

Amber:

A transgender 'lady' from remote Australia

ORIGINAL PROJECT QUESTION:

What are the good, bad and ugly stories of rural, regional and remote Australia for LGBT people?

"They don't give a f*ck what you look like, just who you are and if you have a good heart...Out here I think the desert is so isolating so people are just themselves, and all the pretence of the city drops away..."

"They" are the Aboriginal people in remote communities in Central Australia. And "Amber" certainly knows what she is talking about. As a transgender "lady...I call myself a 'lady' and not a woman..." self-described as "towards feminine", Amber has been working with success for some time in remote communities that are closer to Alice Springs than anywhere else.

Amber's journey to Alice Springs from Melbourne started when she was a child, which included a family holiday to Alice Springs. Years later she would participate in the Peace Walk, a reconciliation walk between Lake Eyre and Sydney spanning some 3000kms. Despite concerns from friends, Amber found a great sense of belonging, a spiritual feeling and acceptance.

An impromptu performance by Amber and other artists was so well received that calls for more performances followed.

"No-one puts on a show for them out here, so they loved it...It was wild and crazy and they went for it..."

Compared to her experiences in queer-friendly Melbourne where venues made Amber and others feel like they should be grateful for any stage time at all, remote communities were throwing dollars, praise and love in their direction to turn up again and again.

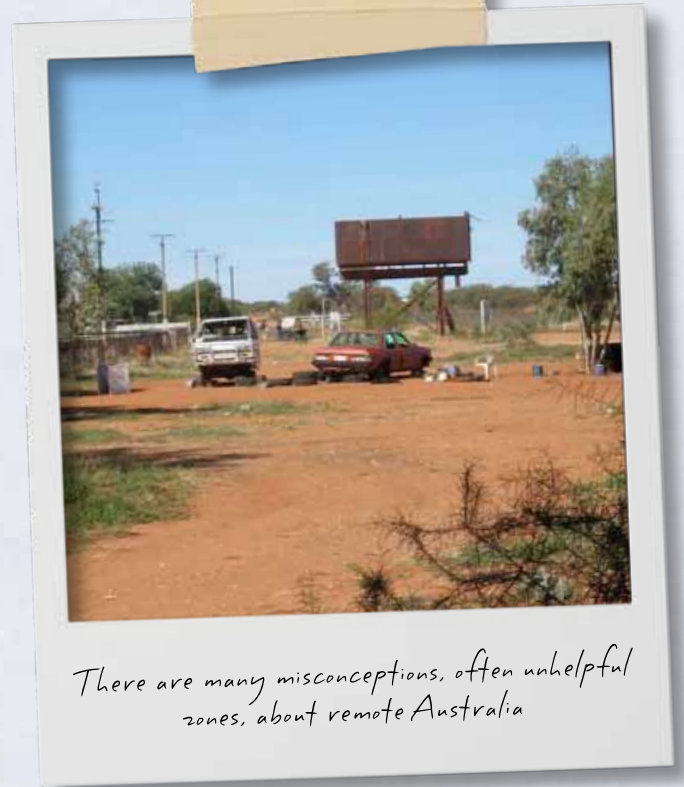
Finding herself coming more and more often to Alice Springs, Amber noticed something important after three months of work in remote communities.

"I came off one of the communities and started crying, and I thought, 'Why am I crying?'...Then I realised that when I was in Melbourne I was getting abused...I was nearly getting into fights almost everyday on public transport just for who I was..."

What Amber described was a dropping of her defenses because, on remote communities, they were no longer necessary.

"I was crying and asking myself, 'Had you closed yourself up this much?'..."

It seems that because of her appearance, Amber felt that seemingly progressive Melbourne was closing her in.



There are many misconceptions, often unhelpful zones, about remote Australia

"In Melbourne people were trying to put you in this box, and that never worked for me...Most people thought because of the way I look I am a crazy, drug party person and I'm not...I'm really straight... I hate going to parties..."

Committing herself to remote community life, Amber decided to find out what skills she could develop

in order to bring back to the people that had welcomed her so warmly.

When it became apparent that it was hairdressing and beauty therapy, Amber hopped onto a plane to return to Melbourne to learn just that. Now that is what Amber takes to remote communities, along with her background in youth work.

