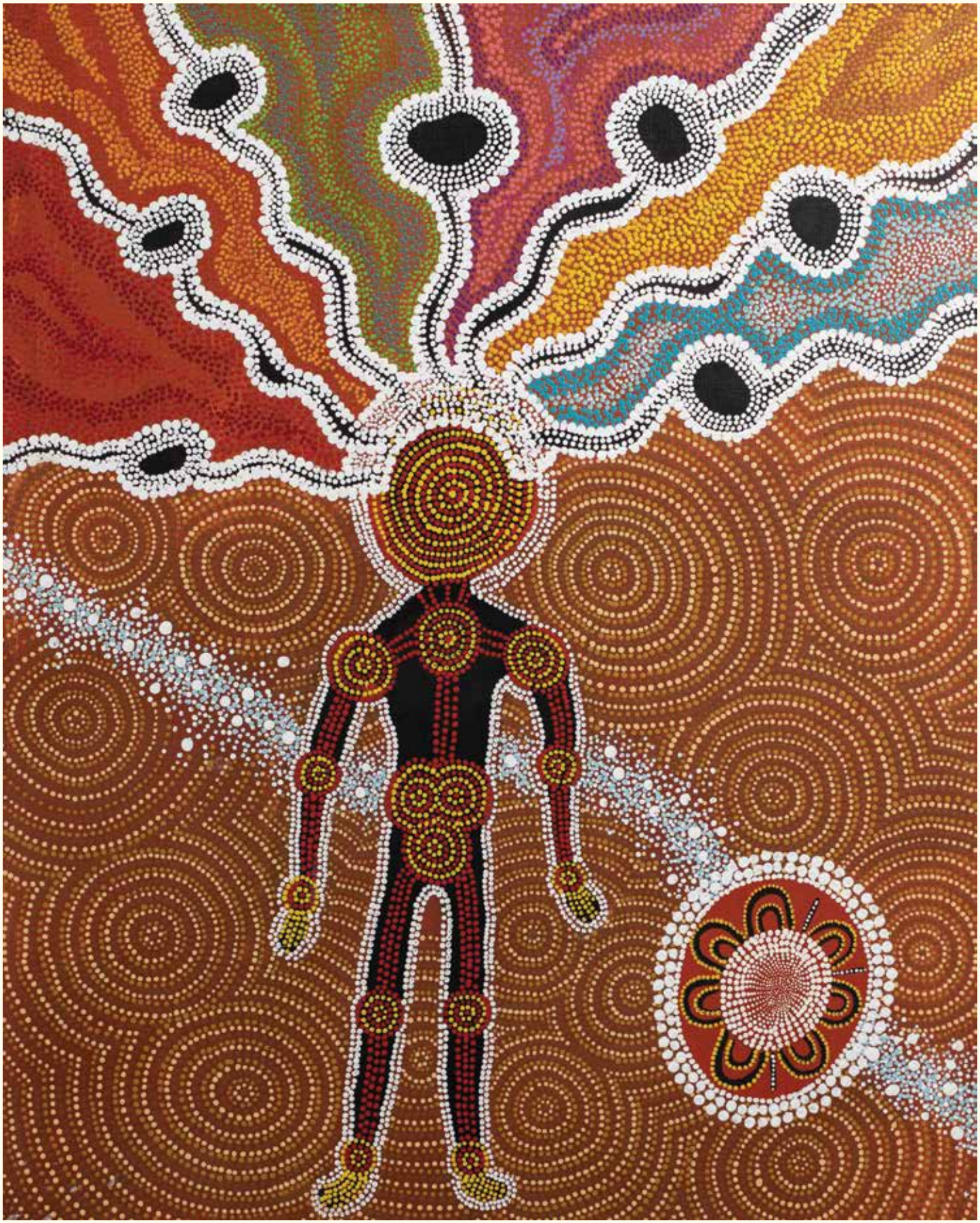
# OUR VOICES

## AN ANTHOLOGY OF OLDER LGBTI PEOPLE'S STORIES



GRAI
GLBTI Rights in Ageing Inc.

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

GRAI
GLBTI Rights in Ageing Inc.



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

There is something deeply wrong with a world so quick to judge and so reluctant to listen. Older LGBTI people know the cost. We have had our love criminalised, our lives condemned and our dead dismissed. Too often, we are still overlooked, even from within the community we helped build.

We have not reached this age to disappear quietly. Our stories deserve to be heard, especially now, when cruelty so often passes for strength and compassion is treated as a weakness.

Across three years and 41 stories, *Our Voices* records the lives of older LGBTI people. This anthology brings together three editions and reflects GRAI's commitment to preserving our histories, with a new edition each year.

These pages hold much of what makes us who we are. A first encounter with a glory hole. The grief of the AIDS epidemic and the people who cared for one another through it. The courage of transitioning later in life. Love, friendship, loss and the everyday business of getting on with things.

To everyone who entrusted us with their story, thank you. Some revisited painful memories. Others spoke openly about experiences kept private for decades. These volumes include stories from First Nations people, those from diverse cultural and faith backgrounds, and intersex individuals. Some of these stories are rarely heard, even within our own community. We are grateful for your trust. Every voice adds to our understanding of who we are.

This collection has in part been an intergenerational exercise with younger LGBTIQA+ volunteers sitting down with older people to listen. Thank you to all our volunteers, Dr Rowan Brooker for establishing the project, and Shutterpups for their photography. We acknowledge the Department of Communities for supporting the first and third editions, and the community donors and GRAI Board whose support funded the second. I am proud to say that the board of GRAI has made a commitment to producing an edition of Our Voices each year because these stories are too important to be forgotten.

To Tim Brown and the staff and community of Connections Nightclub, thank you for sharing your memories and photographs, and for sustaining a place where generations found friendship, chosen family and belonging. Thank you also to Uncle Paul Calcott, whose cover artwork carries the themes of identity, culture and resilience into this anthology.

We have been fortunate to have Tarmon Gibson as editor across all three editions. His patience, care and quiet dedication have helped each contributor's voice remain their own. Finding the heart of a story while respecting the person who lived it takes considerable skill. Tarmon has brought that care to every edition.

In a time where manufactured outrage floods our social media feeds, and attention lasts little longer than a TikTok video, sitting with someone's story matters. These stories invite you to stay longer. So, thank you to our readers for giving your time and attention to lives too often ignored, and for recognising the humanity in each one.

Older LGBTI people have always been here, and we will continue to be here. Preserving our stories protects that truth and gives future generations a history, a sense of belonging and people to thank for the world they inherit.

These are our voices. Thank you for reading.



**David Gibson**
Chair
GRAI – GLBTI Rights in Ageing Inc.



# FOREWORD

It is a privilege for Norton Rose Fulbright to introduce this anthology of *Our Voices*, which gathers into a single volume the stories from all three editions of a series that has highlighted the courage, resilience and enduring contributions of older LGBTI[1] Western Australians.

Each edition of the Our Voices publications has brought something distinct. The first edition, *Our Voices Have Changed the World – Reflections from Older LGBTI People*, paired 16 older members of the LGBTI community with younger people to share stories of resilience, build intergenerational connections, and challenge isolation and ageism. The second edition, *Our Voices Made Connections*, told the story of a shared place: Connections Nightclub, which since 1975 has seen 50 remarkable years in the history of the community and has served as 'a mirror to change'. The third turned to the many and overlapping identities of older LGBTI people, including their ties to culture, heritage and Country.

This anthology draws those three editions together in one unified collection. Bringing these voices together in one collection keeps them safe for future generations, introduces them to new readers, and reveals the threads of connection, belonging, and resilience that link every story. Its cover, featuring artwork by an Indigenous gay artist first used for the third edition, is a fitting reflection of the diversity within its pages.

The stories gathered by GLBTI Rights in Ageing (GRAI) honour the experiences of many older LGBTI people and remind us that, while much has changed for the better, fostering genuine inclusion remains an ongoing journey. At Norton Rose Fulbright, we are committed to a profession and a community in which every person is respected and where everyone can age with dignity, respect and a sense of belonging. GRAI has long been a valued pro bono client of the firm, and we are delighted to support this anthology. We commend GRAI on its commitment to preserving these stories and ensuring that the voices of older LGBTI people continue to be heard.

Above all, we thank the individuals whose stories give life to this anthology. Your honesty and willingness to share your experiences provide an important window into the history, diversity and strength of older LGBTI community. We hope that these stories deepen readers' understanding of the past, celebrate the legacy of those who have helped shape the LGBTQIA+ community, and encourage continued progress towards a society where everyone can belong and feel valued.



**Jeffery Black**
Partner
Pride Committee Co-chair
Norton Rose Fulbright



**Gabriel Liew**
Facilities and Operations Supervisor
Pride Committee Co-chair
Norton Rose Fulbright

NORTON ROSE FULBRIGHT

1. GRAI uses, by preference, LGBTI when referring to older people in the community. The acronym LGBTI is used to refer to older LGBTI 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.

# Perth *Pride Luncheon*

**FRI 20 NOV 2026 | 11:30AM - 5PM**
**RIVER VIEW ROOM OPTUS STADIUM**



MC
Narelda Jacobs OAM



Keynote Speaker
Leigh Ryswyk



Transgender Day of Remembrance Acknowledgement
Alyce Schotte





Pride in Conversation: Then, Now & Next
Tim Brown & David Gibson



Entertainment
Dean Misdale

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IN COLLABORATION WITH pride WA GRAI pride diversity

CHARITY PARTNER THE P/NNACLE FOUNDATION

PUBLISHING SPONSOR NRF

**OPTUS STADIUM**

Optus Stadium is proud to stand alongside Western Australia's vibrant and diverse LGBTQIA+ community.

GRAI
GLBTI Rights in Ageing Inc.

## About GRAI – Supporting Older LGBTI People in Western Australia

For more than 20 years, GRAI has championed the rights, dignity and wellbeing of older LGBTI people in Western Australia. Today's older LGBTI generation has witnessed extraordinary change. Many lived through times when being themselves meant risking careers, relationships and personal safety. Some helped secure the freedoms younger generations enjoy today.

Their stories matter. Their contributions matter. And so does their right to age with dignity and belonging.

Established in 2005, GRAI is a community-led, not-for-profit organisation connecting people, challenging discrimination and ensuring older LGBTI voices are heard and valued.

## Turning our purpose into action

**Rainbow Visiting and Social Connection: Creating community and belonging**

Through volunteer visiting, games hubs and social activities, GRAI reduces isolation, builds friendships and creates welcoming spaces for older LGBTI people.

**LGBTI Cultural Inclusion Training: Making aging more inclusive**

No one should have to hide who they are to receive care. Our Silver Rainbow training helps organisations deliver respectful, inclusive services that recognise identity and dignity.

**Our Voices: Preserving LGBTI Life Stories**

Our *Our Voices* publications celebrate the lives and experiences of older LGBTI people whose stories have often been overlooked. They honour our pioneers and connect generations.

Death Literacy and End-of-Life Support: Supporting life's important conversations

Through workshops and our LGBTI Death Café, we create safe spaces to discuss ageing, death and dying, helping people understand their choices and express their wishes.

**Intergenerational Connection: Building bridges between generations**

Initiatives including our Queer Book Club bring generations together through shared experiences and storytelling, while our housing pilot explored new ways to foster connection and belonging.

**Our Commitment: More than programs, a movement for belonging**

A friendly visit can change someone's week. Inclusive care can change someone's life. Good public policy can change a generation's future.

GRAI brings lived experience into government and public debate, challenging discrimination and championing lasting change.

We are building a future where older LGBTI people are recognised, respected and celebrated.

**Connect with us. Partner with us. Help our community age with pride.**
**grai.org.au – info@grai.org.au**

# 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 from 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. ■

# 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 purp hat 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—anonymously—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. ■

# 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). LGBQTI Health Australia: a great organisation where I am finding my feet in community, on country with deep respect and gratitude. ■







# Dallas

**D:** I was born in York in 1968, but grew up in Darwin. When Cyclone Tracy hit in 1974, we evacuated to New South Wales and then moved to Perth. We settled into an ex- 'Ten Pound Poms' house in the suburb of Lynwood. I went to a small, rural primary school in Canning Vale, before it became a busy suburb. There was nothing there at the time but boarding kennels and sand dunes.

***Q: Did you enjoy school?***

**D:** Yes, when I had good teachers. But I also had a headmaster who was an absolute bully: very nasty, old school, beat us all the time. 'Kids, put your hand out.' *Slap.* 'What's the answer to this question? Don't know? Put your hand out.' *Slap.* Grabbed kids … just holding them down, belting their arses. Very violent. He'd yell in your face, intimidating you – which was my memory of basically all men in conservative Perth at the time.

***Q: What were your parents like?***

**D:** My mum became a Jehovah's Witness in 1969, so I grew up in that religious faith. But my dad was a gambler, a drunk, and womanizer. Mum stayed with him because Witnesses don't believe in divorce. Dad was aloof, but he'd discipline us with a kind of casual violence. If, say, we weren't listening to Mum, he'd come in swinging hands and fists. He'd hold me by the neck and punch the wall either side of my face. Once, I woke up with him holding me down and slapping me face. I just remember him saying, 'Alright?' And I sort of came to at that moment and I said, 'Alright.' I had no idea what he was talking about, and only realised later that I was getting in trouble for the clothes I had thrown on the floor the night before. Another time, he came into my room, pulled my pants down and started laying into me with a slipper (this is one of those heavy men's slippers from the 70's that had grips on them). I remember I had to shower because my butt was all cut up.

***Q: How did that violence affect your later life?***

**D:** I think I developed psoriasis because of it. Even now, whenever I'm in an intimidating situation, I hold my breath and search my surroundings for a potential escape. And Mum, in the meantime, was a woman who really just wanted to lose herself in her faith – and I think she felt like she was stuck with 4 kids.

***Q: When did you become aware of your sexuality?***

**D:** I was 8 or 9, maybe – when I started playing around with some fellas from school without even knowing what we were doing. I was taught masturbation when I was 11 by a guy who was 14. My thoughts always ended up on men. I started trying to think about women, but I could only climax if, in my mind, a guy was involved.

Back then there was no access to pornography, so I drew pictures of penises. If I saw a magazine page with some hot, shirtless guy in it … well, that would be wank material for a week. Then VHS came out. When my parents were out, I'd switch on 'The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas' and pause on the locker scene. And despite my religious upbringing and my parents' condemnation of homosexuality… I knew deep down what I was.

I was 15 when it occurred to me that I was gay. I remember thinking, 'Oh my God … I'm a homo, a poof, a faggot.' All these names … I realised I was that person. And then I began hating myself and became suicidal. At the same time, I was getting more involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses. I had a 'religious epiphany' when I was 14 and decided to get baptised.

***Q: What prompted that?***

**D:** The decision didn't have anything to do with my sexuality. I think it was because Witnesses have a culture in the same way the gay world has its own culture. It's their own culture and it's rich and historic, stretching back to the 1870s. And having had so much exposure to that culture … it just made sense. There was suddenly a *direction* for me.

In the congregation I was seen as – effectively – a spiritual prodigy. Most of the guys were getting baptised at 18 or 19, mostly because they had permanent boners and the only way they could have sex was to get married. That wasn't a thing for me; I wasn't getting horny at the idea of women, that's for sure! My epiphany was a genuine, spiritual thing. The Elders got me doing talks, and they tried to guide me towards the next stage – which was being a ministerial servant, and then an elder. Those privileges also come with responsibility; if you do the wrong thing, you can get disfellowshipped (excommunicated). If that happens, literally everyone cuts you off; your parents, your sisters, your brothers, your family, everyone you've ever known. You're considered 'dead'.

You're also supposed to avoid worldly people. Fellow Witnesses are your spiritual brothers and sisters. They're the ones God is going to save after Armageddon. That's the beginning of the cultification: the brainwashing and the fear. By then, you can't leave; you have too much to lose.

But, as a young person, you experiment, you make mistakes. I started experimenting with smoking. And I was 17 the first time I had sex with a man. It was 1985. He was a hairdresser here at Vic Park. And he came on to me (I'd told him I was 19). I should have reported that to the Elders and I would have been sent to a judicial committee for judgment. But I couldn't confess … sex was just not spoken about as a Witness – even though the '80s was a fairly 'worldly' time. Women wore G-string bathing suits; men's pants were tight as fuck. And men were wearing makeup… a lot going on in the '80s.



***Q: Boy George time.***

**D:** Yes. There was some acceptance around homosexuality, but it was a polarising time for the world because AIDS came out, too. It was about 1983 when it began really breaking out on the news. Kids at school assumed I was gay because, being a Witness, I was deemed non-conformist. I kept my school life totally separate from my life within the Witness community.

Dallas
*Photo Chris Hill*

***Q: What did you do after you finished school?***

**D:** I left school at 15 to do full-time preaching. This was encouraged by the Witnesses because they were afraid of higher education – and still are. School is for worldly people. What use is a degree if Armageddon is coming?

But, on the first day of school, when I was out preaching in the area and watching the other kids pouring into school, I wanted to fucking cry. What was I doing? I always had high grades. I shouldn't have left.

There was no pay for preaching so I also worked part-time jobs. When money started coming in, I was like, 'Oh my god, this is freedom.' So, I started saving for a six-week Europe trip. I departed a year-and-a-half later at the age of 17.

During the trip I was hit on by older men but was too shy to follow through with anything. I didn't know how to respond to them. When I got back to Australia, I was a bit more gung-ho. That's about the time the hairdresser came onto me.

***Q: When was the first time you fell in love?***

**D:** After I moved to New Zealand in 1989. Bobby was 21, like me, and a fellow Jehovah's Witness preacher. We would go preaching together. There were slow walks between houses, with lots of chats. He was beautiful. He had long eyelashes, and a Mickey Mouse watch. I absolutely fell in love with him. We would spend all day together, and then get home and phone each other for another 2 hours.

Many years later, I told him of my attraction, and he just laughed. But I realised … *he* was the one who helped me decide in '89 that I had to come out. I knew it was gonna rock my world, in a bad way. I thought: *It's gonna be an earthquake, but I have to do it. I need love. I need to be loved; I need to love someone.*

***Q: And you're married, now?***

**D:** Yes. I met my husband, Frank, after I moved back here to Perth. I knew from the moment I met him that he was the right person for me. I felt it, deep in my soul.

Before Australia's push for marriage equality, I didn't have any real desire to get married; it felt like copying a hetero institution. But then… actually *being* in Melbourne the day legislation was passed … The celebration was massive, and I realised just how significant it was. I suddenly went, 'Fuck it. I want to be married.' It wasn't only about legitimising my relationship but also a kind of rebellion against my background.

The last email I received from my mum, nearly 7 years ago, read: 'I assume you now want to get married to Frank. Just remember that, while it might be legal under Caesar's law, it is not legal under God's law. Love Mum.'

Frank and I tied the knot on the 6th of May 2018. ■

# 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.

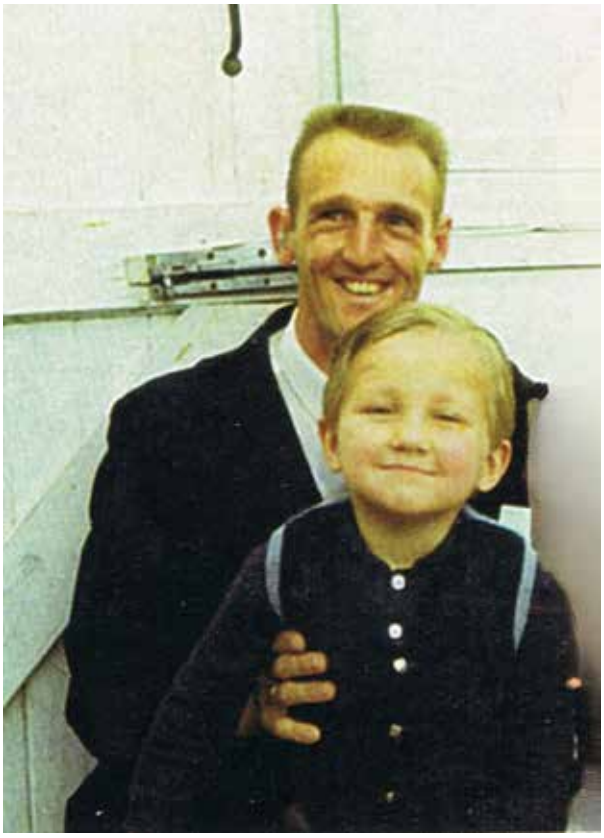
Or so I thought.

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 Codas 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 LGBTIQA+ 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 Codas; 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.

So many stories… so little time!

Let's return to my youthful escapades navigating the treacherous terrain of 1980s Australia as a young, naive bisexual soldier. This was back in a time when homosexuality was still a criminal offence, and the military was definitely NOT a safe place to be gay.

