

# CONVERSATION STARTER

“POSITIVE  
LEADERSHIP IS A  
GAME-CHANGER.”



Not many councillors quote a career highlight as walking in a Pride March, or being MC at a suicide prevention forum. Cr Geoff Ellis does – and there should be more leaders like him.

**WARNING:** This story contains themes of suicide. If this raises issues for you, call Lifeline on 13 11 14

A ripple can grow into a tsunami of change. This requires people who are willing to be the change makers. Standing up and being counted can save lives as we make our workplaces and communities more inclusive – and Bass Coast has their very own champion in Geoff.

Describing his early life in Sydney as “pretty ordinary”, Geoff was a product of his time. He moved to the New South Wales South Coast for a few years, essentially dropping out to enjoy the relaxed beachcomber lifestyle.



Moving back to Sydney, he got a “real job” and built his moral framework as a union representative. Life led him to Melbourne and eventually Bass Coast where he found work on a dairy farm, honed his skills as a writer and was convinced to run for Council. He won in 2016 on platforms he was passionate about – including reconciliation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, LGBTIQ inclusion and support for farmers.

Being a community leader comes with responsibility and Geoff was determined to be a trail blazer for his chosen causes at Council. He saw a need for talking about issues in general and about suicide specifically. When he had been working in Sydney, his mate took his own life one day after work. “He was upper level management, successful with a good family – he’d actually won the raffle that week. He went home and took his life on the Friday night and we all turned up on Monday and asked: “What the hell happened there? I couldn’t understand it at all. At the time, we didn’t get any counselling or anything and just got on with it.”

Ten years later on Bass Coast, he was more aware and recognised warning signs in a co-worker who was suicidal. He stepped up, keeping him talking, removing him from the situation and then maintaining a close eye on him over time. “It really unnerved me for a while - just talking to somebody who was actually thinking about taking their own life – he was right in that danger zone. I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing, but I just followed my instincts.”

Geoff freely admits that men being silent or not recognising their emotions is “our biggest failing” and is determined to turn that around. That’s why he put his hand up to MC a local community forum focussed on suicide prevention.

“I was honoured to be asked and delighted with the turnout. The room was full of people who were starting a conversation about preventing suicide and I reckon probably 60% were men. I thought people didn’t want to talk about it – but I was really surprised at the honesty in the audience.”

He was especially delighted that a number of key people from Council also attended and came away more informed.

In the lead up to the forum, Geoff prepared by undertaking QPR suicide prevention training online, which he says made him more comfortable to talk about the subject. QPR is like CPR for mental health and includes three simple steps of ***Question, Persuade and Refer.***

“Many people believe that saying nothing is the safest way to help someone who has lost all hope. They worry about using the wrong words or making things worse. Caring conversations matter and you don’t need to be an expert; you just need to be there for them. The key message is that having someone listen with empathy, care and offers of support is a bridge across the abyss of hopelessness.”

The forum also reinforced his commitment to advocate for the groups of people he entered Council for – those who he discovered are most vulnerable. “I’m strongly associated with groups of people who are more likely to leave us far too soon. LGBTIQ, First Nations and farming people are tragically overrepresented in the figures relating to suicide.”

Joining the South Coast Inclusion Network (SCIN) has allowed him to offer further support. “The LGBTIQ Roadshow and the State Commissioner for Gender and Sexuality came to Wonthaggi and SCIN grew from that. There was a workshop with community and stakeholder organisations that identified inclusion and connecting people as important ways to prevent suicide and build stronger communities.”

As a member of SCIN, he made it his mission to become informed and share his knowledge, undertaking training, participating in seminars and advocating within Council and the community. He is especially proud of SCIN being featured in a case study on how councils and communities can work together in a recently released Rainbow Resource put together by the Victorian Local Governance Association. He sees it as high praise and



CARING  
CONVERSATIONS  
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endorsing the need for councils and organisations to show leadership in their communities.

