

FINDING YOUR TRIBE

From striving to thriving in a small town



"A MORE POSITIVE
FUTURE DOES LIE
AT THE END OF
THE RAINBOW."

The day the Victorian Government's LGBTIQ Equality Roadshow came to town was pivotal for Helen. It was when she finally started to find her tribe...

For many years, Helen had felt isolated in her home of Bass Coast. Surrounded by those she thought were friends but turned out to be mostly acquaintances, her journey of coming out in the small community aged 35 was a lonely one.

"I felt a little bit on the outer of the community to be honest."

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

Home and work life also threw major challenges and added to her despair. “I was living day to day – supporting my partner at the time through cancer, working in our business and raising my young son. Our neighbours were my saving grace, they stepped up big time and became incredibly good friends.”

“WE THOUGHT, WE’VE JUST GOT OURSELVES AND OUR STORIES, SO LET’S TELL THEM.”

It was a such a bonus when the roadshow bus rolled into town in 2017. “I was just feeling so excluded from the community and separated from what was happening in Melbourne. Just to have them visit and acknowledge us was a big boost.”

On that day, she also met other members of the local lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTIQ) community and allies. “We talked and found that we were all interested in doing something about the invisibility of the local LGBTIQ community. We exchanged numbers, got together and just clicked, there was a really amazing dynamic from day one.”

The small, but mighty group decided to embrace the newly found good will, harness people power and establish the South Coast Inclusion Network (SCIN). “I must admit, it changed my feelings of isolation completely. Those people have become friends as well as colleagues.”

With no money or base, SCIN just gathered around kitchen tables, in coffee shops and borrowed meeting rooms to establish their true purpose and determine how best they could advocate for themselves and their community. Council provided some seed funding for the group to develop a logo and business cards. “At that time, only a small number of people in Council understood



the importance of what we were doing, but through our advocacy and involvement, things have really developed with Council.”

The members attended a workshop in Melbourne with like-minded groups from across the state and this sparked the idea for a storytelling project. “We thought, we’ve just got ourselves and our stories, so let’s tell them.” A lucky, random conversation led to some last-minute funding being given to the group to enable them to create a series of nine films over one very busy year.

Standing on stage at the SCIN Film Launch in May 2019 with the Victorian Commissioner for Gender and Sexuality, fellow SCIN members

and an audience of 60, Helen was able to take stock. “I had felt like no one would ever really see who I was in this town and that they didn’t care. So, to go from that to literally being on stage with six people after working for a whole year on the storytelling project was such a buzz. Also, having the community engaged and service providers being genuinely interested and talking with us around some of the issues presented in the films was huge.”

From little things big things grow as they say, and the SCIN films and lived experience stories struck a chord. “People are often surprised when they become aware of an issue, they look at things slightly differently and start

actually *seeing* the exclusion of people. If it’s not happening to you, it’s very hard to see and understand.”

Helen passionately believes that lead organisations need to be proactive, get involved and make public statements in support of diversity if they truly want to address discrimination. “It’s the only way that people are going to be able to see that our community is inclusive. If someone comes from Melbourne, they’ll go to the Bass Shire Council website and look for signs that such an important organisation actually does see them – the information needs to be there.”

Not just Council, mainstream community groups, sporting clubs, lead organisations, even small businesses can demonstrate that they are supportive of everybody. “Have a rainbow sticker on your window, call out homophobia, Google and educate yourself on how to be inclusive, celebrate events – that sort of thing. A little group like us would never get anywhere just hanging around with each other, we need everybody’s support. Even the smallest gesture means so much. So, I like to think we plant seeds and then people go away to learn more.”

Members of SCIN recently courageously presented to Bass Coast Shire Council’s management team and CEO, telling their stories and explaining the importance of Council playing a pivotal role and being real change agents. Bass Coast Shire Councillors, staff and the CEO marched with SCIN in Melbourne’s Midsummer Pride March 2020 under the banner ‘Team Bass Coast’ – a step forward towards a more inclusive community.

And why does it matter? It matters because every gesture of inclusion is a way that we can work towards less suffering in our communities. Not doing anything often leads to broken lives and even to suicide. Helen knows this first-hand.

“I lived as a straight woman for 35 years and was in a relationship for nine years with my son’s dad – so I know the difference. I’m in the unique position of experiencing the flip

side, to see how people treat me now and how they view me, my relationship, my identity and who I am. I have felt people's judgement that I'd never, ever even dreamt existed because it had never happened to me before."

Helen's advice is to find that 'Magic Five' – those people you can actually open up to, who are really going to be with you in all senses of who you are, not just superficial friendship. She is also positive about her community becoming more inclusive and supportive.

"There's a lot of good stuff happening now and a lot of momentum. I think it would be lovely for people to feel safe to be themselves, but I think it's going to take some time because a lot of people my age and older have lived experience of things like abuse, discrimination and just being pushed aside by their families. There's such a history of events and experiences for people over a certain age that no matter how inclusive our community becomes and how welcoming, they will never truly feel it because of their past traumas. Older members of the community who aren't LGBTIQ have also been through that part of history where gay people were 'sad, bad or mad'. They still carry that and this is another of the challenges we face."

A more positive future does lie at the end of the rainbow, as people move out of their trauma and live in inclusive communities. Everyone can play a part in this vision through becoming more understanding, informed and inclusive.

Five things you can do:

Put a rainbow sticker on your window and website.

Call out homophobia.

Find your 'magic five' friends.

Educate yourself with sites such as www.scin.org.au

Celebrate inclusive events.

"HELEN'S ADVICE IS TO FIND THAT 'MAGIC FIVE' – THOSE PEOPLE YOU CAN ACTUALLY OPEN UP TO"

Finding her tribe on that pivotal day set a new course for Helen. Since becoming involved in with the South Coast Inclusion Network she hasn't felt the need to leave and has found her happy place in Bass Coast with a new partner. "I love the beach and just being at home with my family and fur babies. This is home and I'm really glad now that I didn't leave."

#storiesstrong

WHO TO CONTACT

Lifeline 13 11 14

Seahorse Victoria

www.seahorsevic.com.au

Switchboard Victoria

[LGBTIQ support] 1800 184 527

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

Transgender Victoria www.tgv.org.au

Transend www.transcendaus.org

Emergency 000

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

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