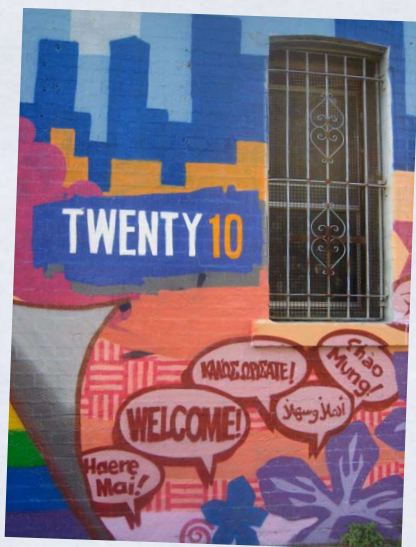


# LGBT “Utopia” In Sydney: Just one bus or train ride away...

FOR THE  
HEART

**Arguably the leading LGBT youth organisation in the country, Twenty10 has been leading the way in supporting LGBT young people since the 1990s.**

*“Twenty 10 is a community based, non profit state-wide organisation. We work with and support young people of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities, their families and friends. We aim to be a beacon of strength and acceptance - supporting young people to build resilience and achieve their potential. [www.twenty10.org.au](http://www.twenty10.org.au)”*



*The jewel in the LGBT support crown*

Before the NSW Teachers Federation generously agreed to host book readings at all five of my NSW locations, Twenty10 had offered their support when the Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ National Tour was a fledgling idea. It was support of organisations like Twenty10, and in particular “Sydney Louis”, that made that fledgling idea soon become a reality.

**[see my Sydney blog for further discussion of “Sydney Louis”]**

Arriving to meet a Twenty10 Coordinator, “Alex”, I found a “busy” organisation.

*“Based on our funding, we are functioning about 164% of our capacity...”*

Whilst unsurprised, given that this is the case with almost every LGBT organisation I have met and worked with, I was pleasantly surprised and encouraged that Twenty10 had, by implication, been documenting their actual vs funded capacity. Alex says it’s relatively new and about burnout prevention.

*“It’s partly about awareness-raising with staff... We ask, ‘What is your capacity. What is Twenty10 here for?’... Because burnout has an impact on the service, the young people and yourself...”*

Twenty10’s experiences explodes the myth of so many throughout regional and rural Australia who believe that life in Sydney schools might be different for LGBT young people.

*“This week I had a call from a counselor from an all-girls school... She is counseling 5 students who are being directly influenced by bullying... Homophobia in particular is leading them to counseling... [The school] have said that they need specific training for the Year 10s but around general acceptance and not naming it as homophobia...”*

A few days later I saw one of Twenty10’s main functions: direct support for LGBT young people. In an impressive upstairs space at Twenty10’s headquarters, I spent time with those attending the Saturday drop-in. I explained that in my travels through regional and rural Australia that many LGBT young people spoke of Sydney, at times in awe at what everyday life might be like for LGBT people. A mix of Sydney-siders and young people newer to Sydney watered down these fantasies.

*“Sydney is not magical... It’s actually just a small portion...”*

However that small portion is loved by most.

*“I walk up Oxford Street and I’m home... It’s ours... [smiles]...”*

Two young men from regional and rural NSW reminded everyone of non-Sydney life.

*“I wasn’t openly gay in [rural area]... If someone was known to be gay then the local gangs took it upon themselves to re-educate the gay person... And I mean bashings... My only understanding was that gay people were hunted down...”*

The second young man found local support in a coastal town in the form of an LGBT youth group, yet still felt different at school.





# LGBT “Utopia” In Sydney: Just one bus or train ride away...

*“[My boyfriend and I] were watching heterosexual couples growing up in a country high school...I used to think, ‘Why can’t I do that?’...We were in love, but we couldn’t show it...And that had a serious impact on our relationship...When [your boyfriend] denies you in public because of what people might say...”*

In Sydney examples of same sex couples and public displays of affection (PDAs) seems to be more common and visible, at least in certain pockets. It’s the knowledge and accessibility of these “certain pockets” of LGBT-ness and LGBT friendliness that perhaps distinguishes Sydney from most other locations, but doesn’t necessarily exonerate it.

*“After all, we’re just a bus ride or a train ride away from a friendly place...”*

I put it to the participants of Twenty10’s Saturday drop-in that many LGBT young people across the country would be surprised that a service like Twenty10 would be needed in Sydney and that they would be interested in why they came along.

Everyone was treating me differently: my parents, my friends...I just needed someone to understand and treat me as normal...”

