

OUR VOICES

HAVE CHANGED THE WORLD

– *more stories from older LGBTI people*





Uncle Paul Calcott is a proud Gay Wiradjuri man and polio survivor. Now living on Gubbi Gubbi country on the Queensland Sunshine Coast.

He is a passionate Human rights Advocate, winning a national Human Rights award in 2019 for his work in rights advocacy and the National disability arts award 2025.

Uncle Paul has art works in private collections both nationally and internationally and has completed a number of commissioned works for NGOs and Government organisations, and corporations, including the Australian Embassy in Geneva and the Queensland treasury.

Seven Spirits image

I painted to represent a person that is not gender specific with the multiple spirits represented by the colours of the rainbow flag, this talks about the multiple gender identities that come from within, the Elders yarning circle is that we have no bad dreaming stories and that gender diversity was just part of our ancient culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We are blessed to live on Whadjuk Noongar Country. We acknowledge that Noongar people remain the custodians of their Country, and that they continue to practice their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge. We pay our respects to the elders and knowledge holders of the Country on which we live, work, love and travel.

Recognition of our LGBTI Pioneers

We would like to honour and recognise the past and ongoing work of the members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQA+) community, and include anyone else who is diverse in sex, gender, or sexual orientation within this acronym. We would like to thank LGBTIQA+ people for their contributions to our society; particularly in areas of health and equality, and acknowledge their experiences of prejudice and discrimination and celebrate their strength, resilience, and perseverance.



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Communities**

A note on terminology The Our Voices project has retained the words and terms used by participants in the telling of their stories. GRAI uses the initialism LGBTI to refer to older people (50+) of diverse genders, sexualities, and sex characteristics, as this reflects their lived experiences and recognises that some terms, like 'queer', were used as slurs when they were younger.

By preserving the authentic language used by participants, some readers may encounter words in these stories that might be upsetting.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every year, our community entrusts GRAI with another collection of stories. And every year, we are reminded that there are still more voices waiting to be heard.

These are the stories of a minority within a minority.

At a time when too much attention is given to what makes us different, this book reminds us of something more important: Understanding begins with curiosity, and listening is the first step towards building stronger communities.

This volume shares the experiences of older LGBTI people whose lives have been shaped by culture, language, faith, community and innate variations of sex characteristics. Too often these stories have been overlooked, not only by the wider community, but sometimes within our own.

Some contributors spent decades balancing the expectations of their cultural community with a sexuality or gender identity that was never fully accepted. Others found acceptance within the LGBTI community, only to experience racism or exclusion because of their cultural background. For many older intersex people, invisibility has been their greatest challenge, with lives that have rarely been acknowledged or understood.

That is especially true for our First Nations contributors. Their stories remind us that culture, Country and identity are not separate, but interwoven parts of a person's life. Reconciliation is not only about listening to First Nations voices in the broader Australian story, but also ensuring those voices are heard, respected and celebrated within our own community.

The diversity we speak about so often doesn't stop at the edge of our community. It exists within it.

At GRAI, we've learnt that listening is one of the simplest acts of respect we can offer another person. Every story in this book is an invitation to do just that. These voices challenge our assumptions, build empathy and remind us that no 2 journeys are ever the same.

Many of the people in these pages grew up at a time when there were few words to describe who they were, and even fewer opportunities to speak openly about it. Sharing these stories is an act of generosity. Preserving them is a responsibility.

My hope is that this book encourages us to look beyond broad labels and recognise the richness of the lives that make up our community. The more voices we hear, the more complete our understanding becomes.

My sincere thanks go to everyone who entrusted GRAI with their story. You have helped create something far greater than a collection of memories. Together, these stories are becoming part of the archive of our community, ensuring future generations will know not only how we lived, but who we were.

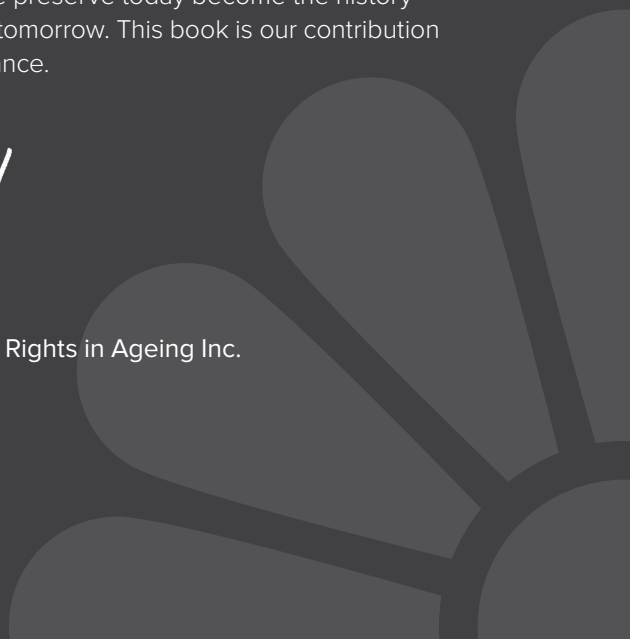
I also thank our editor, Tarmon Gibson, whose quiet dedication to the craft of storytelling has become an integral part of the Our Voices series. His patience and care allow every contributor's voice to remain authentic while ensuring these stories are preserved with the respect they deserve.

I am especially grateful to Uncle Paul Calcott for the extraordinary artwork that graces the cover of this volume. A proud Wiradjuri man, artist and advocate, Uncle Paul's work reflects the very themes explored throughout these pages: identity, culture, resilience and belonging. Before a single page is turned, his artwork reminds us that stories can be told in many ways, and every story begins by being seen.

The stories we preserve today become the history others inherit tomorrow. This book is our contribution to that inheritance.



David Gibson
Chair
GRAI – GLBTI Rights in Ageing Inc.



FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure to introduce this third edition of *Our Voices Have Changed the World*, a remarkable collection of stories that celebrate the strength, resilience, and perseverance of older LGBTI¹ people in Western Australia. This publication also serves to educate and inform us about the diverse and intersectional experiences of older LGBTI and the discrimination that many people have faced in everyday settings.

Collated by GLBTI Rights in Ageing (GRAI) and funded by the State Government through the Department of Communities, this collection of stories is significant because it highlights the richness and diversity within the older LGBTI communities. The stories also reflect the ways their experiences intersect with culture, language, heritage and Country.

The Cook Government has prioritised safe and inclusive communities where everyone can age with dignity, respect and a sense of belonging. That means recognising the unique experiences of older LGBTI people and including their voices in informing how we build services, communities and policies that are welcoming and inclusive for all.

'Our Voices...' strongly reflects the Cook Government's vision of an Age-Friendly WA, where belonging, connection and visibility are central. By sharing and preserving these stories, GRAI is helping to ensure that older LGBTI people are seen, heard and valued.

To everyone who has shared their story in these pages, thank you. Your experiences enrich our understanding of the past, challenge us to do better in the present and inspire us for the future.

