Maybe this realisation will make a difference. Like so many other communities in regional, rural and remote (rrr) Australia, Bunbury knows it has a problem retaining young people. A decade ago when the Outlink project, the predecessor to the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour, spoke to rrr Australian communities they identified retaining young people (both geographically and literally) as the main reason why they would consider supporting local sexual diversity and challenging homophobia.

Bunbury is Western Australia's second largest city, surprisingly coming in at about 50 000 inhabitants. Apart from the Bunbury Pride Parade controversy, the second thing that people excitedly shared when I talked about going there was the new road. Cutting a trip from Perth to Bunbury by around an hour, there is great excitement that the drive now takes a comfortable 90 minutes. This despite Perth-based LGBT workers telling me a saying about Bunbury, "drive two hours and go back 20 years".

When I arrived in Bunbury I found a city that felt like it had gone through a recent major development. Known for its mining and transportation of mining bounty, I had the impression that Bunbury was self-consciously showing off recent wealth in the form of streets lined with quickly assembled franchise buildings and housing developments. I sighed feeling like I could be anywhere in suburban Australia, disappointed that there lacked any Bunbury flavour to it all (whatever that might be).





None of this hides the fact that Bunbury, as “Alan” describes, is “a big country town”. A young gay man who spent his high school and post-high schools years in Bunbury until recently, Alan almost caused me to lose my “interview face” and laugh given that this is exactly how most members of Perth’s LGBT community had been describing Perth.

Alan was born to a logger and a nurse in Bridgetown, about one hours’ drive away from Bunbury. Alan says that the only thing that Bridgetown, with its few hundred inhabitants, is known for is an annual blues festival which he describes as “an excuse for a piss up with music”.

Whilst many would think that growing up in such a small community might be less than ideal, Alan sees it differently.

“I actually loved it...I would not change a thing about growing up there, be it my friends, the community, shooting rabbits and kangaroos on the farms...none of it...”

Alan’s move to Bunbury with his family came at what he believes was an inopportune time: him starting high school.

“Things changed when we moved to Bunbury...It’s never good to move to a new high school I guess...It was definitely a big shock; a new place, not knowing anyone and worrying about making friends... My sister made friends easily because she played netball at a regional and state level...I could only meet people through tennis, but they were sort of non-inclusive people...”

Indeed everyone I have spoken to across regional and rural Australia



thus far has spoken of the importance of locals playing sport in order to become an accepted part of the social fabric. It just so happens though that sport is not always a place where LGBT people feel safe and OK. In recent years my work with CHISI (Challenging Homophobia In Sport Initiative) has seen various key stakeholders in Victoria coming together to make waves systemically in mainstream sport.

Yet Alan's greatest concern was his experience at school.

*"It was a public school full of bad people, most likely with bad parents... People who would say 'I want to fight you' even though you didn't know them and that it made no logical sense...Like one time in Phys Ed we had a sport for the term: Jujitsu...Great, now they have an avenue to do this...OK, I have f**kwits in my class and they all want to fight me and each other...I faked a lot of asthma attacks..."*

This general climate of bullying, and its homophobic nature, started having a real impact on Alan's quality of life.

"In Year 9 I kept asking myself, 'why am I not even remotely attracted to girls and why am I finding guys so appealing?'...Not having been exposed to anything but my life, there was basically mass confusion... It's all about what was taught at school and what parents teach you... This never came up...I used to get upset, emotional and cry, 'I don't want to be gay'...It didn't seem like an acceptable life, it seemed like a life of people's disgust at you..."

An attempt at survival and continuous isolation led to a survival mentality.



“I went into survival mode in high school, I made no efforts to socialise just in case...I went to school and basically hoped to get through the day, then I came home and was thankful I was at home and not there...I threw myself into work, lots of part-time jobs so that my family, no-one, asked questions...”

It is not surprising perhaps that Alan did not perform to his potential and looked to leave school earlier than many of his counterparts. This even though he won an English award.

“I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could, so possibly I didn’t do well as I could...”

That homophobia in schools could impact negatively on students’ academic performance was something explored in research by Jacqueline Mikulsky. For those schools that pride themselves on academic performance, this study of LGBT students across Australia found that student’s perception of their own school environment impacted upon their academic self-concept. Some of Jackie’s main findings that every school needs to know include:

- Homophobia is bad for academic performance. There is a clear connection between school climate, school connection and academic-related outcomes;
- These factors accounted “for 49% of the total variance in academic self-concept”; and,
- That a school that was positive re LGBT people and topics was more important for a student’s academic self-concept than an individual student’s self-esteem.



The ‘Milk Carton’ dominates the skyline, Bunbury...



Drawn to cooking, Alan's work experience placement would provide him with his ticket out of an everyday hell. Approaching the restaurant for an apprenticeship he was successful.

"Yippee, get the fuck out of my life...I never want to see anyone from [high school] again..."

It was inevitable that Alan would soon join a mass migration out of Bunbury at 19, moving to Cairns which is another entire blog in itself.

According to Renee, the local worker for True Colours Bunbury, a space for local LGBT young people, Alan represents most 18-25 year olds in Bunbury who desert the city as quickly as possible for other places, typically Perth.

"Even though Bunbury is WA's second largest city, it's quite rural really and isolating, especially if you can't drive, as drinking and driving is the main way of socializing here...It's a mass migration at 18 to Perth, which I know is a problem across rural Australia, especially for anyone who feels isolated and at-risk...We do hear that from young people that they just want to go to Perth..."

