

# However You Wanna See Me, I'm Just Me

Stories from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Gay Men, Lesbians and Sistergirls



A resource for combating homophobia and transphobia



## **Thank you**

To the community members who generously shared their stories.

## **Artwork**

'Brolga' by Jeffrey Samuels,  
c/o Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative.  
In the Dreaming, Brolga was a person – a beautiful dancer.

The artist has contributed this artwork to symbolise the grace, beauty and strength of our gay, lesbian, and sistergirl people.

## **Editor**

Ruth Pollard

## **Design**

Kate Oliver

## **© 2009 ACON**

This resource may be freely distributed or copied with appropriate accreditation for non-profit use.

The content of this publication reflects the opinions of the contributors and does not necessarily reflect the view of ACON or the Attorney General's Dept of NSW.

ISBN 978-1-86356-050-4



# **However You Wanna See Me, I'm Just Me**

**Stories from Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Gay Men, Lesbians and Sistergirls**





**ACON acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands on which it operates throughout NSW and pays respect to the Elders, both past and present, particularly those reading this resource.**

**This is a resource for combating homophobia and transphobia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Gay Men, Lesbians and Sistersgirls.**

The stories in this booklet tell of finding support from our friends, peers and organisations. They give examples of how others have found strength and overcome obstacles, which makes the community safer and more accepting for everyone.

**Everyone has the right to live safely.**

We don't have to put up with abuse. We have role models who have stories to share, and there are organisations, services and resources to support us.

**You can help protect your physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing by seeking support from other gays, lesbians and sistersgirls.**

Violence should be reported to the police. This can sometimes be difficult so you can get support to make a police report from ACON's Lesbian and Gay Anti Violence Project, from Police Gay & Lesbian Liaison Officers and from Police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers.



## **“I’m not going to let this beat me”**

**It was last year,** December 4, I remember it clear as. I got attacked because of my sexuality. I was on Flinders Street. This young, Caucasian guy attacked me and called me a faggot, and said: “hope you die”. He stabbed me in the face twice with a glass bottle. I got rushed to hospital. I’m not going to let this beat me.

The first six months it didn’t really hit me. I was just binge drinking a lot to numb the pain.

And then all of a sudden I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t breathe.

***“having the support of family and friends, also the gay community, and my doctor is important”***

Anxiety. Scared to walk down the street. Sometimes I get very antisocial. I get a bit of depression.

I’ve always been a strong person, but having the support of family and friends, also the gay community, and my doctor is important.

Play it safe. Be with friends and family when you go out. Don’t go out alone. Make sure you always catch a cab home.

I hope one day that Oxford Street is a safer place for everyone - the whole mob. ■

## **“We love you no less”**

**People ask me,** What do you see yourself as? And how do you label yourself? I say, “I’m just me. You wanna see me as a lesbian, you wanna see me as a black lesbian however you wanna see me, I’m just me.”

It’s made me a lot stronger and determined to keep doing what I want to do in life.

If I didn’t have particular friends that I could talk to about a lot of this stuff, then I possibly wouldn’t be here.

And I don’t know where I’d be if I didn’t have family support.

It took me a long time to even build up the courage to tell my family. Once I told them I was, I was shocked because their attitude was, we love you no less.

An art exhibition I was involved in gave me heaps of support, from Eora and Boomalli. With this exhibition I noticed there was a whole different community and family that was ready to embrace me.

I feel good knowing that it’s not just me that’s doing it, going through these feelings and emotions.

There are other black people and other women that are my age that are

***“I feel good knowing that it’s not just me that’s doing it, going through these feelings and emotions”***

going through the same f\*\*king thing. ■

## **“You don’t have to change who you are in order to fix their homophobia”**



**A lot of small things** can undermine your confidence. I live in a youth accommodation project, and I’ve had to sit there and listen to people talk about gay and lesbian people being dirty and disgusting. When I object and say: “This is offensive to me,” the people in charge say “everyone’s entitled to their own opinion”. It’s institutionalised homophobia.