*“Being more active...To just feel like you’re contributing, whether it be in conversation or whatever...”*

*“I don’t fit in [Sydney suburbs]... I like friends...”*

*“To meet other young people who are going through similar things...”*

*“Coming from a country town... The amount of people that come here...Coming from no gayness to faggotry...Going from nothing to Carnivale...It’s interesting to go from nothing to everything... [Another young person: ‘Kind of like a lottery’]...[laughter]...”*

*“It’s easy to become friends with people, get people’s experiences and stuff...It’s fun!...”*

*“I like the idea that...If I come here that there are other people like me...I think I feel different where I come from and I don’t feel that here...”*

*“For most of my life I was the only gay in the village...”*

*Before I ended my time with Twenty10, I asked young people what their hopes were for the future, which ranged from the delightfully ambitious through to the simple things in life.*

*“I hope for utopia...I’m a dreamer...I’m a writer...”*

*“Super powers!...”*

*“Meet someone, settle down, get a house and a cat, keep my job...”*

*“I want a boyfriend and I would be happy...”*



*A suburban view of our cultural capital*





# A GASP! of Fresh Air: The enduring tale of Geelong...

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)



Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour Launch, Geelong Wool Museum

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 it's 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.



Pre-Pride & Prejudice Facilitator Training





# A GASP! of Fresh Air: The enduring tale of Geelong.....

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.

**[For more on my time in Geelong, see my Geelong blog]**



Young GASPerS,  
Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour Launch





# Open Doors:

## New Work with Indigenous and Trans Young People...

Yet for all the great work that they do, Open Doors struggles, like so many LGBT organisations to maintain funding and services. Despite the fact that they are not funded to do so, through the Commonwealth's Reconnect program, Open Doors feels pressure as the peak LGBT Youth organisation for Queensland. Between direct support, advocacy, research, community development and requests for professional development there is a lot of need that cannot be met.



*A supportive, safe space for many...*

*"We're not funded to do that, but..."*

This is the story of LGBT community organisations across the country; regional, rural or metropolitan.

*"We struggle to get any funding... There is currently no LGBT services funded at a state level... There is a lack of recognition of LGBT young people's needs, and that this should be recognised with significant funding... Sometimes mainstream organisations are more successful when they have their brand behind them, such as Relationships Australia and headspace... We are a gay organisation so we struggle for legitimacy a bit and are thought to have an agenda..."*

"Kerry", a worker with Open Doors and a member of an Indigenous lesbian project fostering connections and leadership, found it difficult to adjust to life in Brisbane after moving from Rockhampton.

*"There is a little community there but it's not very big... I think it's hard to be gay in a small community... I thought, 'I can't do this. I can't be here. I have to move to Brisbane. I have to see what it's all about'..."*

Life in Brisbane away from her support networks presented more opportunities for Kerry than she imagined.

*"I found it challenging... You lose your family, friends... And living in a big city for the first time... There are 3 or 4 gay places and they are open every night... In Rockhampton you had one small gay bar... You had to hide around the corner and run in, because it was around the corner from a heavy metal bar..."*

In sport Kerry found something that had been missing in her move.

*"It was hard not to have my family and friends here... So the way I got around that was to play sport... It was great... I found women's sport, it was really good... Having team members who are gay..."*

Yet despite her first steps into lesbian culture, Kerry felt that her own culture was being lost.

*"Because you don't have your own culture around you, you adapt into the mainstream... So it becomes about the gay culture because there is no Indigenous culture around..."*

I was eager to talk to Kerry given an observation I had made throughout my travels thus far of regional, rural and remote Australia: whilst teachers and workers talked about the presence of young Indigenous men who identify as gay, bisexual or transgender (Sistagal), they have not yet talked about the presence of young Indigenous lesbian women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Through the project, Indigilez, Kerry and others are working hard to combat the invisibility of Indigenous lesbians. They have a few ideas on why invisibility exists.

*"The [Indigenous] cultural expectations are that women are the lookafterers of families, to be child bearers and to look after everyone..."*

With looking after everyone else as a priority, the focus becomes others first. This is one element of Indigenous lesbians not accessing services.

*"Women we work with were not accessing the Indigenous health services... So you might go to see a psychologist that might be your cousin... Also you might see a psychologist who understands your culture, but not what being lesbian is all about... The same with gay organisations, they might understand what being a lesbian is all about, but not about your culture..."*

Kerry has also been instrumental in working with Indigenous LGBT young people, including running a camp with the Indigenous project of the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC) on nearby Stradbroke Island with Oxfam funding.



# Open Doors:

## New Work with Indigenous and Trans Young People...



Bruce Ford waits patiently outside QAHC HQ.

The camp started well.

*"We got one of the elders of Stradbroke Island who came along and spoke to the young people...He welcomed us to the island, spoke about the people, the history of the land..."*

The format of the camp was less formal.

*"It was great because it wasn't, 'Let's do a workshop'...It was, 'Let's talk whilst we're fishing' or 'Let's walk to the Gorge and sit and have a talk there'...Having activities and having a talk makes Indigenous people feel more comfortable..."*

Through her involvement with Open Doors the service has seen an increase of young Indigenous LGBT people accessing things like drop-ins and other programs.

One of Kerry's successes was getting a group of LGBT young people to play in a local football competition: Oztag (tag rugby). The team was a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous LGBT young people, and the combination was challenging at first.

*"After the [Stradbroke Island] retreat we brought the group back to Open Doors for a BBQ with the other young people...There were some really racist comments about the group coming back...But after they'd played footy together that stopped...Perhaps they'd only had bad experiences before with Indigenous people..."*

The result was clear.