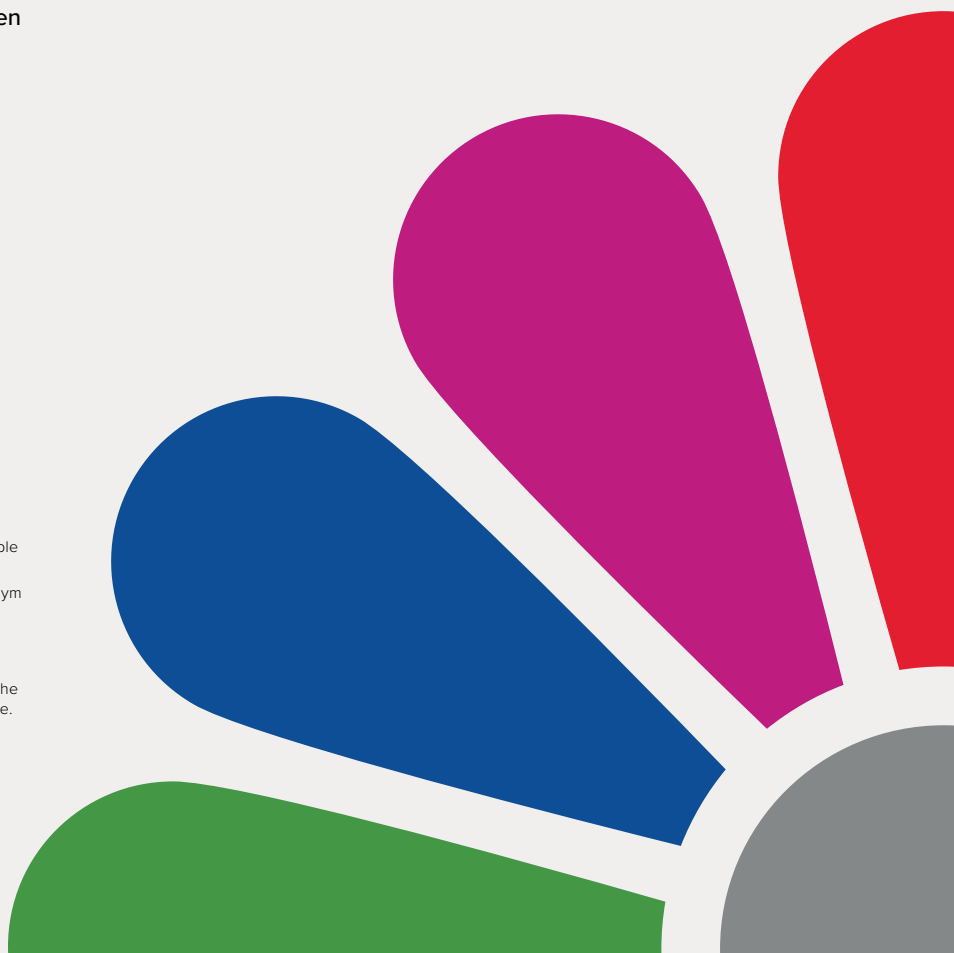


Hon. Simone McGurk MLA
Minister for Aged Care and Seniors; Women
Western Australia

¹ GRAI uses, by preference, LGBTI when referring to older people in the community.

LGBTQIA+ is the preferred Department of Communities acronym for Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, or asexual or otherwise identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. The acronym LGBTI is used to refer to older LGBTI people as the Q which can stand for Queer is considered a slur and term of abuse by older LGBTI people. The A+ is not commonly used or recognised by older LGBTI people.

Communities uses LGBTQIA+ when referring to the broad community of people with diverse sexuality and gender, but acknowledge GRAI's preference when referring to the older community and use LGBTI.



Andrew Douglas

... I knew of no one else in my ethnic community who had come out.

From an early age I realised I was different. To begin with, I grew up in a home where 2 languages were spoken. For the most part, my parents spoke to me in their native tongue while my siblings spoke to me in English. The disruption of World War II in Europe brought many migrants to this country from CALD backgrounds. My parents were among these 'New Australians' arriving in this country from southern Europe in 1947.

Due to language and cultural barriers, certain ethnic communities preserve the familiar practices and traditions of their native culture. It is natural that they cling to the familiar in a new and unfamiliar country. As a result, they can—and do—become insular and resistive to social changes in the general community (which are also occurring in their country of origin).

50 years ago, when I came out as a gay man, it was very difficult to form any meaningful relationships outside of the family: heterosexual marriage was the only viable and acceptable option. Similarly, there was practically no discussion of sexual matters within the home and hardly any sex education information in the public school system (and definitely nothing about homosexuality).

Consequently, coming out was very difficult and rare—but it was possible. At the time, and for decades afterwards, I knew of no one else in my ethnic community who had come out. As a result, any meaningful relationships had to wait until early adulthood and I tactfully distanced myself, to a certain extent, from my ethnic community.



During the late 70s, I attempted to set up a support group for those of my ethnic background with the support of Gay Liberation and CAMP WA, but people were just too scared to come out. Furthermore, I was met with hostility by the heads of the relevant social clubs at 2 universities. One at UWA immediately hung up on me at the mention of the word 'gay'; at a different campus, another individual used articles I had written about the issue in the student paper as a pretext to exclude me from that social club. Thanks to the Student Guild's policy at the time, I was able to secure an offer of membership. Having made my point, I never took up this option.

*... I did not want those whom
I was close to, and who
supported me, to suffer ...*

I had to tread a fine line between being open and the potential consequences for my immediate family: I did not want those whom I was close to, and who supported me, to suffer any censure or ostracism due to my activism. The smaller the ethnic community, the more likely and the more swiftly information (and gossip) can travel within it. While I was rather distant from this community, my supportive mother was more connected to it with in-laws, other family and many close friends.

It wasn't until the early 1990s, that I came across others from my ethnic background at the Wilde Alliance gay students' group at the UWA. Even then, it seemed that they were not 'out' to their immediate family.



*... I was the only openly gay
male in my profession ...*



As migrants with limited formal education, my parents always stressed the value of education as an escape from the 'manual labour' they had to endure. As a result, I was encouraged to finish high school and then attend university. Ultimately, this led to many benefits for me, with a few stumbling blocks along the way.

As a result of my tertiary education, I could enter the ranks of 'professional' employment over 40 years ago. Overall, I was fortunate in the sense that, in all the positions I held, I was never in the closet (at the time I didn't realise how rare and unusual this was). However, in the early years of my career, I suffered overt discrimination as a professional person on 2 occasions when I applied for positions. Given my earlier struggles within my CALD community, I felt confident in tackling the homophobia I encountered in these professional ranks.

At the time, it was unheard of for an openly gay male to assert his rights. In fact, as far as I was aware, I was the only openly gay male in my profession within the State Health Department. As a result, I inadvertently acquired the reputation as a ‘ramble rouser’. With time, this reputation evolved into that of a pioneer and advocate (a more ‘respectable’ epithet).

Fortunately, my university experience resulted in more than just formal qualifications. Ultimately it led to discovering safe spaces like CAMP and the first Gay Liberation group that formed on campus. I gained my support group and started on a journey that continues to this day.

Education is crucial to improving the circumstances of LGBTIQ individuals from CALD backgrounds.

My interest in CALD groups extended beyond my own. I grew up in a neighbourhood surrounded by Italian and Slavic families. The primary and secondary schools I attended had still even more ethnic diversity. For example, my year 12 art class contained students from the following groups: indigenous Australian, Russian, Burmese, Italian, Greek and at least one Anglo-Celtic Australian.

More recently, I investigated another gap in support for individuals from CALD backgrounds. Given the number of immigrants from Middle eastern and Asian countries, there appears to be no support group in this city for LGBTI Muslims. I contacted Federal MP Anne Aly, the only openly gay imam in Australia, in an attempt to encourage the process. As I am not from this background, I am not equipped to form such a group. From experience, I know the impetus must come from within that specific community, from the ‘grass roots’ to be effective.

Education is crucial to improving the circumstances of LGBTIQ individuals from CALD backgrounds. This education must be specific: basic information needs to be available, and support groups are essential to diminish the stigma. To be effective, this needs to begin in the school system—in both public and private schools—to facilitate the process of normalisation and minimise the person’s alienation from their ethnic roots. ■

Christine Sellman

At 66 years of age, every day is a day of discovery

At 66 years of age, every day is a day of discovery
today, walking at Kirra beach
swimming in the ocean (every day, when I can)
marine life that merge with me when I dive down

1992

my neighbour in Newtown invites me
for a rare night out
my son had just turned one, and I, a single mum
I embraced motherhood
but that night I go
that night I meet a woman
Imperial Hotel
home of *Pricilla, Queen of the Desert*

since then I am comfortable
with my life, my choices, my journey
I am becoming
authentic
I am aging gracefully, believing I am
like Benjamin Button, getting younger each year
though my grey locks tell a different story

over the years I've been fortunate
to meet beautiful women who
I spent my time with
fell in love
learnt to love myself, finally
comfortable with who I am
my path

I can still vividly see that frightened child.

Life began for me as a very frightened, anxious
child, living with one parent who drank and was
physically abusive when inebriated. At times I would
hide either in a cupboard or under a bed, hoping not
to be beaten when Dad arrived home after being
out drinking. Hours, terrified to my core.

Five years of age.

And although all that time has lapsed, and I've
spent hours and hours on forgiveness, etc., I can
still vividly see that frightened child. I whisper to her:
'You know, Christine, you will get through this. Hold
on tight. Life will be beautiful.'

Finding family and connecting to my Maori heritage

In 1996, living in North Strathfield, I was introduced
to Qigong. It was life-changing, and I knew I would
always be practicing this meditation, moving with
energy. I became very committed, practising daily,
often for hours.

Moments of enlightenment.

Through Qigong, I met a beautiful Maori elder,
Ehetere Watson, who became one of the most
significant friends in my life. She mentored me
on everything spiritual, including Maori law and
customs. Taught me how to sing a hymn and
connect to country, returning to my homeland at
Taranaki.

In 2003, I chose to become involved with the Desert
Ceremonies in Central Australia. Reconciliation
and learning from the traditional custodians of
Uluru, Alice Springs, Ernabella, Umutju and beyond.
Learning connection to land and law. Tjukapa.

All the aunties would lead us in dance, painting, and
ceremony. What a blessing. It was here in the desert
I would meet so many beautiful woman who have
become my desert sisters. Soul sisters. Lifelong
relationships created and nurtured, again becoming
the most significant relationships in my life.