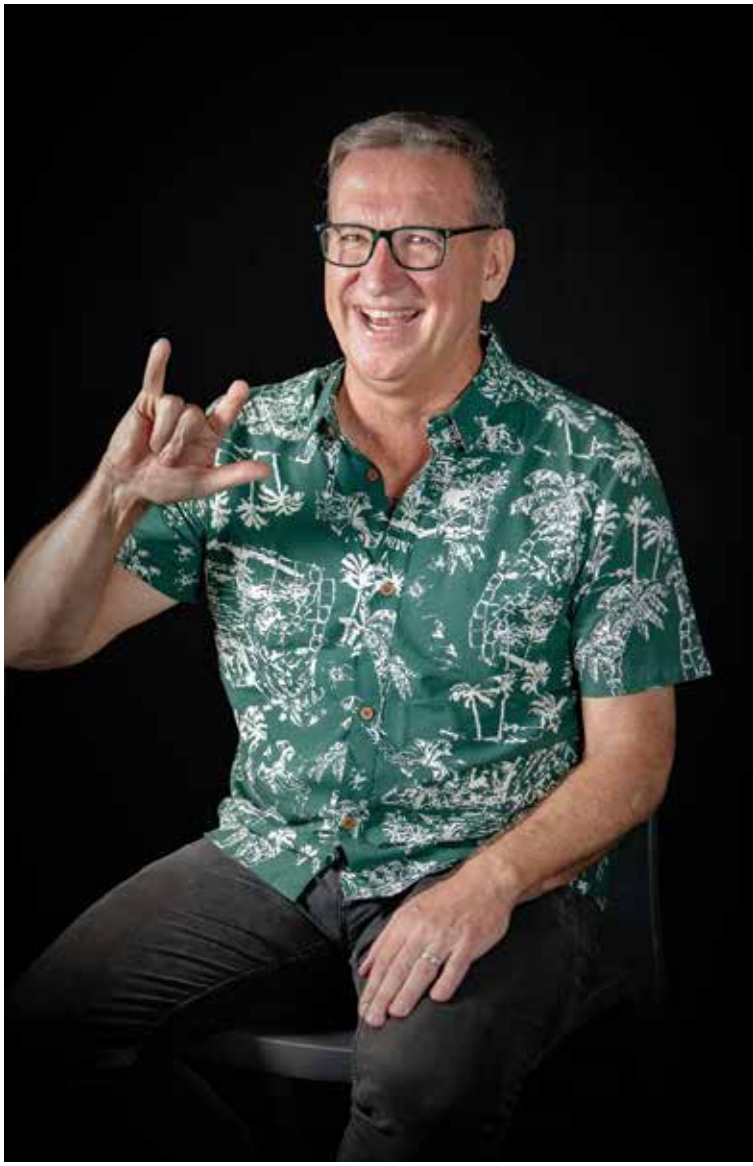
Picture this: it's the mid-80s on a Saturday night at the Red Lion, and I'm fresh out of the confines of high school with dreams as big as my love for disco beats. So, I march headfirst into Army recruiting, looking for adventure and escape from a world that demands more than I can give.

Looking back, I can see that I was seeking a place to belong within the ranks of the Army, a sanctuary from the storms that raged within and without. Little did I know, army life had some hand grenades lined up for me, and like a teenage boy with pent-up frustrations, boy did they explode!

### *Royal Military College*

I begin my Army story with attending officer training in the hallowed halls of the Royal Military College, Duntroon. Now, let me tell you, between army drills and late-night study sessions, there wasn't much time for romance, let alone a discreet hookup. Also, upon arriving at Duntroon, the entrenched homophobia of the Army became very obvious, so the chance of me doing something stupid was pretty slim! However, mix alcohol and teenage hormones …

There was this one notable night, slightly fuzzy around the edges, but I recall I stumbled into a gay nightclub in Civic after one-too-many drinks. Of course, I wanted to be there, but once I actually walked inside, cue the panic! What was I doing??? I mean, the fear of being caught was real; Canberra was a small place in the 80s, and the Defence Force back then had a very active 'No Homosexuality' policy.



David Gibson
*Photo Carmal Foster*

Looking back, I realise how the Army's archaic policies had me tiptoeing around my own identity. *Bisexual?* Check. *Scared of being outed?* Double check. It was like living in a spy novel, minus the glamour but with a whole lot of anxiety. So, like any good spy, I went deep undercover (AKA back into the closet) until graduation.

### *Lavarack Barracks*

Let's shift from my experiences in Duntroon to my first posting at Lavarack Barracks in Townsville, North Queensland in 1987. The backdrop was set with John Bjelke-Petersen still the Premier and the Fitzgerald Inquiry was investigating his corruption on a scale unseen in Australia before. For our community, the AIDS epidemic was getting real with HIV infections peaking across Australia and the Grim Reaper ad. running on TV. The fear was palpable. As a junior officer, I again had very little time to myself, but now, I managed to juggle military duties with some discreet rendezvous … but NEVER with anyone who looked like they had an Army haircut (praise Mary for the gays and their 80's perms!) Again, Townsville was a small place so discretion was a must. However, I found myself attending various training courses in other locations across Australia – almost an invitation to go wild.

On one trip to Melbourne, I went to a beat at the toilets in the park next to the Shrine of Remembrance WW1 memorial (ironic, I know) and hooked up with one of the guards – he gave me a HUGE love bite. It was so obvious that I had to get very creative; I told a story about meeting some old flame who just couldn't keep her hands off me. To my surprise, my story played into the hyper-masculine male culture, and all the Army guys believed it.

### *AIDS and the Army*

Now to the broader context of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. It was a time of intense fear and prejudice within the wider community. The Army's response was to make everyone undertake training on how to use a condom! We were all marched down to watch a video – on a VHS tape of course – of Jack Thompson. Famous from his recent 80's movie Breaker Morant, he had apparently served in the Australian Army before becoming an actor. After the training video, we were all given a condom and had to practice unrolling it on a banana! I think that memory has stayed with me because it seems just as ridiculous today as it did back then.

Another time, my platoon was 'strongly encouraged' (i.e., ordered) to give blood so that the medics could train putting in needles! So off we marched to the Regimental Aid Post to give a pint of blood. A few days afterward, we deployed on exercise for a month, and when I returned there was a letter from the Red Cross on my desk. I looked at it and immediately feared the worst. 20-year-old me sat looking at the envelope, assuming it was an AIDS diagnosis and thinking of the best way to kill myself. When I finally summoned the courage to open the envelope, I nearly cried – all it enclosed was a Red Cross Blood Donor card and a thank you note.

### *Interrogations*

Now, let's fast forward to a fateful morning in '89, a memory to this day that still upsets me. The day began with a route march (nothing unusual there) … but, to my surprise, I got whisked away for a 'chat' with the Military Police. No explanation, just my anxiety on full blast. I found myself caught up in a witch hunt for gays in the barracks. After hours of questioning about my sexuality, I found myself blurting out my truth: 'I am bisexual!'

I honestly thought that would end the interrogation, but all it did was result in a dramatic shift in interrogation tactics. Suddenly, it wasn't about me; it was now about every other queer soul in Lavarack Barracks, and could I confirm if they were gay? Talk about a plot twist! Never have I been so grateful that I hadn't hooked up with anyone who had an Army haircut – not that the Military Police believed me at all.

But wait, it gets better (or worse, depending on how you see it). Next thing I know, I'm immediately transferred to Melbourne for 3 months, isolated from my platoon and friends, and told by the Adjutant on my arrival at Broadmeadows Barracks, 'I don't know what you've done wrong, but I know you're trouble.' And let's not forget the Army psychiatrist, a person I thought was supposed to support me but ended up sealing my fate with a discharge recommendation.

### *Discharge and Demons*

As the dust settled and reality sank in, I found myself back in WA, facing a daunting transition to civilian life with no roadmap in sight. At 22, I was unemployed, battling mental health demons, and craving the warmth of understanding in a world that felt colder by the minute. Looking back now, is it any wonder that for years afterwards I had internalised homophobia?

Today, after much therapy, I can see that, while those years were dreadful, they also shaped me in ways I never imagined. They taught me resilience, the power of speaking my truth, and the importance of finding my tribe, even when the odds were stacked against me.

So, here's to the young soldier who wanted to serve his country; who weathered the storm and stumbled through the darkness to emerge stronger and prouder … and finally, as an older man ready to share his story.

### *Be You*

So, to all my fellow LGBTI veterans and those who currently choose to serve our country by putting on a uniform, remember this: your journey, your struggles, and your triumphs are not just worthy of recognition but are invaluable tales that deserve to be heard and honoured. Wherever life may lead you, continue to embrace your authenticity, for your unique story has the power to inspire and uplift others. ■

# David Pople

**D:** I'm David, 74 – nearly 75. I am discovering there are many people who have similar experiences to me. And they've done it alone – like I did – because they didn't know there was anyone else like them. I've been 'out' for nearly a decade, and I'm happier now than I've ever been. In fact, it's been a reinvention of my life.

***Q: When did you discover your sexuality?***

**D:** I reached that phase in puberty when, suddenly, you become interested in sexual things … and my interest was in other boys – my peers. My parents never had the 'birds and the bees' talk with me. But I'm an inquiring person by nature, so I experimented with all sorts of things sexually and tried to glean what I could about sex. We didn't know what we were doing, but it was great fun. And somehow, we knew it had to be secret. It was a given.

***Q: Was this in high school?***

**D:** Yes, in Africa, in a state then known as Rhodesia – a sort of privileged place for white people. I went to a private school and associated with … you could call them 'upper-class' whites. This was the start of a divided life for me. I never actually came to grips with who I was, or thought: 'Am I gay?' This sort of question was never asked, whereas today's youths are encouraged to think freely about their sexuality.

***Q: Were you aware of the term 'homosexual' at that time?***

**D:** I think I was … certainly by the time I was 16, when I got my first motor car. I remember going to a little drive-in restaurant and seeing a small car that had been physically lifted – with the people still inside it – and put on a wall. I suppose a show of strength by the young 'Bucks' that did it. It was said that a person in the car was a homosexual, so it was like an act of aggression against them. Years later, I heard that, in Australia, 'poofter bashing' was a Friday night sport. Rhodesia didn't have the same form of persecution as that. Nonetheless, I grew up handling this dual personality, hiding the side of me I came to realise was 'deviant'.

***Q: Did you date other people?***

**D:** I knew I would eventually get married and have children; that's what everyone does. I actually did want to have children … but I had no interest in pursuing girls. When my parents decided it was time I got a girlfriend, they set me up with a date for the Christmas ball. It was quite a grand affair. I picked up this girl in my little sports car, and she was very impressed. When we arrived, she asked me to dance. I was horrified! I said 'Oh, no – I don't dance.' So, we sat there, and I seized up. I was so disgusted with myself that, virtually the next day, I went to dancing class. But I can count on one hand the number of girls that I actually went on a date with.

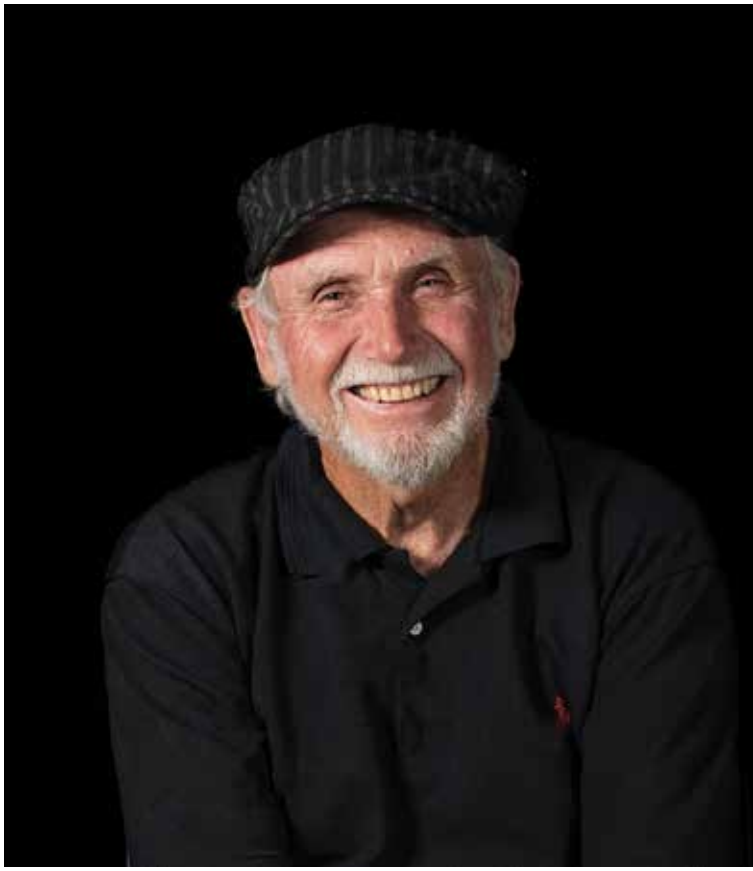
My mates – my male friends – I had constant interaction with. The sexual side of it was very rare; as I grew up, it became more apparent that men just didn't do that sort of thing. Later, I found at that it was actually *dangerous* to do that – to be homosexual – because society would look down on you. And that's when I clamped up, and I met a girl and married her. I was an adventurous sort of person – yachting and mountain-climbing – so I found a girl who shared my interests. She was a good conversationalist; good company. I had no sexual attraction to her at all, but we became good friends. Then it occurred to me one day, 'Maybe I should be married; all my friends are getting married.' And what better person to marry?

***Q: What was married life like?***

**D:** Life was fine (the sexual side of it wasn't, and I now realise why). It wasn't long before we had our first child. We lived in a bus that I had purchased and fitted out as a home. But with the second child, the bus was too small, so I built a mobile home. Now, with the children, my wife changed. She was no longer interested in going out, hanging off a trapeze of a little boat … Although, we *did* do some very daring and exciting things. I mean, to leave the country at that time, when it was under a terrorist war … and to tow this great big mobile home – which was 34 foot long – on a lonely road where terrorists were operating … For me, it was an adventure. For her, it was a necessity.

***Q: When did you move to Australia?***

**D:** 1979. I was 30. And I was still in the same frame of mind, not ever thinking that I was gay or even different. I *appeared* the same as everybody else, so I kind of believed it. I was involved in a religion that was very intolerant of homosexuality, which possibly helped with the denial.



David Pople
*Photo Gregory Helleren*

But I still had crushes on men. When I went to the public toilets, I would see all the graffiti on the wall and I would read it avidly; there were phone numbers being given, and people were obviously meeting and doing something about the feelings they were having.

***Q: This is the era before cell phone and dating apps, right?***

**D:** Yes, and it was the era of 'Beats' – areas where men would hang around to meet other men. One public toilet I went to, there was a glory hole. I didn't know what it was, like, 'Goodness me, a hole in the wall … where's the privacy in this place?' But I was fascinated and excited. And when someone came in and sat down in the next cubicle, I was riveted. The fact that there was another male on the other side was just electrifying. And the next thing a little finger came through the hole and waved at me! I thought, 'What do I do – do I wave back?' And then, to my shock-horror – and of course, delight – this penis came through the hole.

You'd think, given all this, that I would consciously think: 'I'm gay'. But you see, I couldn't possibly be, not when I had a wife and kids. This was just a little 'sideline excitement'. Now that I'm 'out', I've met several gay men who married and had children before they realised … and with catastrophic results. Some came out, and parted company with their wife – in some cases, amicably, but in most cases, with a lot of acrimony and hurt.

If gay men could only say earlier, 'This is who I am, and I love me, and I accept myself.' That was really the motivation of my speaking with you: to tell this to younger gay people. I realise the amount of courage that it takes for a person to come out. The guy that I'm currently living with – and we are very likely to be partnered in a permanent sort of way – has not come out. So, yes, I can understand the agony or the doubt.

***Q: What was 'coming out' like for you?***

**D:** For me, it was not a matter of telling people 'I'm gay.' I had to come out to *myself* first, and say, 'This is the person you are. Now deal with it; get to know yourself.' When I came out to my yachting friends, they burst out laughing and said, 'We could have told you that.' And there I'd been, thinking that I was fooling them. The only person fooled was my wife, and she took it hard. But I only lost one or two friends, and that was more of a drifting-apart – a small price in comparison to what I've gained.

***Q: Going back to your arrival in Australia in 1979 … was that during the AIDS outbreak?***

**D:** That happened a couple of years after I arrived. There was all this talk about homosexual people dying and that it was 'the curse of God'. I was working in the W. A. Museum at the time, and my boss was very homophobic. He said: 'It's the best thing that could ever happen; they can all die.'

I knew that homosexual people caught AIDs, but I felt distanced from it. It was a period I lived through, but I wasn't 'gay' then. I was blissfully in denial – or not so blissfully. Having now met people who lived through that era … my heart goes out to them.

But the AIDs era was also a complete shake-up; people were now talking about homosexuality. The concept of a man actually *loving* another man was still quite foreign. What concerns and hurts me is that I didn't fight the fight – the fine fight (and I'm sorry I didn't, you know, from Stonewall to achieving gay marriage). I didn't, because I wasn't there; I wasn't *with* them. But now I see, and the fight must continue.

For many young people, being 'out' in society is normal; they don't know how hard it was fought for. It hurts me to see division amongst the LGBT community; I hope that, at some stage, we'll all realise we are unique individuals. No two gay guys are the same, nor two lesbians, nor transgender. We are all unique; let's embrace that uniqueness. ■

# Dee Farrell



**D:** My real name is Delia Frances Marie DiNunzio Farrell. Dee is my nickname. I was born in 1947, in Ohio, America. I was 5 days old when my birth mother delivered me to an orphanage in Pennsylvania. Within hours, I was adopted by a couple from Hershey. I was raised there in a very conservative, Catholic community. I didn't have an inkling about gays until high school, where I learnt that some of my friends were gay. But I still wasn't 'out' to myself. After university, I went on to marry a classmate at age 24. It wasn't until I was 32 that I realised that I wanted to 'jump the fence.'

***Q: What influenced you to take that step?***

**D:** After I divorced my husband, I went on a holiday to celebrate with my best friend. We were 'hit on' by some local men, and I put my guy off by saying, 'Bug off. I'm a lesbian.' It was like the lightbulb went on. Back at the hotel I told my friend, 'I think I'm a lesbian.' She replied, 'I've known all along. I'm perfectly fine with it.' We've been best friends for the last 50 years.

***Q: Did 'coming out' present challenges for you?***

**D:** It was clear cut. 6 months after the time I came out, I left the conservative state of Florida and moved to Colorado, a progressive state. Once I got settled, the first thing I did was look up the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre. And my life as a gay woman began there in Denver.

I was told that there was an evening support group for women. I rocked up on the night; it was a round circle of about 15-20 women. And in that group, I met my future wife. After listening to the group discussion, I figured she and I had very similar backgrounds. She had also divorced a man, was similar in age, had come from another state and sought out the community centre for support. I asked her if she'd like to have breakfast on Sunday and go for a drive up the mountains in her jeep. And the rest is history.

Dee Farrell
*Photo Peter King*

***Q: How did your family and friends in Pennsylvania respond to your coming out?***

**D:** The straight friend I'd moved to Colorado with sort of had a problem with it … She had caught her husband with a man, and so, she had this very negative thing about gay lifestyles. But my family – never told them. Colorado was the beginning of a new life for me. I lived there for 27 years, and kept my lifestyle a secret from family – though my mother and one of my brothers later told me they'd guessed.

***Q: What was your experience within the LGBTQ+ community in Colorado?***

**D:** I wasn't afraid, I wasn't shy. I found the community, I found a partner, and events just flowed. I was very lucky. Denver was – and still is – a hotbed for gay and lesbian organisations, so I was immediately wrapped up in that. I remember going to a dance at a very fancy five-star hotel (this is back before gay people were accepted at venues like that). We took over the place and had a big party, and the music of the day was 'We Are Family' … I had found my family!

27 years later, I can say that I left a legacy within Denver's Gay & Lesbian (G&L) community (we didn't have more initials back then!). I started a number of organisations. People knew who Dee Farrell was. I had a reputation as a doer and a leader.

***Q: What organisations were you involved with?***

**D:** The one that I was most active in and proud of was the 'Gay Games,' an international sporting group. In 1984, I was invited to be at the inaugural meeting of the Federation of Gay Games. I was a charter member, and served as an officer for more than a decade.

I also opened the first G&L Travel Agency in Denver. I organised a group – hundreds – to go to the 1987 March on Washington. We went back for the 'Names Project' in 2002, to see the quilts that were laid out on display. In the interim between those two events, I had many friends die of AIDS. Seeing the quilts with their names on was extremely moving.

Other involvements… I started a gay and lesbian wine tasting group called the Bacchus Wine Society, which still operates today. I was a founding member of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association. It went from 20 people sitting around the table to over 2,000 members worldwide today, including Australia. I was honoured as a pioneer at the 30th annual convention in Queensland.

***Q: Is that what brought you to Australia?***

**D:** Actually, I first came here on holiday for my 50th birthday present to myself; I went to Uluru. I had an epiphany. I said to myself, 'I think I'll move here.' I applied for a business visa and moved to Tasmania to open a wine tour business. I was 53 years old … and 20 years later, I became an Australian Citizen.

***Q: How did you end up in Perth?***

**D:** After Tasmania, I moved around Australia while working for 'Rainbow Tourism'. Then, on a trip to Bali, I met some people from WA who convinced me to come to Perth. When I arrived, I wanted to find out what LGBT+ groups were around, so I looked to 'The Pink Sofa' – an online forum for lesbians. I zeroed in on the Lesbian Walking Group, which is where I met my current partner, Noni. That was 11 years ago. We are still members of that group. Mostly older women attend; we've had younger people come along, but they realise that they can't keep up … and maybe don't have much in common with us.

***Q: What are your thoughts on LGBT+ intergenerational connect in Perth?***

**D:** Well, as an example … back during the marriage equality rallies that Noni and I attended, student interviewers came around and asked, 'what's your involvement?' And I said, 'As an elder …' (because we were over 65 when everybody else was in their 20s or 30s) '… I do have some perspective on marriage equality.' And we were disappointed that there were not more people of our age there at the rallies. It may be that they're not into political rallies, or that there seemed to be so much emphasis on student-age trans people and maybe older people were turned off by that. Or maybe they felt like, 'We've already done all the hard work. Now you guys get out there and march and protest'. I don't really know. Maybe it was just a dynamic of Perth.

But Noni and I attended every marriage equality march and rally. We went on the campaign trail. We even wrote letters to our neighbours asking them for their 'yes' vote. We got support from everyone in our neighbourhood – which is multi-cultural, and mostly younger than us. We only ever had one negative experience, and that was with a renter next door who used some slur words against us. Called us 'dykes', or something like that. I had him reported and evicted.

***Q: Do you and Noni plan on any more travel?***

**D:** We're going to New York at the end of this month. One of the most moving moments of my life was marching behind the Stonewall Riot Survivors on the 25th anniversary, in New York City Gay Pride. So, Noni and I are going to do a walking tour of Stonewall, to pay homage.