Amber:

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From all accounts the locals cannot get enough of the lively, energetic and entertaining white "lady" who comes in to give them small doses of "feeling special". Much of Amber's charm, apparent during my time with her, is her ability to relate easily and naturally quite quickly.

"If you can't relate to the people out here, nothing is going to be successful..."

Indeed this observation was made by "Shane" a youth circus director. Working in Darwin's Indigenous communities teaching circus to young people, Shane observed the difficulties white Australians sometimes have.

"They come in trying to do something, and the Indigenous people say, 'Who are you?... Where do you come from?...Tell me about your family'...Then they can relate to who you are and are more open to whatever it is that you want to do...But most white people come in and immediately try to start with what they are doing and it just doesn't work..."

It seems the remote communities have come to know just who Amber is, and they love it. Amber, fluent in local dialects, has been given a title that is given to women in the communities. Not that the locals don't like to play on it.

"Sometimes you see it, the women set up one of the old ladies... They send her up and she says, 'Hi [local dialect word for a male

community member]...'...And I tell her, in [local dialect] that she must be blind, or that something is wrong with her eyes because I'm a lady... And I do it in a playful way and I can see all the other women laughing because they love to see me do it..."

What Amber sees in the communities she works in, she loves.

"It's a playful culture... They really like teasing..."

This certainly defies the expectations of most of Amber's friends in Melbourne who expect to hear tales of her being abused and harassed. But Amber says that this happened to her more in inner city Melbourne than in remote communities. And some people can mistakenly think they are experiencing homophobia when, in fact, they might just be experiencing something else.

"Some people have gone out there and say it is homophobic and I'm quite shocked...Like one guy recently...But he was in child protection so of course you're not going to be popular, and he wasn't..."

Communities working out what Sistagals mean to their everyday lives is something that excites Amber.

"There are a lot of young men taking on feminine roles...What happens and what does it mean, because there is men's business and women's business...It's exciting to be around that, to be involved..."

It appears that Amber will be around for a long time yet to see this all unfold. More recently she has been

showered with praise from the people who fund her important work. She described a recent meeting with the head honchos in a government department. Amber walked in for a well-attended meeting with lots of men in suits.

"There I was, turning up in my pink hot pants and no-one raised an eyebrow... That would never happen in Melbourne... They said they loved my program and that the [Department] wanted to get behind it...They took me seriously and didn't care what I looked like"

Amber laughs and says that she is now seen as someone with experience.

"But that's not hard in Alice... You just have to be around longer than 6 months...No-one stays longer than that..."

And showing that money follows doing what you love, Amber doesn't have to worry about funding her work.

"I don't worry about all that, I let them sort all that out..."

And with the success and effectiveness of Amber's work, one gets the feeling a lot more money will start flying around.



Simon:

A young gay man from regional Australia

ORIGINAL PROJECT QUESTION:

What are the good, bad and ugly stories of rural, regional and remote Australia for LGBT people?

"Dad found an article at the bottom of my drawer about gay and lesbian services...He came to pick me up from the gym and posed the question...I guess that's how I came out to my parents..."

According to Simon, in regional NSW, his parents didn't adjust quickly. Especially his mum.

"It all ended up messy... My grandmother spent about two days on the phone trying to find support for my parents and finally found PFLAG [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] and they started to go down to [the city] for meetings...When I was 15 I ended up going down to PFLAG meetings with them...I definitely knew I was gay...That's when I started dating guys..."

Emboldened by everything that was happening, Simon decided to tell a few friends at his school.

"It seemed to blow out a bit that I was gay...That's when the trouble really began..."

"Blow out a bit" is an understatement.

"I guess the students were pretty bad...I had homophobic teachers, but the students were relentless... It was being pushed down stairs or my bag being stolen, fruit being thrown or lunches being stolen..."

Teachers provided some safe haven, but only some.

"There was one who was a hippy and an English teacher...Every Wednesday we had journal where we wrote for a period...She asked me to start writing about what was happening and what I was doing with my life...So I would...I wish I had the journal, just to see what I'd written at the time...A bit of brain draining and a debrief of what was going on at the time..."

And there were others.

"Beyond her I had, on my side, the Work Experience Coordinator, her son was gay and the same age as me, and I also had a Geography teacher who taught my sister. He was very protective over me. He used to pull me aside, have chats and make sure I was doing OK."

There were also safe places to hide.