Holistic Nursing has also given me so many
incredible moments. Significant meetings, lifelong
family found.

*I travelled further
in the red earth country.*

In 2015, I was in a relationship with a woman who I felt I would be with forever. Our connection had started slowly, very slowly.

We had planned to meet up in the Northern Territory, where I was spending some months on long service leave, as I travelled further in the red earth country. Part of me knew I needed to spend more time up there.

Arnhem Land (East and West), Gove, Nhulungbuy, Yirrikala, Mataranka, Barunga, Beswick, Nhuka, Numbulwah, Darwin and Gunbalanya.

All these places became etched in my skin.

While living in Darwin and working in Mental Health I became a volunteer assisting with the Pride group up there and helping with a few events, including Darwin Pride in 2016.

Fast-forward 10 years and now I am loving being a volunteer with Silver Pride Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP for short). LGBTIQ Health Australia: a great organisation where I am finding my feet in community, on country with deep respect and gratitude. ■



David Gibson

... I grew up in a house where words weren't spoken.

Words have always fascinated me. Maybe that's because I grew up in a house where words weren't spoken.

My parents are Deaf. Auslan, or Australian Sign Language, was the language of our home. Like many children of Deaf adults (Codas), I learnt early on that meaning doesn't just live in words. It lives in faces, in eyebrows, in the speed of a sign, in whether someone signs softly or sharply. Sign language is a visual language. You don't just hear emotion. You see it. Nothing is hidden.

Or so I thought.

As a boy growing up, whenever my father spoke about gay men in the Deaf community, he would use the sign for 'poofter'. There wasn't really any other sign to use—the word homosexual didn't have a dedicated sign back in the 1970s. But, as a young boy trying to work out who he was, I saw the sign and attached all the baggage that came with that word. All the negativity and shame. Every time someone signed 'poofter', it reinforced the belief that this was something bad, something to be hidden.

So I hid.

I didn't come out to my parents until I was in my 50s, and I think the use of this sign was a large part of the reason. I don't think I made a conscious decision to hide that side of myself to them. I just knew that I was the hearing son of Deaf parents. I knew a part of me lived in the Deaf world. I knew who I was in that space. But I wasn't sure what would happen if Mum and Dad knew I was bisexual.

The funny thing is, for all those years, I had misunderstood Dad's meaning behind the sign. For my father, that sign wasn't derogatory. It was simply the only sign he knew for 'homosexual'. It carried no judgement. It was just language. The meaning I had attached to it wasn't his. It was mine.



When I finally came out to my Dad in the 2020s, he accepted me completely. And when I married my husband, Tarmon, Dad was incredibly proud of us. For months afterward the wedding, though, he would refer to Tarmon as 'David's mate' or 'my Irish mate' (BTW—Tarmon isn't actually Irish, though his name is!). Now, I just put this down to one of my Dad's little quirks. Then, one day, Dad's support worker asked him why he called Tarmon my 'mate' when he was actually my husband.

Dad rang me immediately on a video call.

'Why didn't you tell me Tarmon is your husband?' he signed.

'Dad,' I signed back, laughing, 'you came to our wedding!'

'Yes, yes,' he replied impatiently. 'But I thought "husband" meant husband-and-wife. I didn't know "husband" could mean husband-and-husband.'

And there it was again. The power of language.

All those years, I had worried about how Dad would see me. I was discovering now that the love had always been there. We had simply applied different meanings for the same signs.

These days, when I think back on it, I realise I spent a lot of my life worrying about how Dad saw me. The truth was, he saw me exactly the same way he'd always seen me.

As his son.

Growing up in the Deaf world taught me that communication is about far more than words. It taught me that meaning lives in people, not just in signs.

And sometimes, after spending a lifetime interpreting for others, you realise the person you misunderstood most was yourself.

I didn't know there was a name for people like me ...

As humans we seem to love labels. We use them to make sense of ourselves and each other. Within the LGBTIQA+ community we use words like 'gay', 'queer', 'bisexual' and 'trans' as labels. They don't define us, but they do help us feel seen.

The same is true of another label that came into my life much later: 'Coda'.

Growing up, I obviously knew I was the hearing son of Deaf parents. My life was different to my friends at school. Sign language was simply part of life. Being an interpreter between speech and sign was a given. I never thought of it as an identity. I didn't know there was a name for people like me—this was something I discovered by accident.

Many years ago, back in the 1990s, my then-partner and I were holidaying in Bali. I'd been enjoying the hotel pool, when I noticed a Deaf couple signing away to each other. Like most Codas, I could read what they were saying without really trying.

Let's just say they were... *enthusiastically* discussing what they had planned for later that night. After a while, I decided somebody should probably let them know this NSFW conversation was being understood by at least one other person in the vicinity. So, I swam over and introduced myself. Their eyes widened in embarrassment.

'Are you Deaf?' they signed.

'No,' I replied. 'My mother and father are Deaf.'

'Oh! You're Coda,' they signed, fingerspelling C-O-D-A.

Thinking they were asking my surname, I replied, 'No, Gibson. G-I-B-S-O-N.'

They burst out laughing. 'No, you're a Coda. Child of Deaf Adults.'

It was the first time I had ever heard the word. It would take decades before I truly embraced it.

That happened in 2019 at the CODA International conference in Fontainebleau, France.

Everyone used completely different sign languages ... yet, somehow, we all understood one another.

I arrived a little nervous. Here were hundreds of Codas from around the world gathering before the World Federation of the Deaf Congress in Paris. Although we came from different countries and cultures, we all shared something unique and wonderful. We had grown up bridging the gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds.

It was there that I found another layer of chosen family.

Among the Australians, Americans, Koreans, Canadians, Irish and British attendees, were queer Codos of every nationality. Listening to their stories felt strangely familiar. Stories of misunderstanding. Stories about hiding parts of themselves. Stories of living between worlds: Deaf and hearing, straight and gay. All the time trying to work out where they belonged.

What struck me most was the language. People arrived speaking English, French, German, Korean and countless others. Yet, once the conference began, sign language became the common language. Australians signed Auslan. Americans signed ASL. French signed LSF. Everyone used completely different sign languages ... yet, somehow, we all understood one another.

This is because sign language is more than just vocabulary. It is gesture, facial expression and emotion. Meaning is carried across your whole body. We didn't understand every sign, but we understood the intent, and that was all that mattered.

One memory from the conference stays with me more than any other. Late one night, I found myself sitting on the floor with a bottle of vodka and two people who, on paper, I shouldn't have been able to communicate with. One was a lesbian from France. The other was a transgender man from Brazil.

Between us we shared 3 countries, on 3 continents, with 3 cultures and 3 different sign languages. None of us shared the same language—either spoken or sign—fluently. Yet there we were, sitting on the floor until 3 in the morning, signing and laughing, drinking and sharing our lives. We talked about our parents. About growing up between worlds. About hiding parts of ourselves. About relationships, loss and the strange experience of belonging and not belonging all at the same time.

What became clear to me was how distinct our lives were from many other LGBTIQ+ people. Growing up in Deaf families meant moving between two cultures: Deaf and hearing. At the same time, our lives were different from many other Codos; we had also navigated the joys, fears and confusion that came with discovering our sexuality and finding our place in the world.



I came home from Fontainebleau with new friends scattered across the globe. But I'd also gained something I hadn't realised I'd been searching for: the knowledge that there were people out there who understood. People who didn't need long explanations, who just got it.

For most of my life, I had moved comfortably between worlds. I could navigate the hearing world and the Deaf world. But it wasn't until that moment, at 3 o'clock in the morning, halfway around the world, that I realised I didn't have to do the same thing with my sexuality. I didn't have to choose between being a Coda, being bisexual or being a sign language user.

I could simply be me.

And somehow, that made the world feel a little smaller and home feel a little bigger. ■

ANONYMOUS

The message around me was clear: who I was had no place in my own country.

I grew up knowing I was different, long before I had the words 'trans woman' or 'LGBTI.' Inside, I felt a quiet, steady truth about who I was. Outside, my world was full of danger.

In my country of birth, the simple reality of my gender identity made me a target. I survived discrimination, torture and trauma because I dared to exist as myself. For a long time, survival meant hiding. I tried to move, speak and dress in ways that felt like a costume, just to stay alive. Each compromise kept my body safer, but my spirit weaker. The message around me was clear: who I was had no place in my own country. The pain of that rejection went far beyond bruises; it told me I did not deserve a future.

Leaving was not a simple choice, but a necessity. I left behind family, familiar streets and the language of my childhood, carrying only hope and fear in my suitcase. When I arrived in Western Australia, I felt two things at once: relief that I was finally far from the people who hurt me, and terror that maybe I would never truly belong anywhere.