I’ve lost a lot of friends after I came out to them. Especially female friends. They had trouble getting the idea that just because I was a lesbian didn’t mean I wanted to jump their bones.

It really does make you feel like dirt. You just feel so small, so isolated and really down. I think it slowed me down in coming to terms with myself as a lesbian.

***“my mum was the first person I came out to, and she told my entire family within like a week”***

I’ve faced the least homophobia from my family. My mum was the first person I came out to, and she told my entire family within like a week. She told everyone. Aunties, uncles, cousins, the

whole deal. And now she tells people like she’s proud.

Having someone that was always on my side was important. My best friend was always saying, “Okay, it’s their problem. You don’t have to do anything about it. You don’t have to change who you are in order to fix their homophobia.” ■



## **“You can draw on your inner strength”**

**We have to** make people in the community realise; you're related to us mob. You're related. You've got lesbians in the family. You've got gay men in the family. You've got transgender people, sistergirls, in your family. You're related.

Because we're all part of a community and feeling isolated from our own family

***“I've gotten through it with support of other people that weren't discriminatory***

and community can have a terrible impact on our lives. I've had family members say hurtful things and I felt quite isolated at times. I suffered anxiety and depression.

I still sometimes get anxious or nauseous, sick in the stomach, thinking that something's gonna be said to

me or I'm gonna be blamed for something because of my sexuality.

I've gotten through it with support of other people that weren't discriminatory or narrow-minded. You can draw on your inner strength as well, you go into survival mode.

I'm careful with people about how much I expose about myself and to who. Because when you're younger, sometimes you don't think before you speak or act.

As you get older you find out that there is support around – other friends, other indigenous lesbian women. That's what's helped me through.

I look forward to the future. I look forward to being an older lesbian in the community and being able to share my experiences and support younger people. ■



“

**We** *have to make people in the community realise: you're related to us mob. You're related. You've got lesbians in the family. You've got gay men in the family. You've got transgender people, sistergirls, in your family. You're related.*

”



## **“Committed to creating positive things”**

### **I grew up in the ‘50s.**

Those days were not very good for people if you were gay or transgender. Back then there was nothing, no services whatsoever. As a result my brother suicided. He was only 23. He'd been raped, he'd been menaced with a gun.

It never leaves you. It scars you for the rest of your life. It's sad because society paints this horrible stigma of gay people.

When I was young and we'd go out together, my brother would be himself. He'd want to put on a dress, and he'd want to be gay. Then once he was exposed to society and the attitudes towards him, it was very, very painful.

I think the biggest, worst perpetrator of demonisations of gay people is the Christian faith. I am a Christian myself,

but I don't believe that our Creator is down on people because they're gay.

And I don't know of any indigenous culture that has ostracised someone like my brother. Native American people say that people who are male and female are special; they call them “two spirit people”.

The gay community and transgender and sistergirl communities should be

***“I don't believe that our Creator is down on people because they're gay”***

involved in educational practices without it being an issue. They should be seen as people who are reliable and responsible, and dedicated and committed to creating positive things in the community. ■



## “It’s therapeutic to be with like-minded individuals”

**The worst** experience was having a group of teenaged boys urinate at our front door and threaten to kill us. Every time they walked past our house they’d expose themselves and yell out “come suck my c\*ck ya f\*\*king lezos”.

We had to take out an apprehended violence order but it wasn’t worth the paper it was written on. They continued with the abuse and threats.

We lived in a small village in rural NSW. My partner had lived there for many years. We constantly worried about our children’s safety as well as our dog. It all got too much for us and we moved to the coast.

I felt absolute rage at first. Then humiliation and despair – our self esteem was non-existent, and then fear set in.

We then began to question ourselves, wondering if we had displayed any form of affection in public that may have provoked it.

