



Art by Douglas drawn at age 13— story by Mum, Sue

Last year I attended an international conference which focussed on issues relating to the well being of young people. I was both deeply moved and disturbed as I listened to and observed a group of young people and their parents telling their pain filled stories of being bullied, tormented and marginalised by their sexuality. Sad, sad, stories but also enormously hopeful because of the courage within them that has helped them rise above the taunts and prejudices of others. Very deserving of a listen and a think. JB (more stories in the coming weeks)

Hello everyone, my name is Sue. I'm here today along with my husband, Bruce, to support our 19yr old son, Douglas. For most of Doug's life, due to the nature of my hubby's work, we have lived in very remote locations in the Pilbara and Arnhem Land.

Doug is our 4<sup>th</sup> child and one of two still at home. He has 2 older brothers and an older sister all of whom are married with kids. His younger brother lives at home.

Douglas 'came out' when he was about 16yrs old and has and always will have the support and love of Bruce, myself and all of his siblings.

I want to talk to you today about our experiences whilst Doug was growing up in these mining towns. Fortunately we lived in the one town for the 1<sup>st</sup> eight years of his life and people new him from a baby and just accepted him for the shy, sensitive little chap that he was. He went to school with children whom he had played with since he was a baby. I did get a few calls from the his primary school as they were worried he only seemed to play with girls and had no male peer group. He did have male friends but chose to play with the girls because he wasn't very 'Sporty' and preferred not to play the really ruff `n' tumble kind of games.

My poor boy . . . he'd been hiding in the bush with temperatures of 45 degrees + heat and all the bush flies, snakes etc rather than face the school and his tormentors.

he told us

His dad is a rough tough miner. How do you come home and tell your family everyone is calling you gay!

He thought we would be ashamed of him or embarrassed by him.

hiding

poor boy

.../2

Long before he would have even understood what 'gay' meant. Anyway, what had started as a little thing amongst a small group soon escalated to involving just about the whole school. Doug has always kept his cards pretty close to his chest so as a family we didn't know what was happening at first. We did know something was wrong,

Doug was withdrawing ever more into himself, spending hours alone in his room.

Friends weren't coming over to visit, invitations to hang out with other kids dried up. He started being 'too sick' to go to school. It took a lot of patience and coaxing to finally get it out of him that he was having a terrible time at school. Lets not pussyfoot around here, this was a mining town, full of rough tuff miners and their kids.

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He thought we would be ashamed of him or embarrassed by him. Of course unbeknownst to him we had discussed the issue of him possibly being gay since he was a toddler and not because we had any problem with his sexuality but we were worried about the rest of society's reactions.

Everyone wants the best for their kids and we worried about him being discriminated against or even injured by other people's ignorance or prejudices. With good reason as it turns out.

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**bullying**

as a passing thing, you know the old adage of 'ignore them and they'll soon get tired of it'.

I thought 'how bad can it be?' If you have never been bullied you cannot really understand how completely soul destroying it is.

Day after day of abuse, taunts, physical violence, with what seems at the time no end to your torment.

Once he finally told us what was going on we made contact with the school for help. Doug was reluctant for us to do this as he felt it would make things worse. Well, the talk-fest began.....they gave great lip service to their 'no tolerance' policy about bullying. Offered counseling for Doug with the school counselor and held 'talks' with the main instigators etc. But to no avail, Doug was right, it got worse, a lot worse. He was becoming more and more withdrawn, everyday became a nightmare for him, but for me too.

What do you do when your child is pleading with you at the door not to make him go but the education dept demands you send them or you will be breaking the law???

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My days were spent on the phone desperately trying to seek help but we lived in a remote community with VERY limited services. The school psyche visited maybe once a month, the waiting list for local medical center's mental health nurse was months long, I'd rung every bloody government dept that I thought could help us only to find most of the remote services consisted of 'leaving your name and number on their answering machines' and maybe after 3 weeks or so someone might return your call. Only to tell you that they won't be in your area for another 2 months, 'would you like to schedule an appointment'. When he finally got to see the school psyche for all of 20 mins he didn't open up much and who can blame him.

He's a 14yr old boy with zero self esteem who's been tormented mercilessly for months and this person he's never met before wants him to tell her all his deep dark secrets.

Hmmm. Anyway she called me after their meeting very excited to tell me that all is ok.....hallelujah, Doug's NOT GAY! As if we cared about that. But she feels he's very depressed and have we considered getting his family doctor to put him on anti-depressants?' She'd given him 'strategies' to cope with the bullying.

hmmmm.

I thought things had finally settled down until a short time later we received a call from the school to ask why Doug had not been attending for the last 2 weeks. My poor boy hadn't been wagging school at the local shops or fun parlor ('cos there aren't any) he'd been hiding in the bush with temperatures of 45 degree + heat and all the bush flies, snakes etc rather than face the school and his tormentors.

He told us he wanted to die.

I rang the school psyche and demanded she help us and her suggestion was to pull him out of school now! Easier said than done. Our battle with the ed dept began. He was below the legal leaving age so we had to jump thru a million hoops and find him alternate education before they would release him. They didn't help us or offer us any alternate ways of educating Doug.

We have since found out we could have accessed SIDE which is a distance education scheme for home schooling etc. We did find a wonderful lecturer at our local TAFE who took him under her wing and enrolled him in the adult education program there. This satisfied the ed dept but when I read his release documents we realized they were still reluctant to admit they had a problem in their school with bullying, they had cited Doug's truancy as the reason for his release. Nothing about the school being an intolerable environment for him. Hmmm.

Ok wrapping up, Doug excelled under C's (no mention of names) tutelage, got a part time job and a big chunk of his self esteem back. We moved back down near B (country town). Doug went back to High School (very bravely I thought) and met a great bunch of kids which included K (bless his cotton sox). K introduced him to True Colours. Jaye you are a dead set bloody HERO and we are happy to be here today to tell our story if it helps you help other kids in this situation. Doug is still recovering from his bullying experiences but we'll get there. Thank-you ladies and gentlemen for listening to what I've had to say.



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