Slowly, safety began to feel real. I found community and purpose at Edith Cowan University, where I am now both a full-time postgraduate student and an employee. In lecture halls, offices and community spaces, I started to hear new messages: that my lived experience mattered, that my story was knowledge, and that my identity was something to be respected, not erased. Being involved with the Rainbow Migrant Living Lab at ECU has allowed me to transform my pain into something powerful, supporting research and activities that make life better for other LGBTI migrants.

A turning point in my journey was accessing the Gender Diversity Service at Royal Perth Hospital and beginning Hormone Replacement Treatment. For the first time, my body began to move closer to the woman I have always known myself to be. The changes have been profoundly positive for my mental and physical health. My reflection in the mirror now feels less like a stranger and more like a friend. My new gender, as a trans woman, is not truly 'new' at all—it is the truth finally allowed to be seen.

Today, my dreams reach far beyond survival. I am committed to completing a PhD and using my research to contribute to the Western Australian and broader Australian community. I want my work to help build an economy and a society where LGBTI migrants and refugees are not just protected but welcomed and valued. Coming to terms with my identity has meant moving from hiding to visibility, from fear to purpose. I am a trans woman, a survivor, a student, a worker and a future researcher. My past shaped me, but it will not define my limits. My identity is no longer a burden—it is the source of my strength.

I belong here because my experiences, my voice and my perspective matter.

When I walk across the campus of Edith Cowan University, I carry my past with me: the fear, the trauma, the memories of being punished for my gender identity. But I also carry something new—pride. Pride that I am here, as a trans woman, not only surviving but studying and working in a place that recognises my worth.

Becoming a full-time postgraduate student was not just an academic decision; it was an emotional one. After everything I had been through, stepping into a university classroom felt almost unreal. I remember sitting in my first seminar, heart racing, thinking, 'Do I really belong here?' Over time, within the safety of Western Australia and the support around me, that fear has slowly softened into confidence. I belong here because my experiences, my voice and my perspective matter. As an employee of ECU, I feel something I never felt in my home country: belonging and respect. I am not just a victim of torture and trauma. I am a colleague, a contributor, someone trusted to add value to a shared mission. Each day of work reinforces the message that I am more than my past. I am building a future.

My involvement with the Rainbow Migrant Living Lab at Edith Cowan University is especially close to my heart. I don't just support research and activities there; I pour my lived experience into that work. I know what it feels like to be unsafe because of your gender identity, to be pushed to the margins. Now, I help create knowledge and projects that shine a light on LGBTI migrants' realities and needs. Every survey, every discussion, every idea feels like a small step towards a kinder world for people like me.

There are days when the weight of my history crashes over me—memories of what was done to me, of how I was treated simply for being a trans woman. On those days, my academic and community work becomes a lifeline. It reminds me that I am not powerless. I am using my mind, my heart and my voice to change things. My dream is to complete a PhD and carry this work even further. I want my research to contribute to the Western Australian community and the broader Australian community. I want to show that LGBTI migrants and refugees are not a burden; we are a strength.

My goal is for my research to help build an Australia where people like me can participate fully, helping to grow and enrich the Australian economy. Every assignment I submit, every meeting I attend, every contribution to the Rainbow Migrant Living Lab is part of my healing. My academic and community work is not separate from my identity—it is how I turn my pain into purpose and my survival into a gift for others.

*Their shoulders were tense,
eyes fixed on the table. I
recognised that silence. I had
lived inside that silence for
many years.*

One moment that stays with me began quietly, in a meeting room at Edith Cowan University. I was there in my role as a full-time postgraduate student and ECU employee, helping with work connected to the Rainbow Migrant Living Lab. Around the table were people discussing research and projects to support LGBTI migrants. Across from me sat a younger student, also from a migrant background, who barely spoke. Their shoulders were tense, eyes fixed on the table. I recognised that silence. I had lived inside that silence for many years.

After the meeting, I gently approached them and asked if they would like to have a coffee and a chat. At first they hesitated, but eventually they agreed. Sitting in a quiet corner, they told me they were queer and from a country where being LGBTI is very unsafe. They were struggling with fear, isolation and anxiety here in Australia, scared to be visible, and unsure how to access support. As they spoke, I could feel my own memories rising—of torture, trauma and constant fear in my country of birth because I am a trans woman. In that moment, I knew I wanted to be the person I had needed when I was younger.

I listened carefully and with my whole heart. I told them that I believed them, that their feelings were valid, and that there was nothing wrong or shameful about who they are. I shared a little of my own story: how I survived violence because of my gender identity, how I came to Western Australia, and how I am now living in a safe environment and receiving Hormone Replacement Treatment through the Gender Diversity Service at Royal Perth Hospital. I explained how this treatment has been very effective and has greatly improved my mental and physical health, helping me feel more at peace as a trans woman.

I could see relief in their eyes when they realised they were not alone. But I didn't want our conversation to end with sympathy. I wanted to turn it into support and action. I told them about the inclusive spaces and services available at ECU, and about the work of the Rainbow Migrant Living Lab. I offered to introduce them to people who understand the experiences of LGBTI migrants and to walk alongside them, not just send a link or a brochure.

Later, I accompanied them to an initial meeting so they didn't have to go in alone. I also raised their concerns—anononymously—in our project discussions, speaking up about the need to consider the emotional safety of queer migrants who may be afraid to participate or speak. I used my voice, as a trans woman and survivor, to make sure their struggles were seen and taken seriously.

Supporting that student reminded me why my ambitions matter. As I work towards my PhD and my goal of contributing to the Western Australian and Australian communities, I carry their story with me. Championing them was not just about that one conversation; it was about helping build a future where no LGBTI migrant feels invisible or unheard. ■

Marcia Batton

My proudest moment was when I talked to my daughter about who I was.

I was born in Manchester England in 1960 into an orthodox Jewish family. We lived in an area that was mainly Jewish, with most of my aunts and uncles within walking distance.

My parents didn't countenance anything outside of what they considered 'normal' and yet, I clearly remember—even before I started school—praying before I went to bed each night that I would wake in the morning and find the nightmare was over and I was really a boy. Sadly, it never happened.

In England, the school year begins in September, and you started school in the year when you would turn 5. So, in 1964, at 4.5 years old I began school. We were segregated at playtime: girls in one area, boys in another. I didn't understand what the girls wanted to play, so I'd change into my physical education gear and go to play with the boys. I had short hair, so nobody noticed. I had my first crush on a girl at this age also. I still look at photos from my school days and can see why I had that crush.

I wasn't allowed to wear trousers and had to play with dolls. I got around this by first getting a cowboy suit and then later an Indian Brave suit which had a top and trousers. I lived in that suit. As for the dolls, I cut all their hair short and pretended they were boys!

I knew about trans women, but I'd never heard of trans men. I didn't think it was possible. So, I tried to be a girl. But it never felt right. In my mind, whenever I thought of myself, I was a boy.

It wasn't until I was in my early 60s that there started to be mainstream talk on gender dysphoria. Suddenly, everything I felt began to make sense. Then I heard about people who were genderqueer, genderfluid and non-binary. I felt like a load had lifted off my shoulders. There were other people like me. I didn't have to pretend to be something I wasn't.



I've always moved in LGBTIQ+ circles; they have always been the people I've felt most comfortable with, despite continuing to feel unclear about my sexuality. However, I wasn't prepared to fully embrace my new understanding of who I was until after the death of both of my parents. I think my dad was quite aware that I was more 'boy' than 'girl', but my mum wouldn't have been able to cope with it.

My proudest moment was when I talked to my daughter about who I was. She looked at me and said, 'Well you've never been a girlie girl,' then, 'Can I still call you Mum?' and 'Can (grandson) still call you Granny?'

Now I proudly claim the label of non-binary; sometimes I'm male, rarely I'm female, sometimes I'm both male and female at the same time, and at other times I'm neither.

... I spent most of my time being thrown out of class for daring to question what was being taught ...

Religion and I have had a difficult relationship over the years. As a child in Manchester, I attended a Jewish infant and then primary school where, in addition to the usual subjects, we learnt Hebrew and celebrated Jewish religious festivals. As a family, we walked to synagogue every Saturday morning, celebrated all the festivals, weren't allowed to play on Saturdays ... etc.

When I was 9, we moved to Leicestershire where we were no longer in a Jewish community. As well as being a loner at school because I didn't 'fit' from a gender perspective, I now faced being in a non-Jewish school where Christian religious education was taught. Here I faced the bizarre situation of being required to sit in these classes but not allowed to participate. One of the religious education teachers was very antisemitic and I experienced a lot of bullying resulting from his teachings.

