

Editorial

At the conclusion of collating the last newsletter all this information and resources about same sex attraction started making its way to my desk. So as promised we have dedicated this newsletter to stories and resources about same sex attraction.

The information is not just for those who are same sex attracted but for everyone to understand the issues that make living as a lesbian difficult in our culture.

The incidence of suicide or suicide ideation is significantly higher among gay and lesbian young people than among heterosexual young people.

Persons identifying as homosexual are 2 to 7 times more likely than heterosexuals to attempt suicide; between 31% and 63% have attempted suicide, with those living in rural areas at higher risk.

In a New Zealand study of 561 lesbians, 53% had serious thoughts about suicide and 20% had attempted suicide, 80% were younger than 25.

Many thanks to the three women who have shared their story with us.

Julie

Sense sexuality

A conference on sexual diversity in schools

Wednesday 19th July 2006

- φ Working with same-sex attracted and transgendered students
- φ Tackling issues to create inclusive environments
- φ Boosting school leaders' capacity to manage sexual diversity

If you want to make a difference – attend this conference, featuring Sue-Ann Post!

This event is open to Primary and Secondary Victorian school principals, teachers, and health and community workers, to be held at Telstra Dome, Docklands, Melbourne

Enquires: ssayp@edumail.vic.gov.au

Mary's Story

Hi my name is Mary. I am a 41 year old mother of three and grandmother of 2. I came out about 6 years ago.

At the approx. age of 12-13 I started to feel attracted to other girls though at that time I didn't understand what I was feeling. As I got older this attraction towards girls became stronger and I was confused as "society" had told me that what I was feeling was "bad". I felt very alone and isolated. There was no where to go to speak to someone and I was too afraid to anyway as I had been taught to feel ashamed of what I felt.

In 1976 my family moved from Melbourne to Wangaratta. I had hoped that the move would help me but I became more confused felt more alone more ashamed and more lonely.

At 16 I fell pregnant. My parent's reaction to this was "what will people think of us as parents". Imagine what the reaction may have been if I had told them I was a lesbian. Things were not great at home anyway so I saw becoming pregnant as my way out. How wrong I was.

I was told to get married for to be a single mother was something (else) to be ashamed of. So a child bride I became and for the next 18 years I lived as "society" had taught me too.

I found myself at the age of 33 once again struggling with my feelings and this started to affect me emotionally, physically and also my family life.

For another 2 years I struggled with what to do about what was happening for me. I now had a husband, three children, extended family and friends and "society" to think about.

I came to the decision that I could not lie to myself or any one else for that matter any longer, that I had to think of myself. I was terrified about it all. Telling my husband that I no longer wanted to be with him and

by staying with him we were living a lie and that is not fair on him. What my three children would think of me and would they want anything to do with me any more. I felt the fear and did it any way. My children were great about my coming out. My family was fine though my father did ask was it something they had done to "make me this way" and you find out who your true friends are. My ex's family were not happy about it and do not have a lot to do with me but I'm OK with that thankfully the kids still have a lot to do with them.

Coming out was one of the hardest things I have ever done but it was also one of the best things I have ever done. I no longer have to lie or hide who I am no matter what "society" thinks.

The two most asked questions ...

1. Why are you gay? Did something happen to you to turn you to towards women/men?
2. When did you first realize you were gay?

These two questions would have to be the most annoying and stupid the gay community has to put up with. Many people have asked me these questions and I always reply with the same response. I detest such questions for two reasons:

1. It insinuates there is something wrong with me and if we could just find the reason why you are gay maybe we can cure you.
2. I feel as though I am being asked to justify who I am.

These questions tell me they are not accepting me for who I am. Then they justify their questions with the comment, "I'm just trying to understand". Understand what? What is there to understand? No heterosexual is ever asked to explain their sexuality nor do they even think as to when they first knew they were heterosexual.

They just know and accept it as natural. What an insult to ask someone that very question and expect them to oblige you with an answer – there is no answer.

Coming Out - Faylene's Story

My name is Faylene, I am a 45 year old woman who was born and raised in Wangaratta and have lived and worked here for most of my life.

