



## SSAFE in Schools Newsletter #5

This edition looks at the SSAFE conference that happened in May and includes copies of some of the speeches featured on the day. Also included is information around several services and programs supporting sexual and gender diversity across Victoria.

### ***What a class act!***

The "Class Act" conference on Friday May 16<sup>th</sup> was a great success, with over 200 people attending – twice the number we expected!

A major highlight of the day was the various ways in which same-sex attracted young people had their stories heard. Through panel discussion, drama performance and presentations on behalf of their schools, these brave young people talked with passion and with humor about their experiences of schooling – both positive and negative. While each story was unique, some strong common themes emerged, and these are summarised below:

- Its not easy being different in a climate tolerant of homophobia
- Homophobia is hurtful to the people who are the target and those on the periphery
- It can cause disruption to education
- Same-sex attracted students can be invisible to others and suffer in silence
- There is a lack of support
- Lack of intervention and silence in the face of homophobic language or behavior is harmful. "People left me alone - so I was alone"
- There are implications for mental health. It can be a "dark, black and scary" experience that can result in depression or suicidal behaviors
- Negative behavior can be a defense against the pain and anger that results from being the victim of homophobia
- Same-sex attracted youth don't need to be out but they do need to know there is support if they need it.
- School can be a lifeline for young people whose families are not supportive

Copies of the speeches from two of the young people who spoke feature in the following pages. Also included is the speech from one Mum who spoke about the experiences of her gay son, and the very different way he was treated at two different schools.

Seven school communities presented to the conference on the great work they'd been doing to challenge homophobia and support same-sex attracted students. Over the next few weeks, we'll produce a more comprehensive description of the activities and strategies that each school has utilised, but here are some of the key themes that emerged from the day:

- The work feels like it is breaking new ground
- Homophobia occurs not only in the student body, but in the staff, the system and in families
- Heterosexism and stereotypes are a concern
- Change can happen, but it is slow and incremental (often instigated by past or present students)
- Leadership by key decision makers is important in implementing programs in schools, but often it is driven by committed individuals and groups
- It can be hard, tiring work to establish a climate of support and acceptance
- Communication is important in bringing about the kinds of change needed to challenge homophobia
  - Teachers need skills to communicate with same-sex attracted students
  - Messages conveyed at the organisation level
  - Visible resources, brochures, posters, gay flag etc
  - Library displays that are inclusive of sexual diversity
  - Policies to eradicate homophobia need to be developed and communicated
  - Students encouraged to seek support and communicate
- Professional development is important to enable staff to understand and deal with issues (to prevent homophobia and support students)
  - Whole school
- Collaboration with community agencies important – SSAY support groups, community health, counselling etc. Also gay/straight alliances
- Sense of humour important
- Country schools may face difficulties due to lack of privacy and isolation

- Important to respond to homophobia when it happens (intervention) and have programs to prevent it by making harassment and bullying unacceptable at all levels
- Support for SSAY seeking help is very important (and knowledge of how to support, where to refer etc.)
- Change in early secondary schools is important. Senior secondary is too late – behaviors entrenched
- Conciliation – learning process

### ***Workshop Session***

The afternoon session broke in to small groups to discuss what had come out of the day and where things should go from here. One group, made up of young people who had participated in various ways throughout the day, made the following observations:

- Most teachers do care
- We're grateful people are working with SSAY issues
- We have learned new skills
- Future – want to press the issues
- Enthusiastic about getting the whole community involved e.g. Parades, parties etc. (like Mardi Gras)
- More programs in schools
- We need gay role models (visible), mentors
- Centrally located drop-in centre for SSAY
- More support groups in areas where they are not already

Other small groups made the following observations and recommendations:

- A whole-school approach is essential
- A system wide approach, driven by the Department of Education and Training and including the Catholic Education Office, is needed
- Structures that supports dialogue to facilitate change
- Staff need to feel safe to come out at school (role models). The ASU and VIEU need to take a preventative role against homophobic discrimination and educate members about anti-discrimination legislation and enforcement
- Concern was expressed regarding DE&T's lack of formal support and attendance
- Parents of SSAY should be more involved in SSAY programs
- Young people's voices must be heard
- Expansive view of sexual diversity needed in schools

- Focus on success
- disseminate information about programs that work
- Places where people can work through negative feelings
- Improved evidence base regarding parents attitudes on homosexuality
- SSAFE project excellent; we need infrastructure to facilitate ongoing links
- Continue SSAFE / more funding
- Because of success of today, another conference be funded in 12 months time
- Funding subsidy makes conference accessible - price structure excellent

The SSAFE team would like to thank all the people who gave of their time, energy and passion to make the Class Act conference such a fantastic and powerful day.