***“it’s bizarre how we have learnt to laugh about some of our most hideous experiences”***

I’m careful in public and at home we keep all displays of affection indoors. My partner is more fearful than me about history repeating itself, she won’t even kiss goodbye on the cheek in the front yard.

It’s therapeutic to be with like-minded individuals sharing our experiences. It puts things in perspective, it’s bizarre how we have learnt to laugh about some of our most hideous experiences. ■

## **“No-one should be frightened to be who they are”**

**I knew** I was transgender from the age of seven. I also knew I really couldn't tell my parents, so it wasn't until the age of 16 when I actually spoke to a school counsellor, and she made me aware of the Gender Centre and medical treatment available. Up until then I really thought maybe there was something wrong with me.

**“let them know this issue is real. We exist”**

I told my mum that I felt trapped in the wrong body. Dad wouldn't really talk about it. They said: “Well if you go transition you can't be here.”

Now I'm out by myself with my ex-partner I don't really care what they think – I am

just looking forward to when the operation's over. My ex-partner is worried about me. The people she knows that transition in Sydney, they hang in circles that thrive on depression. She's worried it's gonna be that way for me.

And I feel strange about being female in my body and being gay on top of that, worrying that I will get a really negative response from the lesbian community as well.

It's important to stand up, go out to a support group, and start talking to people to let them know this issue is real. We exist.

No-one should be frightened to be who they are. And if you feel different from mainstream society it's okay. ■

## “I just walk away and do my own thing”

**Being** an indigenous gay man I have copped a lot of homophobic words, a lot of racism. I've been bashed a lot of times. It actually hurts me. But the way I see it, they bash us up, I think they're actually hiding something themselves.

It's stuffed me up completely. Lack of trust with other people, whether I know them or not. Trust is a big

***“the AIDS Council of NSW, Victorian AIDS Council - they've helped me through a lot”***

thing for me.

I've dealt with it on my own. I do have a bit of advice from other people, but I prefer to do it on my own.

I don't fight back. I just walk away and do my own thing - I either walk away without saying a word, or I actually literally kick back at them.

I'm out to everyone. I don't hide it. My family; they don't accept it, one bit.

I'm a bit of a traveller. The AIDS Council of NSW, Victorian AIDS Council - they've helped me through a lot. ■





“

**We're**  
*living in the  
21st century,  
we need to  
leave all those  
stereotypes  
and attitudes,  
whether  
they be  
homophobic,  
or based on  
religion, or  
based on race  
or whatever  
- they need to  
be left at the  
door ...*

”



## **“Someone that she really loves and who loves her back”**

**When my daughter** came out she was alienated by some family members. They ignored her and cut her out of the family. I confront it now. I say, you know, “If you’ve got a problem, tell us about it.” Because my daughter is not going to change, so you’ve got to be accepting and loving and generous.

She loves a girl. So what? She’s happy, I’m happy that she’s found someone that she really loves and who loves

***“she got through that with the support of really strong friends and older women who gave her good, positive advice about who she was”***

her back in the same way. People become so insular that they can’t see outside that – you find that in a lot of Aboriginal communities.

We’re living in the 21st century, we need to leave all those stereotypes and attitudes, whether they be homophobic, or based on religion, or based on race or whatever – they need to be left at the door when people come to my place.

When my daughter was discovering her sexuality, she was self-harming and we really didn’t know what to do for her.

She got through that with the support of really strong friends and older women who gave her good, positive advice about who she was. All my mum’s mob are really cool. My old aunty had two boys who both died of AIDS. But on my dad’s side they’re really homophobic. It doesn’t have to be like that. ■

## "I've come through those times"

**Living** in a rural community has presented a daily challenge. I am confronted by homophobia weekly, either being screamed at by people in a passing car, snickered at or pointed at by men or women.

At times it has hurt me and also made me fear for my own physical safety. It outlined to me that homosexuality, at least in my large rural community, is barely tolerated.