"I can remember going down to the Ag farm because it meant that I didn't have to be on the playground... I used to spend my time with a rough kind of farm assistant, and he was good because he kind of knew it was giving me a break... So he used to let me work with the animals

and run around on the tractor [laughs]..."

Several teachers were as homophobic as others were supportive.

"One Ag teacher would say each time I walked in, she'd go, '[Simon "Smith"] get out!'...When I asked, 'Why?', she'd say, 'Because I'm not having a faggot like you in the classroom'.

With such open hostility from several of his teachers, it was perhaps inevitable that it would all come to a head.

"I remember being in a Year 10 Assembly and there were a few boys who were always the ring



Simon had no option but to leave the school system.



Simon:

A young gay man from regional Australia

leaders...They started throwing the fruit at me, and started with, 'Poofta' and 'Faggot, faggot, faggot' and there was a Year Level teacher up the front announcing something...I remember a piece of fruit hit a girl beside me...I remember throwing it back in frustration and screaming, 'I may be a faggot but I can get more women than you!...'"

There was a clear difference with how boys and girls responded. The boys sat and stared.

"All the females stood up and clapped me...It even went in the Year Book as a Most Memorable Moment..."

Although students saw it as a funny, memorable moment, Simon feels the whole point had been missed.

"In hindsight I look at it as a joke that no-one really appreciated just how frustrating it was for me..."

It's moments like these that can turn an entire school experience. Many times I have heard of these moments changing LGBT student experiences for the better. For Simon it didn't.

"So after that the physical stuff started to escalate from being just kicked, having fruit thrown at me or pushed down the stairs..."

Escalated from that?

"It went from being singled out to it being a group of boys coming up

and giving me a hiding...It ended up I had to make sure that I had my girlfriends around me or that I was in the art room or up in the staff room..."

Justin and his mother were taking responsibility for the outcome of the violence. Justin would take himself to the doctor unless it was "serious".

"Mum had taken me to hospital a few times because I'd been punched or kicked..."

Understandably, Simon wanted out. His mum said she wanted him to first hand deliver a letter to the Principal.

"The letter said, 'I'm sick of taking [Simon] to the hospital and to the doctor...I'm sick of the level of violence and I don't think you're dealing with it..."

Once he had confirmed with his boss that he could switch from part-time to full-time, Simon told the Principal he was leaving when he was told the school would not run a challenging homophobia program.

"He denied that there was a problem..."

Yet Simon was not leaving without challenging this. It was not that he was not bright.

"I managed to stay a straight A student, despite everything, apart from the few homophobic teachers that marked me down..."

He reminded the Principal of two complaints.

"I reminded him that there were two formal complaints made about the violence by two teachers who'd had enough...It was then that he recoiled and realised I was actually being serious..."

Going to another school was not an option.

"I can't stay here, I can't go to any other school on the Central Coast because it would be transferred that a gay guy was moved..."

In the Principal's office a deal was struck.

"He said that there was not much of the school term left and that as long as I returned and did my English, Maths and Science exams that the rest of my [high school certificate] he'd have based on my [existing and impressive] marks..."

Shortly after that, Simon decided he needed to go to the big smoke. His older gay friends organised a place for him with their friends in Sydney.

"When I was 17 I decided [here] was probably a little too small and that I should move to Sydney... From there life became a hell of a lot easier... I met a lot of people and found my little spot in the world..."

A few years later Simon has decided to revisit his education in a bid to not "allow what happened to me continue to affect me". Simon is currently putting himself through a business degree, albeit more slowly than perhaps he'd like.



Mini:

A young lesbian from rural Australia

ORIGINAL PROJECT QUESTION:

What are the good, bad and ugly stories of rural, regional and remote Australia for LGBT people?

"It gets to me..."

Mini, a young lesbian in rural WA, admitted that constant comments, especially from young men, and yelled insults upset her. Whilst she tried to stay light and laugh things off, she conceded it got to her. Yet these comments trigger a feeling of "I'm in danger".

Not long ago Mini was walking to her car after a night out at the local watering hole when she found herself alone and in the dark. As she approached her car she was grabbed from behind, one hand over her mouth and one on her crotch. She is in no doubt that the attack was homophobic. Her known assailant was reported to the police, taken to court and charged, but not before she was accused of making up the attack because she was racist: her attacker was Aboriginal. Already distraught from the attack, these claims would add insult to injury given Mini's strong stance against racism. This was evident throughout the group interview where she challenged other young people's racist views and language.