### ***Speeches***

The following section includes copies of some of the speeches from some of the people who talked at the SSAFE conference. Many people attending the conference commented on how moving these speeches were, and how brave the speakers were to share their stories at such an event.

**CHRIS HALLAM is 17 years old. Chris left school largely due to the homophobia he was experiencing. He is returning to school later this year. His speech follows:**

Hello everyone, my name is Christopher and I fell under this category "Same Sex Attracted Youth" throughout my lower years of secondary school years. Here is my story....

When I attended secondary school I had to change schools after my first year due to acceptance issues, and the lack of knowledge about homosexuals and homosexuality.

I knew I was different as did everyone else but none of us knew exactly what it was. Becoming a homosexual and believing within myself is what I thought the answer was. I truly believed that I could handle everything that came along with being attracted to the same sex such as the gay bashings, the thought of us being AIDS spreaders and us being looked down upon and being disrespected in the community. But the pressure and depression took over.

No matter what any same sex attracted youth tells you, you will never know how disgusting high school machos can and will make you feel. At the school I attended in Year 7 I know for a fact that there was not enough supports in the place and the teachers had no control and couldn't look out for all their students equally. With all the high school machos running around really made me think if I could seriously complete my secondary school years at this school. I came to the conclusion that I had to change schools so I decided to change to a semi-private college that had more supports in place due to the extra funding.

Year 8: a new school a new beginning. Everything was great at the start of the year because, I was masking my true self. Hiding from the humiliation of being gay. I loved life and I wasn't thinking about who I really was. My marks were great and from the outside I looked like a normal teenage boy, but on the inside it was black, it felt as if the grim reaper had taken my soul. Semester two I couldn't handle leading a double life anymore. Acting differently towards my family was really hard because my family had no idea what I was going through and they didn't see the real me. This time I knew exactly who I was, yes I was different but I don't think any same sex attracted youth should be labeled as a freak.

My family and I knew that it was going to get worse from here. Not knowing if you want to become the person you are, is a very hard and emotionally time and for me it was self-destructive and as well as demoralising. My mood swings had become worse as did they thoughts of suicide, loneliness and love. I was thinking of:

- Suicide because I felt like I was disappointing my family and I felt so isolated from the world
- Was anyone out there who really cared? Loneliness took over as well as total numbness. Did anyone love me, did anyone care, did I have a purpose?
- All I wanted to feel was love and I didn't feel anything but dark and scary thoughts for the next 18 months

Year 9: the year of coming out but still not accepting it within myself. The teachers who had taught or known me from the previous year and three teachers in particular took me under their wings and supported me through the tough times and who I shared the happy times with. They were the teachers I was the nastiest too and the nicest too. They could handle my manic mood swings and accepted the fact that my behavior was a defense force. These teachers were so supportive they even came to watch a sporting event of mine.

I was getting bullied hard that year and terrible rumors about me were being spread. Some true and some were evil and really hurting. My marks were dropping dramatically I just didn't want to live anymore. So I decided to drop out. I was running away from what was a serious and potentially dangerous problem.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since the December of 2001, and thanks to a few teachers, my family, my friends and the support I had already had in place for understanding me and helping to make my life something instead of non-existent.

Here is a short poem, which would like to share with you all, and helps to reflect upon those torturous years...

They can say anything they want to say,  
Try to bring me down,  
But I will not allow,  
Anyone to succeed hang a cloud over me,  
And they can try,  
Hard to make me feel that I,  
Don't matter at all,  
But I refuse to fault,  
In what I believe or loose faith in my dreams,  
Cause there's a light in me that shines brightly.  
They can try,  
But they can't take that away from me,  
They can do anything they want to you if you let them but they wont  
ever win,  
If you cling to your pride and just push them aside,  
See I have learned there's an inner peace I own,  
Something in my soul,  
That they cannot possess,  
So I wont be afraid and the darkness will fade,  
Cause there's a light in me that shines brightly,  
They can try,  
But they can't take away form me.

Now from my years of experiencing I have learnt that life is a gift, even though it can be hard at times we must learn to love it, and that we are all actors of our lives and the director of our destiny, so make peace with yourself and really start believing in others and most of all believe in yourself. I know that every same sex attracted youth out there can make it! So cling to your pride it will help you survive.