While we're there, I'm going to look up my old friend, Brent, from the 'Gay Games'. He's quite ill, but I'm going to go by and pay my respects to him. 40 years he's been living with AIDS. He's at the end of his life now from complications.

***Q: What was it like for you, living through the AIDS epidemic in America?***

**D:** Because I was involved with these international gay and lesbian organisations, I formed close relationships with a lot of the men who were also serving on the board of directors. One by one, they started to drop. And that has an impact, you know, when someone that you've been close to for years is just … *gone*. (I know only two lesbians who ever had AIDS, and they contracted it through dirty needles – tattoos as a matter of fact).

Brent was a forerunner of AIDS activism in America. In fact, he is the one who got the World AIDS Day stamp in the US. Time Magazine wrote about him. Through my association with Brent, I too took up activism back in Colorado. We had candlelight vigils and protest marches in conservative communities, and we knew that they were going to be throwing rocks – and words – at us, and even making us lose our jobs. People of my generation … we kept our mouth shut until we couldn't take it anymore. Maybe it was AIDS that made me speak up.

***Q: How can LGBT+ voices change the world?***

**D:** It's about not being afraid to stand up and speak your mind. I think the younger generation does that very well. ■

# Dee Parry

**D:** My full name is Deidre Louise Parry. I was born in 1945, as an only-child, in a little market town called Bracknell, in Berkshire, England. We lived on a housing estate, which they built after the war. We were free-range, feral kids, and we just roamed the countryside and played all the time. It was a lot of fun.

When I was 12, we moved to a little place on the coast called Clacton-on-Sea. I spent my teenage years there. It wasn't much fun for me; I came in at 12, and most girls already knew each other because school age started at 11. Also, I was a typical tomboy when most girls were interested in boys.

***Q: When did you discover your sexual orientation?***

**D:** Somebody in high school called me a lesbian, and I didn't know what that meant. So, I looked it up and it said – oh, goodness – that I was 'sick,' and I was 'perverted', and I was this and I was that. I thought, *Oh, what do I do now?*

***Q: Did you have relationships with other girls?***

**D:** I had my first 'girlfriend' when I was 16. She was my best friend, and we ended up in a sexual relationship. Don't ask me how that happened, but it did. She was way more experienced than I was … she'd kissed boys, so she taught me how! For about a year, we lived in each other's houses, and nobody twigged. We knew not to let anybody know. Nobody *said* not to, but we knew.

That relationship ended badly, and I was heartbroken. I had absolutely no one to talk to about it. It was very, very lonely.

***Q: How did you first become involved in the lesbian community?***

**D:** One day, I saw an article in a women's magazine about these two women – lesbians. And I went, 'Oh my god!' *Read, read, read*. And at the bottom it gave the contact details for the magazine *Arena 3*. I subscribed to it. Every month I'd wait for it to arrive – in a brown, unidentifiable envelope – in my letterbox.

Then, when I moved up to London in the 60s for art school, I joined a lesbian social group called 'Kenric', which ran every Tuesday night at the Gateways Club (a small basement club which was usually packed – except on Kenric nights). It was the time of 'butch' and 'fem' – some women in suits and ties, others in dresses with bouffant hair. The unisex look was just starting to emerge, for those of us who didn't identify as either. It was a place you could go and be yourself.

My girlfriend, Penny, wore Dusty Springfield eyes; she was a bit cooler than me. The first time I took her to the club, she got chat up by this big, butch lesbian. I said, 'She's with *me*.' 'Oh, sorry!' she says – which was hilarious, as I'm only little.

***Q: How did you end up in Australia?***

**D:** I first left England when my friend and I got cheap passage on a boat to Philadelphia. We travelled across America by train, and in 1973 we went to Canada. We flew to Tahiti and Fiji, and then on to Australia. From Sydney, we took the Indian Pacific train to Perth. By then, we had only $7 between us!

We got here just before Christmas 1973. It was 42 degrees, and nobody had air conditioning. We thought, 'How does anyone *live* here?' Once we got through the heat shock, we started looking for the Perth lesbian community. We found an ad for 'CAMP', and through that, organised to meet a few people for drinks. The CAMP headquarters were in Hay Street, and we started attending their women's nights, and other social trips and picnics.

***Q: Did you get politically involved?***

**D:** We weren't feminist or political at all. We were just involved in the social life. Though … I was part of a telephone support service for lesbians, which ran on Tuesday nights (gay men had the rest of the week). Later, I fell into the Women's Liberation and Lesbian Separatism movements.



Dee Parry
*Photo Chris Hill*

***Q: How did that happen?***

**D:** I went to a women's meeting at the Women's Health Centre with a friend, Karen. Most women in the room had not been through the years of oppression and secrecy that we had. They all identified as lesbian separatists. It took some thinking to understand sexism, but it did start to make sense.

I got involved with that group … but it became tricky, because I had a couple of really good gay male friends by this time and these women would not allow men into their houses – not even their father or brother or male child. This was a challenge for me.

***Q: But you became an activist?***

**D:** Yes. In 1978, I was part of the Forest Place women's march (this was when legislation 54B prohibited public meetings of more than 3 people). Women got beaten up by the coppers. I was nervous and hung back; I didn't want to be roughed up or bundled into a paddy wagon.

I started to go to Women's Liberation meetings held in the Padbury building. I was quiet during these groups and felt intimidated.

I remember an article by Jo Freeman that came out at the time called 'The Tyranny of Structure lessness.' I think it summed up how I felt about that group, which was supposedly without leaders … but was led by strong personalities.

Don't get me wrong – I was still part of things. At the 1978 Anzac dawn service, we went up to the cenotaph to lay flowers for women who'd been murdered in men's wars, but the flowers were quickly removed. A group of us infiltrated the Anzac Day march with posters saying 'Take the Toys from the Boys'. The reaction was very hostile, as you can imagine. We managed to scatter into the crowds before the police found or arrested us.

On reflection, I'm not sure that marching was the right way to go about changing societal views. Though, some of the women from WEL (Women's Electoral Lobby) – good women in a more conservative group – defended us against accusations that our radicalism was damaging the Women's Movement. They argued that, if it wasn't for us spearheading the movement with our 'outrageous demands', they couldn't have come up behind with their asks, which then looked more reasonable. We were laying the groundwork for them. So maybe we weren't as ineffectual as I felt.

***Q: Can you tell me about the Grapevine magazine?***

**D:** Karen and I started that in the late 70s. *Grapevine* was a newssheet for lesbians in Perth which grew into a feminist magazine. In 1980, some of us organised a Women's Festival in Parkerville and out of that came 'The Women's Place'. *Grapevine* moved in with our small printing press. It was a place for all women to feel comfortable in. We had Sunday teas after the pub session, film evenings and social events. We had a 'no alcohol, no drugs' policy, but some lesbians wanted to use it to smoke dope and there was a big fight about it.

Unfortunately, some local lads worked out who we were and started throwing bricks through the window. We thought it best to move out, then. Next, we opened a successful Women's Workplace in Fitzgerald Street and took the printing press with us.

***Q: You were very busy***

**D:** This was a time of many women's/lesbian activities: Hyde Park's 'Women's Tent', *Rouge* magazine (WA edition), women's dances, women's bands, and a feminist bus tour of Perth. Significant feminist activities.

Next came the 1984 Peace Camp at Point Perron. My partner, Carolyn, was one of the organisers. Many women came from over East – and again, there were very strong personalities. Some women wanted to scale the fence into Garden Island, and there was a meeting of several-hundred women who came to a consensus. About a dozen tried to go over the fence, but the Feds were there, waiting on the other side. Women got very roughed up by the cops.

***Q: Was the media there?***

**D:** We got media attention, but journalists weren't allowed in the Peace Camp (and only female journalists were spoken with). But it brought attention to Garden Island, and that they wanted to bring in nuclear war ships.

***Q: Is there anything from that point that you've been involved in?***

**D:** I haven't really been part of the women's movement since. I guess I'm much more 'in the world', now. I've got lesbian friends, but I don't hang out in the community.

***Q: Are you publicly 'out' as a lesbian?***

**D:** I live a double life now. My partner, Carolyn, is completely open. She works for a union, and even 'came out' once at a Labor Party conference. I'm 'out' to my friends and work mates, but not to the women (with diverse beliefs) in the multi-cultural playgroups I run.

I fought for women most of my life. And I still do, even though they're not lesbian or feminist women. I still fight for them and their children. I work against misogyny and racism as much as I can. I think I do make a difference, bringing women together. That's always been my aim. ■

# Finn

**F:** I was born in Moora, WA, in 1966. I was adopted out as a day-old baby and spent my first 7 years in Papua New Guinea with my adoptive family. We later moved back to WA; I lived in Yanchep, Two Rocks, from the age of 7 to 30.

When I was 36, I tracked down my biological parents through the company 'Jigsaw.' I spoke to my mother over the phone, but we haven't been in contact since 2006. It's sad … I wanted to meet my mum in person, you know? She'd be between 80 and 85, by now – I don't even know if she's still around or not. I don't have any animosity towards her. I just wanted to meet her to connect … Because when you're adopted, there's always a big gap, not knowing where you fit in.

I did get to meet my half-sister, and one of my cousins who I traced through ancestry.com. I've also done DNA testing … I feel a strong connection to my Irish lineage. That's why, when I changed my name, I used my biological mum's surname, 'O'Dwyer.' Then I decided to choose a matching first-name, and became 'Finn'.

***Q: When did you know you were trans?***

**F:** From the age of 4, I knew that I was a boy born in a little girl's body. I was always with the neighbourhood boys, playing with cars and playing in the dirt and rough-housing … it didn't come naturally to do the girl stuff. I was born in the 60s, grew up in the 70s. So, I was given the dolls and the girl toys, and there was a lot of pressure to conform. I think that's why, when I had my own kids, I let them play with whatever, and allowed them to explore.



I grew up in a very traumatic background. My adoptive father was a chronic alcoholic, and violent. For us kids, it was about being 'seen-and-not-heard.' There was no way I was going to be able to articulate that I was born in the wrong body. I didn't even know how to articulate that to *myself*. But the older I got, the more it became uncomfortable. I was 11 when I had my first period. And though my mother was a trained nurse, she'd never sat me down and had that conversation. So, I didn't even know what was happening to me; I thought I was dying!

From a very young age, I was screaming inside, wanting to articulate: 'what is happening to me?' Psychologically, it didn't match what was happening with my body. It was almost like I was two different people.

Finn
*Photo Chris Hill*

***Q: When did you 'come out'?***

**F:** I've had to come out twice; first as a lesbian, and then as a transgender man. Until I was 36, I had lived my life as a straight woman. I was a single mum with 2 children. And then I met a woman through a social group …

When I told my friends I was a lesbian, they were all like: 'Yeah … *and*?' They already knew, and were okay with it. It was only *me* that was … I hadn't able to articulate it.

My family, on the other hand, *weren't* okay with it. I hit a lot of brick walls with my adoptive mum and my stepdad, who is religious. And I think it's a generational thing, too – they were in their 60s, at the time. They would introduce my fiancé to others as my 'friend'. I got very cross about it.

***Q: When did you realise that 'lesbian' wasn't the right label for you?***

**F:** In 2012, I went to a rainbow-event forum that was a held at the piazza. At the table were all these different transgender people. I'm listening to them tell their stories, and …. It wasn't a lightbulb moment; it was a lightning bolt. I literally sat up in my chair and thought, *I'm not a straight woman, and I'm not a lesbian. I'm transgender.* I finally understood the journey I'd been through. And I went straight home, and I went straight into my Facebook, and I changed my name to Finn O'Dwyer.

I wanted to get up on the rooftops and yell to everybody: 'This is who I am!' But I realised that, for some people, acceptance would take time. The funny thing is … my stepdad, with his 'women-should-be-barefoot-pregnant-in-the-kitchen' men's mentality, was never accepting of me as a 'lesbian'. But from the beginning of my transition – and I'm in my 11th year – he was fine with it! I think it's because society now sees me as a man, and I present as a man; I fit in the binary. But before, I was seen as a woman with another woman. My mum and stepdad were in their 70s when I started transitioning, and they were both really cool with it. Mum always introduced me to her friends as her son. That's a huge thing for an 87-year-old who's had a 'daughter' for 46 years of her life.

***Q: How did your children respond to your transition?***

**F:** They were confused, at first. I had to explain that, though I was going on HRT (hormone replacement therapy), I wasn't having sex-reassignment surgery. At my age, I don't need to do that (if I had been in my 20s, things might have been different). My son said he would never call me 'Dad', and he wasn't comfortable with it for a long time. I think, the more you try and force it, the harder it is. It's better to let it happen organically.

My grandson accepted it straight away. When I told him I was born in the wrong body, he was like: 'Wow that's so cool! I'm going to call you 'Pops'. Do you want to be a Pop?' And just like that, he was fine with it.

***Q: When did you start HRT?***

**F:** August of 2012. I went to my G.P. and got an appointment to see a psychiatrist. I brought a letter I had written about my life. I talked about how, after shaving off all my hair, I started feeling more comfortable in my skin. Before transition, it's like you're constantly looking in the mirror, and the mirror doesn't match who you are on the inside.

***Q: Have people interacted with you differently, after transitioning?***

**F:** I've recently started working as a mental health support worker, and when I'm out with a client, I still have moments of surprise – even though I'm in my 11th year of transitioning – when people refer to me as 'Sir' or 'Mr'. It's good that they see me as a man because that's who I am. But I'm still processing it.

But what I've found most challenging, is … I used to have a huge circle of friends within the lesbian community. When I started transitioning, two of my once-closest friends put out to the community that 'Penny' was dead and buried. 'Finn' didn't exist, as far as they were concerned.

In my early transition, I still went to a few lesbian events. At one, my attendance created such a shitstorm … People came up to me and my circle of friends and said I was no longer welcome. Today, friends still invite me to certain things, and I have to say: 'I'm not comfortable coming to events based for women, because I identify now as a man.'

***Q: How do you feel around other men?***

**F:** I've experienced lots of pressure from male friends wanting me to drink. As though I need to knock back all this alcohol to be deemed to be a 'man'. Even the trans men – they're all drinking. And I had to pull away from that, being in recovery. I'm 10 years sober, now.

In early transition, many trans men were very misogynistic towards women. I really struggled with that. It's like, you were born in a woman's body; you *know* the discrimination women go through. And now here you are doing the same thing! That just blew my mind.

***Q: Can you describe your romantic relationships?***

**F:** Before I came out as a lesbian, I had lots of one-night stands. I was in full-blown addiction too, and drinking a lot – I guess to try and numb the feelings. So, I'd go out clubbing, get completely trashed, and go off with whomever. I was trying to figure out my sexuality, and work out who I was and where I fit in the world.

The first relationship I had during early transition … The woman I was dating didn't understand the dynamic. She thought that, because, biologically, I have female anatomy, she couldn't be a 'straight' woman anymore, and had to identify as a 'lesbian'. I tried to explain to her that I'm a *man*, you know … we're not two women dating! She just didn't understand. It was as though, when I was out and about in community, she saw me as a man. But when I was naked, she saw me as a woman. We ended up splitting up because of it.

My last relationship was very different. We're not together anymore, but it was a beautiful experience: to have a lover who accepted me fully – with my body as it is – as a man. ■

# Gillie

**G:** I was born in Northam in 1967, as the youngest of 4 girls. We moved to Busselton when I was 5, and I went to a tiny school. We came to Perth when I was 9, because Mum wanted us to have better educational opportunities. She decided that Methodist Ladies' College was the only option. It was a shock being with ultra-privileged rich kids after being in a 2-roomed school … I just didn't fit in. I was bullied; I had a miserable time.

***Q: Was religion a significant aspect of your schooling?***

**G:** Not especially. Mum decided the best way to keep 4 daughters safe was to connect us with a local church community. We got heavily involved, and because I was youngest, I think it impacted me the most. I thought, 'God is going to zap me if I do the wrong thing.' My family had a very prudish attitude to sexuality and sexual expression, and the church added another layer of shame. I remember some 'esteemed leaders' having very explicit conversations about dating (obviously 'boy-with-girl') and that it was not appropriate to do anything more than hold hands before marriage.

***Q: What were your parents views?***

**G:** It was the generation where secrets were kept in the closet. For example, Dad had 3 children before us, but Mum hadn't known that when she married him.

Dad was born in 1926. Although in practice he was surprisingly open-minded, he would often say things like: 'Homosexuals need to go to the doctor and get fixed.' He was just kind of parroting the values of the day. But I was absorbing all of that. Which meant that, by the time I found myself – quite unexpectedly – in a same-sex relationship, I was like, 'Oh my God, what am I going to do?'

***Q: So, your first experience of sexual attraction was towards women?***

**G:** Looking back, I always had crushes on girls and women. I remember thinking that my year 8 maths teacher was just gorgeous! My first sexual experiences were with men – more because I thought that's what I was supposed to do.

My first long-term relationship was with a woman and started in 1989. We didn't meet in the best circumstances. She was in another relationship and had a small child. I managed to convince myself that it wasn't wrong of me, because it was her decision. She was older, she was far more experienced … and she was also the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me.

On our first date, we went to have coffee in the most secluded café we could think of … and one of the church elders walked in. There was just no place to be, where you couldn't be seen.

We lived in Fremantle for about a year, then she decided that she wanted to study in Tasmania, and I followed.

***Q: How did you tell your family?***

**G:** By then, my partner was already around all the time, and had been to family Christmas lunches … but we had kept the façade of the 2 separate bedrooms. Dad was perfectly accepting. Mum was always a little challenged. But she decided that, if it was a choice between the church and her daughter, she would choose her daughters every time. So that was brave and fabulous!

***Q: What was life like in Tasmania?***

**G:** We lived north of Launceston, in a little holiday village called Kelso. My partner's ex-boyfriend (who followed his son to Tassie) ended up with a man, and they lived up the road from us. Then, after a while, we all moved in together – in Rowella and then Hobart – when my stepson was about 3.

But I desperately wanted a child of my own. One of my housemates found an advert in a gay magazine, from a man who wanted to father a child 'with some involvement welcome, but not necessary'. I ended up meeting him in a pub to discuss whether we would be compatible, and, after a lot of thought, we decided to parent together.

***Q: I imagine this was before IVF was readily available?***

**G:** Yes. We knew no-one who had done this, so we had to find our own way. He did do some health screening first, but the rest was DIY. We literally tried a turkey baster until we realised the proportions were all wrong! Fortunately, a lesbian GP friend was on hand to give good advice.

I had a home birth. In retrospect, a large part of the reason was that I didn't feel comfortable or accepted in the medical system. I just couldn't deal with any judgement or shaming from staff. Evie's dad and other mum were both at her birth, and I didn't want to have to explain who everyone was each time the nursing shifts changed.

***Q: And homosexuality was illegal at the time.***

**G:** Well, it was sodomy that was illegal (targeted at gay men). But Launceston was a place where you absolutely couldn't hold hands. And in Hobart, it was likely somebody would wind down the window and hurl abuse at you and throw cans. Some men would get beaten up just for looking effeminate. It was a rough time. So, everywhere you went, you'd be on guard.

People think this stuff has changed now, but … From 2013, I entered a same-sex relationship again after having a long-term heterosexual relationship. I moved back to Perth in 2014, and my partner would fly back to Tassie to visit family. When we were saying goodbye at the airport – just a hug and kiss like every other couple – people would yell stuff. And this was 2014, 2015, 2016 …



Gillie
*Photo Chris Hill*

It's not only the abuse. There's also the exhaustion of constantly having to decide whether or not to correct people when they assume your partner is opposite-sex.

Now, I've had the good fortune to meet LGBTQ+ folk who are a bit older than me, and I can only imagine how much harder *they* had it … but there was plenty that was tough for me, and there's plenty that still is tough.

***Q: How were you involved in the queer community in Tasmania?***

**G:** The lesbian community in Tassie was very small. That first relationship lasted 10 years, and I completely identified as a lesbian at that time; it didn't occur to me that I was bi. When that relationship ended and I entered an opposite-sex relationship, I felt like I could have no part of the lesbian world. I mean, there were women's nights, but I couldn't go with my male partner. I lost the lesbian community and my support system.

It's funny … my straight friends don't care whether I'm in a same-sex or opposite-sex relationship. Whereas, within the queer community, if I'm fluid in terms of who my partner is, some of my friends struggled. I really think that's something that we should call out within the community.

***Q: We bisexuals can feel very invisible.***

**G:** Yeah, and not very 'legit.' There's that whole thing of lesbians not wanting to date a bisexual woman because you're going to 'go off with a man.'

***Q: Have you been involved in activism?***

**G:** In Perth, I did lots of activism around racial equality, including land rights, and protesting apartheid in South Africa. In Hobart, I was involved with the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights group working for gay law reform. I remember going to a public forum about de-criminalising homosexuality. It was in a church – I'm not sure what denomination – and the pastor of that church was the most venomous human I have ever met. This was meant to be a man of God, and he had 5 little kids who were just speaking complete hatred.

I also helped produce *Lilac* magazine, for lesbians in Tassie. I did a good year and half of community stuff like that. But once Evie was born … I was really protective of her and her privacy, so avoided a high profile. Evie is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. She grew up to be really outgoing, an LGBTQ+ ally and community member, and more than happy to share our story with the world!