Mini now does not go out at night alone, mindful that she is not safe in her own community, which locals describe as quiet, idyllic and conservative (perhaps quiet if you are heterosexual and male, or maybe, as "Lisa", a local "heteroflexible" young woman, calls them, "rich, white c*nts"). This concern extends to Mini's friends, with her taking great care, mindful of the safety of

others. After a group interview she made sure her friends were not leaving our evening conversation alone.

As opposed to the common view that lesbianism might be "cool" and even welcomed amongst young straight males, Mini had other stories of the boyfriends of female friends who would not speak to her.

"These small-minded, retarded cowboy boys, they are so dumb."

She gave one example of one young man who banned Mini from visiting her friend in his home. When he found out Mini had visited his girlfriend in their shared home, he kicked out his girlfriend who then had to stay with her mother for two weeks. As Mini explains, **"all his porn is lesbian porn, yet his biggest fantasy threatens him too much..."**

The journey to identifying as a lesbian was difficult from Mini's perspective, yet full of treasured memories that she recalled with good humour and hilarious impressions.

When she was in primary school, Mini remembers vividly a dream about her female music teacher, who she admits she had a huge crush on.

"I had a dream I had her baby and I was breastfeeding it. That's some fked up sh*t for a 6 year old!...But I'd always known. When I was 15 I had a best friend and I was totally in love with her. We used to wag school, steal her mum's wine..."**

One day Mini remembers that both girls went to the beach and sat talking under the pier. Her friend was complaining about her

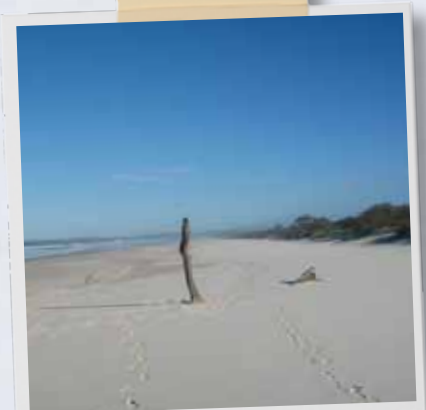
boyfriend until Mini finally said, **"if you keep whinging about him I'm going to kiss you..."** The friend kept complaining, and Mini describes how passersby soon must have been watching two girls in school uniform kissing passionately on the beach beside a bottle of wine.

"That was freakin' awesome! I pretty much knew from that moment. That was it..."

Mini excitedly told everyone at school that she had shared her first kiss, but admits that fear led her to use a male name when asked who it was. That and continued pressure would lead her soon after to go out with a young man.

"I kissed him and he wanted to keep going, so I stopped and said, 'buy me a pizza' and so he did."

Knowing that it would not work Mini began to ignore the boys calls, to the point where her family became "pissed" at her. It all came to a head for Mini around New Years one year.



Mini had her first kiss on the beach, under a pier.



Mini:

A young lesbian from rural Australia

"I made out on New Years with the little sister of a girl who hated me from high school. That made her hate me even more! One night at the [pub] we were all drunk and she confronted me in front of everyone, saying I'd slept with her sister. I screamed back at her that I'd never slept with her sister and that it was well known that she's f**ked [female] in the [pub] toilets."

The second incident again involved alcohol. Quite drunk, Mini, finally confessed to her concerned mother that she was a lesbian. Her mother reassured her, "you know what love, I still love you..." This is something Mini still clearly holds onto. Her father is a different story. He believes that Mini is going through some phase.

This was evident in one anecdote where Mini came out to her grandmother on social networking site, Facebook. Harangued to join Facebook by "Nanny". When Nanny looked at Mini's page and saw that she had joined a gay group, she immediately rang Mini's mum.

Nanny: "Is Mini gay?"
Mini's mum: "Yes..."
Mini's dad [yelling in the background]:
"She thinks she's gay!"

Nanny would send a Facebook message simply saying,
"I love you."
Mini would reply,
"I love you.
I'm sorry Nanny."

Nanny responded one last time,
"You have nothing to be sorry about."

Mini cried.

Mini theorises that grandparents are much more relaxed with their grandchildren whilst being "more angry" with their own. At least that is her experience, acknowledging some brewing anger with her father.

"I'm 26 years old, my frontal lobe is fully developed so pretty much nothing is going to change..."

Mini continues to live and work in rural WA.