**SHARYN is the mother of Liam, a young gay person who attends school in Melbourne. Her speech follows:**

I'd like you to know a little about what it has felt like to be a mum whose child's life has been turned around through a fantastic school.

In 1999 Liam finished primary school with a glowing report. We then moved to a rural area and Liam attended the local high school. In this environment, Liam's academic performance became very measured; in essence, he made sure that he performed only in those subjects, Math's and P.E, perceived to be 'blokey'. The content of his English work was often barely appropriate. Sometimes it was positively misogynistic, yet in the past he had long displayed a deeply held sense of justice concerning issues of gender.

I suspected that he was trying to conform to a particularly rigid masculinity code.

Unfortunately, I did not connect this suspicion with the hidden inner-turmoil Liam was experiencing (and there were other deeply grave and hidden issues which led to his eventual breakdown). It was not until the early weeks of Year 9 that he experienced Depressive crisis and I learned the depths of his despair.

Liam was hospitalized. We later made an attempt to begin to return to his local school. Liam became the first and only openly gay citizen in that school and town. The school welfare officer told us that the school had a considerable group of same-sex attracted students. Sadly, because of the climate of intense fear in the town, each was entirely isolated from the others.

Through his involvement in a suburban support-group for same-sex-attracted young people, Liam became aware of an outer suburban state school at which it was possible to be openly gay and unharrassed. At a time when the 'blackness' of Depression seemed almost absolute, Liam was able to identify a single ray of sustaining hope: this fabled school. I was taken aback by the smoothness of the resulting liaisons between the community health worker and the school welfare officer.

When Liam and I visited the school, Liam was still deeply depressed and barely able to make eye-contact with, must less display proper manners toward, the people in whom his single hope rested. I did not expect this well-regarded school to welcome by sick child. My

understanding was that in today's climate, under pressure from parents seeking what they believe to be the best possible reputation for their child, schools are very fast to try to rid themselves of students with such unappealing characteristics as mental illness may bestow. I will never forget the sight of the school welfare officer bending down to my huddled and broken son and saying gently, "there is a place for you here."

I don't know how many of you come from schools that deal in delivering 'miraculous graces'! However, I wish to share with you what it is like to be the recipient of such compassion because I do think that the demonstration of such positive values as justice and tolerance is a very real measure of a school capable of truly great things.

Liam finished Year 9 with a glowing report, two academic awards for English and Drama, and an invitation to extend his Year 10 to some VCE. Which for me, is the minor success of the story. What is far more priceless is that my young person belongs to an institution in which he has enormous faith (despite his childhood denying him faith in the protective value of the family, and his early adolescence denying him faith in the world as being friendly to his authentic self.) An institution that encourages and stimulates his intellectual and moral enquiry, which he loves passionately and with great pride. This is health promotion of the highest order.

Liam's class photograph is displayed in our kitchen and Liam enthusiastically introduces his classmates to visitors. The tone with which he describes these individuals fills me with pride – no physical characteristics draws his attention, and each person is described without reference to any social cliques or divisions. There are those individuals, like himself, who struggle with difficult life histories, and there are those who don't. What matters to them all, he says, is that each is respected by the others for their integrity, or in Liam's words, "Being" their own person. This tone of respect permeates the school. Almost a year since my first contact, I am still taken aback by the depth of courtesy and the deeply humane quality I meet there at every level of contact.

I suspect that the genuine academic vigor of the school lends itself to such positive values being imbued in the students. As I walk through this vibrant place it occurs to me what a one-dimensional thing bigotry is, and thus simply not that attractive to many of these engaged young minds. Of course, fabulous, experienced teachers is the major factor. In particular, the extraordinary effective work of the student welfare

officer. And of course the school reflects a partnership with its community, in particular its parent-body and its health support agencies. It is a community this is educated, relatively artistic and affluent socially aware (although who can explain why they are such terribly rude drivers or a motor care?)

I did some studies in adolescent health some years ago and I learned of the theory that young western nations like Australia are failing young people through an absence of shared cultural meanings. I believe it is schools like Liam's – schools who intellectual and moral vigor and vigilance extend to creating a community inclusive of compassion, justice, tolerance, diversity and individual integrity – which lights the future not only for an individual like my son, but truly, for us all.

Someone needs to commission a study into the social wellness at my son's school!