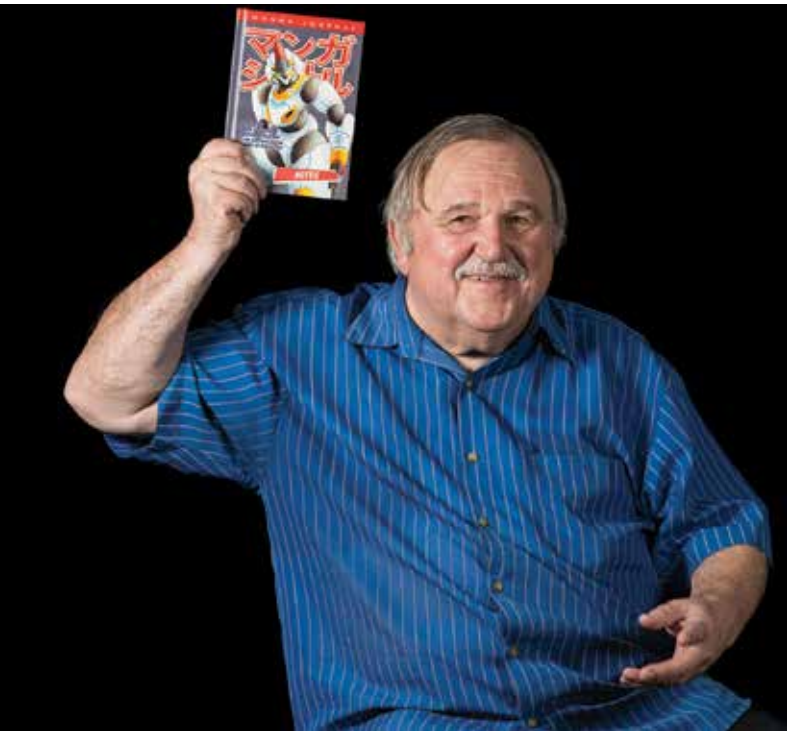
***Q: Do you think being a 'queer' person has made you more inclined to stand up for the rights of others?***

**G:** I think so. We have that experience of being othered and being a minority, and stepping outside society's rules. In a way, that gives you a freedom to challenge other rules.

A special interest in justice is really common in neurodivergent people (I'm late-diagnosed autistic and ADHD). Justice and fairness has always been core for me, long before I had any awareness of my sexuality or neurodivergence.

There are multiple aspects to my life that led me to feel different. I experienced childhood trauma – small 'T' trauma, but it was impactful, and taught me to hide. And I knew I was different to other kids. Some of that was sexuality, and some was neurodivergence. But I had no language for the sexuality until I was in my 20s, and no language for the neurodivergence until my 50s. And so, now that I have all of those, I know that I'm a 'neuroqueer' human. Both aspects are integral to who I am. ■

# JJ



**JJ:** I'm 70 years young. I'm Polish by ethnicity, but my family comes from Belarus. Both my parents were born before World War II.  My father was born in the Soviet partition and my mother was born in the Polish partition (that's pre-1939 borders). Both my grandfathers fought on opposite sides in the Russian Civil War.  One for the Bolsheviks and the other for the Polish nationalists. My parents met in England as refugees after WW II. I was born there in 1953. In 1954 we moved to the US and lived in Jersey City, opposite NY City from 1954 to 1974.

***Q: What was your childhood like?***

**JJ:** I have always had a rebellious streak. When I was 5, a priest at my Polish-Catholic primary school threatened to cut out my eyes and ears if I couldn't learn to read and write. I made a fist and punched him in the face – then I ran for it!  I wasn't hanging around with such a crazy person running the school. I almost made it out of the school when Mother Superior caught me and spanked my backside for daring to strike God's representative on Earth. My mother then put me in a government primary school.

***Q: Your parents were very religious?***

**JJ:** Yes – really conservative. Their idea even of *heterosexual* sex was that the guy always had to be on top of the woman. Anything else was abnormal. So, as a teenager, there was no way I could talk to them about my sexuality. At that time there was no gay support group in the high school and internet did not exist.

***Q: How did you discover your sexuality?***

**JJ:** Through reading 2 books when I was 16.  The first book was Ann Farraday's Dream Power. This book introduced me to self-analysis of dreams as a way of understanding yourself.  The second book was David Reuben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)*. There was a boy, about 2 years younger than me, who I kept dreaming about. The dreams were sexual and romantic. We had met (in real life) on the music scene. I played trumpet in a jazz rock group and high school band and violin in a youth orchestra. I came to the conclusion that I was bisexual through reading and dreaming.

JJ
*Photo Gregory  Helleren*

***Q: Did you ever 'come out' to your parents?***

**JJ:** Never. My mother would have made me go to the Catholic priest for an exorcism! Or she would have sent me to a psychiatrist, or force me into an arranged marriage to 'cure' me with heterosexuality. My maternal grandfather, who was living with us, would probably kill me for bringing dishonour to the family. Most of my father's family, including his parents, were killed during Stalin's purge and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

But my rebellion continued. I ceased going to church. When I was 18, I became a Marxist, after reading the book *Socialism*, by Michael Harrington. Harrington advocated a democratic socialist view of Marxism. I still have the book and every so often I read it again.

Because the Vietnam War was still going on, and I was an only child, my parents decided to move to a safer country. After a two-month ocean voyage, we arrived in Sydney in October 1972. In order to cure my growing radicalism, my parents enrolled me in the Patrician Brothers' Catholic College in Fairfield. But the brothers sensed that it wouldn't be a good idea to force me to go to Confession. If they had, I would have made up some incredible sins! After all, if one is going to make a confession, make it an outrageous one.

***Q: What did you do after high school?***

**JJ:** I couldn't get into a university in NSW, so we moved to WA in February 1974. That year I attended mature age studies to get into UWA.

In October 1975, I left the ALP to become a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). From February – May 1980, I went overseas to study history and politics with the Yugoslav, Italian and Spanish communist parties. When I got back, I enrolled at Curtin uni and got my social science degree in welfare practice. I later went back to uni to become a qualified social worker.

I worked as a social worker at Centrelink for 20 years. A lot of that time I was a workplace delegate. My union was the Community and Public Sector Union/Public Sector Union (CPSU/PSU). We covered Commonwealth public servants. In the last few years, I became an unpaid union official. In that 20 years, I was also a delegate at the Kalgoorlie office and became a co-convenor of the Goldfields Union Committee which was part of the union campaign against the Court Liberal state government's Third Wave industrial legislation which sought to limit the rights of workers.

At various industrial actions, including strikes, I would at times lead members in singing 'Solidarity Forever'. When I came back from Kalgoorlie, I became a member for a few years of the Working Voices Choir (I sung bass).

***Q: You've led a very political life.***

**JJ:** I've had a long involvement in the labour and union movement. My first industrial action was when I was 5. I walked a Teamsters Union picket line with my father during a strike. I joined my first union when I was 14 – the Jersey City local of the Musicians Union. In Australia, I was a member of the Moulders Union for two years, and when unemployed, a member of the Unemployed Workers Movement for 3 years. I was one of the representatives of the CPSU/PSU at two Asian trade union conferences in Thailand and India. And in an individual capacity gave a lecture tour to a Malaysian socialist political party.

After an interlude of membership in the Greens (which I helped form) I've gone back to membership of the Labor Party.

***Q: How did you become involved with the LGBTQI+ community?***

**JJ:** There were gay members in the CPA whom I came out to as bisexual. That's when I sort of started to find myself. I went to gay rights protests with my CPA comrades. I used to sell the *Tribune*, a CPA weekly newspaper at the 'Paddington', a gay bar. Every Friday, during the last drink before closing time, everyone stood up and sang 'God Save the Queens' ('Queens', in the plural).

I got more involved in the LGBTQ+ community during Australia's same-sex marriage campaign. I carried around a backpack with loads of badges and stickers – became a full-on walking YES campaigner. I just felt that we needed to win this issue and the NO supporters were not going to force us back into the closets.

Around this time, I started adding the word 'queer' to my identity calling myself bisexual and queer. Calling myself just 'bisexual' is too narrow an identity.

About 11 years ago I participated in the Tel Aviv Pride Parade. That was a small one, only 100,000 strong. For a few years I marched with the Jewish contingent at the Perth Pride Parade.

***Q: What have your romantic relationships been like?***

**JJ:** I met my wife at a party in January 1984, and proposed to her 10 days later. She was a former Anglican nun, and had left her order in New Zealand 2 years earlier and I was a Joint State Secretary for the CPA. She knew that I was bisexual, and that I'd had a prior relationship with a male. Our friends thought that we made a very strange couple! We married in September, that same year. We had a Quaker wedding, and 3 wedding receptions on the same day. We have one son.

***Q: And are you involved with the LGBTQI+ community today?***

**JJ:** Yes. Apart from membership of the Queer Book Club, I'm a member of 'Acceptance' – the Catholic LGBTQ+ group. I'm a member of Equal Voices – a Christian LGBTQ+ group. I play violin most Sundays at the evening service at St Andrews Anglican Church, which is LGBTQ+ friendly. However, I am not a Christian. My prime religious relationship is with Humanistic Judaism and Reform Judaism. But I also do Buddhist meditation and I also like paganism and witchcraft.

Politically, I'm still an activist. I'm still a Marxist, and I'll believe in working for social change till the day I die. I'm also a co-convenor of the Interfaith Social Democratic Network.

But life is always different; nothing stands still. I have my own contradictions. I'm Polish, with a Catholic background. I align with multiple religions, including Judaism. Australia is my adopted country, but I still identify as an internationalist.

But most of all … I'm a humanist. To me, it's more important that I like someone as a human being, than whether I'm ideologically at one with them. What matters most is that we connect at a human level. ■

# John

**J:** I was born in Brisbane, but I grew up in Rockhampton. My parents got pregnant with me before they got married – scandalous, given that it was the 1940s. They probably moved for that reason, though it was never discussed. Nothing was ever discussed in my family.

***Q: What was your childhood like?***

**J:** It was pretty drab. I mean, we had adequate food and clothing, but it was a tiny, austere house. I always thought that there was another life that I ought to be living. I loved to read, though – I taught myself to read very young.

***Q: Do you have any siblings?***

**J:** I have one brother, 8 years younger. I remember the day he arrived home from the hospital, screeching and cranky. And he remained screeching and cranky for years!

***Q: When did you start to become aware of your sexuality?***

**J:** When I was about 6. I had a friendship with a boy across the street, and we'd engage in sexual play. I suspect that my mother became aware of it, because she disapproved of our friendship.

I engaged in masturbation at night from an early age. Because our house was so tiny, my parents knew, and told me not to do it. 'Wiggling', they called it.

From early adolescence, I had secret sexual encounters with boys that were intense and highly pleasurable, but never led to lasting relationships (which has been the pattern of my life, really). At the same time, I had lasting romantic relationships with girls, but the sex … I could have taken or left it.

At school, there was no sex education. I was aware of the existence of derogatory terms like 'sissy', 'poof' and 'queen', and I knew they applied to me because I was attracted to boys – it didn't matter that I was interested in girls as well.

The school had a highly authoritarian system, and boys in particular were brutally beaten. I was good at schoolwork, so I rarely experienced that. I insisted on finishing secondary school, though my mother wanted me to leave school at the end of year 10 and start making money.

***Q: How was your relationship with your parents?***

**J:** I knew my mother loved me, but there was no expression of that. There was no physical affection. And my father was always angry and disapproving. He had a better relationship with my brother, who was more like him. But he just saw me as bookish, and different from the men in his family.

It was liberating to leave my parents' house and head to Brisbane to attend a teacher's college. I lived with other young men in the residential college, where I made long-lasting friendships. I developed a non-sexual, romantic friendship with a roommate, though nothing was said aloud. We remain friends to this day.

This was 1966, and homosexuality was still illegal. There were no gay clubs … I'm sure there would have been 'beats', but it wasn't part of my knowledge or experience at that age.

***Q: How long did you spend at the teacher's college?***

**J:** 2 years. But I went back to uni – James Cook University – in 1973 (I was 25). That was the same year that *Forum* magazine was first published. It was a revolutionary sexuality journal that helped me develop a sense of myself as 'bisexual.' And it was only a year earlier – 1972 – that the American Psychological Society declared that homosexuality wasn't an illness. So, in my 3rd and 4th year of psychology at uni, I focussed my studies on the history of sexology, gay liberation, and the formation of sexual identities.

I met Lesley and Tony at uni, and the 3 of us ended up in a relationship together. We came to Perth because of Lesley wanted to study here. We lived all together here for a couple of years. Big disaster.

***Q: What barriers did that relationship face?***

**J:** Firstly, we had no point of reference – I'd never heard of anyone else in a multi-partner relationship. We never talked about our dreams for the future together, as though we knew there couldn't be one. And there were points of conflict between us: Some of Tony's overtly gay mannerisms made me feel embarrassed and uncomfortable – which probably demonstrates that I wasn't accepting of myself. During this period, I concluded that it impossible it was for bisexual people to be open and honest and have anything like a conventional or settled domestic and family life. Mistakes made were repeated in my subsequent relationships.

***Q: What was the LGBTQI+ scene like in Perth?***

**J:** I arrived in Perth around 1976. When I first went to Connections – which is a little microcosm in itself – I was wowed that such large numbers of men could be in a semi-public place, just being affectionate and enjoying themselves. I'd never seen that before, anywhere. But the stereotypical way some gay men acted – affected, bitchy – I didn't like and didn't want to be associated with. I just wanted to be myself and not be categorised or 'boxed'.

***Q: What was that time period like in terms of the gay liberation and movements?***

**J:** Lesley was at the forefront of the second-wave feminist movement. You could say I was on the men's auxiliary; when they marched in Townsville on International Women's Day in 1975, I was in the street clapping and cheering. In Perth, Tony was very involved in the gay liberation front, out in the streets marching. But I was not directly involved in anything overt or political. I think I was afraid of being targeted. I remember having a confrontation with our neighbour once, and she shouted over the fence something about '... you filthy perverted people!' So, I was very conscious of social disapproval and hideous attitudes. There was also an embargo on demonstrations in WA; the government passed a legislation in 1976 making it illegal for more than 3 people to gather (sounds like Russia, doesn't it?)

***Q: And the AIDS crisis came soon after?***

**J:** I became aware of AIDS in 1981, when I went to America for the first time. I intended to be sexually adventurous, but there was a massive infection going around in New York and San Francisco. They weren't calling it 'AIDS' at the time, but referred to it as some hideous intestinal disease. It was terrifying. You couldn't get information that was not hysterical from the conventional press or media. It was a very difficult time to work in education because of right wing ratbags screaming about gay teachers being a psychological threat as well as a health threat to children. There were no positive images or messages on any front.

Eventually, I read a *Time* magazine article that described AIDS as a virus in the blood, transmitted through unprotected anal sex. I changed my behaviour overnight; before the AIDS crisis, I never used condoms. Thankfully, Australia had a progressive set of policies and practices around containment and treatment – not just for gay men, but also intravenous drug users. There were some wonderful medical people and community leaders.

***Q: Did you know anyone directly affected by AIDS?***

**J:** There were acquaintances I knew were HIV positive, but I didn't have any friends who deceased. But I was totally traumatized by the whole thing. I did try … I did think about getting into support groups and networks for people who had AIDS. I went to one meeting, but I just found it too confronting. At the same time, I felt guilty about not doing anything. About not being involved.

It took almost 2 decades – the late '90s – before effective medication was available, and AIDS was no longer a death sentence. Only then was there a change in public perception, and the bullying and shaming and threats slowly decreased.

***Q: Did you ever 'come out' as bisexual?***

**J:** I mean, I'm sure everybody knows that I'm not a conventional sexual person. But I'm not into big statements – which probably doesn't fit the criteria of 'out and proud'.

***Q: Are you in a romantic relationship now?***

**J:** No, though I do have several deep and meaningful friendships. I don't have many gay-couple friends, but I see other couples and the way that they relate, and how integrated they are in terms of their family connections. I get it, I understand it … and I guess I'm probably envious that it wasn't my experience. Maybe I was foolish.

***Q: What do you mean?***

**J:** Well … I'm still alone. I am alone now. People may need more supports than are readily available. But I keep busy with my friendships and my work. That's why I've not retired yet; work always provided me with structure and predictability and a framework.

But I still wonder if I should have taken a more conventional relationship pathway, and chosen somebody and stuck with them, or at least had serial monogamy.

**Interviewer comment:**

***If there's a choice between being conventional or living a conventional life, or living with integrity true to yourself … that feels like that's a kind of a choice that you've been having to make most of your life. I think there's a lot of courage and a lot to appreciate about the choices that you've made.*** ■

# Leece Johnson

**L:** I was born in Three Springs Hospital, 1958. My family had a farm at Winchester, which is about 3 hours north of Perth. I've driven trucks for a living for 40-odd years, and road trains for 30. I thought I was the only person like me in the world until I was 20. And it was another 20 years after that before I realised that I wasn't a crossdresser; I was actually transgender. I 'came out' in the early 2000s, and had surgery in Thailand in February 2005. Best thing I ever did.

***Q: The world has changed a lot over the last few decades. What was it like, discovering and exploring your identity through the 70s and 80s?***

**L:** I didn't know where I fit in life. I knew I had this compulsion to be a female, but didn't know anything else; didn't know there were others out there who'd had surgery and all that sort of stuff.

Back then, there was very little information. I got information from magazines like 'Transceiver' – which was run by the Perth-based group, The Chameleon Society (I discovered that group through a column in the Sunday Times, while I was working in the Pilbara). But it was difficult, in that era. Many shops didn't want to know people like me; we had trouble buying new clothes. 90% of doctors wouldn't go near us, and the police used to love us back in those days too. They'd put 'yellow stickers' on your car for 'bald tires' or something else … but it was just because of who we were, and they wanted an excuse to get us off the road. Once, they even threatened to lock me up if they ever caught me out again … but two weeks later, I was back on the road.



***Q: Did you get to challenge them, for their discrimination?***

**L:** No. I don't know how the laws stood, back then, but wasn't game enough to find out. I was on my own. I had to try and deal with it or hide … and I couldn't hide. So I just had to go out and be me in the 70s, 80s and 90s. It wasn't until I discovered computers in the late 90s that I learned there were many other people out there who felt the same way I did. It was in the early 2000s that I came out to family and friends.

Leece Johnson
*Photo supplied*

***Q: What was that like?***

**L:** I ended up writing it out in a letter, so that I wouldn't forget things. It took my parents a little while to understand – and my dad a little longer. But once he met and spoke with a few of my transgender friends, he was cool. I was very, very lucky; most families don't want to know you. My partner at the time – my wife – knew, but she thought she could 'cure' me. I was very busy working at the time to try and make enough money to keep my wife and son in Melbourne at the hospital; my son had a bad heart. He died in 2001. A few years later, I got up in front of my work colleagues and told them I was born in the wrong body. Every person in that meeting was dumbfounded. Some of the guys and girls shook my hand and said 'Good on you' and 'You sure got balls.' I had to tell them that I would not have balls for much longer!

***Q: Did you have negative reactions too?***

**L:** The big boss wanted to sack me – and this is the normal thing that happened back then – but his wife was very accepting and stopped him. The transport manager was also supportive and stood up for me many times. He even offered me a new white Kenworth … but I told him I wanted a pink one! So, he said that if I took the white one, he would put a make-up mirror in the truck for me (I never did get that make-up mirror). True story.

***Q: And I hear you made a bit of a splash, in the industry?***

**L:** On March 14th, 2004, I was interviewed by the Western Australian newspaper about a young girl in New Zealand wanting to become a boy. The interview ended up more about me, and where I was going for surgery, and that I was a truck driver. I got both the front page and page 7 on that day. So, the people who hadn't known about me by then sure did now. I even made a few dartboards around the place. Many drivers stopped talking to me; some got over it, some did not. But that's life. If people cannot accept who I am, that's their problem … not mine.

***Q: How were your subsequent years in the transport industry?***

**L:** As far as I could find out from Yahoo groups online, I was the first transgender person to stay in the industry after transitioning. There were other transgender truck drivers, but they did not stay in that career after transitioning; some tried, but could not handle the abuse, or company would just sack them. I got sacked from one company after the union threatened to go out the gate if I was not removed. And I was a *member* of that same union!

***Q: That must have been very difficult.***

**L:** I was just trying to make a living for myself. I didn't want to be like a lot of other transgender people who had been sacked and just stayed on the dole. That wasn't me. I thought, 'Why should I give up something I love doing just to placate everybody else?'

So, I ended up going through labour hire companies – and that was a smart move, as it turned out. I got a parti-time job at Rio Tinto in Dampier Salt, which only lasted about 18 months. But I met 2 drivers in Karratha who told me to apply for a FIFO job with them at Mitchell West in Cue – and I got the job.

In February 2007, I had been interviewed again – this time by a magazine called 'Truckin' Life.' I got so much acceptance at Mitchells, and things now really started to turn around for me in the transport work force. During one shift change, a new driver stated that, if I ever tried to hit on him, he would 'belt the crap' out of me. The other guys told him that, if he did, he would have the whole shift crew on him. He left within a week or so, after that. I knew then that I had gained acceptance.

I've now been with Qube Logistics in Fremantle for 8 years. I still get the urge to go back on the roads heading North; the Pilbara has put a spell on me. It's too costly to live up there, but when I retire in a few years, I want to take my camera back to the Pilbara again for many more photos!

***Q: What involvement have you had with the transgender community?***

**L:** It started with The Chameleon Society. After I moved to Perth in 1993, I'd go to their get-togethers at the Claremont WISH Foundation. Then they moved to other spots, and I got more and more involved with them. I became their librarian and got a heap of books to help people to learn, you know … about how to dress, how to do makeup … and so on. We had weekends away – sometimes up in the Perth hills – where you could just be yourself, and not have to look over your shoulder all the time. Just have those other people there to meet with really helped me – and lots of other people – to gain confidence and knowledge. The Chameleon's don't exist anymore, unfortunately; I guess they just ran their course on the internet and everything else took over.

***Q: Have you been involved in other groups, since?***

**L:** I started the Facebook groups Trans in WA; 40 plus Transgender; and Rainbow Camping. And then TransFolk of WA came along, and I believe they are doing a very good job. Nowadays, there's just so much information out there on the internet, and it's so much easier for people. Gee … if I had that back then, I could have come out 20 years earlier, who knows? But it wasn't meant to be. And I'm very happy, now. I wouldn't have lived this life in any other way. I don't hide who I am; I'm proud to be a transgender woman. ■

# 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. ■

# Maxine Drake

***Q: How did you realise you were gay?***

**M:** In my adolescence, I thought of myself as neither straight nor gay. I was completely asexual until about 17 when I entered a relationship with an older man – which I now realise should never have happened. But that was the awakening of my sexual self, and it was directed at men because I was *pushed* towards men. For the school social, my family made some poor, random guy go with me. But for me, sex with men never really worked … It was clumsy, I was faking orgasms, and the connection with the person wasn't there.