At times I feel I am virtually invisible and overshadowed by my sexuality. I am not gay, I am also gay, there are other aspects to me.

I have spent long periods of time justifying people's homophobic reactions. I have concluded that their attitude and behaviour is based on fear, ignorance and at times a true hatred for difference.

I have become more consciously aware of the abuse. I have also advocated for equality in different forums.

I have just survived it. I have come through those times by having friends to confide in, who allow me the opportunity to explore the stupidity of hatred.

If I am going out to the pub, being in a larger group of friends has been helpful – there is a feeling of safety in numbers.

***"having friends to confide in, who allow me the opportunity to explore the stupidity of hatred"***

Unfortunately I've also changed and shaped my social behaviour and gestures so as to fit in and not to attract un-needed attention. ■

## **“The violence made me stand up and fight for myself”**



**I've been** painting all my life, since I was seven years old, and even then I knew I was gay.

The attitude was bullying. You know, people standing over me, thinking that they could boss me around. They were thinking that I was gay because I was “sissy”.

But I'm also a bit outspoken. So I don't take crap from no-one.

I tell them that what they say don't affect me no more. Anyone call me a poofter, I say: “Ooh I love being called a poofter!”

The abuse and the violence made me stand up and fight for myself.

I now go to gay and lesbian events. Going to a place

where you feel normal, where everyone else is normal, where everyone else is the same – you feel better.

When I lived in a country town I got abused. And I didn't know where I'd be sleeping. I remember ringing ACON and crying, and they just said “Come over”.

***“being gay or lesbian is not a hindrance to achieving your dreams”***

So I went over to their office and they arranged for me to stay at a hotel for the night and helped me get my own place. Boomalli helped too.

If the community can see that a gay or lesbian person is very successful in their chosen career, that could help them understand that being gay or lesbian is not a hindrance to achieving your dreams in life. ■



## “Proud of being gay, proud of being black”

**I was lucky** enough to have a good friend and we both come out together – our community accepted us because we were so brave about it. That’s when the respect came back.

That acceptance made me feel really proud – proud of being gay, proud of being black.

The only really bad experience that I’ve had from my own community was my sister.

My other sister has said to

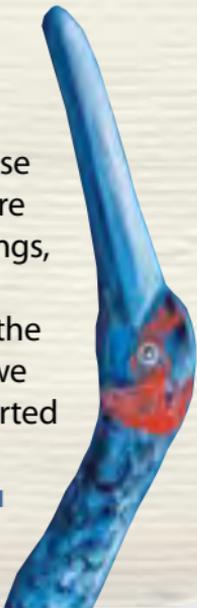
***“I remember a lot of parents coming to us saying, “I think my daughter’s a lesbian,” or, “I think my son’s gay, can you please talk to them?”***

me that me being the way I am – she won’t say the word – has helped her with her kids.

She loves the way that her kids have that acceptance of different people. Their aunty has helped them not to be judgemental, and my sister really praised me for that.

We became the service in our community. I remember a lot of parents coming to us saying, “I think my daughter’s a lesbian,” or, “I think my son’s gay, can you please talk to them?”

There needs to be more education. We’re addressing all these other issues. We are doing family outings, we do women’s outings, we have the men’s sheds but we have not even started to speak about same-sex issues. ■







**“**  
**Our** *community accepted us because we were so brave about it. That’s when the respect came back.*  
**”**

## staying safe

### 1 Use your judgment

Every situation is unique and each person's skills are different, let your judgment be your guide.

### 2 Stay alert and be aware

Being alert and trusting your instincts is a good defense against violence or abuse. Homophobic signals like comments and stares can be followed by an attack.

### 3 Plan ahead to get home safely

Keep some money aside for a taxi, bus or train. Try and have some phone credit for emergencies to call a friend or a taxi, so you don't have to walk.

### 4 Walk with others, walk safely

If you do have to walk, walk confidently and in well lit areas, as if you know where you're going. If you are upset, intoxicated or out-of-it it's a good idea to walk with others. Being drunk or out-of-it can make you a target.