Making friends was made even harder as I still wasn't allowed to play on Saturdays, and others weren't allowed to play on Sundays. My parents also made me attend the Jewish equivalent of Sunday school, where I spent most of my time being thrown out of class for daring to question what was being taught (how dare I question creationism vs evolution?). As a result of this, I turned my back on religion for a long time. I tried to reconnect when my daughter was born, but a distressing incident made me walk away for close to 40 years.

I have since embraced many of the aspects of Tibetan Buddhism and have been deeply moved by the opportunity to meet His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. As with most organized religions however, Buddhism struggles with fully and unequivocally accepting those in the Rainbow Community.



... being Jewish is about more than following religious doctrine ...

My parents both became ill and died within a few years of each other, my dad from metastasised cancer in 2019 and my mum because of vascular dementia and other co-morbidities in 2022. I was deeply involved with the care of both parents in their final time and received great support from our local rabbi who was hugely supportive of the rainbow community. He convinced me to reconnect with my Jewish heritage—although I still don't attend synagogue or celebrate any of the festivals.

I've come to realise that being Jewish is about more than following religious doctrine. This became really clear to me when I did a DNA test through Ancestry.com and the results came back 99.9% Ashkenazi Jew. My ethnicity is not from Russian-occupied Poland, Romania, or Lithuania—where my family on both sides originates from—but from my Jewish heritage. My birth religion and my ethnicity are irrevocably intertwined.

I'd like to make something really clear: Being Jewish and being a Zionist are two entirely different things—and I'm *not* a Zionist. Jews and Arabs are descended from the same forefathers and mothers, and I would like nothing more than to see them all live in peace together. But fundamentalists and hatred on both sides currently precludes this.

We have never had a better opportunity to be heard and to make real changes ...

I've been involved in representation and advocacy for those unable (or unwilling) to do so for themselves throughout my entire working life. Examples include my role as a union delegate, health and safety representative/union negotiator (for some of the larger commonwealth public service agencies), or helping a neighbour's friend obtain a birth certificate for a child who had never been registered at birth by their (now uncontactable) mother.

I experienced the old system of aged care as I supported and advocated for my parents, and I'm now experiencing the new aged care system as my partner's authorised representative. There are so many issues to be ironed out in the new system, which is failing on so many fronts despite being based on the rights of the individual to receive person-centred care.

I am therefore thrilled to be a part of the Silver Pride Advocacy Network Lived Experience Advisory Panel (SPANLEAP) where I can actively reflect and represent the interests of our ageing LGBTIQ+ community in order to effect change. I am fortunate to be able to participate and present at conferences, share my views and experience through podcasts, and provide feedback on papers, etc. We have never had a better opportunity to be heard and to make real changes within the aged care system so that the rainbow community receives safe and affirming care that reflects the individual and their needs.

Every aged person deserves—and should expect—respect for who they are, and care that is tailored to their needs and preferences. Additional systems and steps need to be put in place for individuals who have special needs and are also LGBTIQ+, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, or transitioning from the NDIS system. This is not only to ensure they receive the care and respect they deserve, but also so that they feel safe in the environment where the care is being provided. It is essential that these systems are more than just a tick box on a form at admission to residential aged care, or for providers of support at home.

As an individual navigating the system from a personal perspective, and as a member of SPANLEAP, I intend to use the skills I developed throughout my working life to be a loud voice advocating for the instillment of meaningful processes and safeguards into aged care legislation, practices and procedures. It is imperative we ensure those who are out and proud are not forced back into the closet in their twilight years. ■

Miro

In Croatia we say: 'Što će ljudi reći?' *What will people say?*

I was born around 1970 near Zadar. Croatia was still part of Yugoslavia. I've lived in Perth now for more than 2 decades. Back in Croatia, I learnt early to keep quiet and follow what has been known: to get married, have children, and die surrounded by loving family. I knew I wasn't like everyone else, but I couldn't name why.

There was no other way to live. In Croatia we say: 'Što će ljudi reći?' What will people say? There was also the war—not the best time to think about your own happiness. So, after the war, I married and became a father. No one pressured me, but, as the only child, I put that pressure on myself.

After the war, it was hard to make a living in Croatia and many people left, including my wife's cousins. They helped us to start a new life in Australia. My wife's family helped us with jobs, accommodation and childcare. There was comfort in that, and support—but also control. The Croatian community I lived in here held the same fixed values as my hometown.

At night, I would lie awake and think about 'the wedding guy'.

I remember attending one wedding here in Perth, many years later. There was a man about my age, and I could not stop looking at him. Tanned, strong arms; an easy smile. My wife's cousin saw me staring and started to tease me. I said quickly that the man reminded me of someone I knew from the army in Croatia—that was why I was looking. They believed me. But it was at that wedding I understood that I wanted to be with a man. At night, I would lie awake and think about 'the wedding guy'. I never saw that man from the wedding again, but he turned my whole life upside down without ever knowing my name.

I started drinking more. One night, very drunk, I told my wife I wanted a divorce. She was sure there was another woman. I remember thinking, I wish that was true. I did not tell her the truth. In the morning we did not speak about it. She decided it was just stupid drunk talk, and I convinced myself that I was happy.

We stayed together another 2 years, until my head could not carry it anymore. When I finally told her, she was not surprised. We divorced quietly after the kids were older. They understood. We were kind to each other, because, after everything—the war, leaving home, starting again on the other side of the world—we did not have it in us to be cruel.

People think that coming out is the happy end of the story.

People think that coming out is the happy end of the story. For me, it was the start of a harder part. In my late forties there was mostly embarrassment and grief and being alone.

The first time I went to a gay venue, I sat in my car outside for 20 minutes. I nearly drove home. When I made myself go in, I felt like a fish out of water. When a man came over to talk to me, I panicked and told him I had left my wallet in the car. I walked out and did not come back.

When we came to Perth, my wife's cousin gave me work. He had tiling business. After I came out, and after the divorce, everything on the site changed. At first nobody said it to my face. One day a younger guy (Croatian also) said in front of everyone that he did not want to share tools with 'topli brat', a 'warm brother'. Some of them laughed. My wife's cousin was standing right there and said nothing. Later, he told my wife—not me directly—there was not enough work and that he had to let me go. I did not fight it. I was too tired, and too ashamed. I found other work, much better, outside of my community, with people who did not know my story.

I am still angry at Croatia, at the church, at my parents, at community ... but mostly at myself. I was brave enough to be a soldier but not brave enough to be honest. I lost my young life. I have never met a man I fell in love with who stayed.

*When you spend 30 years
pretending, you do not
come out into love, but into
catching up.*

I came to all of it too late. When you spend 30 years pretending, you do not come out into love, but into catching up. I went looking for the gay youth I never had (also because of the war in Croatia) and all the things other men did at 20—but I was doing it at 50, and it is not the same. It is empty in a way that is hard to explain to someone who experienced their youth when then were meant to. I wanted first love, first kiss, first heartbreak. It made me reckless.

There was a man I loved. But I was still catching up, still greedy for the years I had lost. I cheated on him, and he left me, and he was right to. I lost him because I could not stop grabbing at what I missed. That is not something anyone did to me. That one is mine.

I am planning to go back to Croatia to live there again. For many years, Croatia was the country I ran from, because it taught me to hide who I was. But I am older now, and something has changed. I do not care so much anymore what people think. I already learnt my lesson about hiding, and there is nothing left to prove to anyone back there. And Croatia is not same country I left. It is not perfect, I will not pretend, but young people there now live openly in a way that was not possible in my time. Australia gave me space to finally become myself. But I am craving something I could not find here. Maybe it is language, because I still think and feel in Croatian and only translate into English. Maybe it is culture. Maybe my expectations are simply too high after everything. ■

Nobu

Learning sign language gave me confidence and opened the door to a new community.

I was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan. I was born deaf.

At 3 years of age, my language development was delayed. I was taken for medical tests and diagnosed with a hearing impairment. My mother, believing it was the right thing to do, enrolled me in a school for deaf children. At the time (late 70s), sign language was not allowed in the classroom. Instead, the focus was on oral communication and speech training.

However, my language skills still failed to progress as expected. After one year at the deaf school, I was still struggling to learn spoken language. One teacher even suggested I might have an intellectual disability, leading to further medical examinations and brain scans (no abnormalities were found).

My mother wasn't satisfied with the school's conclusion, so she withdrew me from the deaf school and enrolled me in a mainstream school. I was generally happy at school and had many (hearing) friends, but I continued to struggle with communication. Conversations with family and friends were difficult, and I understood very little of what was being taught in class.

Everything changed when, at 15, I enrolled in a new deaf high school that taught sign language. Suddenly, language began to make sense. I was finally able to communicate effectively and understand the world around me. Learning sign language gave me confidence and opened the door to a new community.

