

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK NINE, PERTH, WA: PICKING AND CHOOSING: LGBT INCLUSION

*"You're a long way from f**king anywhere..."*

The definition of "anywhere" for "Hope" is "Sydney and Melbourne". Not that Hope, a recently returned lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) advocate and educator believes that Sydney and Melbourne are necessarily the places to be, or else she would have returned from Belfast, Northern Ireland, to there.

Yet this feeling of not "being there" was something that played itself out in almost every conversation that I would have during my relatively lengthy stay in Perth.

When I arrived in Perth for the next leg of my national challenging homophobia tour I found a partly relaxed, partly anxious city. To be honest I was partly relaxed and partly anxious myself after changing my plans considerably in the wake of my Indonesian LGBT project trip being cancelled due to direct terrorist threats.

From the moment I arrived in Perth I was given nothing but the gold standard in hospitality, be it accommodation with exemplary hosts, access to practical and moral support from a sister organisation or assistance with setting up interviews with key stakeholders from fellow activists. This relaxed me in ways that I could not have expected. I quickly went from cursing the fact that I could not be in Surabaya, Indonesia to implementing an exciting storytelling project with rural lesbians to feeling lucky to have such a productive pitstop after a few months and almost 10 000kms on the road.



I'm one to quietly observe, absorb and form impressions over time about anyone I meet or anywhere I visit, yet Perth was nearly an exception. With the best of intent, Perth's residents set about convincing me how great it was. The economy was booming ("you can tell a city's wealth by the number of cranes you can see..."), the lifestyle was easy ("in Perth you can drive anywhere in 15 to 20 minutes, it's just so easy here, not like Sydney or Melbourne...") and there was an abundance to do ("we have museums, art galleries, cafes, shops, bars...").

All of it is true. Yet as time went by I started to gently challenge those eagerly and anxiously selling Perth.



"Let Perth be...If Perth is so great, then you don't need to sell it to me, it will sell itself..."

There is no doubt that there is a distinct energy in Western Australia's people at present that was lacking as I moved through Victoria and then South Australia. Yet this economic boom-related energy has its downside according to Hope.

"The boom has been bad in a way... All they want to talk about is their property, cars and their next holiday..."

This, Hope believes, has led to a more conservative climate that combines with Perth's, and to a lesser extent Western Australia's, lack of proximity to "f**king anywhere" to ensure that the LGBT community

"I notice it here with young lesbian and gay people...It's much more prescribed, there is no individuality...This is what you look like if you are a boy, this is what you look like if you are a girl...Just to go to [local venue]...They all look the same Dan!..."

This is something that a former gay politician, "Roger" referred to when he



says spoke of his regret that regular trips out of Western Australia for his role no longer facilitate him escaping it's "mono-culture".

Not that this feeling of conservative, mono-culture meant that Perth and Western Australia have not thrown up all manner of characters and individuals, on the contrary.

For example, one of the most delightful interviews I have undertaken so far on the national tour was with "Zoe", a sitting member in WA's upper house. Less than 24 hours after sharing a cuppa, contacts and stories with Zoe I was driving down to Albany listening to ABC radio. Following her interview about parliamentary enquiries, a listener e-mailed in during the feedback section to inform listeners of her clearly playful, passionate dislike of Zoe due to a permanent scar after encountering Zoe and a hockey stick many moons ago.

It was Zoe who provided the quote:

"There are plenty of women in Albany who look like dykes, but aren't...It's so confusing..."

She then laughed. Zoe's laugh is delightfully contagious.

It was Zoe who told the story of the new government's review of the state suicide strategy. Running into the responsible Parliamentary Secretary when she was about to hand in the final review, Zoe asked about LGBT young people and found, to her horror, that this woman had not even thought of including them. It is said that Zoe worked frantically before the close of the review to gather every bit of evidence she could get her hands on.

"That level of invisibility [shakes head solemnly]...It's not even a box that gets ticked: 'have we considered LGBT people'..."



