

Steve:

Rethinking homophobic lumberjacks...

FOR THE
HEART

Original project question:

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

"...looking at life for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in regional, rural and remote Australia...Try saying that five times quickly..."

As the audience laughed at my introduction, the minute-taker chimed in.

"Well can you say that again one more time slowly so I can get it all down?..."

I laughed.

Late winter saw me in central New South Wales attending a regional meeting of a Youth Network. This was the perfect example of timing falling in my favour, just as it had not the week before (see Newcastle blog). This meeting just happened to be the week that I was in town, a one in 8 possibility.

Having attended countless youth network meetings in a former life as a youth worker I felt like I was going home, right down to the polite, slightly nervous introductions and the uncomfortable process of getting someone to volunteer to be the minute-taker. Little did he know what he was in for given that I was going to talk and my history of excitable verbosity.

When there was space to talk about our own projects I was asked to talk about the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour.

When it came to questions and comments, one project officer for

a large chunk of regional and rural NSW reflected that schools, when asked what their major issues were, did not identify homophobia at all. This despite the fact that it was widely known that it was an issue for students.

A school counselor remarked that she thought there was still a stigma for young people to come out to counselors before asking about programs.

"Are there any programs for schools because it's a gap...I went to the 'That's So Gay' conference and whilst there was a lot of talk and goodwill, there was nothing for schools to run...?"

Ladies and gentlemen may I introduce the formally evaluated Pride & Prejudice educational package (incidentally now available as a third edition at www.hbe.com.au)? The interest in Pride & Prejudice and in Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools meant that at least 5 attendees were going to try the now infamous book reading at the Panorama Hotel later



that night. They were going to try and collar other people during the day to come too.

After that meeting I would be taken aside by a youth worker who could have been a lumberjack. "Steve" and his colleagues work to support young people in the region who are disengaged with school. Steve was very concerned about a young man he was currently working with and wanted my advice.

After grabbing a cuppa and a seat away from people, I settled in to see what I could do. Steve was immediately up front about his own limitations.

"I'm from Tassie and I'm ex-army so...I grew up and [homosexuality] was illegal or it was a mental health issue...I left Tassie and I went into the army and of course there are no gays in the army...And then I went to Sydney and that was the first time I knew about gay people... Gee, I must sound really naïve..."

Many years of conversations with men like Steve have reminded me over and over again that sometimes people's underestimation of him and those like him can be a barrier to change.

After some reassurance Steve continued.

"In Tassie there was no grey...It was black and white about gays..."

Many people would think there is no use because Steve could not catch up, but I could tell by how this man mountain clasped his hand, leaned forward and looked at me with an anxious hope that a great deal was possible.

It seems his time in Sydney changed his life dramatically.



Steve:

Rethinking homophobic lumberjacks...

"The blinkers came off in Sydney ...I thought, 'Wow, there's a lot of Asians here and a lot of gays here...'"

Then tragedy struck. Steve's wife and kids were killed in a car accident. The subsequent soul search thereafter made him vow to be a different man.

"I realised I was not happy and that I had to change everything..."

One of those things was his own homophobia.

Recently his work with a young gay man has triggered his own process of reflection about himself and the way in which he works. This young man was seen by the Principal of his school with another male student.

"He was sitting on the boy's lap and kissing him..."

As a result of bullying this young man had to leave school and start attending TAFE. Whilst this ended the bullying, it hasn't helped with his home situation.

"He is getting kicked out of home... He gets a lot of grief from his brother's about his size and his weight, about not eating...His two brothers are probably like me..."

Nervous and new to challenging his own homophobia, Steve tried once to broach the subject of this young man and the lap/kissing incident. The young man quickly became uncomfortable and tried to change the subject. Steve took this hard, feeling he'd upset the young man so much that he should never talk about it again. Now he knows his ability to support his client is limited.

I talked to Steve about how he tried to talk to his client and he admitted that he was so nervous that it might have come out like an incoherent, barely supportive monologue. As I have discussed in blogs previously (see Mackay et al), it seems that Steve needed some clarity around the two major issues: process and content.