Geoff notes that his chosen platforms were not on the mainstream agenda at council when he first came to office. “They were kind of like an add-on. Inclusiveness wasn’t apparent across the whole organisation, you had to go looking for information and people to talk to. Now, support for diversity and positive mental health is inherent through the whole organisation whereas, when I started, it was a bit unusual to talk about it.”

Positive leadership is a game-changer. When Council’s CEO, Ali Wastie, came on board, she immediately put an inclusive LGBTIQ poster on her office door – within days, similar posters appeared across the building.

“It’s clear that there’s no room for racism or misogyny these days, so you can just be who you are. We created a safe space so no one has to be ashamed or secretive. Ali broadened that space.”



Ali also initiated training for managers about LGBTIQ inclusion, the risks of suicide and the reason why organisations and communities are far better off when they create an environment where people can come to work and be open about who they are. Geoff proudly helped to deliver that training and is even more proud that staff from Council, Bass Coast Health and members of SCIN now march as Team Bass Coast in the annual Pride March.

At the end of the day, big change can often come down to the small things – like simply being willing to listen and providing opportunities to talk. “You can’t expect people to put their hand up in a meeting and say they are having a bad day and need help. Leaders need to make themselves available to talk and get to know people on a one-on-one basis. Then they can notice if someone is going through a rough patch. Don’t be afraid to ask.”

### Geoff’s Key Messages

- Every emotion is valid and it’s okay to cry.
- Talking about suicidal feelings/depression helps prevent suicide, it doesn’t increase the probability.
- ANYONE can get to the point where they feel like taking their own life – that black dog can sneak up on you when you least expect it.

### #storiesstrong

**QPR aims to save lives by providing innovative, practical and proven suicide prevention training for individuals and organisations.**

- How to Question, Persuade and Refer someone who may be suicidal
- How to get help for yourself or learn more about preventing suicide
- The common causes of suicidal behaviour
- The warning signs of suicide
- How to get help for someone in crisis  
[www.qprinstituteaustralia.com.au/](http://www.qprinstituteaustralia.com.au/)

This article is part of the #storiesstrong suicide prevention campaign which highlights a series of twenty articles developed by a diverse range of people with lived experience of suicide and experts in the field.

**Stories Are Strong** is an initiative of the **Place-Based Suicide Prevention Trials** project which is jointly funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services and Gippsland PHN.

For more information visit [www.gphn.org.au](http://www.gphn.org.au)

## WHO TO CONTACT

**Lifeline 13 11 14**

**Beyond Blue**

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**Headspace** [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

**Mens Line 1300 78 99 78**

[www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

**National Centre for Farmers Health**

[www.farmerhealth.org.au](http://www.farmerhealth.org.au)

**Switchboard Victoria [LGBTIQ peer support] 1800 184 527**

**Yarning SafeNStrong 1800 959 563**

[www.vahs.org.au/yarning-safenstrong](http://www.vahs.org.au/yarning-safenstrong)

**Emergency 000**

## WORKPLACE RESOURCES

**Black Dog Institute workplace mental health and wellbeing programs and services**

[www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/education-services/workplaces/workplace-programs](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/education-services/workplaces/workplace-programs)

**VLGA Rainbow Resource for Victorian Councils**

[www.vlga.org.au/resources/vlga-rainbow-resource-victorian-councils](http://www.vlga.org.au/resources/vlga-rainbow-resource-victorian-councils)

**South Coast Inclusion Network (SCIN) Inc** [www.scin.org.au](http://www.scin.org.au)



An Australian Government Initiative



Gippsland PHN acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their elders past and present. We also recognise, respect and affirm the central role played in our work by people with lived experience, their families and/or carers. Gippsland PHN is committed to providing inclusive services and work environments where people of all backgrounds, sexualities, genders, cultures, spiritual beliefs, age, bodies and abilities are valued, supported and celebrated.