That level of invisibility was highlighted at a national level when news spread of a review of the Clinical Practice Guidelines on Depression in Adolescents and Young Adults by Australia's peak depression organisation, beyondblue. A document that is used by practitioners such as psychiatrists, GPs and counselors, it was time for its periodic review. beyondblue was leading this review, and I would quickly get the impression that this was because others had no interest in conducting that review.

From the moment they were released there seemed to be universal uproar about the lack of LGBT inclusion, even though many admitted to me that they had not given the document more than a skim read.

Attending last year's beyondblue gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) Roundtable "talk fest" at Melbourne Airport, I was interested in how the organisation was going to justify their position given all the apparent signs of LGBT goodwill going forward. Hearing of people's experiences of attending consultations on the east coast of Australia, I arrived with low expectations to a Perth-based consultation with health professionals.

I had been prompted to attend by "Lois Lane", a coordinator of True Colours, a regional LGBT young people's project introduced in my Albany and Bunbury blogs. Lois had hoped I would attend, not feeling sure about attending after reports of rude, dismissive responses to any questions raised about LGBT young people's inclusion.



Headed up by beyondblue board member and adolescent psychiatrist, associate professor Brett McDermott, the consultation went for about two hours.

Lois summed up the obvious power imbalance in the whole process.

"I felt like I was in a first year psychology lecture... Now I know why I don't hang around with psychs..."

Lois was backed up by "Paul", a local LGBT advocate with more years experience at 22 than most people twice his age.

"Why is he giving us his opinion on everything?"



Both had picked up exactly what I had: Brett was arrogant, dismissive and defensive.

I decided early that I was going to play good gay cop. It was clear from the beginning that Brett saw any criticism or challenge with relish. To him this battle of wills was, and is, a bloodsport. And how convenient that he sees things this way when he holds all of the cards? Just one of many examples from Brett.

“Oh, it doesn’t bother me...I’ve been expecting it...”

Lois leaned in and made a great observation.

“It’s no use having a battle of wills when the other party knows doesn’t know they are in a battle...When you are dealing with people coming from the medical model you need to talk to them from that perspective...Really it’s only us [LGBT community] that are upset with beyondblue...No-one else does, everyone else loves them...”

Despite the fact that I too love a bit of intellectual jousting and bloodsport, I decided to work with the process that was on offer, albeit one that afforded anyone little opportunity to make much impact.

Immediately I saw that for Brett McDermott this was a performance, a dance. As he gave background to the document under review, his dismissive arrogance was on show everytime a challenge was discussed.

“Someone’s writing a submission about that...”

Turning to two women on laptops who were facing the audience he would roll his eyes and add, “guess who?” These women would then snigger and roll their eyes too. It was not only when Brett prompted it that this behaviour took place. Throughout they would turn to one another after an audience member asked a question, talk behind their hands, make faces, smirk and snigger. I only wished they would have done so when I spoke, because believe me I was ready to name the behaviour.

Brett himself exacerbated this creation of an environment that in no way was conducive to criticism. Talking about a lack of evidence around adventure-based therapy you get the flavour of how he approached everything.

“There are lots of adventure-based therapies [for depression] going on out there...I mean it might be good for something else, such as self-esteem, or maybe one day you’ll need to paddle faster...”

Wisely Brett would survey the audience for the areas in which they had the most interest. When it came to me I explained that I had been traveling to regional and rural areas talking to teachers and health professionals about student safety, and that homophobic bullying was at the forefront of many of their minds in relation to same sex attracted (SSA) young people.

Brett jumped on SSA. He put his glasses on the end of his nose, lean on the bar at the front of the lecture theatre and say he liked “SSA much more than the term I am forced to use which is gay, lesbian, transsexual, intersex and, what’s the other one?...[prompted]...Oh bisexual...”



Lois would add that diverse sexuality and genders (DSG) was also a popular term on the West Coast. Both SSA and DSG were noted by the two women on their laptops at Brett's request. "Did you get that?"