It will take time for Steve to acquire LGBT content, and this does not happen without time, good quality professional development and opportunities to reflect with our peers. What I wanted Steve to focus on in the meantime was process, that is, how he supported his client.

Rather than avoiding the issue, I asked Steve what might happen if he broached the subject again but from a different angle. What if he was open, and transparent about his own limitations and lack of experience and that he set himself apart from all the other lumberjacks in this young man's life by saying some supportive things around sexual diversity? We talked about how much young people can appreciate someone telling them like it is.

Within 15 to 20 minutes Steve was a changed man.

"I'd avoided it because I thought I'd blown it so I moved as far away from it as I could...I just got so wound up because I was worried so much about being PC that I forgot to be real..."

I wondered how many people would have seen Steve and thought, "Redneck lumberjack". Now he was sitting with me, looking into my eyes and quiet. There was no doubt he was glassy-eyed.

"I feel like a weight has come off...I feel lighter, almost like I want to ring this guy and see him straight away...Thanks so much..."

No Steve, thank you.



“Whatever...”:

Everyday (LGBT) mainstreaming...

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

I would finish my time in Gippsland visiting local LGBT young people's group, 'Whatever' at the Morwell branch of national young people's mental health service, headspace.

I looked forward to it because it meant I could finally meet Jack, a local young gay man, who was on ABC's Bush Telegraph program before me back in February (see Geelong blog). Jack came to the ABC's attention after reading a moving piece he wrote for website Heywire – regional youth telling it like it is. Now Jack is studying community services and co-facilitates Whatever with local youth worker, “Moira”.

Read more of Jack's story at heywire.abc.net.au N.B. Jack would become famous this year as the gay character on Chris Lilley's 'Angry Boys' series

I sat with Jack, Moira and local headspace manager, “Zoe”. Zoe is quite outspoken about the challenges of even providing something like Whatever locally.

“Whatever is restricted to the Latrobe Valley [but one of Gippsland regions]...This is the only area that has a formal project for LGBT young people...There are no generalist youth services and I think that is a real issue...So that makes it really hard for there to be any focus on these issues...”

So if there is a lack of generalist youth services, why is headspace partnering with a local youth organisation to keep Whatever up and running?

“It's because [Moira] and I have decided it's important and have lobbied our organisations to do the work...We've done that because nobody else is, not because we have particular knowledge and skills...”

Even then it is not resourced. Yet again it's individuals going above and beyond their actual role (see any blog, for example Ballarat). As usual, it's about people's time, rather than there being allocated funds.

“There is no funded LGBT work in this region...”

And as is the case throughout regional, rural and remote Australia that pressure falls on the local LGBT young people's project to think about what it can do more broadly for the local LGBT community.

“The adult community spend a lot of time complaining about nothing happening, and they start looking to the welfare sector...I feel the weight all the time from the adult community saying, ‘You do all the stuff for gay youth, what about the gay adults?’...”

Moira explains about the adult LGBT support group's demise.

“We've tried doing this for two years, and said, ‘If we can't form a committee, we're going to fold [the LGBT group]...People said, ‘No, you can't’...But when they were asked, ‘Well why not come on the committee?’, they all said, ‘No’...”

Yet whilst not being all things to all people, Whatever has had success in it's short history.



“Having the Whatever project for 5 years has really helped...It really has put it on the agenda...”

Zoe plays down her's and Moira's role.

“It's youth led, youth action ...It's the best social work we do, by hanging around and doing nothing...We just barrack from the sidelines...It's a group that they own and they direct...And yes they whinge when nothing happens too...But nothing happens out of that group that we own...”

The results are encouraging.

“We have young people who had dropped out [of school] and had jobs at Maccas and now they've gone back to uni to do social policy because they want to change the world...Sometimes they know more about stuff than we do...”



“Whatever...”:

Everyday (LGBT) mainstreaming...

There are plenty of great stories. For example, one young same sex attracted woman came and introduced herself to me during my visit. She had recently won Latrobe City Council's Young Person of the Year Award for her efforts in challenging homophobia at her school.