**JEN BLYTH is 23 years old. She is studying Youth Work, works at Knox Youth Services and with the Purple Bus magazine, a mag for and by same sex attracted youth. Her speech follows:**

Like a lot of young people, the events that defined my secondary school life didn't happen in the classroom. They happened in the schoolyard - recesses, lunch times and waiting for the bus after school. For me, that's where the most significant lessons were learned.

I'd already lost any chance I ever had of being 'popular' by the middle of my first year at high school. Being 'teacher's pet', good at maths and in the school band was more than enough to ensure a lifetime ban from the 'cool group'. Did I care one tiny scrap that these shallow people who valued things like wearing the right clothes or make-up didn't want to know me? I sure did. For some reason, I wanted very much to be near the 'leader' of that group - to have her like me. In year 7, it would have been enough just to have her notice me.

I can't remember homosexuality being mentioned at all in any of my classes, most notably sex education in year 8 science. This was before my school had the resources to run a 'Health and Human Relations' subject which was introduced a few years later, of which my younger sister had the privilege of undertaking. On subsequent consultation with her, homosexuality wasn't mentioned in any capacity in this subject either. This science class was a memorable moment; not so

much for the content that was discussed, but for the contraceptive demonstration, when our science teacher realised that she was short a few condoms and announced that it would have to be 'one between two'.

Of course homosexuality was mentioned often enough in the school yard; 'faggot' was a very popular insult when I was in year 12. It was a rare moment that some guy from any year level wasn't a 'faggot' for some reason or other. The use of this term generally invoked raucous laughter from the peer group and anyone within earshot, followed by a physical retribution from the poor 'faggot', to prove that he wasn't.

Girls who didn't fit the stereotype of how a young woman should look or act were automatically the butt of lesbian jokes, even if they had male partners. Socially, not having a boyfriend made you a target, not wanting one made you an outcast.

When I was in year 12, my girlfriend and my sister were both seeing the school counsellor when I realised I was gay so I figured I didn't need to. I didn't have a problem with it - I was perfectly happy finally having the pieces fit.

I've spoken to students from that school who've come after me, that have been brave enough not to hide their sexuality. They've spoken of harassment, discrimination and assault, in terms of social interaction in the schoolyard, and within the classroom in terms of their work.

I was spared direct discrimination on the basis of my sexuality at secondary school. Sure, it was present in the heterosexism that is rife in our society today, but I avoided it personally, by the narrowest of margins. My sister didn't escape it - somehow people found out that I was gay, and she was labeled a lesbian by association. She faced verbal and threatened with physical assaults, discrimination by her peers and staff members, all in the presence of teachers who chose to turn a blind eye.

Homophobia affects everyone, not just same-sex attracted students. In a piece I wrote for the gay & lesbian youth magazine 'Purple Bus', I outlined some strategies for overcoming ingrained cultural homophobia that is largely perpetuated by the education system in this country. These included:

- Being inclusive of SSAYP's needs in the curriculum
- Include issues related to being same-sex attracted in class, and

- Provide a representation of being same-sex attracted as natural and healthy

I'm aware of some of the great work already being done around addressing homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in schools. I urge the teachers sitting in this room to take this information back to their schools and use it.

As Nelson Mandela stated: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

*Thanks to Chris, Sharyn and Jen for giving us permission to reproduce your speeches.*

***Did you know about...?***

### **VICTORIAN GAY & LESBIAN POLICE LIASON OFFICERS**

Victoria Police has expanded their Gay & Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO) Program to throughout the state. The GLLO Mission is to "Contribute to the creation of mutual trust between police, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and intersex (GLBTI) persons so that they have increasing confidence in police through the provision of a fair and equitable policing service." The Victoria Police GLLOs are available to provide advice, assistance and referral for the GLBTI community. Victoria Police encourages victims or witnesses of crime to report to their local police or GLLO. The GLLO program is part of the Victoria Police commitment to serve our diverse community in an equitable manner. The State Co-Ordinator Gay & Lesbian, A/Sergeant Melinda Edwards can be contacted on 9247 6944 for the location of your nearest GLLO.

### **Pride & Prejudice**

- Looking for practical strategies to use in your classroom?
- Wanting to find out how to address homophobia in a fun, interactive way?
- Sick of hearing "That's so gay"?

**Pride & Prejudice** is primarily an educational package to assist teachers in addressing sexual diversity and homophobia within educational settings, particularly secondary schools. Pride & Prejudice offers an opportunity for teachers and the school community who might not have otherwise picked up on the issue.