### 5 Keep in the clear

Avoid trouble spots, or dark and quiet areas. Walking down the centre of a quiet street can help avoid shadows but watch out for traffic.

### 6 Avoid groups of young men

Most street-based homophobic violence and bashings are committed by groups of young men, so be alert for this when on the street and avoid them.

### 7 Watch your mouth

Verbal abuse often happens before a physical assault. It's safer to ignore verbal abuse as answering back can make things worse.

### 8 Attract attention to scare off attackers

Carry a whistle or personal alarm or scream, yell to attract people and to scare off attackers. Make as much noise as you can.

### 9 Have an escape route to get away

A good defense against violence is to get away and head for somewhere with people. Distance is a good strategy against a weapon too. If something doesn't

feel right get away...it's better to be safe.

## 10 Have your keys ready

This means you may be able to get to safety faster (home or car).

## 11 Supporting your mates

You can encourage your mates to sober up/come down a bit after a night out. Call them a taxi, walk or drive them home, or call someone to pick them up.

## 12 Keep an eye out for each other

Support others if they've been victims of violence. If you see anyone being hassled, call the police or yell. Going to the aid of someone in trouble can stop the attack, but keep your own safety in mind.

## 13 Leaving a venue

This is a key danger area. Assaults or verbal abuse often happen after leaving known gay or lesbian venues.

## 14 Beware when picking up

Introduce anyone you might pick up to someone you know, make sure they are aware that other people know you are leaving together, don't tell your trade if You live alone.

## 15 Report all attacks

Report to police all homophobic incidents/violence, even if you can't identify the attackers. There may be a local police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO) that could assist you.

## 16 Report it to the AVP

ACON has a Lesbian and Gay Anti Violence Project (AVP). If you don't want to report to the police you can report the incident confidentially to the AVP. They can offer you support and referral.

## 17 Give police the details

If the incident is homophobic related, tell the police to record this in their crime report. Otherwise it may not be recorded as a hate or homophobic-related crime.

## 18 Do a self-defence course

You may not need to use it but knowing self defence can give you confidence and help to get out of a violent or abusive situation.

## 19 Take note

Try to remember details so that you can identify anyone who attacks you if you need to.



contacts



- **Police** In an emergency, call **000**. Some stations may have a Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer or Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer you can talk to.
- **Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project**  
**(02) 9206 2116, Freecall 1800 063 060**
- **ACON Counselling Service** For inquiries call between 11-12 am and 3-5 pm Monday to Friday. **(02) 9206 2000, Free call: 1800 063 060, TTY: 9283 2088**
- **Inner City Legal Centre** The Gay and Lesbian Legal Service operates out of this centre on Wednesday evenings from 6pm (appointment only). Telephone advice is also possible if you live outside of Sydney. Call between 10am-6pm Mon-Thursday or 10am-5pm Friday. **Phone: (02) 9332 1966**
- **Indigenous Women's Legal Contact Line**  
**Freecall: 1800 63 97 84, TTY: 1800 67 43 33**
- **Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Service**  
**Phone: (02) 9569 3847 Freecall: 1800 68 65 87, between 9.30 and 5pm Monday-Friday.**
- **Crime Stoppers** This is an anonymous way to pass on information to police. **Phone: 1800 333 000**  
**[www.crimestoppers.com.au](http://www.crimestoppers.com.au)**
- **Domestic Violence Line** Information and referral service. **Freecall: 1800 65 64 63** from anywhere in NSW any time of the day seven days a week. **TTY: 1800 67 14 42**
- **NSW Rape Crisis Centre** **1800 424 017**
- **Victim's Services** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Line  
**Phone: 1800 019 123**



To request additional copies or for further information please contact  
ACON's Aboriginal Project on 02 9206 2000 or free call 1800 063 060.  
[www.acon.org.au/aboriginal](http://www.acon.org.au/aboriginal)