Kerryn explained how her school launched a new code of conduct for students that included 'acceptance'. The final draft was released and the code of conduct failed to name sexual orientation. When quizzed on this omission, school staff said that Kerryn should just assume it's "included". After asking a few of her friends, Kerryn collected 200 student signatures (with 600 students at her campus, this is 1 in 3!), LGBT and not, who demanded there be an inclusion of sexual orientation in the code of conduct.

Yet Zoe, Moira and Jack don't assume that the 15-20 young people they see each week are representative of all local LGBT young people. Zoe explains.

“The young people that we know are faring well, but what we know is that it's the ones who we don't know who are the marginalised ones...It's not the kids that are out...It's the kids who are sitting in the back of the classroom hearing that Maths is 'gay' and that such and such is a faggot...Year 8 and year 9 are still some of the harshest places in the world, especially for young men...I bet [it's] still as sh*t as anywhere...”

For this reason schools, as with many other regional, rural and remote areas, is a focus.

“We've had good success in some state schools...We haven't had any success with any of the private schools, but then again we haven't tried too hard...”

It seems locally there is some promise.

“I think we've got really good individual advocates in the schools, stickers, brochures, posters...”



Yet Zoe keeps an open mind about how well this works.

“It's all very well to have posters around, but I think that young people are swamped by that visual material...It still that it takes kids going to talk to somebody about that...And there's still that, anything that you tell them at school they have to report to their parents...”

The parent community might not be so receptive (not that I'm condoning young people's confidentiality being broken).

“I think there's a whole lot of people in the community who don't think it's an issue...In their mind they're not homophobic so they can't understand how anyone could be...You need to loudly shout the messages to drown it all out...If you don't have any personal connection to it, you'd be annoyed how many people say they don't know any gay people...”

Despite the challenges, people like Jack, Moira and Zoe are focusing on what they can do, and doing it well. Meeting Whatever participants and hearing their stories, it seems they are doing just that. This clearly excites Zoe.

“We love that sh*t...”



Michael and Mary: Everyday (rural) resistance...

MICHAEL

"Mate, I want to know where the association is for white heterosexual blokes..."

Certainly it was not the first time I had spoken with an older, white heterosexual male who felt they were somehow missing out, whilst having little or no concept that the only thing they had missed out on was the point.

The former Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO) for the [region] had warned me he would be frank. Almost 60 and intending to retire, Michael explained that homophobia had always been a part of police culture. "I've lived in with homophobia in the job for years, but I'm leaving so be prepared..."

Michael was acting as a GLLO whilst a colleague was on maternity leave. Now that his superiors in Adelaide had ruled that only police with a higher rank than him could take on the role of GLLO, he was pessimistic about it continuing. Knowing his superior's views on the role of GLLOs in the police force, Michael told him he had to do a GLLO training course.

"Oh, what was the response again?...I believe it was 'f**king queers' or words to that effect... See?...I told you I wasn't holding back mate..."

A known and hard working identity amongst young people in the region, he made it clear why he took on the role.

"I am here for the kids...I have my phone on 24/7, during holidays, but I don't care cos the kids are important to me..."

Rather than sit at the police station, Michael drove me to a Roadhouse for the "best coffee in [this town]". I appreciated his hospitality, frankness and, in some strange way, his swearing. After the briefest of phone calls to introduce myself and explain why I wanted to talk to him, we both got into a police car for a drive, I suspect wary of one another and what exactly was going to transpire.

Once in the car we both attempted to break the ice. I would attempt to let him know that this was nothing special, given I grew up with a father as a policeman in Geelong. This entailed plenty of walks and time in police stations, drives in police cars and socialising with policemen (given there were no policewomen who worked with my father when I was growing up). Heck, I had even mowed the lawns for one police station for extra pocket money.

Michael for his part would attempt to make it clear that he was gay and lesbian friendly, which I believe largely he was, although occasionally he would miss the mark.

"Oh, have I told you that I'm a lesbian?...I have lesbian friends and I ask them what they do...When they tell me, I say 'I'll have what you're having!'...See?...I told you, I'm a lesbian..."