I first started to question my sexuality in 1997 when I was 36 years old. At no stage prior to this did it ever

cross my mind that I may be a lesbian though I had had feelings for several women over the years. For several months I tried to work through my feelings and thoughts and was becoming more confused so I decided I needed to talk to someone about my sexuality. As I was a middle aged woman I wanted to talk to a woman who had recognized their sexuality later in their life. This was a difficult task as I did not know of anyone in Wangaratta. I knew a lesbian in Albury and contacted her. She put me in touch with a woman who agreed to meet me in Albury. After two meetings with her and much soul searching I came to realize I was gay and decided to come out to family and friends.

The process of coming out was not a difficult one for me as I had recently disclosed my childhood sexual abuses to my family and friends and confronted two of my abusers. Compared to doing that, for me coming out was a breeze. I liken it to a child telling their family and friends they received a straight A report card. I was just as excited and proud to finally know who I was and I was not about to let anyone's negative reactions suppress the new found love and self esteem I had for myself. I had confronted and over come my fear of being rejected by the people I cared about the most before I disclosed my abuse, so this was not an issue for me. I believe it is this fear of rejection which stops many women from accepting their true sexuality and perhaps stay in an unhappy and/or unhealthy heterosexual relationship. There are women out there who stay in heterosexual relationships for fear of losing their family, friends and children. I know some of these women and that saddens me. All I can do, is encourage them to be who they truly are and hope that one day they will find the courage to live their life as they were meant to.

Thankfully my coming out was a positive one, even though I did lose a couple of friends. I am not saying it was easy, it wasn't but it was worth all the effort. Most people have been very supportive and others accepting in their own way. Not too many were surprised which annoyed me. It seemed most knew or suspected I was gay before I did. (They could have told me.) I contribute this positive response to several things. My total acceptance of who I was, my honesty and openness with them, my positive attitude in regards to my sexuality. The excitement and happiness I felt and radiated. And being able to show them I was still the same person I was before I came out.

The most important lesson I have learnt from coming out is, it is OK to be me. I have found that true happiness, freedom and contentment that comes from knowing who we are, total acceptance of one self and living our life according to this knowledge. I hope my story has enlightened some and inspired others to be who they truly are.

Come Stand in Line!

L.I.N.E

Lesbians in the North East

Inaugural Coffee-n-Chat

In a Local Café in Wangaratta

6.30 - 7.30 Date to be decided

Call 0408 466 770 and ask for Bronny

Coming Out after Marriage

I came out after my marriage was over at 36 years of age. I had been married for 12 years. The marriage did not dissolve because I was gay it was just that we were not suited. I was yet to discover what I really wanted in life.

I had realised in my early 20's that I preferred the company of women much better than men. For a while, after the separation I tried to find a 'new father' for my boys, 8 and 3, but realised that a heterosexual married life would not work for me again. I needed to be with a woman.

I took a giant leap of courage and phoned the only social club I could find in a magazine, which was over the other side of the city from where I lived. I remember my hand shaking and my mind racing as I dialled the contact number for the club. After stuttering and stammering, we arranged that I would meet another lady at a nearby hotel for lunch the following week. I could not wait for the day to come!

We met, had lunch and I can distinctly remember my friend saying, "You know it doesn't happen on the first time you meet someone" and I kept saying 'Yeah ok'. We were together for 7 years! I had begun my journey as a lesbian. That partnership eventually disintegrated but we remained good friends until she died of MS.

Sadly, I did not get to say goodbye to her formally as her family did not like me, and neglected to tell me that she had passed away. I found out from our mutual doctor, which was a very sad day.

My next partnership began almost immediately after, which was not what I had intended to happen! I wanted some free time to get 'balanced' again before jumping in again. However, it was not to be. We met at a disco dance in Brunswick and that partnership lasted for 11 years. Unfortunately, it ended with bad feelings, which is something that always saddens me about break-ups whether they are same sex break-ups or heterosexuals. I wish we could have counselling about how to break-up as well as how to stay together.