I grew up in Sydney and went to Sydney University. After failing the first year I came to Perth for a holiday and ended up staying to finish that first Uni year in Social Studies at WAIT.

Through that year, I had three boyfriends. I kind of had that thing, you know … that *obligation* women feel to respond to male attraction. I feel sorry for those guys, now, because I was trying to make this boyfriend-girlfriend thing work and it was just idiotic. But towards the end of that year, I'd made friends with a woman. I was obviously drawn to her. The last night before she left the state to go back over east, we had this closeness and almost a kiss … and then the next day, she was gone.

When I got back to Sydney, I got this burning feeling to find her again. She'd said Stanthorpe, so I got the map out and found it – just over the Queensland border from New South Wales. I was a machine on a bike, as I'd spent the year in Perth doing thousands of km – because I was running away from myself, probably. So, I caught a train to Casino, then got myself over the Great Dividing Range. The trip was a disaster … her feelings were clearly not as strong as mine. So, I flogged my way back to Sydney.

Then I was due to start at New England University, and that was another hotbed of heterosexual madness that I had no place in. One night, in this tavern, I saw two stunning, exotic-looking women; one was dark-skinned and the other had short, ash-blonde hair. As I made my tragic, desperate, puppy-dog way over there, they looked at me, and must have recognised something. I ended up having a frisson with the blonde gal, but it all went disastrously wrong. And so, broken-hearted Max moved back to Perth. I settled into a share house in Kensington. There was a gal there – a hairdresser – who said, 'Max, you know there's this thing called 'gay line' in every city?' And that was the start of it: the dawning. Now I had this awareness, this capacity to have an orgasm and this recognition that I was an okay sexual human being. So, then I just threw myself at women in a kind of frenzy, and I've never really stopped.

***Q: When did you come out to your parents?***

**M:** I was 21 at the time and working at the AIDS Council, so I was immersed in gay life. When I told Mum I was a lesbian, she said, 'You don't have the symptoms.' And I said, 'Well, what are they?' Mum had been working on Thursday Island, and apparently there are a lot of lesbians – nurses, runaways – living there. I think there was a massive migration of queer folk to places like Thursday Island, where you could go and be yourself amongst predominantly female communities. My mum was a stenographer, so she would have been looking over her glasses at these odd characters, and probably recognising they had a subculture. And maybe she thought that, because I didn't wear a packet of cigarettes up my sleeve, I mustn't be a lesbian. She took a while to get used to the idea, which is fair enough – so had I!

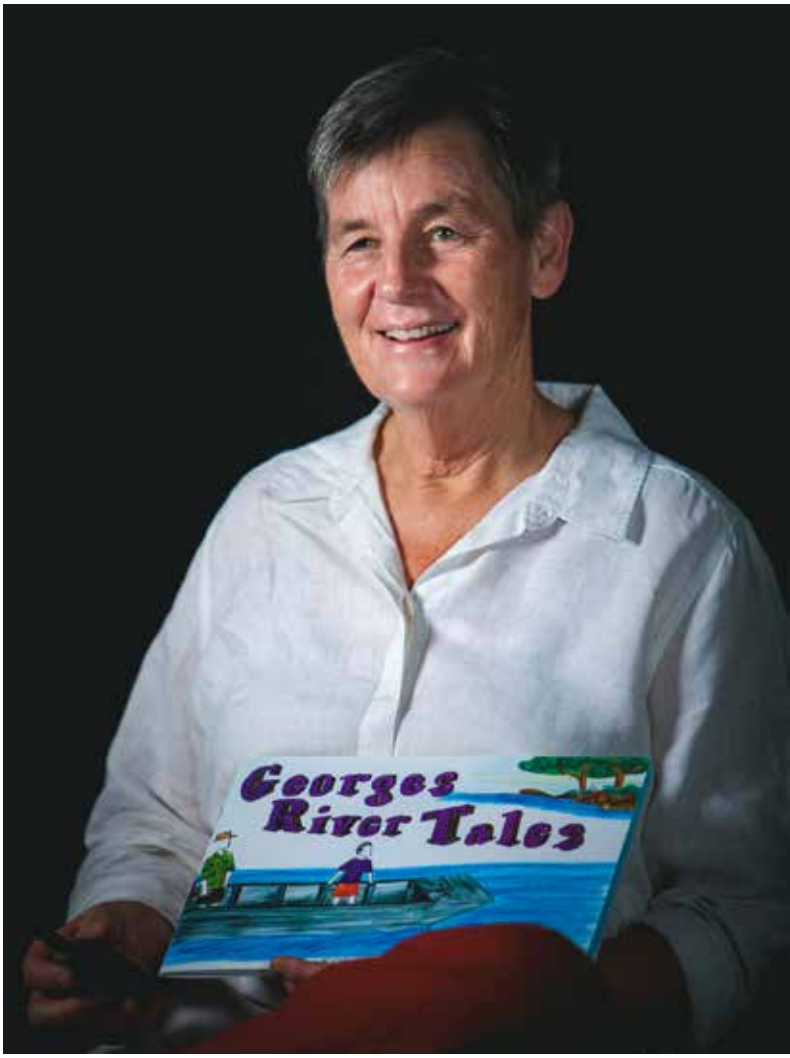
I decided to tell Dad on my next visit. I was washing the dishes and he was drying, which was unusual – I think Mum might have hustled him into the kitchen for me. I said, 'Dad, I need you to know that I'm a lesbian.' And he said, 'Well, love, if you can handle it, I certainly can.' I went off to my room and cried, and then he came and said, 'You know, love, if you ever need anything, I'll always be there for you.' It was just beautiful … Every time I've said anything difficult to him, he's always come out with the perfect answer. So, the return to Perth after that was the real beginning of my 'queer' life.

***Q: When you came back to Perth, did you go back to uni?***

**M:** Yes, I went back to finish my degree in social studies. I gravitated somehow to the Women's Room in the Guild building. And like the saying 'we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us', I benefited from the writers: the fiction and non-fiction authors about queer life and queer history. I suppose what it gave me was a tribe. Like I was part of a group, and my experience had a commonality and could be described.

***Q: Did you find other queer people at uni whom you could connect with?***

**M:** You mean, where did I find the 'lesbots'? See, I was a bit of a solo Lone Ranger: I rode a bike, I didn't drink, I didn't smoke and I didn't do dope. I wasn't very skilled in socialising, I know that. But I did meet people at queer venues, like the Red Lion on Aberdeen Street (which is now the Aberdeen Hotel). And the AIDS Council, when I worked there, was just a ferment of intensity. There were dance parties and events, and no shortage of lovers. I've been utterly faithless my entire life. Every lover I had … I wasn't monogamous. I was just hungry for sex, hungry to connect, hungry for that passion and emotion and that kind of loss-of-self.




Maxine Drake
*Photo Carmal Foster*

***Q: What was it like being involved with the AIDS Council work?***

**M:** It was interesting that some of the lesbian community had words against other lesbians taking part in the HIV/AIDS work. Like, it was all about 'dirty male sex' … like, gay men whose entire social world was gay men – who were still part of the patriarchy. And I really subscribed to lesbian separatism as well; I loved lesbian feminist theory and feminist ideology. And for many women, it was a fucking valid reality; '2-4-6-8, dead men don't rape'. At the time, I was struggling with that thing of 'don't trust any men' … but I had to trust some. But which ones? You can never tell until it's too late. We were still losing a woman a week – and some of her children – because of that fucking complexity of understanding men.

But it was the humanist in me driving my HIV AIDS work – just the raw humanity of that. I was aware enough of the gay liberation struggle to understand that the veiled references to 'should we put them all on Rottnest?' meant there was a potential attack underway on the gains that had been made. The AIDS Council was part of the effort to hold back that reactionism to gay liberation. We focussed on harm minimisation: 'safe sex', not 'no sex'. The AIDS Council in Western Australia was unique in that it had representation from the entire community. And that's because there was a really solid buy-in from the health department, who said, 'Look, we'll fund you, but just never say that we funded you.' There were certainly other lesbians there as well. But some people didn't wear their identity on their sleeve, like I did. I've always been clearly, visibly 'out'. I didn't know how to be any other way.

***Q: Where did you work, after the AIDS Council?***

**M:** I went to the prison system, where I spoke to prisoners about HIV prevention, and to prison officers about universal precautions. God knows why they employed me instead of a nurse, but I carried the tag, 'The AIDS Lady,' and just did my best – the best I could. I spent a lot of time at Casuarina learning how to play pool in the infirmary, in the HIV seclusion ward (sadly, any prisoner who was found to have HIV – even if they were a minimum-security prisoner – went into a maximum-security environment.)

And then I worked for the Health Consumers Council, and now I'm in the disability domain. I see so many parallels between the gay liberation movement and the disability anti-discrimination movement; there is such oppression and stigma attached to people and their families. You've got to work against taking that stigma and internalising it.

***Q: How do you think your earlier involvement in the AIDS Council influenced your career?***

**M:** 'Your career.' That's a gorgeous term. I've never had a sense of a career. It was a 'vocational occupation' as opposed to work. Like, I *lived* it. But I think it probably led to a need for meaningful work with a focus on social justice. Work with the kind of *energy* that comes from trying to change things; from being an agent of change. ■

# 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. ■

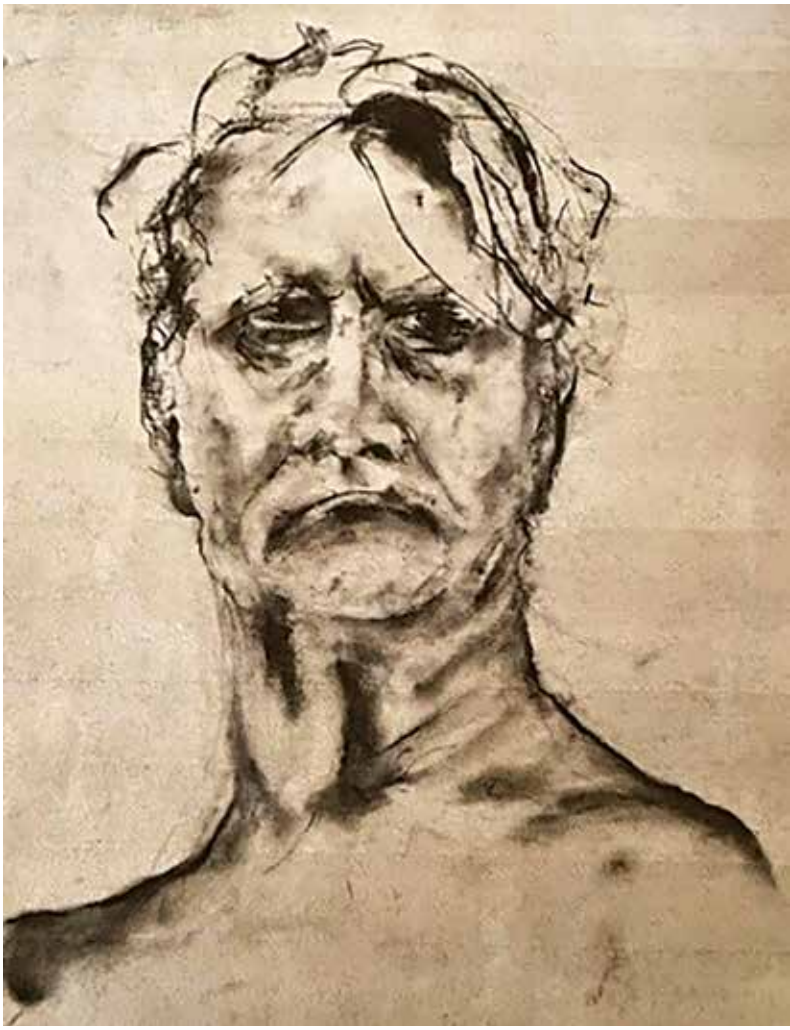
# Queerpeg

Aged five-and-a-bit, I fell in love with another boy. We were inseparable. But when my family moved back to the city, I never saw him again. Not 'til we started university, and I was stupidly too scared to talk to him. I had by then internalised some virulent form of homophobia. And now, in my old age, this has grown into a fear of sometimes everything. Even my sexual identity. And they don't warn you about that when you're young and yearning for love.

I first heard the word 'homosexual' when I was 10. A boy I was having sex with bravely declared that we were both homosexuals, like in the Bible. I dunno where he learned that from.

When I was born, peg-legged and mewling for a gay life, I had no idea about sexual identities or the history of homophobia or religious fanaticism or settler colonialism or any other baggage behind my arrival. I squirmed and wriggled into something like I'd dreamed a boy could be. A wild, free burgeoning slut of a child clambering inchoately, unerringly, towards sexual revolution. And all the while, my mother warned me of the hidden dangers of public toilets, of men with funny voices and of cum-stained sheets. Funny indeed. I hadn't a clue what she was talking about. Though I was fast developing a rasping camp-ish voice. A nascent gay mannerism, learned from where? A hysterical reaction, perhaps, to the stifling rigidity of 1950s white Australian culture? Or an imitation of Jerry Lewis and Danny Kaye movies? Well, that was soon obliterated by an operation on my vocal cords and remedial voice lessons. Talk about silencing the poofs. It didn't work though, Mum. Sorry.

On my 7th birthday I was given a book voucher from Alberts Bookshop and purchased a yellow hardcover copy of Enid Blyton's *The Magic Wishing Chair*. I fell in love with camp little Chinky the pixie. No surprises there. Blyton's whole oeuvre of books for children oozes childhood sensuality. Oh Enid, did you make me gay? Or was it just in the water?



Queerpeg
*Self-portrait*

At 8, I was smitten by the blonde, long-haired boys in Fess Parker's *Westward Ho The Wagons*. Then, at around 10 or 11, I 'came out' as a homosexual to my friends. I sort of had to. I was having sex with them all.

It started when we got told to run round the local footy oval one sports day. I'm hanging off the railings being silly. Start running you boys, says Chrome Dome. So we run, Brad and me, right around to the other side where the teachers can't see us. Brad hops under the rails and down the slope where we become invisible to everyone. He grins at me and says, I'll show you something better than plodding round the bloody oval.

And he did. Something much better than I'd ever done before.

Eventually, Brad says we'd better put our clothes back on. Someone might see us. I didn't care. For the first time in my life, I am free. I stand up with sand in me crack and laugh. We are sandgropers. A defining metaphor for my unsettled life in colonial Western Australia.

As a ten-year-old, I didn't realise this exciting game of possibilities with Brad was a foundational, decolonised moment in my expanding life. The 'queer me' finding out, as they say. From little things, big things grow. And I was growing.

In 1960, daydreaming of what I could do with Brad (get off your bed and play outside), I invented sixty-nining. We tried it out the very next arvo and I haven't stopped doing it since. His donk in my mouth and mine in his. This was home. Not the bleak treeless 1950s subdivided war service asbestos-lined unpainted-as-yet home-to-be. Nup. Sex was my true home.

At the time, I didn't particularly reflect upon the meaning of my feelings. I had sex with boys and loved it. I wanked each night in bed, eager for that feeling of melting into a benign universe, and loved that too. But when it was over I was left with undefined and aching guilt. The French call it *le petite mort*. I continually promised myself I would never wank again. And I continually broke that promise. Every night. Eagerly. Compulsively. Right into my adult life. The guilt has long gone, but I remember. Its real name is homophobia.

One day, holding up my cum-spotted sheets, my mother asked me if it hurt when I pissed. I didn't catch on. Not for a while anyway. Then it became just one more naughty something to worry about. Except when some older guy crept into my bed at night and sucked me off, cos that left no stain. And never made me feel guilty. Although I think I accidentally scared the bejeezers out of one of them.

But you think that stopped me? Not on your nelly. I knew that someone, somewhere, was lying about sex. Without my consent, my body had become a battleground between the skinny naked men and boys I desired and had sex with, versus a dreary mid-twentieth century Abrahamic suburban prudery. Such is life. And has it improved for kids today? It is still illegal for anyone under the age of 16 in Australia to have sex. Something for the Queer movement to brood upon.

One last outrageous highlight of primary school was my grade 7 teacher's claim that I was the world's biggest pansy. She cast me as leading lady to Brad in the end-of-year play for our school concert. I was in me element. Mum helped get a wig and costume together. And makeup. What on earth did she think she was doing? Well, she's long dead and I cannot ask her.

Going into high school, Brad moved away to a new brick-veneered suburb. I never saw him again. Calamity.

My summer holidays before high school were spent at Palm Beach, beguiled with a boy named Kevin. At the end of our two-month tryst, my big sister woke me and said, Go and kiss your boyfriend goodbye, Kevin's leaving this morning. Boyfriend? I'd been sprung! I hid under my bed in shame. And worse, I didn't dare speak to him, even when we both enrolled in the same high school the same year. I never played with him again.

In first year High I sat next to Jurgen, totally transfixed. Oh, skinny tall exotic boy! My mother discovered an unsent very pornographic letter from me to him. White-faced, she and Dad questioned me about our friendship. I shouted back that they were prejudiced against Jurgen because he was German … see, I was learning to be a devious little poof. I also learned it was somewhat outré to be a wanker, and sex with boys was now absolutely forbidden. Even amongst my old mates. The hot sandy fun was now a dry dusty desert. Overnight, I went from being a happy cheerful kid into a grumpy teenager. Its name is homophobia. No wonder that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the great grandmothers of queer theory, insists that homophobia is central to the construction of masculinity. A masculinity that colonises and destroys both straight and queer boys.

Senior high school saw me transferred to a Christian boarding hostel. I fast learned to keep my secrets close. Until a housemother rifled through my belongings and found one of my lovingly transposed Dobell drawings of a fisherman wanking. I was interrogated about my sexual activities, then threatened with being outed to my parents and expelled for being homosexual. My friendships and contacts with other boys were monitored.

At that school were two teenage boys everyone hated. Me included. We knew they were poofs. I hated them because I was terrified of them. They were homosexual. Ugly, pimple-jawed, stoop-shouldered figures, creeping around our school yard. Was I one of them? I learned to act straight. I told poofter jokes. I found myself a girlfriend. But all the time lusted after the untouchable boys surrounding me.

I learned to scoff at our homosexual music teacher. Don Browne. He wore pink cashmere sweaters to work. Men didn't wear pink, or cashmere. Oh my god no. He'd come walking along the corridor and we'd be all, Backs against the walls, boys – laughed out loud so he could hear.

I am a traitor to my kind. Don Browne should have carried a fucking cricket bat and beaten us up. But he wouldn't have. One night he was beaten up in a street attack … and lost an eye, I later heard.

My sister's art teacher was a poof too. The well-known writer, Griff Watkins. He swam to his death off Cottesloe beach when only in his 30s or 40s. These stories are so sad. They should never be repeated.

After school I worked in community theatre and fled at last to the Eastern States and into the arms of Gay Liberation. It was so scarily enthrallingly liberating. At last, we could come out of those awful straight-jacketed lives, spread our wings, flee suburbia and walk along Oxford Street holding our boyfriend's hands. Unafraid anymore. And we must never forget our histories, lest we lose these freedoms all over again. Nor forget, Queer luvvies, our brothers and sisters still suffering. ■

# 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.

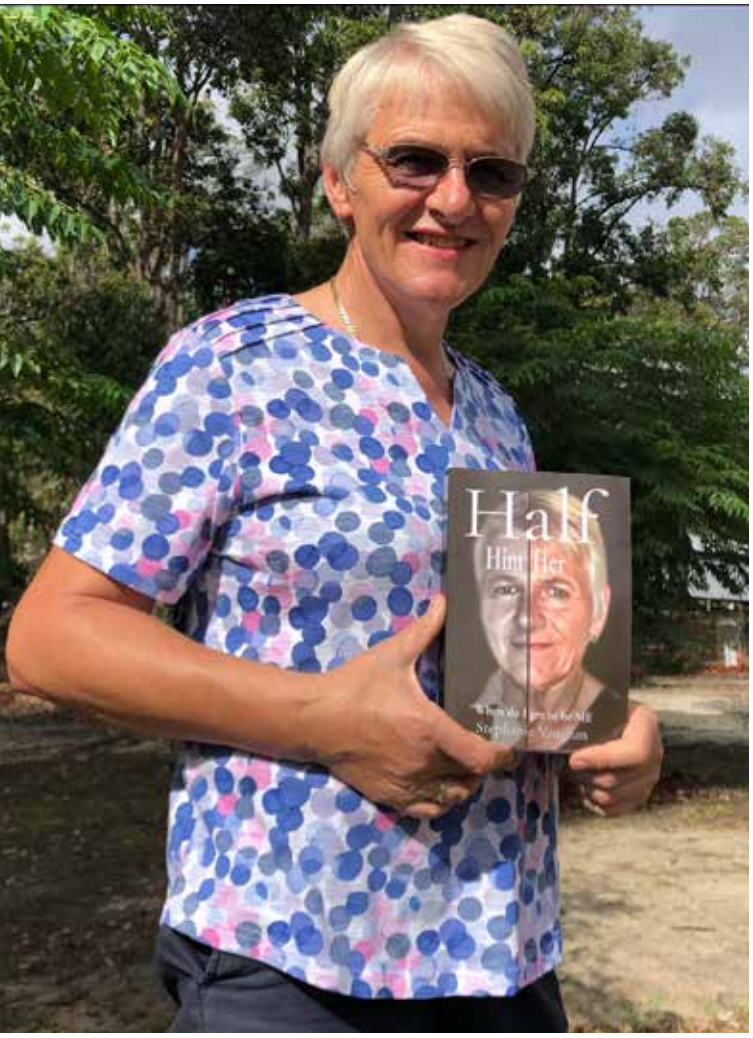
At home, from time to time, I still had to go and pick lemons and oranges, which I always hated doing. But I now knew who I was, and that gave me strength.