At 20 years of age, I was working in administration and accounting roles. Life was stable, but I felt that something was missing. When I turned 30, I realised just how lonely I was, living on my own. I wanted a partner, and I was also tired of hiding who I was. Being a closeted gay man was emotionally exhausting. I first came out to my friends and to my sister, who were not surprised at all and reacted positively. But I wasn't yet ready to tell my parents.

While looking for a partner, I met an Australian man. That relationship changed my life. I moved from Japan to Perth, Western Australia, to be with him, though I told my parents it was because I wanted to learn English. I came out to my parents after living in Perth for one year. Their reaction was positive, and I realised I'd had nothing to worry about.



My partner and I spent 15 years together, and during that time I became actively involved in the Deaf LGBTQIA+ community in Perth. For the first time in my life, I met people who understood both my Deaf identity and my sexuality. It was a huge relief, and I finally felt comfortable being myself.

Today, I have been single for 3 years. However, I continue to live authentically and proudly as both a Deaf person and a gay man. My journey has not always been easy, but it has taught me the importance of language, community, identity, and being true to myself.

'I'm Deaf; would I still be able to participate?' The answer was simple: 'Of course.'

In 2019, just two days before my birthday, my beloved dog passed away. I was devastated. To help myself move forward, I decided I needed to try something new and focus on something positive.

I have always enjoyed physical and competitive sports, so I searched for local sporting clubs and discovered Perth Rams, an LGBTQIA+ rugby team in Perth. I was excited, but also nervous. In the past, I had experienced discrimination because I am Deaf and because I am gay. Before joining, I contacted the club and asked, 'I'm Deaf; would I still be able to participate?' Their answer was simple: 'Of course.'

I attended a training session and loved it straight away. Soon after, I joined the team, bought a new pair of rugby boots, and felt excited about the future. It felt like a dream come true.

I attended training every Tuesday and Thursday night. However, communication was a challenge. I often struggled to understand instructions from coaches and conversations between teammates. There were times when I felt isolated and frustrated. Even so, I refused to give up.



Over time, some of my teammates became interested in learning Auslan (Australian Sign Language). I decided to organise Auslan classes for the team, and many players joined in. We learned together, and before long, we were able to communicate using simple signs during training sessions and social events. For the first time in my life, I truly felt like part of a team.

A year later, I told my coach that I wanted to play in an official match. After discussing it together, I was given the opportunity to take the field.

Playing my first rugby match was an unforgettable experience. After the game, everyone gathered in the change room. My teammates raised their beers and celebrated with me: 'Congratulations, Nobu! You played your first game!' It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

For many years, I had felt different because I was Deaf and gay. At Perth Rams, I was accepted simply as a teammate and a friend. The people around me made an effort to communicate with me and to include me, supporting me both on and off the field. They showed me what true inclusion looks like.

The friendships I built through Perth Rams gave me confidence, a sense of belonging, and a community that I had been searching for my whole life. This relationship with my teammates changed my life forever.

... Becoming an Auslan teacher in Australia and seeing people use the resources I created has been the highlight of my working life.

Having grown up in Japan, Japanese Sign Language (JSL) is my first language. I now also use—and teach—Australian Sign Language (Auslan). However, when I first moved to Australia, I didn't have a strong understanding of Auslan or English. (It is important to understand that Auslan is not simply a variant of English, but a completely different language with its own grammatical structure). To improve my skills and become part of the Deaf community, I began volunteering with an organisation that supported Deaf people and sign language users.

For 2 years, I volunteered full-time from 9am to 5pm without any income. During that time, many Deaf people generously shared their knowledge with me. They taught me Auslan, English, and Australian culture. Looking back, those two years were one of the most important learning experiences of my life.

After receiving my partner visa, I was offered a paid position by the same organisation. I accepted immediately and began working professionally in the Deaf community. Two years later, I became an Auslan teacher. At the time, there were limited teaching resources available for Auslan learners, so I began creating my own teaching materials.

Eventually, I started my own business. I taught Auslan to families, friends of Deaf people, community groups, and workplaces. I also delivered Deaf awareness training and sign language workshops. Alongside my work, I was actively involved in Deaf community events and volunteer activities. Supporting Deaf people and helping hearing people learn Auslan became—and remains—a passion of mine.

What started as a small project grew beyond anything I expected. Through word of mouth, my Auslan classes became increasingly popular, and demand continued to grow. I expanded from one class to several and became busier than ever.

One of my proudest achievements has been creating and publishing my own Auslan learning books. I write the content and illustrate the books myself. My goal has always been to create resources that are simple, visual, and easy to understand for learners of all ages. To date, I have sold more than 1,000 copies of my Auslan books.

As a Deaf migrant from Japan, becoming an Auslan teacher in Australia and seeing people use the resources I created has been the highlight of my working life. Knowing that my books and teaching have helped families, friends, and community members communicate with Deaf people is incredibly rewarding.

Today, I continue to develop new learning resources and children's books. My goal is to make sign language education accessible to everyone, from young children to older adults. I hope to continue building bridges between Deaf and hearing communities for many years to come. ■

Paul

I have lived life knowing that I am different to the rest of the male population ...

I am 57 years old, born and bred here in WA. I came out as gay in my early 20s. That's all cool; any traumas or issues I may have had are all dealt with... However, there is something else about me that has only recently come to the forefront of my life, though I've lived with it since birth.

It is something I've carried with embarrassment and shame, never having been discussed, researched or brought to light. I have lived life knowing that I am different to the rest of the male population of this world.

The embarrassment and shame I carried lead me to negative and unhealthy behaviours ...

Not anymore.

I am so grateful that I have found a beautiful group of people who share some of what I have experienced, and I now do not feel alone in this world. I have been able to share my intersex experience with others in a supportive, respectful and caring group of people.

... For the first time in my life, I realised that I am not alone and there are others like me in this world.

By pure chance, I stumbled across an episode of the ABC program You Can't Ask That—season 3, episode 4—on intersex people. It was a jaw-dropping, life-changing moment for me. I never knew there was such a thing. I remember thinking: 'OMG they are talking about what I have!' And for the first time in my life, I realised that I am not alone and there are others like me in this world.



I was able to contact some of the organisations that were in the credits at the end of the show. I have been able to connect and engage in peer support programs and meet others. I now realise that I do not need to live with shame and embarrassment about my body.

I am blessed to be able to share my experience and knowledge within a peer support framework.

I have a bachelor's degree in the health care industry, and I have met many amazingly talented and caring individuals throughout my career. I have seen and participated in many amazing events, but also crises and episodes of acute illness, both physical and mental. I am blessed to be able to share my experience and knowledge within a peer support framework with others who are living with HIV and who identify as Intersex. ■

Reno

Content Warning: Mentions of child sexual abuse

... The moment you showed signs of being gay ... that was when you'd crossed the line. You basically became a second-class citizen.

I was born in Australia. My parents came here from Southern Italy in about 1950, just after the 2nd World War. In my family, I was the 4th out of 5 children. Of all my siblings, I'm the only one who isn't straight.

Being from an Italian background—especially Southern Italian—meant you couldn't touch women until you were married. In order to 'relieve' themselves, it was acceptable for men to have sex with other men provided that it was just, say, a wank behind the garden shed. But the moment you showed signs of being gay ... that was when you'd crossed the line. You basically became a second-class citizen. Anybody could take pot shots at you, and there was no recourse and no-one came to your aid.

I think I knew I was gay when I was about 6. Rather, I knew I was attracted to boys, but I didn't know what that meant, other than that it didn't seem to be the normal way other kids were developing. After a while, my family realised that I was more attracted to men ... then they used that against me.

My father and my grandfather had orchards. My grandfather's orchard was in Kalamunda, and my father's one was in Maida Vale. He would collect me every weekend, and I'd have to go and pick lemons or oranges. My brothers didn't generally have to do this. I was already ostracised at that young age. I was this 'different' sort of person, or not a 'real person' anyway, so I could be treated like that. This really threw me. At that age, what are you to think about your parents? You wonder: *Why did you treat me that way?* Was it part of a post war anglicised cultural concept about homosexuality?



Back in those times, abuse was viewed very differently. Children were actually treated like work cattle ...

I was abused when I was very young by my aunt's husband. I didn't know what to do or how to go about telling anyone. I would try to tell them, but I *couldn't* tell them, because at that age there was no definition I could draw on. So, I became, I suppose, what's best described as 'a bit of a troublemaker', constantly making comments and constantly aware of people I met and the potential danger to me. It was a defence mechanism for me. And as a consequence of that, I think my parents began to put it together that I was gay.