Since that time I have had a couple of short lived relationships but nothing really substantial which is what I am looking for, but for one reason or another it has eluded me up to now. Although I am happy with my own company, it is much nicer to have someone to share the daily events with and, who you know cares for you, as you do for them. There is nothing quite like the closeness of another woman to make me happy.

It is the closeness, unselfishness and serenity of a lesbian relationship that I like the most.

I currently live in the NE rural city of Wangaratta. I have found that this community is so in denial of gay people within the immediate community it amazes me.

I am trying to offset this by introducing a coffee n chat session group around the community for gay and lesbian people to attend. This group is called **L.I.N.E. (Lesbians in North East)** and can be contacted on 0408 466 770. Ask for Bronny.

Maybe I will find my 'soul mate' in Wangaratta soon!



Hints for working with young people

The following summary of is found in Australian e-journal for the Advancement of mental Health (AeJAMH), Vol. 1 Issue 1, 2002 *Self Harm and Suicide Risk for Same-Sex attracted Young People: A Family Perspective* by Rhonda Brown. <http://www.auseinet.com/journal/vol1iss1/index.php>

- φ Provide space and opportunities for young people (and others) to explore feelings ensuring privacy and confidentiality.
- φ Affirmation rather than judgement of a young person's expressed feeling and sexual attraction will more likely gain trust and encourage a young people to share their feelings.
- φ Avoid overemphasis on sexual orientation, it may not be an issue for the young person. Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual identity is one variation of a range of normal, natural and healthy sexual identities and sexual orientation may be irrelevant to the problem.
- φ A SSA young person may welcome support to approach their family about their sexual orientation but workers should never assume this role without the involvement and consent of the young person.
- φ Practitioners should familiarise themselves with the language used by SSAY and avoid gender specific and 'heterosexually biased' questions.
- φ Practitioners should be mindful of how information about sexuality is reported, recorded and documented. Young people will be particularly worried about their parents and families finding out, but also concerned how the information may affect other workers response to them.
- φ SSAY are not a homogenous group. They come from many backgrounds and family contexts and as such should be treated with an individual approach and response.
- φ Practitioners can also contribute to making their organisations more "SSAY, gay and lesbian friendly".
- φ Ideas among colleagues, peers or within families that aim to convert or change SSAY or encourage them to adopt a heterosexual lifestyle should be questioned and challenged.
- φ Aware and sensitive practitioners will tackle anti-gay and anti-lesbian attitudes in their workplaces as well as in the wider community.
- φ Have gay, lesbian and SSAY information available and clearly displayed where clients and families can access the information.
- φ Develop relationships with gay and lesbian organisations, groups and support networks and provide training for workers on gay and lesbian issues to enhance an organisation's capacity to be sensitive to SSAY, gay and lesbian clients.
- φ Families need clear and factual information to help them to gain better understanding of homosexuality.
- φ Reassure parents that they are not responsible or the cause of their child's sexuality.
- φ Focus on qualities and strengths of both the young person and their family.
- φ Encourage the family and young person to develop a support system to deal with 'coming-out'.

Book Reviews

WHGNE's library has over 30 books and resources on same sex attraction for you to borrow. Books for young people exploring their sexuality, for parents and workers. The catalogue is on our website www.whealth.com.au so you can look for a resource and we can post it to you or you can ring us and talk about what we can send you that might be helpful. Resources can be mailed back to us free of charge.

Here's a sample:

Making sense: Information for parents, families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people.

The booklet is produced by the SSAFE (Same Sex Attracted Friendly Environments) in Schools Project, Family Planning Victoria and is funded by the Victorian Government and permission is granted by the State of Victoria to reproduce the text of this booklet in its entirety.

It can be downloaded: www.ssafeschools.org.au, or contact WHGNE for a copy.

The booklet covers definitions, common question about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, common question asked by families concerning their loved ones. There is a book list and referral information.

A must read for everyone!!

When our Children Come Out : How to support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered young people.

By Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

This is a new easy to read well presented book drawing on the experiences of young people, parents, teachers and youth workers from different socioeconomic levels, diverse regions and many cultural backgrounds. The author has compiled a practical and moving guide for all those whose lives are affected when a young person come out. As many of these stories attest, support can mean the difference between tragedy and fulfilment.

My Child is Gay: How parents react when they hear the news

By Bryce McDougall

My child is Gay is a compilation of letters written by parents who have a gay or lesbian child. The letters have been written to be shared – to help parents cope and come to terms with their feelings, as well as assist gay men and women who are contemplating sharing the truth.

Am I Blue? Coming out from the silence

Edited by Marion Dane Bauer

An anthology of short stories dealing with gay and lesbian themes.

For women who have been abused by another woman

A short easy to read booklet that informs and supports women who are being abused – useful for everyone to read to understand the issues.

Love Sex Desire: A Collection

A collection of stories, poems and artwork by students of Northcote High School or friends from other schools. The book is the end product of over two years of hard work by students who wanted to promote greater tolerance and acceptance towards same-sex attracted students.

Organisations and places to contact

ALSO Foundation

Established in 1981 ALSO Foundation provides leadership and support for Victoria's gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered communities to help them grow and develop. Information; Support Services; Research; Referrals; Rural Networks; Charitable Services; Advocacy. Phone 03 9827 4999
www.also.org.au Email: also@also.org.au

The ALSO Foundation Directory

<http://www.also.org.au/directory/>

This directory is Australia's first and most comprehensive directory of business and community groups offering services to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex community. It contains listings from the annual ALSO Directory available in print form, for a free copy please call 03 9827 4999 or email also@also.org.au.

Gay and Lesbian counselling and Community Services of Australia

Counselling, information and referrals, by trained counsellors are available daily from 6pm until 10pm and Wednesdays from 2pm until 10pm.
1800 184 527 Website: www.glccs.org.au

AIDS and Sexual Health Line

Provides anonymous telephone counselling and education programs about HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, sexually transmitted infections and sexual health to the community.

1800 133 392 www.aidshep.org.au

WIRE Women's Information

Women's Information provides free information, support and referrals to women across Victoria.

Women contact WIRE to talk things through with a sensitive, supportive and skilled woman. WIRE services include a phone support service, 1300 134 130 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and a comprehensive, searchable website.

www.wire.org.au

PFLAG

Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays

P-FLAG is a social support group for families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Many people find it very helpful to talk to others who have experienced the same issues and feelings.

Helpline 9827 8408

Contact number (03) 9827 8408

Email: p_flagvic@hotmail.com

www.P-FLAG.org.au

Rainbow Network Website

The Rainbow Network is the State-wide Network for workers who facilitate groups, coordinate projects or work with same sex attracted, bisexual, queer and transgender young people.

www.rainbownetwork.net.au

Hume Phoenix – non heterosexual group

Hume Phoenix Inc supports non-heterosexual people of the Albury/Wodonga area and surrounding regions.

www.humephoenix.dragnet.com.au

02 6023 3364

RNC

The Rural Network Committee (RNC) is a group of paid and unpaid workers and volunteers who run social and/or support groups or projects for GLBTI people throughout rural Victoria.

The group meets together in a relaxed, social, safe environment to offer support to members, share and discuss emerging issues facing rural GLBTI people & advocate at a statewide level.

Damien Stevens is the contact for Shepparton, 0418 155 562 damien@damienstevens.com

There is no current contact for the Albury/Wodonga group.

Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria

The GLHV website and clearinghouse. This site provides news and information of particular interest to the health and wellbeing of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Victoria. www.glhv.org.au
They have posters to put in your waiting room.

You don't have to tell us if you're gay or lesbian...but you can

Police Emergency line

Phone 000

Police Gay & Lesbian Liaison Officer

9247 6944 or 9881 7093

Centres Against Sexual Assault

Counselling and support if you have been sexually assaulted by another woman
Shepparton 5831 2343 Wangaratta 5722 2203
Counselling and information is available 24 hours a day by phoning Freecall 1800 806 292