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. ■

# Terri Kebblewhite

My grade 2 teacher bent over in front of me. I could see right down her front. A young woman in the 1960s with no bra. I was mesmerized. My first lot of feelings.

In primary school, all the gals had eyes for boys. I didn't see the attraction. I was 9 when the thought struck me: 'I'm different.' But I had no way of knowing how things would unfold.

I grew up in NSW. When Dad moved to Darwin for work, Mum moved with us 3 kids to a unit in Roseville. She was still young, and she hit the gay nightclubs (she was a 'fag hag' – a woman who hangs out with gay males).

I was a latchkey kid. I was still in primary school, but was left taking care of my siblings, cooking, cleaning and shopping. I had so much responsibility, with very little freedom. I knew then that I'd never want kids of my own.

I started working at 12, at Norman Ross Discounts. There, I fell for a beautiful Irish woman, Una, who was years older and had purple nail polish. I never knew if she realised how I felt.

Through my teens, I had both male and female partners. I didn't have the vocabulary to describe myself; I just knew I was a girl who couldn't wear a dress. I didn't feel safe with just a sheer piece of cloth between me and the world. I wanted to wear shorts, but my mum was seamstress. Once, I tore my dress by getting it caught in my billy cartwheels. I thought, 'It's buggered.' But the next day, it was presented to me repaired. Oh, I was *not* happy!

Two-and-a-half years of high school was all I managed. I was missing many classes and was very unsettled. I was taking my mother's Valium, which I'd find stashed around the house. One day, Dad showed up at the school. He stood in the hallway as the bell rang, telling the headmaster he 'couldn't run a two-door dunny, let alone a school.' That was the end of my school life.

I left home at 15, after I'd saved enough money. Mum's last words to me on the way out were: 'Don't darken my doorway with babies!' I moved into a rented room, and later a flat in Manly – right near the ferry, which I caught to get to work. I'd jingle-jangle my way on board in my hippy clothing and bells (well, it was the 70s!). I'd roll my Bank tobacco and light it up. The stale, pale businessmen would peer over their *Sydney Morning Heralds* at me.

At 16, I flew to Perth and met up with my friend, Peter. Deciding to head to Darwin, we hit the Nullarbor in his fabulous HR station wagon.

Darwin was a frontier town in the 70s. It's a pretty flat place, and Cyclone Tracy had blown all the leaves off the trees; we could see for miles. Floorboards and toilets were all that was left of the houses. Peter and I lived in a tent in caravan park. We were partners then, but he knew I was a lesbian.

Peter left town after a year, but I was there for a decade. I had a string of lovers, both male and female. I fell madly in love with a woman who was straight. It caused me great angst at the time, but we are still friends today.

In 1983, I flew to Alice Springs to manage a video shop. It was the time of Pine Gap protests. I heard stories from the prison officers who hired videos; they told me that the arrested wimmin[1] required hygiene products as, apparently, they all were menstruating. The wimmin put all the products down the plumbing and flooded the prison. I sat on the sidelines, wondering how I could enter the Lesbian community.

1 A phonetic re-spelling of the word 'women', adopted by some feminists to avoid the word ending *-men*.



When I returned to Darwin 6 months later, I started knocking around with heroin users. I was a drug user for 4 years, and it was a rollercoaster. One day, I went to the airport and asked for the next flight – which is how I ended up back in Perth.

In the mid-80s, Perth had a lot going on in the wimmin's scene. In those days, we were allowed to have female-only spaces. I started volunteering at Women's Information Resource Exchange (WIRE). I was a 'contact dyke' in the quarterly magazine, *Lesbian Network*. Through WIRE, I met my first lesbian partner, Ruth. I felt like I had finally found the missing piece in my soul.

Around 1988, I went with Ruth to my first Perth Pride Parade. I was horrified at the lack of boundaries by the blokes there, all dressed up in high heels and loud makeup. I thought, *How can this 'woman face' be acceptable?* They felt OK about grabbing you, hugging and wishing you a happy pride. I couldn't get out of there quick enough.

I started work at the Western Institute of Self Help (WISH), a feminist organisation. I was a counsellor specialising in domestic violence, incest and rape. I was also a rape crisis worker, and I worked in a few Safe houses for woman escaping domestic violence. I asked the staff, 'What's the policy if we have a Lesbian couple fighting – who do we allow to enter?' I was met with wide-eyed silence; there was no policy.

In 1989, I was living in Hilton with Ruth. Hilton was heaving with lesbians at that time. I was part of a motorcycle group, Dykes on Bikes. One of our members – and a dear friend of mine – Maxi, moved over to Sydney. I got a letter from her informing me of her desire to transition to a trans man. It was out of the blue. My friends asked me what I – a lesbian separatist – would do if Max turned up? I really didn't know … but I knew in my heart that I loved this person.

Terri Kebblewhite
*Photo supplied*

When I went to visit Max in Sydney, the same person I knew and loved was still there. Max's girlfriend said: 'He used to be real tidy, a bit OCD. Well … since the start of the T shots, he lays on the lounge, is getting a pot belly, going bald, and has no idea where the vacuum lives.' That was 30 years ago. I still holiday with Max.

My relationship with Ruth ended, but my home in Hilton remained a clean and sober space. It was a separatist household. I would warn everyone if a fella was coming to the house (sometimes, you need a tradie). I started to take a leadership role in Perth's Lesbian community. I helped organise the 'Reclaim the Night' rally. There were so many blokes there being rude, but we had support from police, and wimmin lined up between the curb and the marchers.

In 1992, I met Colleen. We became lovers. We took ourselves off on an adventure through WA: 7000km in 7 weeks on her 883 Harley. We returned to Perth for the 'Lesfest' – a lesbian gathering held every 18 months. There was dancing, singing, networking and workshops. We had fellas throwing lemons over the fence, yelling insults. We just laughed and thanked them for their lemons. Goes well in the gin.

After, Colleen and I drove over to QLD. On the way over, we stopped at Wimmin's Land in Wauchope, NSW. The land had once housed a large community of wimmin (though, when we visited, it was largely vacant).

In Nambour, I started a lesbian newsletter. Never before had the words 'lesbian' and 'Nambour' been uttered in the same sentence, let alone in print. There were over 50 addresses I used to send to all over QLD. I also got involved with the Coalition of Activist Lesbians (COAL), and volunteered at the Nambour Aids Council, working at the needle exchange van. I had to be careful not to be affected by seeing the users come to the van.

The Brisbane Lesfest (~ mid 90s) was the first time a 'trans-identified male' had been on the committee. Around the same time, the lesbians of Sydney fundraised nationally and bought a building – it was to house a library, drop-in centre and safe space for lesbians. It didn't last long, because trans-identified males took umbrage and took them to court. The law says that we can't discriminate, so we had to allow them in. The building was sold, and Lesfest never happened again.

Dykes On Bikes also changed their constitution – without consulting the community – to allow non-dykes to ride with them. The word Dyke, for me, means to put Lesbians first and foremost. It isn't about not understanding others who aren't female. My story is never about them. I'm radical (apparently), I'm cranky, and I love my mates to the moon and back. I don't want anyone to think that I am anti- anything except violence.

I live in Albany, now. There has been some visible Pride stuff done in Albany which is great. Blue hair and rainbows for miles. Still – we have lost so much visibility in the Lesbian community. So much has gone underground again (when will we be safely and legally able to have our single sex spaces again?)

The Van Dykes are my crew these days. There is a community of Lesbians travelling and camping around Australia and afar. Facebook is the new way for us old dykes to connect. I love hearing about all their adventures. My home is still open to travelling lesbians. ■

# 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 LGBTIQA+ 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. ■

# Tony



Tony
*Photo Duncan Surin*

**T:** I'm 71 years old. I grew up in the South of England. My childhood was pretty normal: I did reasonably well at school, I was interested in cars, trains, football … and all those things that boys do. I was never interested in playing girl's games, though I had 2 younger sisters I got on well with.

***Q: When did you discover your sexuality?***

**T:** Throughout my childhood, I became very attached to other boys. At school they gave us a talk about growing up; it's quite normal, they said, for people to have strong attachments to the same sex when they're younger - normally, they grow out of it. Well, I reached puberty, but nothing changed. I tried dating girls … I might have broken some hearts when I was young.

At 17, I was developing passionate crushes on uninterested boys. I got totally overwhelmed by these feelings, and tried to take these relationships further. I got into difficulties sometimes by being a bit overbearing. They must have really thought I was a pain in the neck (not a pain in the arse – I never got that far!)

***Q: Had you heard of the term 'homosexual'?***

**T:** Yes, but I didn't really know about being gay. I didn't have any friends who were gay. When I was 16, our English literature teacher read us something by Oscar Wilde. 'The thing we need to always remember about Oscar Wilde,' she said, 'is that he was a homosexual. And like many homosexual men, he was a very unhappy and lonely man.'

In fact, he was neither of those things. But his life was never completely fulfilled because he was gay, and eventually he went to prison for it. So, that was all I knew about being a homosexual.

***Q: What happened after you left school?***

**T:** At 18, I was living just outside London, and working an office job. One day, my colleague brought in a magazine she'd got in London. 'This column ad is for a new flatmate in London,' she said. 'They can be gay or straight … You know what 'gay' means don't you?' I didn't know. She said, 'Well, 'gay' means homosexual and 'straight' means not homosexual.' Ding – the lights came on! I'd never heard the word 'gay', even though London had a huge gay population. This was 1970, when real sexual freedom and liberation was on the rise – for heterosexual people at least. And homosexuality had been decriminalised in England by then. Yet, it was another world to me. I didn't know London had gay bars … Even if I *had* known, I would have died rather than go into such a place; I was too scared.

Back in those days, it was dangerous to be gay. It wasn't unknown in England – and it certainly happened in Australia too – for the police to entrap gay people. They would send a good-looking young undercover policeman in there, and when a guy said anything to him, he'd be arrested. The other danger was getting beaten up. They called it 'queer bashing'. It happened a lot. So, I never did anything. I didn't know anybody gay who I could talk to about this.

In a local paper, I saw a support group advertised for homosexual men. I wrote to the group coordinator and he wrote back, encouraging me to attend the next meeting. But I realised that entering a room full of homosexuals, for the first time, would be a very scary thing to do. I couldn't go.

***Q: But you eventually met other gay men?***

**T:** In the back of a magazine was a section for men seeking men. What you did was, you read the little ads and then went to the post office with an envelope containing your name, address and money. Then they sent it to the person who put the ad in.

I got a reply from a soldier who also lived near Windsor, and we met up. That was the first time I had sexual experience with a man, and it was wonderful. I never saw him again.

***Q: When did you move to Australia?***

**T:** 1974 – I was 21. There were industrial problems in England in 1973: power blackouts, shortages of oil and petrol, strikes … and it was *cold*. My mother phoned me one day and said she and my stepfather were moving to Australia. I said, 'What? Why?' Turns out, they were escaping debts.

So, they moved to Perth. They sent back photographs of beautiful beaches and their nice new car. They talked about how wonderful Australia was, and how everything was cheaper. And I thought, 'What have I got to lose?'

I applied to the Australian government for a visa scheme called 'Ten-pound Poms' – even though it had gone up to £50 when I left. The man who interviewed me said, 'We want young men brought into Australia, to marry the girls here and have families.' Well, they missed out there, I'm afraid!

It was 49 years ago today that I left England. I got a job here straight away. Living cost was low, in those days, and I did well. I was still as lonely as ever, of course.

Then I moved to Bunbury, and met a Christian group. I'd never been involved with church before, but these people cared for and encouraged me. They became my friends. They persuaded me to talk to the bishop about becoming a priest. Before I knew it, I was travelling (in 1978) to attend a theological college in Adelaide.

I expected college to be a terribly pious place. That I'd have to keep the 'closet door' locked and bolted shut. But I found, to my surprise, that there were many gay college men – many of whom were older and wiser than me.

***Q: Did you find romance at college?***

**T:** I fell desperately for another student a couple of years younger than me. Have you ever seen that movie *Alien*, where the thing tries to get out of the stomach? That's what I felt like. This was inside me, writhing and destroying me. I was absolutely, totally besotted with this man. And it was awful. How I succeeded in passing all my exams and getting my degree, I don't know. And then, to make it even worse … shortly after college, he asked me to be the best man at his wedding!

My older, gay friends helped me work through those feelings. They also helped and encouraged me to come out as a gay person, especially in the Anglican Church – which is not always the easiest place to be gay.

***Q: What happened after college?***

**T:** After I moved back to WA, I was ordained as a priest in the Cathedral of Bunbury in 1981. I was celibate, but I continued to have crushes on other men. And I was lonely. I didn't have anybody special in my life, and I wanted it so much.

Eventually, I moved to a parish in suburban Perth. I met a man a few years younger than me who came to the church. The relationship was wild, absolutely wild. If you can imagine someone who's been shut up without any sexual encounter for 35 years and suddenly the door opens … Everything I ever wanted was there, presented for me. Quite how I reconciled that with my work as a priest, I don't know. I kept it separate.

The relationship lasted for 4 months. When he announced he'd found somebody else, I was totally devastated. My sister noticed something was wrong – that was when I came out to her. She was totally supportive. I came out to my mother next. We were sitting in a café on the Rockingham beach front. 'Oh, darling,' she said. 'I've known that all your life.' She was fine with it.

***Q: Did you continue your search for love?***

**T:** After my breakup, I had a time of quite extensive promiscuity. I wanted to meet somebody special, but, as a rule, you don't manage that by hanging around in parks or going to a sauna – which is what I was doing. I was in my 40s when the internet was invented, and I began using chat rooms. I met Duncan, and we started chatting. He'd been previously married to a woman; not a successful marriage. We met up in a pub over in Mt. Lawley, and we hit it off. We began to see each other. He stayed at my place often, and eventually moved in with me – into the church house. How we got away with that, I'm not sure!

I later left the parish and went into other work. I didn't have anything to do with the church anymore. We travelled a bit, then built our first home together in 2006. We still live there now, with our dog.

***Q: And you're married?***

**T:** We got married in 2013 in the British Consulate Office in Perth. When Australia legalised same-sex marriage in 2016, we didn't feel the need for another ceremony. We're very happy.

My old English teacher was wrong. Oscar Wilde probably *was* unhappy and lonely from time to time, but not always – he had a *wild* life! I don't think all gay men are condemned to unhappy, lonely lives. I think your life is what you make it. ■

# Verna



**V:** I want to start with a memory important to me, as a pre-78er. At Sydney world pride in 2023, I had a serendipitous encounter with another pre-78er. I'd just come out of a place off Oxford street (we'd been there for a book launch of lesbian stories from the 70s) and I ran into a man on the street who was stumbling home. I called to him, 'How are you tonight?' We got chatting, and he said something about 'Cappricio's'. He was surprised that I remembered that bar; not many people did. It turned out that he was a dancer and choreographer there in the 70s. That's when I went to all the bars on the scene – in my 20s – after moving to Sydney from New Zealand.

***Q: Can you tell me about your life in New Zealand leading up to the move?***

**V:** I was born in New Zealand in 1948, and grew up there. I left school at 15, and worked as a taxi telephonist and radio operator At 18, I became a psychopaedic nurse, looking after people with mental health problems During that time, I met another nurse … we got on really well, and both lived in the nurse's home near the hospital. We became good friends, then sexual partners … and I guess that's when shit hit the fan.

***Q: What happened?***

**V:** I went out with a group of the nursing girls and came home quite drunk. I vomited on my bed. So, my girlfriend put me in her bed. When we woke up in the morning, there were 3 matrons of the hospital standing at the doorway. I was called into the office of the head psychiatrist. The only time I'd had anything to do with her was when she lectured on psychology and psychiatry. So, we sit down in her office, and she says to me, 'I think you need to have treatment – or leave the hospital.' I said, 'Treatment for what?' And she said, 'Well, it seems you are paranoid schizophrenic, and you have a communication problem.' She had come to this conclusion without having ever spoken to me.

Verna
*Photo Peter King*

So, I put that to her, and said, 'If by 'communication problem' you mean that I don't like sitting around talking about babies and glory boxes and fiancés and wedding rings, then you're right. But I don't think I'll be going and having any treatment.'

***Q: Was it implied that you had to get treatment to keep the job?***

**V:** Oh, yeah. If I'd known then, I could have said: 'Why don't you just call it for what it is? I'm a lesbian.' But they weren't allowed to do that. But I knew there were more girls around like me, university students I'd met who worked at the hospital during the holidays. They said the same thing to my friend, that she was 'psychotic'. She laughed when they suggested it to her. And I thought, well, I would, too! So, then I went home, and told my mother, 'The doctor said that I'm just mad.' And she says, 'Oh. Well … they know.' Because anyone who was a doctor or had stethoscope or a white card … basically, that was it. But I had the gumption to stand up to that, because I had met those other women.

***Q: What did you do next?***

**V:** I was 20 when I handed in my notice. I moved to Christchurch, where a lot of my friends went to university. We'd go to the pub dressed in what we called 'high camp', which was clothes from op shops: old pinstripe suits, or a top-hat and tails. There were a few trans boys amongst us who were saving up to go over to Singapore for surgery. The uni pub let us in, but other pubs wouldn't allow it. They'd pick us up by our collars and throw us out. But we still used to do it.

The uni girls also worked in the shearing gangs, and I decided to join them. They opened my eyes to the fact that you can get out there and have the life you want. I met other women on the gangs, one who was a registered nurse, and one who'd been in the army or navy. And they'd all been 'pushed out' by various reasons other than what had been named.

So, I was working on the gangs at around '69 as a roustabout and a cook. And I remember these Aussie blokes came over – because the shearers went from country to country, following the work – and they nearly wet themselves when they saw women on a shearing gang. At first, they refused to work. But the contractor said: 'This is my specially selected team; the best people. You work with them, or you walk.'

***Q: Was this contractor unique, in hiring women?***

**V:** Not in New Zealand, but I think it was uncommon elsewhere. We also heard stories of friends – male and female – who'd been put into institutional care, because they didn't conform to gender roles. It only took one psychiatrist, one parent. You'd go visit them and they'd be all pumped up with medication and were receiving electroshock therapy. There were rescues that went on, though. I wasn't directly involved, but they'd visit a patient regularly, and one day just walk out with them.

***Q: This was '69?***

**V:** Yes. And so, one day when I'd just had enough of everything, I packed my stuff up, rang a friend, and said, 'Can you tell my parents later today that I've left for Australia.' I moved to Sydney, where a few of the women I'd known had gone. I worked as a telephonist, and then I did agency nursing. After that I went and travelled, up north and back down again, and lived for a short while on the mid-north coast. I went back to Sydney, then traipsed over here to WA. I turned 30 over here.

***Q: Did you ever return to New Zealand?***

**V:** For a couple of years, in my early to mid-30s. That was the first time I had contact with my parents since I'd left.

***Q: How did that go?***

**V:** Well, I don't know. My family's very strange. They're just of a different era. I don't think they knew how to deal with me. I was probably one of the lesbians you saw on telly that kept causing a fuss about needing more women in politics. As I went through life and through jobs, my sexuality never came up. I was just who I was. Never thought that it was something I should or shouldn't hide. But when I arrived over here, I met up with a lot of very strong lesbians; radical feminists. They were political. They went on marches, spray-canned the cathedral: 'Priests don't get pregnant' and 'Repeal abortion laws' … And these were women who set up women's health care houses and helped refugees… Some of them were involved in the Women's Information Referral Exchange, which used to work off St George's Terrace.

***Q: How did the community in Perth compare to Sydney?***

**V:** Well, when I was in Sydney, I wasn't really aware of any hugely feminist movements. Although… in the mid-'70s, I lived quite close to the Women's Lands in Stuarts Point. The Women's Lands was started by a group of lesbians who raised money to purchase about 1,000 acres joining two national forests, which was then expanded to 2 more plots.

Only women were allowed to live there. Many went there with this ideal image, like, 'I can walk through the forest with no clothes on', or 'Wow, I might be able to make a fire by myself.' They knew they would be safe because there wasn't anyone bad. And so, they came from all walks of life – street people, and people who had degrees – and every one of them had their own little ideals about what the land might or might not be. And you got tussles, and you know … But it was lovely to see these women here, able to express themselves. And the women who were living out on the land; they carted everything in and out by horseback because the roads weren't suitable. They had no electricity. They built houses, and some women were quite happy with a lean-to, or a piece of canvas. But it was all built by women, with no electricity. You know, I think people would be quite surprised if they had seen all that, at that time. Even now, really.

***Q: How long were you involved with that camp?***

**V:** I never actually lived there but ended up buying into a piece of property nearby. And I used to go out there quite often. But I was struggling … things were spinning in a way that wasn't going right for me. So, I left, travelled around a while, and settled in Ballina for a few months. I did a massage course, I did my bronze medallion, I did a spring teaching course … And then it was like, 'Now I'll go back to Perth.' I've been here since I was 50. The last 25 years of my life has been solid. In that time, I've worked as an agency nurse and been a handyperson for women's refuges.

Really, in my life, I've been very lucky with who I am and how I've been, because my sexuality has never been something that stopped me. ■

# Vivienne Claire



**V:** I was born in 1960, in Perth, Western Australia. I've been to other countries, but only actually lived in Perth. In my early life, I had lots of different jobs: I was a labourer, I ran a yacht chandlery for years, and then for 25 years I was a computer science academic. I was aware that I wasn't normal for most of my life, but I was ignorant of the reality. I thought of myself as a 'man who wanted to be a woman'. I didn't understand that my gender was female all along, but stuck in a physically male body.

***Q: What was it like for you, growing up in the 60s?***

**V:** The 60s was not a time of self-awareness or open mindedness. The only accepted relationships were between married, straight people. There was also a blurring between the concepts of gender and sexuality. The word 'transgender didn't exist back then, so my mother feared I would become a 'transvestite' – which, in her mind, was a gay man who dressed like a female to have sex with other men. That notion is obviously incorrect. She had no understanding of the difference between gender and sexuality. It was painted to me as a very wicked, evil, and wrong way of being, and I carried that prejudice with me my whole life.