(***Note that on the West Coast of Australia virtually no teacher or health professional, the LGBT ones included, know about the Writing Themselves In/Again research evidence on same sex attracted young people, which is food for thought and a great potential project in education and awareness raising***)

When he came to the time to tick off my point on the whiteboard, Brett talked about the importance of family-focused treatments for young people, and "tailoring it to particular groups like gay students..."

When I put it to Brett that teachers and health professionals in regional and rural areas would argue very strongly against a family-focused approach to bullying of a gay student in most cases, he tried a smoke and mirrors approach. He recounted a tale of one of his counseling clients in regional Queensland who presented as hyper-masculine, driving at high speeds in his black ute in his small community to prove he was not gay.

I know this approach only too well, if in doubt and a good story comes to mind just throw it out there and hope it distracts everyone. It's a favourite of mine that has, at times, held me in good stead. But even at the end of his story Brett conceded that "it was 3 years before he could come out to his family...Look there were brothers and the dad was going to k...Oh, I don't know...So obviously you have to tailor it..."

Hmmm. The rest of the audience, not surprisingly all middle-aged females, loved the anecdote and were lost in the story. Indeed I can imagine how some people might see Brett as charming, although I found him to be smarmy.

Paul sat beside me enraged at Brett's approach. His eyes indicated he was furious and that at times he wanted to say something and/or leave. Lois conceded it was all too much.

"I'm just going to feedback through Gabi [Rosenstreich] and the Alliance..."

We all felt that kind of sick feeling when you know you are in something that is hopeless. I leaned over to Lois and suggested a difference approach.

"I understand why you would, but remember that it is easier to dismiss a sole voice representing us, as opposed to us warming them up to hear that voice...Your voice might be most important right here, right now... Everything you have to say is as important as anything else anyone else has to say..."

Lois nodded as it dawned on her that I might be right.

To Paul I said it was always going to be only 5 relevant minutes in a two-hour consultation that would test all of us. It appears that I was right.



Lois would make a point to Brett about misdiagnosis of young SSA people's depression in the case of school bullying. She said she was concerned a GP might use the guidelines to decide the problem was the student's depression, rather than seeing that the real issue was the homophobic bullying and the attacks the young person was experiencing at school. How was that good practice?

Brett took it on board. "Fair point..."

I was interested in beyondblue's method of reviewing the guidelines. Although not an expert, my understanding is this:

- These guidelines are reviewed periodically;
- They are late;
- Some rather harsh decisions, and I concede that some would need to be made, were made in the interests of getting them completed and meeting a particular research standard that suits rich, educated, white and heterosexual men;
- Criteria set means that a number of groups, including LGBT young people, homeless young people, refugee young people, etc miss out, interestingly given that rich, educated, white and heterosexual men are not researching these areas adequately because it doesn't come onto their radar and it doesn't lead to money;
- Research to ensure LGBT inclusion ain't happening anytime soon;
- The way that the process is currently set up, LGBT young people cannot be included.

It was frustrating that so many lead LGBT advocates failed to note the limitations of the process and instead attack the lack of LGBT content, which can only get us so far. It does not mean that it makes it OK, but it gives us the context that we need to tackle.

At times when I raised this lack of openness and transparency in this very context, Brett appeared genuinely apologetic (small comfort for a generation of young people impacted upon by these guidelines).

Wanting to get him on side by using his own language I noted his bravado in saying, "having said that I am happy to hit people around the head". A board member of beyondblue and you are using language like that? Oh how far we have to go.

Asking about what could be done in light of the process constraints, I repeated his own words that the guidelines were "an amalgam of science and good practice".

"I understand how you explain that there is not enough research...But we do know there is plenty of good practice in this area out there...Perhaps it could be made more widely known about the limitations of the process...It is fair to say that many people I've spoken to in regional and rural Australia would want to know where they could go to in the meantime for what they could do about this issue...If the evidence is almost there but not quite, surely we can lead people to that evidence...Because believe me I know there will be people who will be using your guidelines to do what you said, 'hit people around the head with them...'...So I wonder what could be done in the meantime?..."