It's really weird—having been abused, you sort of become 'tainted' and attract abusers who have similar notions. It's like, 'Well, this person has already experienced this; the kid knows what's going to happen, so we'll go ahead and do it.' There were a couple of times that it happened—principally from my Aunt's Husband. I got the feeling I was some sort of currency he used to pay off favours from his fellow abusers.

The thing to make clear is that, back in those times, abuse was viewed very differently.

Children were actually treated like work cattle—certainly in post war Southern Italy. My siblings weren't subjected to any of that because, here, in Australia, it was a different world. But because I was this sort of strange kid who might be gay, my family thought they could essentially abuse me on various levels. Not necessarily sexual abuse all the time, but abusive—like having to go every weekend to pick lemons and oranges, and taking backhands across the face whenever they thought it appropriate.

I had a really difficult grandfather who ruled the family with an iron fist. The verdict was that I was this person who had to be 'worked out'—all this extra hard work would make me eventually 'man up'.

My siblings also treated me differently. I didn't have a lot to do with them. I would have liked to, but they were off with their friends, and they had their own little lives. And I was the youngest child, then, so—though I could relate to them—I would never be part of their social life. So, I never really learnt to do 'blokey' things, like learning how to fight; anything I did I had to do by myself. So, I spent most of my time alone ... though I managed to get away sometimes and get into trouble, as young kids do.

There was a time that I it all got too much for my parents. I was sent to go and stay with my grandparents (who were old and quite demented)—as an assistant for them, but basically like a little slave, as turned out to be the case.

To get kicked out of confession is pretty amazing ... They knew I must have done something seriously fucking bad.



My family was highly religious. We would go to mass every Sunday—but so did everybody, during that time. In the 50s there was an anglicized attitude about people. There was this underlying rule that, if you're English and you're Pommy then you were a level above migrants like my family.

The first time that I ever admitted I was gay, I was 9 years old and I was going to a Catholic primary school in Doubleview which had a church next to it. Well, I went to confession, and I said to the priest, 'I don't know what this is, but I seem to be attracted to men and I don't know what to do about it.'

He opened the confessional screen and looked at me. Then he closed the screen and said, 'I can't hear your confession.'

'What do you mean?' I said. 'This is confession to God, right?'

'I can't hear it,' he said again. 'You have to get out.'

I was stunned. But I refused to leave.

Finally, he loudly said, 'Get out. Your penance is '50 Our Fathers and 50 Hail Marys.'

The confessional booth had fairly thin walls, so the people lining up for confession probably heard the whole exchange. But I got up, went out, and started my penance.

After a while, the priest came out. He told everybody that he was going out of the church and that no one was to follow. Then he grabbed me and took me out. He sat me down on the church steps and said: 'Look, I'm sorry I had to do that, but you see ... we were ordered by the Archbishop not to hear anything in relation to homosexuality.'

That's when he explained to me the difference between the church, the institution of the church, and God himself. He said: 'Look, if you love God, God will love you. The church has different ways of interpreting things, but you shouldn't let that worry you. Live your life.'

Now, there's a second part to this story, because the priest—who was really a very good priest—made representation to the Archbishop, asking, 'How can I perform my role with these kinds of rulings regarding confession?'

The Archbishop agreed to come down and have a look at the situation, and I was presented to him. He asked me some very pointed questions. I can't recall a lot about it because I was in shock with everything happening to me. Little did I know (and I later found out) that the Archbishop himself was rumoured to be gay—as were a collection of bishops around him.

As the Priest latter explained, this inquisition was about framing the Church's response to future confessions of homosexuality. At the time, however, no one would give any direct counselling about homosexuality. It just couldn't be done like that. And anyone who attempted to always got me worried that they might be a potential abuser trying to sort of 'zero in' on me. So, I was constantly in a state of confusion in relation to all of this.

But the people from that point on ... They looked at me. To get kicked out of confession is pretty amazing. I mean, you can confess murder in confession! They knew I must have done something seriously fucking bad.

But, having had that conversation with the priest, I realised: For Christ's sakes, I'm alright! All I have to do is please God, right? Not the church. And then it didn't matter. God didn't care what I was or how it was or who I was or what I did. And I just had to take that for truth, and everyone else could just go fuck themselves—that was my attitude.

From then on, I fought back. I would blurt out as much as I could, and quite often I found ways of being clever with my words, to make a point about their beliefs and their stupidity—and to make it loudly enough to embarrass people. In this way, I'd highlight their ignorance. I still got slapped about, but that gave me connection to who I was. That gave me some life. I wasn't always friendly, but it didn't matter. I didn't need to be friends with them. I would just set off finding other people like me.

At home, from time to time, I still had to go and pick lemons and oranges, which I always hated doing. But I now knew who I was, and that gave me strength.

I was gay, and that was it.

I was not going to go backwards; I made that my mantra. ■

Stephanie Vaughan

‘... The problem with you being born INTERSEX is that, 50 years later, it’s impossible for me to tell you what degree of intersex you were born.’



I knew from around 8 years ago that some things didn't seem right; I was a boy but felt like I should be a girl. At 13, instead of entering a male puberty, I developed as a female. I had breasts, no Adam's apple, no body hair, and my voice didn't change. I was taken to a specialist, then told by my parents that I had breasts because I was overweight. I knew it wasn't the truth. I left school at 14 because I was constantly bullied and abused for being different. It was at that time I started cross-dressing—mostly for breast support, but it actually felt right.

In 2006, when I was 45, I emigrated to Western Australia after being offered a job here. In 2012 I developed a thyroid problem and, in fixing it, my doctor discovered that I was producing an amount of oestrogen. At first, she thought that it could be a tumour causing it. But after every test and scan known to mankind, which all came up clear, I was accused of self-administering oestrogen by an endocrinologist at Murdoch. Thankfully my doctor didn't agree with him and suggested that I get my health records from the UK.

I thought this would be easy, but it turned out to be anything but. First, I had to have an interview to ascertain why I wanted my health records. The lady who interviewed me eventually agreed to send them to me, but when they arrived there was a lot redacted or missing completely.

I called her back and asked her how I could get the rest. Her response was: 'You have been given what the department considers to be in the patient's best interests. If you want more you will need to go to court.' I decided to give what I'd got to my doctor. She looked at the redacted records and said she thought it was all very suspicious, and that she'd like me to see a specialist in Perth.

During the specialist appointment, I was quite surprised when he asked me if I always presented as male. I told him that I did in public but cross-dressed in private. He seemed very understanding and asked if he could examine me. This took less than 30 seconds. He then showed me some photos of male genitalia which had an L shaped scar on them and asked me if they looked familiar. I said that I had a similar scar, and he said: 'Of course, the problem with you being born INTERSEX is that, 50 years later, it's impossible for me to tell you what degree of intersex you were born.'

I asked him to explain, and he couldn't believe that I didn't know. He went on to explain how he thought I'd been born, which was with stage 3 hypospadias and that, instead of peeing through my penis, I had a hole underneath like a girl. My scrotum was split in two and I was born with a vaginal opening which had been sewn up when I was born.

I left his room shell-shocked, and after that I went off the rails somewhat. About 8 months later, I had absolutely made up my mind to end my life. But my partner said to me one day, 'If you want to transition and become the woman you always felt that you should have been, I'll support you.' I was shocked to say the least. We had talked about this dozens of times, but I had always said that I didn't have the courage to do it. But the choice was now either to end my life or become the person I always knew I should be. Eight months later, we flew to Philadelphia for corrective surgery. It has been a difficult journey, and it took 2 years for me to completely heal. But I now feel that I have the best of both worlds.

I never got to ask my parents why they kept the truth from me, as they had both passed by the time I discovered the truth. Sadly, my only sibling wants nothing to do with me (but I've come to the conclusion that it's his loss, not mine). In 2021 I published a book about my journey to raise awareness of intersex people, and I have given presentations at numerous health care organisations and educational institutions. One of the biggest highlights of my life was being asked to speak at Notre Dame University, to tell my story to an audience of medical students who are the doctors of tomorrow.

... She didn't know what would become of our relationship, as we would both be girls—and she was straight.

At the end of 2012 I started a relationship with Denise. If I'm honest, I was bullied into taking her out by her best friend, but we got on well and it soon developed into a deep friendship. I was upfront about feeling that I should have been a female, and that I cross-dressed in private. I told her about the oestrogen issue, and she accompanied me to several of the scans.

When the truth came out in December 2015, Denise was there for me. We talked for hours and hours. She could see that I was becoming more and more depressed, and I think she realised that I had suicidal thoughts and intentions. While she said that she would support me if I wanted to transition, she also said that she didn't know what would become of our relationship, as we would both be girls—and she was straight.