***Q: Was religion involved?***

**V:** My mother was strictly Catholic. She harbored prejudice against many groups of people: Irish, Jewish, Aboriginal … and right at the bottom of the list were the evil transvestites, gay people, and paedophiles. Those 3 groups were put in the same box, and they were the worst of the worst … the only group worse than them were atheists. So, I was emotionally programmed at that young age to believe that I was in the same category as a child molester.

Vivienne Claire
*Photo Gregory Helleren*

Through my teens and 20s, I didn't know what things like 'gender dysphoria' were. I would look at my face in the mirror and not understand why that made me feel horrible. Going to the barbers was humiliating and I didn't understand why; there must be something wrong with me. Then there was the guilt, because I was hiding a secret from the people close to me. I was so afraid that I would be badly judged. It was my secret, and I was going to take it with me to my grave.

***Q: What was your experience with romantic and/or sexual relationships?***

**V:** As I approached puberty, I was obsessed with wanting to be 'normal' – which, to me, meant meeting a woman, getting married and living happily ever after. So, when I realized I was bisexual, I took the part of me that was attracted to men and put it in a little box. I was also attracted to women, so I basically picked the 'accepted' side of my sexuality and ignored the rest. Years later, I realised that, though I am sexually attracted to men, it's not in a 'man-to-man' way. The idea of having male-to-male sex was – and is – repulsive to me. The idea of me being *female* and having sex with a male was attractive.

***Q: How did you cope with gender dysphoria?***

**V:** For most of my life, my coping mechanism was to daydream about being a woman. In those daydreams, I wasn't a man who changed to become a woman. I was born a woman. There was a point where I was suffering crippling irritable bowel syndrome. There were days when the pain was so bad, I couldn't even stand up. I used my daydreaming as a coping mechanism … but there was a voice in my head saying, 'This cannot be. You're not a woman.' So, then I changed to daydreaming about being a *transgender* woman. I was 59 (2019) when, for the first time in my life, I went on the internet looking for details about what it is to be transgender.

***Q: What prompted you to seek answers on the internet at this time?***

**V:** I had been on the internet before, but I had been looking for a cure. So, the second I read something that started talking about transitioning, I stopped reading. But I reached a point where the pain was so bad, I was going to commit suicide, or I was going to transition.

After my first failed suicide attempt, I realised I had to transition – even though I knew it would end my marriage and throw my entire life into chaos. After I came out to my wife, there was another suicide attempt because I just felt so guilty about what I'd done.

***Q: Had you already started socially transitioning, at that point?***

**V:** No. I began that process towards the end of my 60th year, in November 2020. I don't think I really understood what was involved in transitioning or what I was letting myself in for. Transitioning was horrible. It had wonderful moments in it, but it wasn't an easy path. I was wracked with internalised transphobia. I spent months in a state of high anxiety and fear. I feared that I was never going to be able to pull this off; never be able to 'pass' as a cisgender female. I didn't think I'd ever get past the fear of not 'passing' and be comfortable in public. It was at this point I became suicidal.

During 2021, I worked with my psychologist to minimise the impact of my internalised transphobia. She explained that I needed to put all that to rest before I went out in public again. I am alive because I followed her advice. I then re-attempted social transition; this one I carefully planned, and it went much better.

***Q: What do you think your biggest misconception was, about transitioning?***

**V:** I thought it was all about surgery and clothes, but there is much more to it than that. Every single phase of transition, even the surgeries, has a huge emotional aspect to it that you must deal with. The danger was that I was going hell-for-leather. I wanted to get to the end of the transition process as quickly as possible.

***Q: What was the hurry?***

**V:** The hurry was driven by two things. One, I was 60 years old, and I've only got so many years left. The second was that – due to my internalised transphobia – I wanted to get to the point where I could pretend I was a cisgender woman and no one would know I was transgender.

I watched hundreds of YouTube videos by transgender people. But the nature of YouTube means there are certain subjects that are censored because they might be too triggering, too dark. It's just that, if you're going to go about transitioning, it's the dark bits you need to know about. The bright and happy bits you don't need to manage. So I was in a hurry, I was going too fast, and I didn't know all I needed to know.

***Q: Would you like to share anything about your transition process since then?***

**V:** The types of surgery I decided on were facial feminisation, breast augmentation, and bottom surgery. I decided against voice feminisation surgery when I found out how horrific the recovery is.

I was 62 when I went to Spain for the facial feminisation surgery. I wasn't fully prepared for the recovery process and the time it takes for your brain to adjust to your new appearance. There were about 30 other transgender women there all having the same issue: the rest of us could see the change was good, but each person thought the surgery had gone wrong.

My most recent procedure – only a couple of months ago – was vulvoplasty. This type of surgery creates genitals that look the same as a cisgender woman, but there's no vaginal cavity. If I was young, then I would most definitely have had the full vaginoplasty, because I would have more time and more strength and resilience to help me through the recovery. But I'm very happy with the results – though there are still emotional issues that need resolving.

***Q: Will you be celebrating Pride month?***

**V:** Yes! Last year, for the first time in my life, I was in the Pride march. All those people on the sidelines, acknowledging you and cheering you on … after a lifetime of me thinking the opposite. It was an experience so positive that, even if I have to get there in a wheelchair, I'll be in it every year for as long as I can swing it. ■







50
Connections
1975-2025









NEVER STOP DANCING










# FOREWORD



I never had a grand plan to run a nightclub. Certainly never imagined I'd do it for most of my adult life. And if you'd have told me that one day I would be asked to write the preface to a book of stories about Connections Nightclub, I'd have laughed at you. Not because I couldn't imagine it happening, but because I couldn't imagine such a book being published without the storytellers getting sued and/or arrested!

But we can, and we have. Shared places and shared stories are two of the very things that define a community, help make it strong. And we have both.

Since 1975, Connections has witnessed 50 remarkable years in the history of our people; years both wonderful and tumultuous, reflecting incredible change, adversity and resilience in our community. And, by virtue of its location in a small, isolated city, it has been a hub for all of our community, all the colours of our rainbow family – and then some! This makes it even more special and precious.

Connections has been a mirror to change, and part of its legacy, I hope, is the active role it has played in achieving that change.

It is, in the end, just a disco, a place of laughter and forgetting, of ephemeral joy … But it is also a place of incredible memories; memories fuelled by the gamut of emotions. Connections has witnessed all the big themes of life: love, friendship, sex, death and passion. It has awakened and nurtured feelings of freedom, belonging and release. All under the sparkle of mirror balls …

**Tim Brown**
**Current co-owner of Connections Nightclub**

**February 2026**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Perth's most popular lesbian DJs • Show by Bronte
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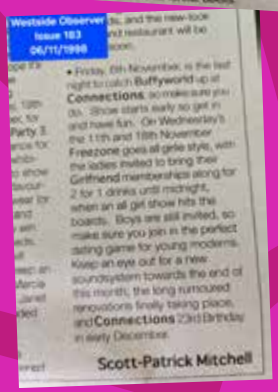
Westside Observer
Issue 183
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Scott-Patrick Mitchell


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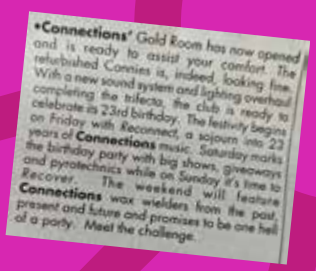

'Connections' Gold Room has now opened and is ready to assist your comfort. The refurbished Connies is, indeed, looking fine. With a new sound system and lighting overhaul complering the trifecta, the club is ready to celebrate its 23rd birthday. The festivity begins on Friday with Reconnect, a sojourn into 23 years of Connections music. Saturday marks the birthday party with big shows, giveaways and pyrotechnics while on Sunday it's time to Recover. The weekend will feature Connections wax wielders from the past, present and future and promises to be one hell of a party. Meet the challenge.


Julie and Dave, Connections


TRANS TASTIC 2016
THEATRE & CULTURE
MUSIC
FOOD

# ADAM COOPER

Connection's Nightclub has a very special place in my heart, and – given that I was born in 1976 – has pretty much been there all my life. We've grown together, through good times and bad. There was a period between 1994 and 1997 (guesstimating here as the exact details are a bit hazy!) where we would go out 6 days a week, only resting on Monday (mainly due to the fact that most places were shut that night).

*... men would stand and watch the dancers shake their rumps ...*

I remember Connections once being a bit smaller, a bit simpler (for lack of a better word), and even a bit darker – not that this made it any less fab! My favourite night of the week was Wednesday, which was a male only night called 'Reach'. Back then, the layout of the club was basically a dance floor and a wall of glass or clear Perspex to the side where men would stand and watch the dancers shake their rumps. I recall being both the voyeur and the exhibitionist on several occasions.

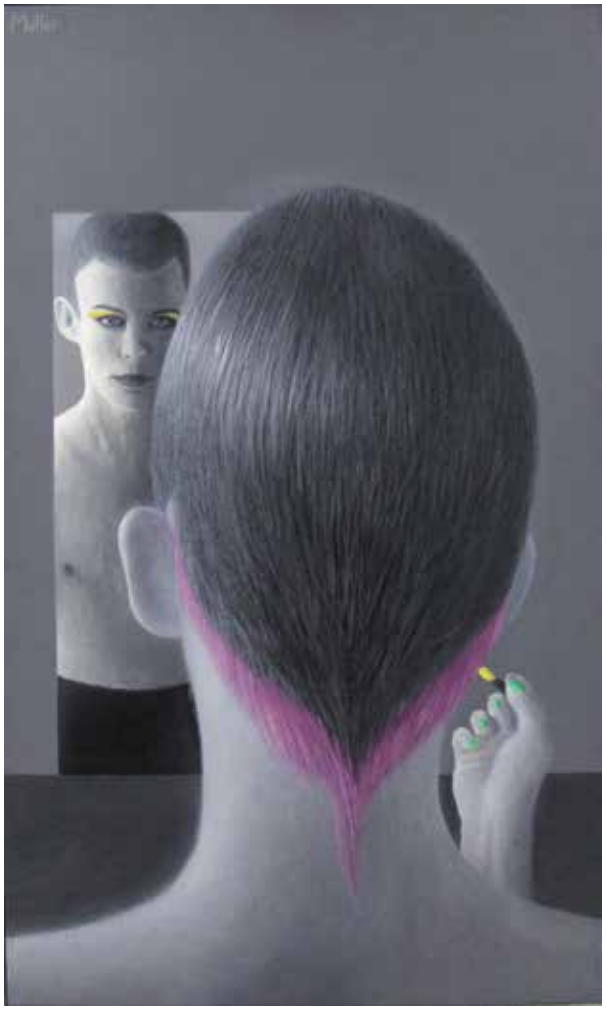



Another anecdote I just must share ... One night at Connie's, I dragged my Mum and Sister-in-law upstairs and a lovely lady came up to them and proceeded to tell them what a cute couple they made. It really was quite funny, and I always try and bring it up at family get-togethers.

On that happy high note, I'd like to wish Connie's a very happy 50th – and here's to many more!!!

# ALAN MULLER

In 1978 I was a young emerging Perth artist who had not yet come out. Connections had the reputation of being a den of iniquity, so going there was seen as a daring thing to do. One Thursday night, a friend talked me into going and I met my first male partner. With my new boyfriend as a model, I began painting artworks that expressed my coming out and the tidal wave of changes in my life.



***Making Up*** by Alan Muller
Acrylic on canvas, 1985
Collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia

*Reproduced with permission from the artist.*

A friend saw my paintings and encouraged me to try and show them to a gay audience. He suggested I speak to Colin Griffiths, who was the manager of Connections. My first gay themed painting, Tamas, was exhibited in 1979 at Connections on the wall above the stairs and illuminated by a spotlight to dramatic effect. Over the following year, 4 other works were exhibited.

At the beginning of 1981 I found more inspiration at Connections. New young people in strong make up and new styles of clothes heralded the New Romantic and New Wave movements. Performers at Connections like Natasha and Audrey were a very long way from the feathers-and-flounce look of old drag miming Broadway songs. Songs they chose were contemporary and edgy. The popular culture influence from London's Blitz Club and Japanese Kabuki gave a whole new look to drag, make up and clothes that were boldly experimental and theatrical. I finally got the courage to ask some of the Connections performers to model for me. Audrey, Natasha, Pricilla Perfect and Sweet Jane all posed for photographs from which I created paintings that became a central part of my exhibitions at Gallery 52 in Claremont in 1981 and 1983.

Perth was not a big place, and Connies was like a big mixed bag of lollies with the unexpected lurking in corners. The very loud music was fantastic, with lots of thumping disco tracks, but at times the DJ would throw a curveball and suddenly play something like 'Highway to Hell' by ACDC. So many people smoked cigarettes, that, through the night, the cigarette smoke slowly became a thick fog.

*Connections had the reputation of being a den of iniquity, so going there was seen as a daring thing to do.*





In 1982, I was shocked to see a work colleague at Connections. With his 'bush bogan' look of denim and very long hair, he swaggered over to me and said he had come to Connections to 'have a look'. The following day at work he said that he was disappointed by Connections because, even when he went to the toilet, no-one had attempted to 'molest him'. My colleague discovered that the Connections crowd were actually very cool and friendly people.

With a mix of ages and people from all walks of life from across the city, the Club brought everyone together to have a great night. It was a community of some truly inspiring people.

Connections – *Happy 50th!*






Connections

# ANDREW DOUGLAS

I first went to Connies in January 1978 with three straight friends. It was the first time for all of us. I was thrilled as I'd never been to such a venue owned by, and specifically for, gays and others who didn't fit the then 'neat' sexual categories.

*I was thrilled as I'd never been to such a venue owned by, and specifically for, gays and others who didn't fit the 'neat' sexual categories.*

Initially I was a little intimidated by the novelty but soon embraced the experience. It helped that I was with other supportive friends: a woman I'd known since primary school and her two housemates, who were a heterosexual couple. Never will I forget that first time!

As it was a more closeted era, don't think photos were encouraged at the time. However, I still have the original top I wore that night: a simple sheer pale blue hippie-type thing with embroidered flowers on the shoulders front and back. What's more – my Mama had bought it for me for $5 in 1978!



# CARL FREEDMAN

I had just moved to Perth … heard about a nightclub about to open. An advert in the Sunday paper in the personal columns. What to wear, how does the hair look, how do you get in. Arrived early, walked past a few times then walked in, up a long steep staircase into a blaze of lights, music and people. Trying to look casual, in 6-inch platform shoes, tight-as jeans … open neck shirt and an afro.

*You felt comfortable to be with your people, safe to express, be camp, flirt, and just let go.*

The bar was so high, even in platforms the bar staff looked down at you and smiled. I remember seeing a person I had met at Swanbourne Beach, nerves at saying 'Hello'. The drinks kicked in, the music was full disco, the dancefloor beckoned. You felt comfortable to be with your people, safe to express, be camp, flirt, and just let go.





*The people you met became your tribe, a connection. They were like you, trying to just see where they fit in.*

Leaving late at night was sometimes stressful, as some people in the straight community took it upon themself to hassle and bash ('poofters') as they left – so you never left alone. The people you met became your tribe, a *connection*. They were like you, trying to just see where they fit in.

I went on to work in gay establishments through people I met – the sauna, Feathers restaurant and Trish's Wine Bar. Many people are no longer with us, but through Connections, GAY PERTH had opened its wings.












c Photo







# COLIN LONGWORTH

**Connections: The First Time**

I remember my first visit to the club. Having heard of the place, I walked past the entry door probably 3 or 4 times before seeing a group – about 3 or 4 guys – walking towards the place. I recognised one of them as a fellow from a record store in City Arcade, where I had been known to frequent. For whatever reason, that was my impetus to grab the door handle and walk up those stairs, pay the door fee and venture into the club for the first time.

I walked into a place like no other I'd ever seen. A place where men were dancing with men (I don't recall many women being there). Where one would see men showing affection to other men. Somewhere high up was a slide projector flashing 'beefcake' pictures of men onto a screen (as I recall it) hanging from the ceiling. When I first started going there, Connections probably only had one glitter ball, spotlit from time to time to send flashes of light around the room. Later, the number of them increased considerably, becoming (to my eyes) a showcase for spectacular nightclub lighting effects.

Then there was the music. Over the years, one would come to hear disco tracks long before they were heard on commercial radio. When these tracks did appear on radio, they were often in their shortened version, not necessarily the full version – like The Village People's *'San Francisco (You've Got Me)'*, or, later on, Donna Summer's 17-minute disco classic *'MacArthur Park'*, reworking an expansion of a classic song. There were a few interesting and/or (now) amusing musical pieces like Dame Edna Everage's *'Disco Matilda'* – a disco version of Waltzing Matilda. Then there was ABBA's *'Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)'*, a song played after the midnight hour on New Year's Eve after the bells-and-whistles *'1812 Overture'* ending and the 'over-the-top' musical transition to the New Year at midnight.

Thelma Houston's *'Don't Leave Me This Way'* was another song first heard at Connections, and Vickie Sue Robinson's *'Turn the Beat Around'* (which might have a different meaning for some Gay men of that era!). With all this music coming (rather loudly) through an amazing sound system, you could sometimes feel it thumping through your chest via the huge speakers.



*I walked into a place like no other I'd ever seen. A place where men were dancing with men... Where one would see men showing affection to other men.*

Ultimately, Connections was a place for me as a young, nervous, relatively naïve gay man to 'meet my own tribe', as we would say now, and to come to realise that we are not the stereotypes that may have been depicted (or not) in broader society. Finding Connections was an uplifting entrée into the broader LGB (as it was called back then) community.

# COLIN YOUNG

I was 18 and had just come out to family and friends. I walked into Connections in about March 1979 with my boyfriend and my brother. I remember the mirror balls and the spacious dance floor. Amy Stewart's 'Knock on Wood' was playing, and I started dancing ecstatically to the thumping bass blaring from the loudspeakers. I was wearing ridiculously tight jeans and a flimsy t-shirt since it was a hot night, accentuated by the pulsating bodies that surrounded us.

Everything was a blur of excitement as I felt I'd found my tribe and alternative family. Afterwards, outside, I asked my straight brother what he'd thought and he simply said: 'It's not my cup of tea.' My boyfriend and I laughed at this. From that point on, I knew Connections was a place I could always feel myself and also meet all kinds of queer people. At that time, it was the only queer venue I knew. It was a wonderland of joyous freedom.



*I was wearing ridiculously tight jeans and a flimsy t-shirt since it was a hot night, accentuated by the pulsating bodies that surrounded us.*





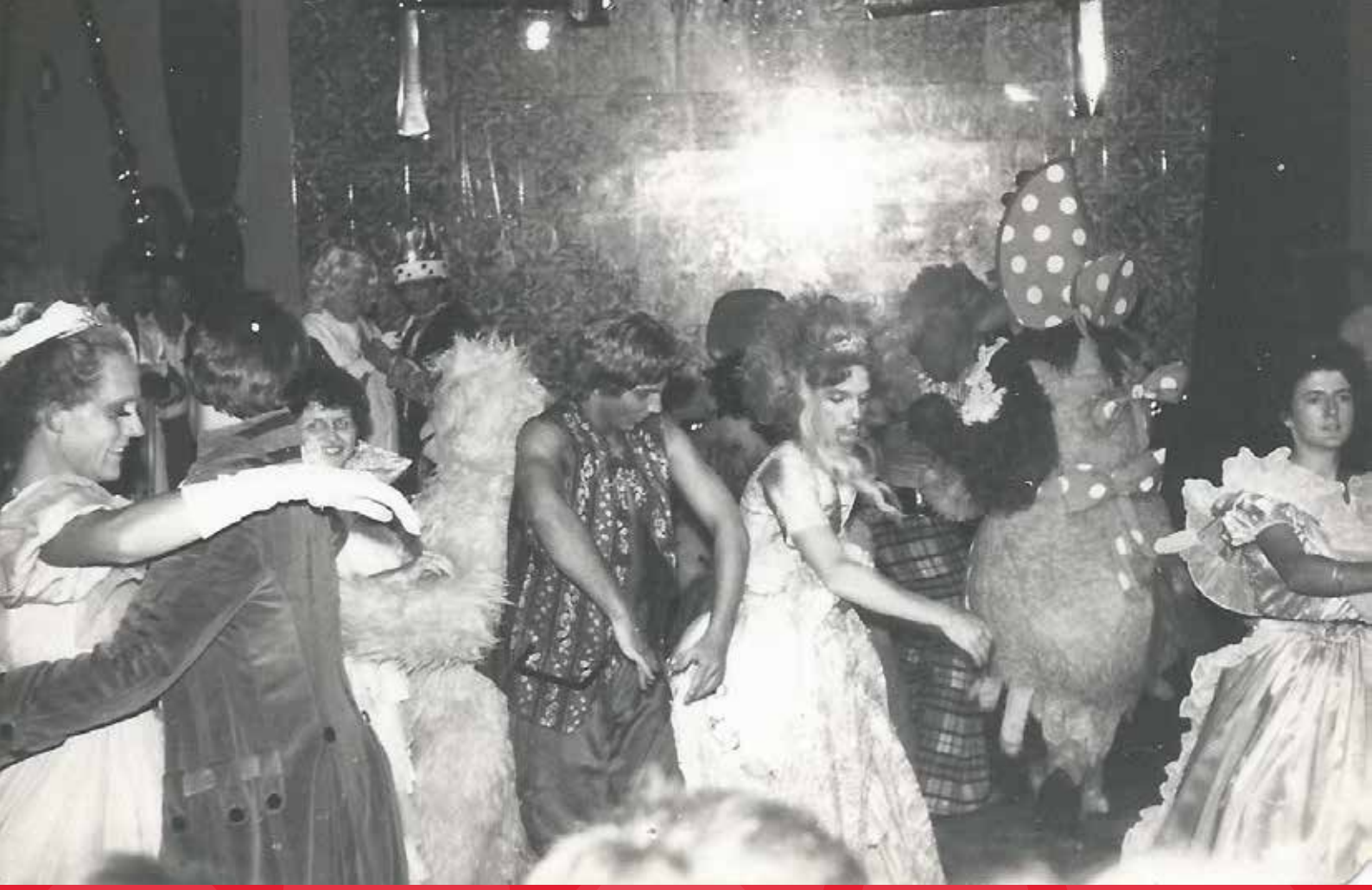

Photomatic Photo











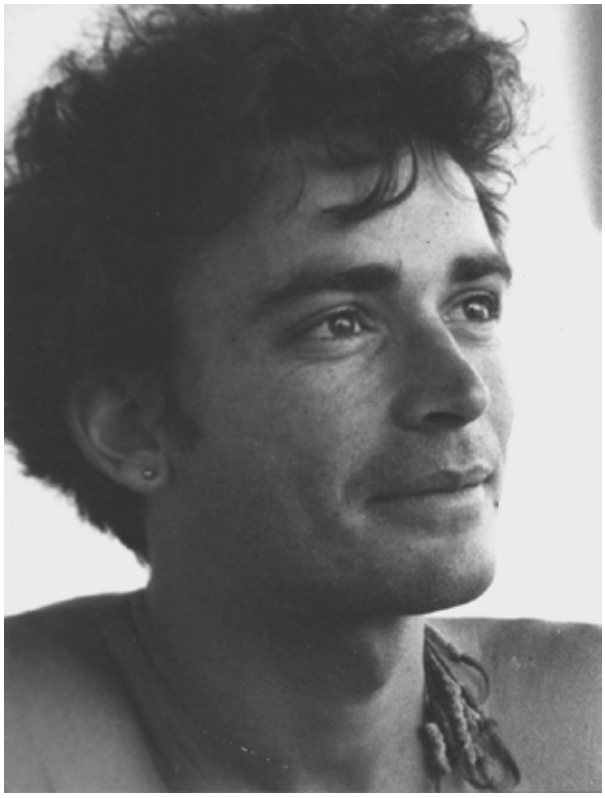



Connections





# FROGGIE LA PONDA



*Attached to the ceiling was a chain which swung out over the dance floor. As I was swinging away, one of the chains broke and I went flying over the dance floor ...*

I worked at Connies 7 different times in the 70s; I've been Bartender, Bar Manager, DJ, Go-Go Boy, and I've performed in many shows. I started working on opening Night as a bartender. Walter – the owner at the time – gave me the task every night before the doors opened to polish the brass lamp at the top of the stairs.