Brett conceded.

“That’s fair criticism...I’m happy to say that it will be in there...Trust me, it will be in there...”

Lois followed up on my point of ‘in the meantime’.

Brett turned to the typing women and said, “I think we could include a chapter called ‘In the meantime’...I think he has something there...”

By the end of it Brett looked weary when someone observed that attendance at the consultation was poor. After experiencing one I can understand why people wouldn’t turn up. Tired and defensive he said that it was just they way things had to be done. The whole process was something that he was prescribed.

Lois fumed at the end.

“I’m going to find out who he is...He’s on the Board of beyondblue and the Chair of this, yet he doesn’t want to take responsibility for any of it...”

Brett’s last attempt possibly contradicted everything he had said.

“At the end of the day you need to treat depression, to do something...So you pick and choose...”

Indeed you do older educated and heterosexual white man. Indeed you do.

Lois Lane and the True Colours Project were a breath of fresh air for the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ Tour. Given that the organisation for that project, Uniting Care West, is the sister organisation of those auspicing the tour, Uniting Care-Cutting Edge, I had been welcomed with open arms long before I arrived.



Without suspicion, doubt or defensiveness I was warmly welcomed to Uniting Care West and a base to work from. Infrastructure like a phone, a photocopier, a desk and even another person to make small talk with at the tea station are hard to come by. It was only when I experienced it that I realised how much I missed it. Lois provided a sounding board, delivered with wisdom, good humour and care.

At home I had the warmest of hosts, “Nigel” and “Vince”, a gay couple who allowed the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ Tour to have a headquarters, and some semblance of normality. Nigel provided meals, entertainment and hilarious stories delivered with a rare brand of a unique Australian ocker camp, whilst Vince took me under his lean, athletic wing given his second job, aside from university professor, as an elite fitness instructor. So I was well-fed whilst being well-exercised, the latter an essential element for maintaining my sanity and emotional stability given the demands of this tour.



Practically I had Paul actively organising any number of cuppas with all manner of influential, interesting and everyday locals only too eager to engage with the tour because they trusted Paul’s judgment. It was clear that Paul had a vested interest in the tour’s success, given his own experiences in secondary school that would not be wished upon any young person. First making contact via Facebook, Paul admitted that without meeting me, he had developed a crush on me merely from looking at my photos, reading their captions, watching my video blogs and reading through my blogs.

I mention this because I find that my undertaking this work can evoke powerful emotions in people, be they good or bad. Time and again I experience a great deal of emotional force from people merely for the work that I do. At times exhausting, it is important for me to always remember that this has less to do with me and more about what this means for the person in question. Not taking it personally, even when it is overwhelmingly positive, is vital to me maintaining my emotional sanity.

Not one to mince words, I sat having lunch with Anita at Paul’s house as she explained her time at said Perth prestigious school. Whilst Anita was out to her students and fellow staff, even (arguably) being the first teacher in Australia to take a high school banner in an LGBT Pride Parade, it became increasingly obvious that she was not supported by her colleagues and the school leadership team, or as she likes to call them, “f**king gutless pricks” or “f**king heterosexist bastards”.



When one hears of Anita's experience, it's easier to understand the venom in her voice. Anita describes systematic, homophobic abuse and harassment over years.

*"I thought I could [be openly lesbian] but I couldn't...They said to themselves, 'let's totally f**k her over'...It absolutely killed me...My physical health suffers as a result of the trauma..."*

Yet the abuse and harassment to students was what concerned Anita the most. Until recently the school had "a chaplain from the Church of Christ who handed out anti-gay leaflets, scared because he didn't want the Pride Parade going through Subiaco..." That same chaplain refused to counsel a gay student.

"He did not counsel a gay student who'd had a knife held to his throat. That same student came back to school the next day because his mum had taken it to the police who said they can't do anything about it...He headed back to school and was beaten up that day by the other students..."