I had told Denise on our very first date that, if I'd been born a girl, I would be a lesbian—so both of us being girls wouldn't be a problem for me. She said we would cross that bridge when we came to it. But before I had my surgery, she said, 'You know, you fall in love with the person, not the gender,' and that she wanted to be with me because I was her best friend.

Nine years later and we are still together and stronger than ever. ■

Tony

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Broome, mid-1970s, population about 3,500. Small enough that everyone knew each other, and everything that happened around town.

I was a young man then – though I didn't feel like one. Not really. I felt like a secret walking around in daylight. I was suffocating, I was dying.

Eyes always watching. Paranoia, just the way small towns are. People didn't need to ask questions. They already knew, or thought they did.

And I knew what they thought of people like me.

Except I didn't have a positive word for 'people like me' yet. Not one I could say out loud. Not one that didn't come wrapped in shame, in whispers, in warnings. At church, it was sin. At school, it was something to be taunted and ridiculed at. At the pub, it was something to bash out of someone.

I learned early – say nothing. Show nothing. Be someone else.

But you can't hold that in forever. It leaks out somewhere, eventually.

Mine came out in addictions. Drinking too much, too young. Gambling every weekend. Eating until I felt my hunger satiated, but not that satisfied feeling I was longing for. By my late teens I was pushing 100 kilos, carrying more than just weight. Every kilo felt like armour. If I made myself big enough, maybe no one would look too closely. I was fat and ugly! It was a never-ending cycle of abuse. I would these days have been diagnosed as clinically depressed, but back then, there wasn't such help, you struggled on your own.

Sunday mornings were torture. Sitting in church, the smell of incense thick in the air, the priest talking about sin and salvation. I'd sit there, heart pounding, convinced he somehow knew. That everyone knew. That I was one confession away from being exposed.



The guilt was relentless. Not just guilt for what I felt—but for not being able to stop feeling it. I prayed. God, I prayed hard. Fix me. Change me. Make me normal. I was a hypocrite and hated myself for it.

Nothing changed.

Instead, something inside me started to erupt to the surface. Like a slow split down the middle. One life on the outside—what everyone expected. Another life buried deep, barely breathing.

I realised something I couldn't unsee: if I stayed, that eruption would swallow me whole, kill me.

Broome was home. It was really all that I knew—it was family, it was Country, it was community. But it was also a place where I could never be fully seen without risking everything. Shaming myself and my family.

So, in late 1979, I left.

Perth wasn't just a move—it was an escape. A line in the sand. I remember the feeling more than the details. Fear, yes. But also something else. Something I hadn't felt before.

Possibility.

I made a promise to myself somewhere between leaving and arriving - I will not live a double life anymore. I didn't know how I'd keep that promise. I didn't even know who I really was yet. But I knew this much: I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life hiding in plain sight.

I chose to live. Fully. And in my own truth. Liberation!

A CRIME WITHOUT AN ACT: In 1980s Western Australia, being there was enough

Floreat Beach, Perth, Western Australia. Early 1980s. A Sunday. I was in my mid-twenties and drove there by myself, like many did back then, to a place quietly known in the gay community. You didn't say it out loud. You just knew.

I parked in the top carpark, engine off, sitting there by myself.

Then a police car pulled up beside me. A very young male officer got out—straight out of the police academy. No hesitation. No life experience. Just authority.

'What are you doing here?'

I felt it instantly—fear. Real fear. I had never had any dealings with police before. My hands were sweaty, shaking.

'Just went for a drive,' I said.

He didn't accept it. Didn't even pause. 'I'm charging you with loitering.'

Charging me.

I remember asking, trying to stay composed, 'What happens from here?'

He gave me what felt like reassurance. 'You'll get a summons to attend the magistrate's court. You don't have to go. The magistrate will decide. If you're found guilty, it's only a fine.'

Only a fine. He made it sound minor. Manageable. Like nothing to worry about.

But it wasn't.

Looking back, he was being inducted into the system—into the way police dealt with gay men at the time. A quiet lesson in enforcement, in control, in targeting. He gave me a false sense that everything would be ok, when in reality, the consequences could have been life-changing.

At that time in Western Australia, homosexuality was still a crime. That wouldn't change until 1989. It was a notorious period in WA history. Gay men were being actively targeted—entrapped, harassed, watched, and charged. Police knew the places. They knew why men went there. And they used that knowledge against us.

There was strong advocacy at the time from CAMP Inc and others pushing for the decriminalisation of homosexuality, but change was still years away. On the ground, nothing had shifted. The law, and the policing of it, still held power over our lives. Careers were destroyed. Men lost their jobs, including those in the public service. Families were torn apart. Some were forced deeper into straight marriages to survive. Others were exposed, ostracised, and shamed. The cost was not just legal—it was mental, financial, and deeply personal.

Sitting there that night, I knew exactly what this was about. I wasn't doing anything wrong—but I was in the wrong place, as the wrong person, at the wrong time.

A few months later, the summons arrived.

I held it in my hands and felt the weight of it. I agonised over what to do, whether to go to court or not. I was working in the State Public Service, building a career in education and Aboriginal affairs. I was an emerging advocate. I had a future. If this became known, I could lose everything. But if I didn't go, and the magistrate found me guilty, I would have a record. For doing nothing. That was the injustice of it.

Something in me pushed back. *You have not committed a crime.*

I went to a law firm. Sat down with a lawyer and told him everything. He was calm, direct, and—most importantly—on my side.

'You've done nothing wrong,' he said. 'I'll represent you. You don't need to attend court.'

For the first time since that night, I felt some control return.

He went to court. I didn't. The charge was dismissed. Just like that. But it didn't undo what had happened. I had been singled out, questioned, and charged—not for an act, but for suspicion. For being in a place associated with people like me, at a time when people like me were criminalised. My life could have been ruined. My career ended before it had even begun.

And I carried that in silence.

Until now, I never told anyone about this encounter for more than 40 years—my family, my friends, my work colleagues ... no one.

Because back then, that's what you did. You survived it. You stayed quiet. And you carried the truth alone. Knowing how close you came to losing everything—for doing absolutely nothing wrong.

KIMBERLEY BLAK *PRIDE: Loud. Proud... Unapologetically Ours.*

October 2022 did not arrive quietly. It came alive with noise, electric excitement carried by our partners at Goolarri and a troop of passionate volunteers who made something powerful possible.

I had been living as an openly gay man since my early twenties. That journey was shaped by silence, survival and a refusal to ever live a double life again. But advocacy for our Queer Blak mob in the Kimberley had not yet found its place in my life.

That changed when I became part of the Sydney WorldPride 2023 First Nations Advisory Committee. In those spaces, I saw pride on a global scale, visible, unapologetic and celebrated. But I also saw what was missing. Back home, our people were still largely invisible, and our voices were not being heard in the corridors of power.

The brutal truth is this: Everything is still city and East Coast centric. Queer leadership, funding and decision-making sit in the big cities. Resources flow there. Narratives are shaped there.

And we are left out.

We are spoken about, but not listened to. Included in words, but excluded in practice.

There is privilege in those spaces, especially white privilege, and it determines who gets heard and funded. Too often organisations claim to represent all of us while having little connection to our realities in the Kimberley.

Don't talk about inclusion if you do not include us.

Don't claim representation if our Voices are not in the room.

Because we are among the most underrepresented, under resourced and marginalised within the Rainbow community, remote Queer Blak mob navigating culture, community and survival.

My lived experiences—personal and professional—working in Indigenous affairs for 50 years gave me the strategic insight and practical capacity to navigate systems, challenge exclusion and shift power. I was also part of the first ever Western Australian whole of government LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy. It was historic and showed how far we still had to go to ensure Queer Blak voices were central.

That night in Broome in 2023, at our WorldPride watch party, something shifted. It was the first ever Queer Blak public event in the Kimberley. And from that moment, Kimberley Blak Pride was born.

In 2024 I led the first ever Queer Blak Festival in Broome, an eight-day festival unlike anything the Kimberley, Western Australia or arguably Australia had seen. The entire festival was funded through corporate and community sponsors. No government funding. Every performer, MC, DJ, designer, dancer, drag king and queen and musician were Queer Blak mob from the Kimberley.

No importing big names.

This was our stage. Our stories. Our people.

It became a space of nurturing, visibility and voice like never before.

Over 1200 people came.

Kimberley Blak Pride is not just for Queer mob. It is about genuine inclusion. Our families, allies, Elders and communities are integral to our lives. KBP exists to shift power. Sydney WorldPride may have been the spark. But this is the fire. A fire demanding our Voices be heard, that resources reach our communities and that systems change.

Kimberley Queer Blak mob will always be at our center.

Always.

A peacemaker. A changemaker. A positive disruptor.

And this is only the beginning. ■





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