**Let’s Hope Ian Thorpe Starts A Necessary, Overdue Conversation About Young People**

Way back in 1999 I started talking about “gay stuff” in regional and rural schools. Back then it was rare and risky for a gay man to venture out of the city, go into a classroom and perform a gay routine.

My ‘gay routine’ was where I came into the classroom and said something along the lines of: “Hi I’m gay Daniel. I am a gay worker from the local gay project. Ask me lots of gay questions, I’ll give you lots of gay answers...” Then POOF, I was gone.

At the time, the most commonly asked-after famous person was Ian Thorpe; was he gay? This was especially the case that year when I piloted a formally-evaluated challenging homophobia program, *Pride & Prejudice*, in an all-boys Catholic school in country Victoria (for the record, Ricky Martin was the next most asked-after celebrity).

In recent days, before, during and after Ian came out as gay, many have asked, “Who cares?” Back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, everyone certainly did.

Hearing Ian talk about his all-boys school days, I recalled working with a young man called ‘Ben’ in a similar situation in 1999: if someone asked if you were gay you denied it and got ready for a fight.

I worked with Ben weekly, and he was a good example of a young man struggling with his sexual identity in his all-boys Catholic school. Ben found it difficult to reconcile his realisation that he was gay and the fact that he did not fit his idea of the stereotypical gay man. Nor did he want to. To (over) compensate, Ben adopted a hyper-masculine persona. He was confident that no-one at his school would know he was gay. Ben was constantly aware of the way he walked, talked, presented and moved in public, taking painstaking care not to do anything that might be construed as effeminate. This to him would be abhorrent.

So much so that, unlike with Ian, Ben didn’t wait for people to ask him if he was gay; instead he took matters into his own hands. He felt the need to take on a policing role, abusing and harassing young men he judged to be "too effeminate". Ben confessed to me later that if no one else suspected him then perhaps he would not have to face up to it himself either.

It wasn’t until Ben was caught hitting an “overly effeminate” younger student by a Deputy Principal that he faced his greatest fear. At first Ben was infuriated that he should be questioned, let alone punished with a suspension for lashing out at the younger student. Later Ben would meet with that teacher, come out to him as gay and thank him for stopping him that day. He’s clear he probably wouldn’t have been jolted out of his closet otherwise.

Ben’s story alongside Ian Thorpe’s reminds us that our environment matters when we come out. For Ian, an all-boys school, international swimming and being the focus of pre-Sydney Olympics media was a combination too great to allow a coming out story like Sydney silver-medallist Jumping Ji Wallace. Whilst some sports have made great strides in providing safe and supportive spaces, some still fall behind. One need only look to Channel 7’s AFL commentator, Brian Taylor, who lit up my social media with his “poofter” comment 10 minutes before Ian’s coming out did (and took over).

For those who would question that our environment doesn’t, or shouldn’t, play a part in our coming out we need look no further than the north of Tasmania. During my 266-consecutive day drive around regional, rural and remote Australia, those working hard in the Apple Isle’s north saw a consistent pattern: gay men in the north-west were coming out 20 years *later* than gay men in Launceston; less than 150kms away from Tassie’s second-largest city.

I’m sure I’m not alone in seeing the wild range of reactions to Ian’s coming out on social media. After reading one too-many venomous responses, often from gay men, I took to social media with:

*“Let those amongst us who have had a multi-million dollar business empire and the sporting prospects of an entire nation riding on our teenage shoulders cast the first stone.”*

This was not something I thought up on the spot, it’s something I’d considered for 15 years.

One perk of working in my field is that I hear many things on the gay and lesbian grapevine. One was a rumour that everything had been put in place – with a team of lawyers, PR people and his management – for Ian Thorpe to come out at the Sydney Olympics. When this did not eventuate the grapevine wisdom was that Ian was too concerned about the financial impact on the small industry that was relying on his success and smiling (straight) Aussie boy persona. I admit that I was bitterly disappointed at the time; I knew the difference it would make for the young gay and lesbian people I was working with in Geelong. As Rodney Croome from Australian Marriage Equality said yesterday, Ian Thorpe coming out will most likely save 1000s of lives.

Now that Ian Thorpe has come out and everyone has had their say, it's time to continue working to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people across regional, rural and remote Australia. Whilst a number of commentators talk about a brave new LGBTI-friendly and supportive world, research evidence is beyond debate: most young people are not benefitting from this brave new world. Not everyone makes it through to come out and thrive as Ian and others do.

I’m not alone in thinking about how Ian’s reported fee of $400,000 could go towards work like mine in rural schools and communities, yet I also hear it’s linked to his upcoming commentating role at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games for the BBC. Given Ian’s interest in a TV career and his concern about how this could’ve been handled, I can’t begrudge him an interview with one of the foremost interviewers of our time.

I’m asked around the country if things are better these days, and I’m consistent with my answer: at a casual glance, things are better these days, yet scratch that LGBTI surface and we find that unless you are resourced, supported and linked in, your experience is likely to be what it was 15-20 years ago (around the same time that Ian Thorpe was contemplating coming out).

I’ve actually had people get frustrated and angry with me, because their sense is that things are better for them these days and those around them.  So how can it be seemingly better, yet the research evidence still points to LGBTI people, young and old, experiencing similar levels of abuse and harassment as they did over a decade earlier?

The answer lies in an increase in LGBTI-friendliness (i.e. where people are much more likely to be friendly to LGBTI people than not; a kind of ‘potential’).  There have never been higher levels of LGBTI-friendliness in every pocket of Australia.  Yet unless that ‘potential’ translates to some action – a demonstration of LGBTI-supportiveness – then LGBTI people don’t benefit.

In my work around male family violence prevention there is a great deal of emphasis on violence-supporting attitudes and behaviours, and how everyday men can make a difference through challenging and interrupting others.  Research shows that 90% of men feel uncomfortable with the way that men around them treat and talk about women, yet when you look at the percentage of men that actually act on this discomfort, it’s almost zero.

The same can be said about the conversion of LGBTI-friendliness to LGBTI-supportiveness: a lot less happens than we would like to think.  One way to remedy this is to resource, support and encourage more everyday people to challenge everyday homophobia. We talk about it, yet we’re not as good at getting practical.

Not only can we support LGBTI young people and challenge everyday homophobia, we can also grant them their wish.  I’ve had the chance to ask them across the country, “What are your hopes for the future?”  Time and again LGBTI young people were clear: to be able to hold the hand of their partners in public without fear, concern or anxiety of something happening to them or the one they love.  They are telling us that most of them do not live in an Australia where that is possible.

Let’s hope Ian Thorpe’s coming out is the necessary conversation starter to get us one step closer.

**Daniel Witthaus is the author of *Beyond Priscilla: one gay man, one gay truck, one big idea…,* *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’: Challenging homophobia in Australian schools* and *Pride & Prejudice*, a formally-evaluated educational package for everyday teachers. In 2013 Daniel launched the National Institute for Challenging Homophobia Education (NICHE), which focuses on the needs of regional, rural and remote Australia.**