Despite the occasional off-jokes, Michael's commitment was clear. He had proactively supported both lesbian and gay young people in the region. One he described as young, gay and indigenous. "He cops it from the kids at school. Then he goes home and cops it from his family." When I asked if "copping it" meant that he experienced physical violence, Michael answered,

"I honestly don't know mate, he won't tell me." Posing that many would say that being gay and indigenous do not go together and if this was his experience, he was clear, "yes, basically this is why this kid's head is f**ked".

The reason for Michael's support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people was simple.

"I'm afraid they'll go into their own room and I'm afraid if we are not careful we'll lose 'em..."

Yet Michael openly questioned whether there needed to be a GLLO role. Whilst he could acknowledge that all his colleagues were homophobic to the point of hostility, he failed to see that a "gay and lesbian friendly" port of call at the local cop shop might therefore be important. Perhaps this reflected in his attitude to such an initiative in the police force.

"If you throw it down people's throats they'll choke it back up... You need to stop throwing it down people's throats..."

Asking if any LGBT people had come forward during his time as GLLO, Michael again was frank, "not one". Having walked into the police station to attend a meeting, not being a victim of crime and getting the reception that I did at the counter I found myself thinking that I was not surprised.

"Look there are no gays and lesbians here...They all f**k off to [the capital city]..."



Michael and Mary: Everyday (rural) resistance...

MARY

Certainly religion was behind the concern of a senior education department official when I asked if she had any contacts in the local Catholic school.

"Mary" had spent most of our first 15 minutes together looking at me suspiciously and displaying with her body that she was, at least, slightly repulsed by my presence in her humble office.

"Well if you go don't tell them I had ANYTHING to do with it...No, I didn't say anything..."



I assured Mary, as I had constantly done in the preceding 15 minutes, that I was merely asking a question.

Mary came recommended by a colleague in Mt Gambier, which I think was the only thing that got me through the door. When I explained my national project and how I was interested in what was happening to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia across the many schools she worked with, she immediately assumed I was there to trip her up, judge her and get something from her. Whilst I inevitably encounter anxieties from most people along the way (e.g. "I'm not sure I'm the right person", "I don't think I'll have much to say" or "I'll probably be a waste of time"),

these can be typically calmed relatively quickly and easily.

Not so with Mary. At least 5-6 times in 15 minutes she seemingly recoiled physically and asked, "but what do you want from me?" Time and again I answered that I wanted to get her observations of how schools were supporting LGBT students, if at all, and what was and wasn't working in schools to challenge homophobia. At one point I stopped and thought, "I'm an Amway salesman. My whole life, all my work and everything I've done has come to this moment...I'm an Amway salesman..."

Mary made it clear that schools were time poor and expected to do so much. Why did schools have to do this when it's up to individual families to "do this with their children"? Um, have you seen the current evidence?

I asked Mary what she felt the typical gay or lesbian student's experience in local schools might be and her face almost turned grey.

"I really wouldn't...like to say...I just wouldn't...I mean, of course it's going to be diffi...No I just wouldn't want to say..."

That two thirds of same sex attracted young people face abuse and harassment, with most of it happening in schools, makes it relevant. That over half of all bullying is homophobic in it's nature makes it relevant and that most bullying programs and training don't even mention homophobia makes it relevant. That the term, "that's so gay", is so commonplace, harmful for LGBT students and not challenged or interrupted by most teachers makes it relevant.

I felt I won back some credibility when I mentioned my new book, *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools*. Mary said she had heard about that somewhere. When I mentioned my publisher, she confirmed she subscribed to their mailing list and that it had been featured that month. This calmed her temporarily.

Thankfully the meeting ended with a win-win situation. Mary wanted me out of her office as quickly as possible, or at least I assumed that based on her squirming. I did not take this too personally, especially as I was slightly amused by her lack of self-awareness in this situation. In order to get me out quickly, Mary offered up names of other people I should talk to in the region. Indeed these turned out to be great contacts, and again demonstrated how regional and rural areas are best broken into by recommendations of "good people" here and there. Without these contacts it would be a week for me of pushing sh*t up hill. I appreciated the shortcuts and would soon be off to talk to the local high school.

