

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK ONE, GEELONG: BEYOND EXPECTATIONS - FROM PRISCILLA TO THE LEYLANDS

"Well Jon, I'll tell anyone who'll listen that the tour is less Priscilla Queen Of The Desert and more Leyland Brothers..."

The question, about how I would conduct my national challenging homophobia tour, from the ABC's Jon Faine has been the most common I have been asked since announcing my plans for 2010. Admitting before the interview commenced that he was not prepared, I realised the risk of being reduced to the most familiar stereotype mainstream Australia has for gays in the bush.



My answer, I believe, was accurate. Rather than an abbreviated personal quest with shades of provocation, entertainment and titillation, mine was an extended, simple journey to engage and educate. Just as Mal and Mike Leyland travelled our great country to answer questions from everyday Australians, so too would I seek the answers to questions such as:

- Just what is modern day life like for everyday lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in rural, regional and remote Australia?
- Is life outside metropolitan Australia really difficult, impossible and/or non-existent?
- What are the good, bad and ugly stories of regional Australia for LGBT people?
- What happens when you give teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others strategies and resources to challenge homophobia?
- What do we need to do better to ensure that all Australians feel able to live safe and supported wherever they choose to call home?

I was adamant that my national challenging homophobia tour, *Beyond 'That's So Gay'*, would kick off from my hometown of Geelong. After all, the story of the tour started in Geelong. On the night of my tour launch in Geelong's atmospheric National Wool Museum, Thursday 25th February 2010, I outlined this in my speech (see *Tour Launch Speech*)



On his own travels to regional Australia a decade ago, Rodney Croome found that teachers and health professionals were crying out for practical strategies and quality resources to challenge homophobia in everyday classrooms and workplaces. Pre-empting this I decided that I would provide training for those educators wanting to facilitate a program like *Pride & Prejudice*. *Pride & Prejudice* is a step-by-step guide for teachers who want to challenge homophobia and affirm sexual diversity in everyday classrooms.

On the first day of the *Pride & Prejudice* Facilitator Training, I always ask educators to share the main issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students in local schools. Unfortunately Geelong was no different to any other regional area that I had trained:

ISOLATION INVISIBILITY BULLYING SAFETY

When I asked what is available locally in Geelong to support these same students, again the answers were all too familiar. Apart from a local LGBT youth support project, Geelong's students had to cross their fingers that they had a supportive school and staff. Too often supportive staff are thought to be an exception to the rule and seen as a breath of fresh air, not the status quo. As one educator said, there is a vast "gap between [education] policy and practice". Despite describing themselves after the training as "inspired", "motivated", "enthusiastic", "confident" and "ready" with comments like "I can't wait to get out there and try it", the gathered educators also added



“overwhelmed” and “sad” when factoring in the broader education system.



A seeming oasis in the education desert is GASP!, the City of Greater Geelong’s support project for LGBT young people. Operating since the mid-1990s, when some of the current participants were not even born, GASP! was the first local government youth service project of its kind in Australia. That many other local governments have followed since in the last 15 years and that the project has not been given the chop, as it so easily could have numerous times, is a testament to Youth Services Coordinator, David Burke. Whilst David, who spoke modestly and eloquently at the launch of the national tour, would shun any attention for this, his contribution to the local government –based support of LGBT young people is virtually unparalleled.

It was with interest that I attended two meetings of the current GASP! project. Roughly a decade earlier I had reluctantly left Geelong and GASP! behind to work on other projects. Now I was visiting a Geelong-based group and, the following afternoon, a Bellarine Peninsula-based group where life can feel much more rural than regional.

Within ten minutes I was transported back 10 years. I was seated on the floor with the current GASPers and it was like I never left. One young woman began testing me immediately with sarcasm and humour, yet she would soften when she realised I wasn’t going to bite or be particularly fazed. Five minutes later she was sitting next to me showing me a picture of her girlfriend on her mobile phone. When I asked her what was best about having her as a girlfriend she said “she is like my best friend and my girlfriend at the same time”. A trans young person would try to unsettle and shock me, before grabbing my copy of *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’* to read when she learned of my tour.



The following afternoon on the Bellarine Peninsula a young woman would talk of having a very supportive, close-knit group of friends between the ages of 15 and 21.



My delight in the familiarity of it all turned to sadness and disappointment when the young people began giving glimpses into their lives. It became apparent that although most had found a better quality of life through their association with GASP!, most had arrived after an often harrowing journey. Many were still on it.

One young man spoke of recently deciding to change schools after being physically threatened and having his name with “dirty faggot” written on a wall. Responding to questions about her school’s lack of awareness and support, a trans young person described how she had been through enough to ensure she had three lifetimes worth of self-esteem. Before she was eventually left in peace, one young woman spoke of being regularly “beaten up” over her early years of secondary school because other girls were scared she would “hit on them”. Attending a religious private school, another young woman told stories of being “ranted at” in relation to the Bible and feeling unsupported by her teachers. Some gay and lesbian teachers were clear that they could not be open about their sexual identity or support her because they were fearful of losing their jobs under the Victorian Equal Opportunity exemptions in religious organisations.