*For more information on Pride & Prejudice, obtaining the package, workshops and professional development e-mail Daniel Witthaus at [prideprejudice\\_1@yahoo.com.au](mailto:prideprejudice_1@yahoo.com.au) or call Amanda Francis at Moonee Valley Youth Services on 9243 8888*

### **ZAQUE**

**Zaque** (pronounced zar-kwey) is a social and support group for same-sex attracted young people aged 12-25 in Ballarat. This includes young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or who are unsure about their sexuality.

Youth Services would like to encourage young people to contact us about becoming involved with the group. Meetings involve hanging out at a relaxing meeting space, meeting other similar young people, and activities and workshops around issues important to group members.

*"It is heaps of fun, I've made some new friends and I don't feel like I'm the only one I know who isn't straight." Zaque member.*

Contact Brendan at City of Ballarat Youth Services on 53 205 644, visit [www.splinta.org](http://www.splinta.org), or email [Brendansartori@ballarat.vic.gov.au](mailto:Brendansartori@ballarat.vic.gov.au). All enquiries are confidential. If someone you know could benefit from this, please pass it on.

### **NOT QUITE STRAIGHT (NQS)**

**NQS** is starting again on Thursday 30th July. NQS is a social support group for young people aged 14-18 in and around the Camberwell area. Activities/discussions include coming out, relationships, support, art projects, video and games nights and more! NQS meets weekly from 4-6pm.

*For details contact Kate on 9882 2621 or email  
kclark@boroondara.vic.gov.au*

### **FRESH**

**Fresh** is a social/support program for young people (under 30) living with HIV and their friends. Fresh is based in Prahran, membership is free and confidential.

*To join or find out more call Fresh on 9863 0419 or e-mail  
fresh@vicaids.asn.au*

### **KALEIDOSCOPE**

**Kaleidoscope** is a same sex attracted project on the Mornington Peninsula which is auspiced by **Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service**. It has been operating for two and a half years now by offering practical support, professional development and classroom teaching to schools that want to make positive changes for their same sex attracted students and those students whose parents are gay or lesbian. There are a number of secondary schools on the Mornington Peninsula that are embracing sexual diversity education in various ways. To contact Kaleidoscope, ring Viv Ray on 0408 483 980 or email kaleidoscope@infoxchange.net.au

### **PURPLE BUS**

Purple Bus is a magazine produced by GLBT young people aged 15-24. The group meets fortnightly. Each issue features poems, short stories and interviews. The group is always looking for new members and contributors.

*For more information telephone Knox Youth Services 9298 8304.*

## **GAY & LESBAIN SWITCHBOARD**

Free & confidential telephone counselling and support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people or those questioning their sexuality. Switchboard operates between 6-10 six days, & 2-10pm Wednesdays.

*Free call throughout country Victoria: 9827 8544 or 1800 631 493.*

## **EGG**

**EGG** is the social and support group for same sex attracted young people aged 14 - 18 who live, work or study in the Nillumbik or Banyule region.

*For more information about EGG social group activities and the fortnightly support group call the SSAY Project worker Felicity at the Eltham Community Health Centre on 9431 1333 or email her on [felicitym@elthamchc.org.au](mailto:felicitym@elthamchc.org.au).*

*The SSAY Project worker is also available to speak to school staff about assisting in the development of a whole school approach to dealing with homophobia and addressing the issues facing SSA young people specifically.*

## **RAINBOW NETWORK**



### **Would your organisation like a list of the social and support groups for same sex attracted and transgender young people in Victoria?**

The **Rainbow Network** is a statewide network for workers facilitating social and support groups for same sex attracted and transgender young people (SSATY). The network is a voluntary initiative that meets monthly and provides a space for information sharing, support and joint activities.

There are now almost thirty groups across Victoria, being facilitated by a broad range of organisations and Local Government Youth Services. New programs are also being developed in a number of Municipalities. The Rainbow Network updates a comprehensive list of the programs on a monthly basis. It is designed to provide organisations with information about local services and referral points. If you would like to receive this list via email please fill out the form below.

Thanks for your support.

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**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Organisation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Position:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ **Postcode:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone:**

**Email Address:**

Please return this form to:  
Jemma Mead  
Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service  
354 Main Road West  
ST ALBANS, VIC, 3021  
Phone: 9364 3200  
Fax: 9364 3733  
Email: [gsjemmam@infoxchange.net.au](mailto:gsjemmam@infoxchange.net.au)