For this reason, True Colours Bunbury see it as part of their work to continue supporting LGBT young people who move to the big smoke, seeing transition from regional to metro as a potentially high risk time. Often young people will move without any support around them. Once they arrive in the state or territory's capital, their experience could be best determined by the flip of a coin, which is why this was identified as a priority area by workers across the country in the original Outlink project.

In contrast to Esperance and Albany, it seems that most, if not all, LGBT young people feel unable to stay in their own communities. With a new road making it quicker and easier to get to Perth, this might very well exacerbate the point by Renee that "there is no cohesive gay and lesbian community in Bunbury..."



“There is no queer nightclub, bar or café here...There is just not a place where you can meet people...”

Interestingly Bunbury seemed to lack what many other regional and rural communities do have: some informal, underground safe haven where LGBT people can mix amongst a more relaxed, diversity-accepting crowd (e.g. a café, a bar, etc). I wondered if the proximity of Bunbury to Perth didn't help matters. When I worked in my hometown of Geelong in the mid to late 1990s to support LGBT young people, the fact that it was on Melbourne's doorstep was a barrier to anything LGBT happening. Most people thought it was easier to drive an hour up the road to have everything they could want and need rather than live their LGBT life in their own community. For many it just seemed too hard.

Whatever the case, Renee feels that this fuels depression in local LGBT young people.

(I WILL DISCUSS DEPRESSION, BEYONDBLUE, PRACTITIONER GUIDELINES, LGBT INVISIBILITY AND OTHER MATTERS AS PART OF A BROADER PERTH BLOG NEXT WEEK)

“You can isolate yourself because the wrong words to someone could mean so much more...In a community where you are isolated because you can't talk to anyone or you'll face violence if you do talk to anyone or you hear people yelling 'that's so gay'...where that stuff is everywhere, pervasive...it's tough...”

Such fear of violence meant a young local trans woman made an extraordinary decision.



“She identified as gay at school because she knew she would probably be beaten up, but if she came out as trans she thought there was a good chance she'd be killed in Bunbury...”

As in other places in regional and rural Australia, seeking help can present it's own issues.

“You can't go to a doctor or access counseling without your mum or dad knowing...There is a chance that they will know your mum, dad,



aunty or uncle...And it's easier to get into that space of self-hatred without any light..."

As I'll explain next week, beyondblue would have us believe that doctors and counselors need only talk with these young people about depression in general and that this will suffice. There seems to be little or no understanding that there is a unique context to the hostile environments that make depression much, much more likely.

One hope is that projects like True Colours Bunbury will thrive and prosper as spaces for LGBT young people. Yet getting them to come to these spaces is a challenge. On the night that I attended to interview local LGBT young people, none turned up. Despite feeling bad for the project workers involved, who I suspect feel unnecessarily that they let me down, I reflected that this is a challenge that projects with LGBT young people across the country are facing. It was similar to my experiences in regional Victoria where young people turning up was often the culmination of efforts over time. Referrals from schools and organisations as well as word of mouth do take time to establish, and Renee has found this difficult.

"I have difficulty [in talking with schools and organisations] , whether it's because they really don't want to know about it or if they are busy... You never know which one it is really...They are not even open to pretending to listen to what I have to say about working with them and their young people..."



Tennis friend from Melbourne and temporary tour assistant, Simon...



Renee still chooses to plough on. And as a young bisexual woman she faces the dilemma that so many LGBT people working in regional and rural Australia face: how to separate one's personal LGBT life and professional LGBT life in such a small community.

"It bleeds a lot...I don't work 9-4 because I'm always aware of what I can do and what could be done at all times...Technically I'm supposed to think about this job for 14 hours a week, but I'm always conscious of the seeds that I can sow...I figure out how to do things at 11pm... We have such limited funding where we try to achieve so much with so little so our personal life becomes a part of it...I know I don't know when to back off...Some of these projects don't have anyone else...I don't think I'm irreplaceable, but if I do give slack I know there is no-one to pick up the slack..."

It seems that Renee might very well be making some progress with the seeds she is sowing. The day I met her she was going to pick up robes for her graduation ceremony, having completed a social work degree. In Bunbury the local university organises an annual parade, not of the LGBT Pride kind but one of academic pride. This march through Bunbury's streets, lined with friends and family, ends at the university where the formalities continue. This year Renee will be the first female student to hold the ceremonial mace.

It's moments like these that help keep Renee in her hometown. With her own thoughts that one day she might move to Perth, there are things that keep her at home.

"I want to be happy...I hope to live somewhere and be who I am, whatever that looks like and I guess it's something that is happening at the moment...I have a family and I have a little brother who I adore and would do anything for and a mother who I love...I want all that here..."

Alan reflects on his time in Bridgetown, Bunbury, Cairns, Sydney and Perth.

"I feel qualified to talk about all this because I have lived in all these places, and most other people haven't..."

Bunbury is not where he'd like to return, nor is Sydney. He jokes about what happened when people asked where he was from, and how they knew nothing outside of Perth, except for Margaret River, "because that's where all the wine that they drink comes from..."

Alan moved from Sydney to Perth to support his father when he was diagnosed with cancer. Now that his dad's cancer is in remission, Alan spends four days every week driving between Perth and Karratha ("basically a mining town full of cashed up bogans") in a truck with his dad. Although his dad talks too much to the radio and wants his own version of talkback in the cabin, the time together is working out well.



The hopes Alan has for the future are modest.

“Probably the same as everyone...I want to meet someone, I want to be content with them, to build a life together...I want to build a house with him, have a good group of friends around me and basically do what I want...”

Part of Alan still craves life in Bridgetown. It seems that life has never really been the same for him since he moved. He questions why everyone else is not instilled with “country ideals” like him.

“I just wish everyone was like that...”



Time out with vanilla slice...