*"So these young people who were making those racist comments were now playing footy with the Indigenous kids and making friends...I think it brought the Indigenous kids out of their shell to be able to mix with the kids..."*

Perhaps it was also the experiences of the football competition itself, by all accounts horrifically homophobic, that helped form stronger bonds within the team.

*"The young people at first copped a lot of sh\*t and homophobia...We had it all through the competition...I think it was like the stereotype like gays can't pass a football..."*

Before the competition started the team had sat down and discussed the possibility of homophobic reactions.

*"We said, 'We have our own code of conduct, if players experience abuse, we don't give it back. We talk to the organisers if we experience it'..."*

To everyone's surprise, the team played well and made it to the Grand Final.

*"Then it all changed and there was none of that 'faggot'...They were all friends and then mixing in...We were a good team and we could play football, and they didn't expect that..."*

And it was not just sporting prowess that did it. Kerry observed what so many have in changing attitudes and behaviour.

*"The way that the young people handled the homophobia and handled themselves...They would still talk to people, play football and turn up each week...I think they got to know us as individuals and people, rather than gays..."*

Clearly enduring abuse, harassment and ignorance can win you points eventually, although one wonders if there is another way apart from being patient.

And patience is still required if Indigenous lesbian invisibility is to be overcome, as well as the racism within the LGBT community.

*"We're the minority within the minority...There is still a lot of discrimination with the gay community...Hopefully that will change one day...That's really frustrating to me...I just hope we work together instead of fighting each other...I think we'd get a lot further...In Queensland we have a long way to go..."*

Yet on an everyday street in Brisbane we can see there is hope.

*"After the football, I live down the street from one of the young guys who played football against us, he kept hounding me about when we were 'coming back to play footy with us again'..."*





# Open Doors:

## New Work with Indigenous and Trans Young People...

### Trans Matters

Observing that they themselves had to make something happen and that life can be difficult for transgender young people, Open Doors Youth Services (see Mackay et al and Brisbane Part 1 blogs) decided something needed to be done. "Joan" explains.

*"The workers and managers here at Open Doors thought that whilst they knew there were many trans young people, none of them were accessing the service... They knew there were young people slipping through the cracks... Before [starting a drop-in for transgender young people] you'd be hard pressed to find a trans young person coming to [a general LGBT young people's] drop-in..."*

Young trans people were also not going to transgender support organisations.

*"The services that are around are more geared towards older trans people... They also are focus on a medical model of transition... They'd say, 'This is your ultimate goal. Your ultimate goal is surgery'..."*

Recognising that trans young people needed a safe and supportive space to explore their gender diversity whilst at the same time not being boxed into any categories or told what surgical procedures they needed to undergo, Open Doors started Jelly Beans.

*"We wanted to give young people a safe place... It's not an automatic referral to the gender service... It's about talking, networking, communicating and giving young people a space where they fit in..."*

That they did, yet the workers were unsuccessful with two things: *"a highly structured group with very little time for young people to just chat..."* and *"a 'gender queer' push"* that felt more like the workers' agenda rather than something the young people attending felt worked for them.

Joan reluctantly arrived to Jelly Beans after completing her studies in mental health. Ironically as a transgender woman who had a history of working in the LGBT community, she had been adamant she would not continue her LGBT work.

**[For more on "Joan's" work on the Gold Coast and the story of intersex participant, "Jo/e", see the Gold Coast blog]**

With the recommendation of her psychologist and supportive staff at Open Doors, Joan soon found herself facilitating the Jelly Beans drop-in space.

*"It's basically a social group... Let 'em come, let 'em talk... I'll be there if they need anything..."*

Through trial and error Joan has found that having about half of the drop-in focused and structured works well for the trans young people attending.

*"That evolution has been about trial and error... We were probably too regimented and that turned the young people off..."*

I was invited along to a Jelly Beans drop-in, sitting and talking with Joan ahead of the arrival of the first young people. One young trans person excitedly told of coming out to their step-mother.

*"I just came out to my step-mother on Wednesday night... We had like this hour and a half conversation and it was really good..."*

Joan points out that this is a rare situation.

*"The main thing [for trans young people] is usually coming out to parents and parental reactions... Far too many young people end up with nowhere to live... Finding homeless accommodation for trans young people can be a nightmare... An absolute nightmare..."*

The same trans young person would tell a story of coming out on Facebook.

*"Everyone was really cool about it... All except for, like, one person..."*

Joan says this is common.

*"When they come out to their friends, their friends are mostly OK with it... It's usually interacting with the adults where young people have the troubles... That is also reflected with agencies when I've been advocating for [trans] young people..."*

One agency, for example, refused service unless that young person stayed with their previous gender and went to church. Joan explained that this would be a problem given that young person had been raised in the Pagan faith.

*"Interestingly in the trans community there are a high number of practicing Pagans... It's about the acceptance... The basic thing of the Pagan faith is that you do what you do and don't harm others... You're not hurting anyone so it's all OK..."*

Advocating for trans young people is something that Joan takes seriously, yet she can also see the humorous side occasionally.

*"When I'm supporting young people and I'm out and about, in a number of places I've been asked if I'm their mother or if I'm related..."*