One night, when I was a go-go boy, a sweet and heart-melting thing happened! One of my straight younger brothers was visiting from the East and came to the club. I was up on my podium dancing away in only a G-string. Attached to the ceiling was a chain which swung out over the dance floor. As I was swinging away, one of the chains broke and I went flying over the dance floor ...



As if in slow motion, my brother came running to the dance floor where he caught me – almost naked – in his arms!!! That is one of many-a-story to tell about those fabulous early days of Connections!!!

# GRAEME WATSON

I don't know what year I first went to Connections, but I do know the date: April 24th, sometime in the 90s. My friend Robert took me. We climbed up those stairs, and I discovered a new world.

*We climbed up those stairs, and I discovered a new world.*









At the time, I was still denying to everyone that I was gay, so I was there s an 'ally' with my friend (who clearly saw through my denials). It was a time when being gay still could lead to career death, and, in my workplace, bullying based on sexuality was rife. I loved my job, so that part of me was kept hidden and under wraps.

I remember sitting down on the floor for the drag show – my first one ever! After the show the drag queen said to the crowd, 'It's ANZAC Day in a few hours; rather than going home, go to the dawn service. Go and represent gay people at Gallipoli, because, statistically, some of them had to have been gay.' In that moment, I thought about how life had been for LGBTIQA+ people through the years. My coming out would be years later, but the 24th of April was my first time *stepping* out.


Connections










Women's Team
Head Office


Women's Team














ME IN
ONEY
throw me to
the lesbians

# JENNY SAMPEY

I was at the opening weekend of Connies in 1975 as an 18-year-old. I went with my 20-year-old bestie, Trish Moss, who was out (me not so much) in '75. FYI, I also went to the (sleazy as) Top Hat – as it was called before becoming a gay bar named Connections. My memory of the early days was that there were mainly guys at Connies. We – Trish and I – quickly made friends with the boys and drag queens and the odd brothel madame and spent every weekend there. Slowly, girls started to come to Connies too, especially when they knew how welcoming it was.

I moved to London in 1976 and lived there until '79. On return, Connies had fully come of age – there were many more girls and just great times and new friends. By this stage, I was out of the closet. Having the DJ on the floor next to the bar was amazing! The music of the 80s was incredible, and Connections played it all. We would sign to the DJ, almost like track picking ... Being a huge Madonna fan, we would use our arms to make an 'M', and, sure enough, a huge current Madonna hit would be played. Connies always had amazing DJs, the best in Perth. Perth drag was so unique back then, too, not following anybody else's playbook ... just incredible theatre and entertainment, which continues to this day.

Over the years I was involved in the Connie awards and even hosted a few in the 80s. It became so big that it moved to the new Burswood theatre room, where I also hosted. There was also a few – maybe one – Connie Awards held at Club A at Scarborough Beach. That was probably before the awards moved to Burswood ... it's a blur trying to remember the timeline. The gay scene was pumping; I spent every Sunday night at Feathers, other nights at the Clarendon Hotel, The Red Lion ... always ending up at Connections after the others had closed. (The Court Hotel was also an incredible venue when it opened; so much fun and partying. Can't forget DCs, which was a great venue too.)



I am now 68 and still go to Connections as least once a year, usually after Pride Parade. Connections was home to us. I met a new family there and we were always there for each other. Still friends to this day. The AIDS crisis was a time that is still very raw for those of us that were around then. When I think about the beautiful friends we lost ... it was truly devastating. But we had each other and it got us through, and Connections was a big part of helping us all cope with the grief.

*I met a new family there and we were always there for each other. Still friends to this day.*

Congratulations to Denis Marshal and Walter Furlong, who opened Connies in 1975 – you really gave us a home in hostile times. And congratulations to TIm Brown, who took over the reins in the early 90s and co-owns Connections to this day, and to everyone who has called this place home for 50 years. Thank you for the amazing memories. Let's Party!! 🥳

# JULIE TOWNSEND

I first climbed the stairs to Connections in 1977. For a young 17-year-old kid who didn't fit in anywhere in life ... The moment I entered Connections and looked around at the magic, I knew I'd found my tribe.

Connections was to me a safe space where I could (tentatively) express myself, make like-minded friends, and celebrate. Connections was *joy*, and I am forever grateful.

*The moment I entered Connections and looked around at the magic, I knew I'd found my tribe.*























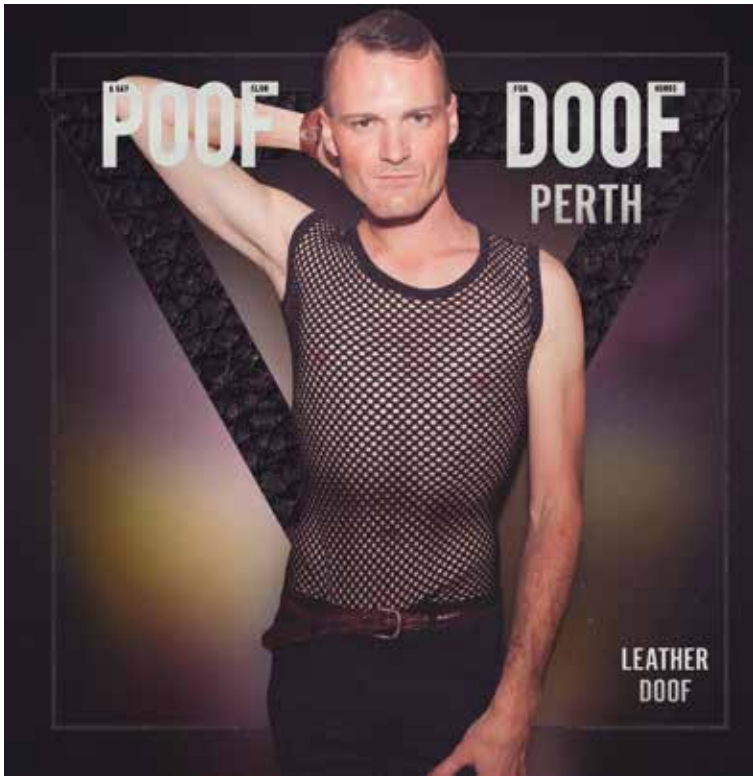


# KYLE KASH

I came out at 22 – which I felt was late at the time, becoming an adult in the late 2000's. My years as a young man, walking the time-old passage from one club to the next across the Cultural precinct, will always be cherished. Making friends, discovering drag, marching in the Perth Pride Parade with OUTinPerth, attending the DIVA Awards, and making out with trysts on arrival at Connies ... these remain treasured memories. I found friends and family at Connies in a way I've not discovered anywhere else in the world. Not NYC, not Sydney ... nowhere.

*I found friends and family at Connie's in a way I've not discovered anywhere else in the world.*

From the days of being covered in rainbow handprints and shirtless dancing after the parade, to seeking shelter in 2017 after being one-punched for not giving a guy 'who voted YES' a cigarette I didn't have, Connie's promised love, safety, and the night to keep us dancing through it all. We partied when we won marriage equality and we mourned communionally when the Pulse Nightclub massacre occurred. We danced in the smoke and laughed under the stars, knowing we had a place that treated us as human and loveable.





# LISA LUSH

### Those Were the Nights, My Friend ♫

Once upon a time, we'd head to Northbridge
We'd climb those stairs, our hearts about to burst
With smoke and lights and laughter all around us
At Connections – see who'd get trade first.

*Those were the nights, my friend*
*We thought they'd never end*
*We'd dance and shine forever and a day*
*We'd live the dream we knew*
*In sequins, pink, and blue*
*Oh yes, those were the nights –*
*At Connie's, we were gay!*

The DJ spun Madonna and some disco
And boys in lace were posing by the bar
The queens would sashay down that bloody staircase
As if they thought they'd be a movie star.

*Those were the nights, my friend,*
*We thought they'd never end,*
*We'd dance and sing forever and a day*
*We'd love without disguise*
*Beneath those neon skies*
*Oh yes, those were the nights –*
*At Connie's, we were gay!*

Through disco fog we found our tribe and freedom
Each heartbeat pulsed in time with flashing lights
When daylight came, we stumbled out together
Still glittered gods from golden Perth nights.

*Those were the nights, my friend*
*We thought they'd never end*
*We'd kiss and laugh forever for a day*
*Though time may fade the tune*
*Beneath that mirrored moon*
*We'll always hear the song –*
*At Connies, we were gay!*

So, raise a glass to every lost connection
And every drag queen who once stole the show
The music fades but still inside we're dancing
At Connections, where our hearts will always glow...

**Happy Birthday, Connies! You made me the Lush I am today.**


CROSS COLOURS








NEVER STOP DANCIN




Cocktail
Lounge
Today's Special
Bloody







# PETER MURPHY

My first experience going to Connections was through a workmate of mine who worked at the large retail store where I worked in the 70s. He asked me whether I had been to Connections. I answered that I hadn't. He said it was a gay nightclub. I was in my early 20s and was very unsure if I should go. Plus, I had never been asked out by another man. This was really a first for me, but I decided to see what it was like.

*I was in my early 20s and was very unsure if I should go. Plus, I had never been asked out by another man. This was really a first for me ...*

I remember walking up the straight flight of stairs to the Club. There was someone at the end of the stairs who let us in. I felt very nervous but also very excited about what it was like! I enjoyed the atmosphere so much that I felt I had to return, so I got used to going there often and having a great time. This was in the 70s when the disco music featured a lot of ABBA songs. I loved *'Dancing Queen'*. The dance floor was always so crowded and so was the bar. I remember some of the guys used to stand near the male toilets in the hope they could pick up someone for the night.



Connections was always a great place to hang out and meet people. When I finished work of a Friday night, I really looked forward to going to Connies. Sometimes we would dance all night until about 6.00am the next morning. Unfortunately, I would have to go to work the next morning with a hangover and throwing up. I decided I wouldn't repeat that too often.

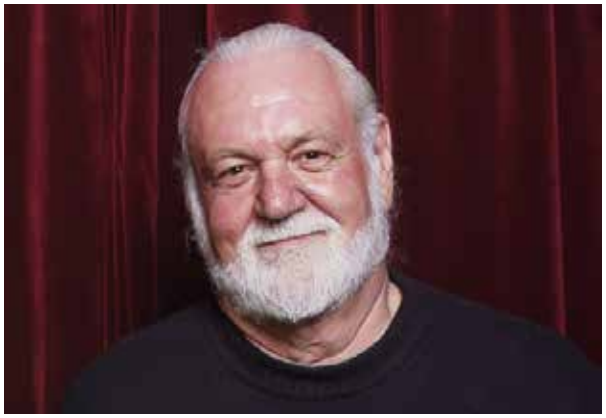
A big congratulations to Connections Night Club for operating in Perth for 50 years. It's the longest running Gay Nightclub in Australia.

# TIM GRANT

## Connies and Me



It was around 1979 when a dear family friend first took me to Connections. We were there to support their friend's debut drag performance. While the show itself was fairly average, the energy of the place was something else – exciting, electric, and unlike anything I'd experienced before. It both thrilled and intimidated me. Although, it would be months before I mustered the courage to return. When I did, I dressed in my best casual beach gear (I was a surfer at the time) and walked in with trembling nerves. The first question I was asked by the doorman was *'Are you gay?'* which hit me like a bolt. That moment was a huge hurdle. I wasn't even sure how to answer that question confidently to myself yet. No one spoke to me that first night, but I knew I had to come back, and deep down I knew that this was to be my new tribe.



Fairly quickly I made friends. I don't recall exactly when I met my first real friend, but soon I was spending time with a group of vibrant lesbians and larger-than-life drag queens. The nights became wild, loud, and full of mischief – flirting, partying, and endless laughter. There was a sense of belonging I hadn't felt before. To this day, I'm still in touch with some of those first wonderful friends. My circle widened after I connected with many like-minded gay friends at 'the club'. That experience helped me open up to others and gave me the confidence to embrace the world more honestly.

Climbing the long staircase into Connies was always a moment of anticipation. The pulse of the music, the loud noise of people laughing and chatting was intoxicating. At the top, Colin Griffiths, the manager, with his long flowing hair and signature tight black leather pants, was often there to greet you. He'd kiss his friends and subtly size up everyone else as they arrived. The bar was unusually high, reaching above my chest, with the barmen standing elevated on a platform. Ordering the cheap beer while gazing up at those cheeky, handsome barmen made me feel like a dizzy schoolboy.

*The first question I was asked by the doorman was 'Are you gay?' which hit me like a bolt. That moment was a huge hurdle.*

And then there were *The Stray Girls*. Their drag performances were nothing short of world-class. They'd strut, mime, and dazzle to the most eclectic music. The crowd would gather close to the stage, sitting on the dance floor, cheering and hooting in appreciation. Their handmade costumes were often breathtaking, tragically all lost later in a storeroom fire (thankfully, the blaze was contained).

Leaving Connections at the end of a night out was never simple. Everyone was gloriously drunk, so there were always endless hugs, kisses, and last-minute stories before ascending the challenging stairs. Many a stumble, twisted ankle, and fall occurred – but always with joy and camaraderie. Outside, small crowds would often gather to witness this flamboyant, joyful exodus. Some were curious, others perhaps closeted. Luckily, I never faced violence or abuse, though some friends weren't as fortunate.

Connections was more than a nightclub – it was a sanctuary, a family, and, for many of us, the place we first found ourselves.


tic Photo


Connections








Connections


50
Connections
1975-2025
GOLD. ALWAYS BELIEVE IN YOUR SOUL.




50

# TIM BROWN

Earlier in our 50th year, we had the idea to do another party. A staff party. One for anyone who had ever worked at Connections. There are about one hundred people currently on the payroll at Connections and, although it hasn't always been that large, multiplying out that number over 50 years makes one realise just how many people have come together to make the magic that is Connections night after night. To throw that party for everyone else and make it seem effortless; to allow people to let loose, lose themselves to dance, but to make sure that they are safe and that they're treating themselves and others with respect. No mean feat at 3 in the morning!

It takes a hell of a lot of work to make all that happen, and even more for all of you to not notice it. But it's a wonderful thing, and that party made many of us realise how lucky we were to have had this experience. In my speech at that party, I said:

> *Most people go out clubbing when they're in their prime, for only a few years. They're young and carefree and, very often, these are the best years of their lives. That's why everyone always says, 'It's not as good as it used to be.' But it absolutely is, for anyone experiencing that time right now. It always was and always will be.*

*We got the chance – and we continue to get the chance – to make the best years of people's lives.*

> *We, however, are a particularly blessed bunch. We got to work in that time—the best years of people's lives and maybe our own, too (whenever that might have been). We got the chance—and we continue to get the chance—to make the best years of people's lives. And, we get to have mad fun with some incredibly amazing people whilst we did and do it. That's not something you can put on a work resume but it's sure as hell going on my life resume, and I hope you can think of it like that too.*



That kind of sums it up. For Connections, and for those of us who have worked there.

My Dad once said to me in anger, 'You'll never understand until you've had children of your own.' And I replied, 'Dad, I've raised more children than you could imagine.'

Being an incredibly handy and capable man, my dad worked with us once on a renovation, rebuilding and restoring that beautiful jarrah main bar (he did also build several Pride floats and many, many other things). Some time later, on a day when we found ourselves sitting together having a sandwich for lunch, Dad looked up at me and said, 'I understand. You have quite a family.'









You see, as LGBTI people, we know, more than most, that we get two families. The one that's given and the one we choose (or maybe it chooses us). We, at Connections, have a family that spans generations. And, like all families, ours is fuelled by strong emotions and passions. Emotions and passions that bind us so closely together that one could only call us family. We too, could write a book … but *that* one is certainly unpublishable!

The photo above shows the Connections staff at closing time – probably 6 or 7 in the morning after another long night. Somewhere in the early 2000s, I reckon, from the set of faces in it. A grainy Polaroid snapped in the moment. And there have been thousands of these moments. Moments of such joy and camaraderie. Exhaustion too, but it doesn't show on anybody's face. Photos like this make me smile, make me so proud of this other family that I have been given.

In the end, it's only a couple of buildings, bricks and mortar, gaffa tape, glitter, and a faint whiff of amyl … But it's much more than that, because it's filled with life, with stories. 50 years of the people who worked so hard every night to make it happen, and 50 years of people finding joy, freedom and release under disco lights. Finding themselves and finding their community.

















# We only came to party !




## MEDUSA MAKES HERSTORY.

Women came from far and wide for this herstory making event. After 17 ? years as a gay male domain, Connections nightclub endured Medusa's big #1, women for the first time had this club all to themselves for ' four hours '. Never before had the club acknowledged the lesbian population of W.A. until we asked them (management). Medusa hosted 350 women wall to wall at the new look club, (by new look we mean white walls and de-chewing gummed carpet,).

Dj Rachel did a wonderful job of keeping women dancing although some women unused to club atmosphere did seem to suffer at times from a volume level designed to send ones senses into another dimension, but gosh we were all women eh? Lots of women came to us with comments like" thank you this fantastic?" and more with "gee I've waited for a decade now to have Women Only at this club" and "it's about f*cking time, good onya!".

We really partied on and as usual women drank vast amounts of alcohol, thereby injecting a very big profit to Connections with the generous patronage that this lesbian community is capable of outpouring, at the time we held this event the club was pretty desperate for clientele and the Connies versus Dc's saga was in full swing. So again, Medusa hosting women's nights at a boys club pulls those clubs onto another level just like we did this time last year when we started our fundraisers at the then dormant DC's , the clubs are starting to realised Medusa can generate them income, but alas they still refuse lesbians women only access on Friday or Saturday nights because the men are too important to turn away **EVEN ONCE A MONTH.!** Perth does seem to be the last frontier for women only events and parties nationwide. Aren't we lucky???

8

## We only came to party !

The most annoyed comments of Medusa's Birthday was "that the atmosphere really changed at midnight when the men had to be let in, as we always tell managers "at least two thirds of the women will leave at that point taking their money with them", As predicted the men do not spend like the women do and both clubs could do well to start to treat the women of perth fairly.

The final comment that has to be made is that after 17? years as a night club one would think Connections would have profitted substantially enough **$$$$** from this gay community to renovate both toilets, by firstly putting **MORE** in, as clients we have a right to a higher health and safety standard in venues patronised by the lesbian and gay communities.

As we began our setting up that night, Linde Ivimey appeared before us with a fabulous sculptured cake for Medusa's Birthday (see above), totally blew us away with such a splendid gift, we did end up eating her after much procrastination and just not wanting to put knife to such creativity. But we did and found her to be the most succulent and moist fruit cake covered in butter icing, the whole thing edible and delicious. Thank you Linde xxxxx

Medusa has her fingers crossed that come **October** when the **Lesbian Extravaganza** will once again kick off **GAY PRIDE** month in Perth, that one of the Gay clubs will give over a FRIDAY or SATURDAY night to lesbians for longer than just FOUR hours!

Excerpt from *The Laughing Medusa* – Issue date July-August Vol. 2, No. 8, 1992.






















CAMP (WA) Christmas Social for men and women 8 pm Wed 17th Dec at club-rooms. 224433.

CAMPAIGN members and friends new nightclub opens this Thursday "Connections" at 81 James Street Hours 9 pm-3.30 am every Wednesday to Saturday. Connections Connections Opening this Thursday.

CAR Leaving 20th Dec for



GRAI

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