Sadly, I heard resignation in most voices that this kind of treatment should not be so surprising, maybe even that it is to be expected. As when I was supporting young people, most don’t always identify when they experience homophobia. Many instances of prejudice and discrimination are normalised out of necessity and survival.

Channelling their experiences, both positive and not, the week I visited



the GASPerS they were busy preparing for a parade. A number of placards were being put together for an annual march down one of Geelong's main commercial strips. The reason for their invitation to march was directly related to my visit to Geelong. Let me explain.

Months before my arrival a local worker with GASP! would get me a spot reading at a writer's festival as part of Geelong's multicultural festival, Pako Festa. When it came closer to the reading, GASP! worker, the relaxed, strategic and enthusiastic Jami, would send through my author bio and the details of my book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay'*, to the Polyglots Festival organiser, "Bill". The problem was, Polyglots was a festival for German poetry and music. Bill had seen



my name, Witthaus, and assumed correctly that I was German. Yet now that it was clear that my book was not relevant to the Polyglots Festival.

Instead of politely declining my inclusion, Bill instead rang Jami. What followed was a sustained homophobic rant at Jami. According to Bill, who commenced the tirade by outing himself as a Catholic who worked in a local private secondary school, my work in schools to challenge homophobia was "not culturally appropriate", especially for a festival reading "with a multicultural audience" who could not handle such content. It seems Bill in his teaching work also decided for others what they could and could not handle. Describing recent Victorian Education Department policy efforts to support sexual diversity as "imposed" and "bullshit", Bill outlined how the government was out of touch with "all the teachers [he] know[s]". He highlights how progressive government policy in education sorely needs to be followed up with resources.

Immediately upon hearing this, Pako Festa organisers moved swiftly. They asked Polyglots to explain why they should continue to be a part of Pako Festa after this incident. A review of the festival's policies was also launched to ensure that this could not happen again. Finally, the GASP! project and myself were invited to march in the annual Pako



Festa Parade, a first for Geelong. But more on that later.

Shunned by Polyglots at the last minute, I was now left without a book reading in my hometown. An assured audience of 70-80 people I would otherwise not read to now was an almost assured audience of zero. Luckily local owner of Go Café, long time supporter of local LGBT community efforts, Jason, would come to the rescue and offer his café for a dramatically reduced crowd. Warm and welcoming, Jason joined a last minute crowd of seven locals for an intimate reading of *Beyond 'That's So Gay'*.



In attendance was a mix of locals, most interestingly “Noelene”. An older, weather-beaten woman, Noelene was a former primary school principal. Badgered into coming by the mother of my best friend from high school (hey we were desperate for numbers), Noelene seemed very tense and skeptical as I read three stories from my book that described my coming out to a group of young men, my work in an all-boys Catholic school and a “nightmare” parent scenario. In an unnerving coincidence, I would run into the only “good” teacher in this scenario, for the first time in ten years, an hour before the book reading whilst leaving the Bellarine Peninsula-based GASP! group meeting.

Opening for questions, Noelene dominated the initial discussion. She became a mouthpiece for typical concerns from teachers and parents, yet in an open and self-reflective way that can only result from experience and intelligence. In the peaceful, idiosyncratic and cool courtyard of Go Café, Noelene and I would address her concern as a parent of students making “certain choices” after undertaking my challenging homophobia program, *Pride & Prejudice*. Gently challenging her underlying assumptions that sexual identity resulted from a sudden, reactive choice and bringing other listeners in, I would



encourage a productive group discussion as the sun slowly went down. Noelene would later reveal to the group that she had been challenged as a young teacher when an older lesbian teacher came out to her in the staffroom. Previously happy to sit every lunchtime with the older woman to complete crosswords, Noelene would temporarily stop the cooperative completion of crosswords until she realised that she was not going to be “hit on”. Reflecting openly that she had some way to go and affirmed and supported by me, she would resolve to go home and read *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’* from cover to cover.

Noelene was a perfect example of one of my measures of success for the tour: to engage an audience of new people who would otherwise not become involved in challenging homophobia and affirming sexual diversity. She had been clear that she would not have come along had she not been “hassled” by a good friend.

One might suspect the Mayor for the City of Greater Geelong would be just as unlikely to engage in the *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’* Tour. Yet it was Cr John Mitchell who would discard his speech notes, explaining that this hampered his ability to speak with feeling. The Mayor explained how vital supports were “to young people questioning their sexuality”. In a departure that had most surprised he even offered that he had done just that in his teenage years, adding that every man – no matter how macho – would have done the same thing. Perhaps then feeling the gravity of his words the Mayor then said he hoped the *Geelong Advertiser* were not going to report that “the Mayor thinks he is gay”, adding a nervous laugh. I’m not sure regional Australia had ever had such a high-profile individual reflecting so openly.



Afterwards I would have a brief but intense exchange with the Mayor. “Anything we can do to support this tour Daniel, let me know.” Sensing my reaction to an offer given at an emotive event such as a national



launch he repeated, “I’m absolutely serious, anything we can do”. I have had many insincere conversations, yet I didn’t feel this was one of them, even if many might think he was trying to make up for referring me to “David” through the first half of his speech before being prompted by his advisor (which proved humorous, even to myself).