When Anita suggested there be some measures put in place for LGBT students the chaplain said, "why don't you do something for left-handers?"

"I said that I would when he could tell me about left-handed people who are not allowed to be open about being left-handed, who are beaten up at school because of it, thrown out of their homes, labeled as pedophiles and rejected by their families..."

Some students saw Anita as a breath of fresh air.

"One student said, 'coming into your classroom is like walking out of hell'..."

Not that all students were supportive. One student in the school yard spat on the ground and called her a "fat lesbian".

"I spat on the ground and said I have a problem with being called fat..."

Speaking up became more and more dangerous.

"When they saw that I saw an injustice and wouldn't be quiet about it, they had a problem..."



At Perth's The Freedom Centre, a space for young people with diverse sexualities and gender, coordinator "Nina" says that she faces resistance traditionally from most schools. If she does get into a school it's because she works with school nurses, who are not employed by WA's Department of Education and Training (DET). It would be fair to say that DET is not thought of fondly in LGBT/SSA/DSG lands.

That became apparent when I held a book reading for *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*, hosted by the B-LeGITs committee, an LGBT interest group with the State School Teachers Union of WA (STUWA). Opened by Upper House member for the Greens, Lynn MacLaren, the first question I was asked was, "What has been the response, if at all, from DET?"

An exciting mix of senior DET staff, politicians, young people, LGBT community members, teachers, health professionals, parents, friends and even the Equal Opportunity Commissioner for WA spent about 90 minutes hearing about over a decade of my experiences in schools and asking questions. The EO Commissioner would go back and ensure her staff undertook professional development with me the very next week.



Yet the picture all the attendees painted was not a hopeful one.

Nina tells a story of one school psychologist who recently contacted her to send some LGBT-related material to his school. He is said to have asked what would be on the envelope the information would be sent in, legitimately concerned that he would lose his job for being sent this information about a service for young people, funded by government. As Nina says, "This is in Perth!?"

Such pressure, even in seemingly progressive schools can certainly take it's toll. For Anita is became too much.

"I couldn't bear anymore of what they were doing to me..."



Only recently Anita returned to the same school, after a few years absence. She was told by the current principal “that what [she’d] done had worked...”

With hindsight and wisdom that can only come through such a challenging journey, Anita sees her lot in life differently. Citing a moving, powerful pilgrimage to Israel and hearing of the story of politician Yitzhak Rabin.

“You gotta know that you will cop the bullets...Those who work for change will take bullets...Previously I was completely unaware of what they could do to me...”

Now Anita has learnt a strategy that she believes will protect her. She has steadily been getting more and more qualifications knowing that this is something that the marketing conscious school appreciates.

*“You are knocked down left, right and f**king centre at every turn...If you are a lesbian out in the open then you have to have as many credits to your name to make up for all the arrows in your back...”*

What remains a concern for Anita is that the LGBT community seems not to care.

*“What hurts the most is the LGBT community not giving a sh*t about gay kids getting sh*t at schools...”*

A conclusion from a conversation with one senior LGBT community member who once walked the halls as an advisor in Canberra was that “there will be little more change because metro-based, conservative gay white men in power have everything they want...”

Former openly gay politician, “Roger” was equally blunt, and perhaps more cynical.

People will happily pay a few hundred dollars for dance party tickets and outfits, yet wouldn’t give \$20 to a human rights campaign...”

Whilst many in WA have spoken to me fondly of the law reforms, years later there is little change on the ground as a result. This is clearly related to a lack of resources to educate the broader community about those changes. Most agree that there is still a long way to go. Nina says it best.

“There needs to an education campaign to understand current, contemporary climates for LGBT people...You have a wild range of views about what people think life is really like...I can understand why people might think that [things are better these days], but it’s not the case...All the key health indicators show that we are overrepresented, especially in terms of mental health, but also physical, sexual, etc...”