Another offer the Mayor made was to march with myself and the GASPers in the Pako Festa Parade, yet this failed to eventuate. I arrived late on a Saturday morning to find another familiar scenario. Having taken part in Pride marches in Australia and abroad I understood the long wait, delayed start, stop/start nature of any parade and how I mostly feel like I’m in some kind of fishbowl. However the Pako Festa was anything but an LGBT celebration, more a regional, multicultural celebration with a small, yet significant, LGBT contingent of about 15 people.

I chuckled to myself in the build-up to the march. Some young people sms’d to say they had slept in and were not coming, some changed their minds, someone’s arms got tired prompting a reshuffle of the flags and placards and someone got bored. Then a young woman realised a nearby group’s helium balloons could be used for pre-march entertainment.



Finally we would commence, wedged between an ode to Bosnia Herzegovina and a truckload of bongo players with gum leaves taped to their simple black outfits. Not discouraged by the light rain or the delay, the GASPers would march down Geelong’s Pakington Street with high energy and enthusiasm. I am certain that they did not realise the gravity of each and every step they took. Their footsteps measured more on the challenging homophobia Richter Scale than the ones they had strode only a few weeks earlier in Melbourne’s



Pride March. Although GASP! had been the biggest group, of young or old people, from regional Victoria at Pride March, this was more momentous. These steps were before, in and for their own community. It was not lost on me that halfway down Pakington Street we would march past Geelong West Library, the venue for the Polyglots Writer's Festival that prompted this very moment.

Did most people realise the LGBT nature of a banner with "GASP! Geelong", some rainbow-coloured flags and umbrellas with placards saying "Eat My Rainbow Shorts" and "Pride NOT Prejudice"? Possibly not. However some realised their was "something about that group" that was different. A mother waved excitedly to her daughter and her female partner who were marching side by side. A young man from a local Catholic school marched with his boyfriend with whom he was celebrating a one-month anniversary. I smirked, yet did not want to interrupt his moment to explain that I had been taken to dinner by the principal and deputy principal of his school the night before in an effort to discuss challenging homophobia in schools. Unsolicited, that same student had described his principal earlier in the week as "a real good bloke". I agree, and not just for the free feed.



By the time they had finished the march it was clear to everyone that a page had been turned. GASP!'s participation in Pako Festa would happen again. A group of young African women came to mix with the group, hold their signs and get a combined group photo. There was no turning back. And so too their was no turning back for me. My time in Geelong would soon come to an end. In 37 weeks I would be back to end a national challenging homophobia tour.

Before embarking on my journey I would spend some final moments with my family. They had been proud of a write up of my national



tour in the local newspaper, the *Geelong Advertiser* titled “38 weeks of busting homophobia”. www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/article/2010/02/24/148841_news.html



Twelve years before, myself and my GASP! colleagues had been accused on the *Geelong Advertiser's* front page of being pedophiles – and that was just the headline.

With all the attention of the national tour and it's Geelong launch, my sister decided she should sit my 15 year-old nephew down to clarify, if he didn't know already, that I was gay. Billy was my first nephew and single-handedly challenged my fear that I would make a terrible uncle. I was deep into

studying for final year exams when we got the call he was born. I hid in the corner of my sister's hospital room, hoping she would offer for me to hold him. When she did I got upset because I was scared I would drop/hurt him or that he might start crying. Wisely my sister gently pushed. Remembering holding Billy in my hand (he was that small) for the first time still evokes powerful emotions to this day. Perhaps sensing my seriousness, he famously broke the ice by farting in my hand. I did not know whether to laugh or cry.

In this same manner Billy would unnerve his mother. When she “broke the news” he rolled his eyes. “Mum you are so stuck in the dark ages, I already knew that...I worked that out f**king ages ago...” Billy had observed me with male partners since he was born. Yet I'm told he still uses 'that's so gay' when with his friends, although interestingly not as yet in front of his uncle.

When recounting the story my sister affirmed what I had already known myself. “He thinks the sun shines out of his uncle's arse...He said he is so sorry he cannot make it and to give you a big hug from him...”

My niece would have a completely different reaction to her older brother. “What is the name of his book?” My sister replied, “*Beyond 'That's So Gay'*”. Alannah in her naturally curious way asked, “What's



gay?” My sister thought for a moment and said, “It’s when two girls love each other, or two boys love each other, just like mummies and daddies...”

That was all, apparently, she needed. So excited was Alannah that she would race to the phone each time it rang and excitedly yell “I’m going to my uncle’s book launch on Thursday and it’s called *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’* and...”

Yet it was not Alannah who would steal the show at the national tour launch, but a young man called Thomas who shared his experiences of being gay, disabled and isolated on a farm. Thomas would transfix an audience of around 65 people as he slowly and confidently typed out his story on a screen.

When asked to sign his book I would write, amongst other things, “my thanks for being the highlight of my launch”. (See Thomas’ speech.)

What a week!?