There is no doubt that it is a hard slog. I would meet with the Gay and Lesbian Community Services (GLCS) of WA on what turned out to be their 36th birthday (yes 36 years). Head of what used to be Gay and Lesbian Counseling Service of WA, “Denise” believes that GLCS is the oldest organisation of it’s kind in the Southern Hemisphere, and second only to one organisation in New York (go Perth!).





A factor in GLCS's longevity in such a hard slog is a stable work environment thanks to a deal with a building dedicated to community services that was set up by the proceeds of WA lotteries. This means that GLCS sits amongst many other services and groups that prevents isolation and encourages informal networking and collaboration.

Another reason for GLCS's longevity is "Denise" who has been part-time with the organisation for about a decade. In a sector where so many people don't stay for more than a few years, Denise finds part-time roles, passion, an evolving role and a steady, proactive board of management as vital in keeping her doing the great work she does. I will talk further about the impact of the work of GLCS's Opening Closets Project in the coming weeks.

How LGBT-friendly WA is depends according to Denise.

"It depends on where you live...It depends on if you are a white male professional in Perth versus an Aboriginal lesbian in Kununurra...It becomes the haves and the have nots...In Mt Lawley [inner northern gay-friendly suburb of Perth] you can be as gay as you like...But really it's not that open...There is no street in Perth where two guys can hold hands..."

One focus of GLCS' work is to provide professional development for mainstream organisations in the hope that they take up this work. One such organisation taking this work up before any professional development is headspace Fremantle. I contacted them, funnily enough, after seeing them quoted at the beyondblue GLBTI Roundtable described earlier. A senior headspace staffer had said that Fremantle was doing some great work to support LGBT young people.

At very short notice a proud group of staff, including the manager, "Joel" would meet to discuss the work they were doing. It's important to note that with about 40 headspace locations around the country, each develops and evolves very differently. As Joel explains, "we are focused on increasing



help-seeking behaviour, we are somewhere else to go...”

“Right from the start” Joel and his team saw a need to engage the LGBT community. After considering the research evidence (anyone at beyondblue reading?) they were clear that LGBT young people should be a major focus of their resources. Not because of an LGBT staff member or an incident, just based on the facts and the need. Clearly to Joel and his team it is an unmet need.

“The trauma that is created in a high school setting through bullying is amazing...”



headspace Fremantle is not just waiting around for young people to come out either (for more on this see my Adelaide and Esperance blogs). They recognise that LGBT young people “have needs before they make that decision to come out to someone...” To them, ‘in the meantime’ is a vital part of their support. As I sat in the space where general counseling clients sit and wait I noticed some LGBT-friendly materials lying around, but I can never know if they ran around madly placing such information before my arrival :-)

Part of their work involves community engagement, such as participating in Pride events and collaborating with The Freedom Centre. When I asked if they copped any flak for their involvement in LGBT events and support, it seemed there had been none. If anything, it might actually be fun.

“The staff have been having a real fun time...We use the photos [from Pride] as profile photos on the website...We haven’t really had anything... Nothing at all...”

Not that it’s all easy and fun, but this serves as an example where an organisation is doing it’s best, working with LGBT organisations and not hiding what they are doing. As far as mainstream organisations go, headspace Fremantle is leaps ahead of so many others along the south of Australia that I have met with, and there have already been so many).

It certainly seems that Perth, and the south west of Australia have much potential that goes hand in hand with the apparent energy created by an economic boom. Yet the historic distance from “f**king anywhere” and



perhaps long-term neglect by the east coast (one of the main reasons I headed west as soon as possible rather than starting on the east coast) still lives on in everyday interactions.

I was at one of only two Perth LGBT venues relaxing after a long week when a young woman I had supported 13 years ago in Geelong approached me. We had both come so far and laughed about stories long gone. One of her friends approached me after she had gone back to a group of friends.

“Where do you come from?...”

“Melbourne, originally Geelong, but Melbourne now...”

“I could just tell...Yep...”

“Can I ask how?...”

“You are just classy, that’s all...”

“Me, classy?...”

“Yes, you’re all classy...”

