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Queensland homosexual youth still find it a battle to 'come out'

- by Jackie Sinnerton
- From: *The Sunday Mail (Qld)*
- February 27, 2011 12:00AM **(also published in the 6th March 2011 print edition)**



COOL WITH IT: Shelby Dinan-Ouston (right), who has "come out" with the support of her family, is one of the happy exceptions to Queensland gay youth. Pic: Jono Searle *Source:* The Sunday Mail (Qld)

SCRATCH away some of the glitter of this week's Mardi Gras festival and there is a darker element to the celebrations.

While the focus is on the costumes, parade and parties of the homosexual community, many gay youths will be wrestling with their sexuality and finding the strength to 'come out'.

Homelessness, depression and suicide are often the fallout of their struggle.

"Unfortunately, Queensland doesn't fare well when it comes to embracing people's sexuality. There is still a lot of homophobia and conservatism that weighs heavily on a teen who is scared to reveal themselves. And ultimately when you have to hide who you really are it will eventually have a massive impact on your mental health," according to Brisbane psychologist

Paul Martin who was this month named one of the top 25 most influential gay and lesbian Australians by SameSame website.

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Also on the list were young comedians Josh Thomas and Tom Ballard, politicians Bob Brown and Penny Wong, media personality Ruby Rose, and theatre producer John Frost.

Mr Martin, of Lutwyche, Brisbane, received the gong for his tireless work helping young gays in the 'coming out' process.

"The work is my passion as I have lived the trauma. I was brought up in a deeply religious family where I was taught it was an abomination to be homosexual. I lived in deep personal conflict for years.

"I became something I was taught to hate. I joined a Christian group called Exodus that promotes heterosexuality. So you could say I did my best to stay well hidden in the closet. But I saw the light. By then I was an adult and had wasted many years fighting something I just could not help.

"I think my background helps me relate to these young teens. When they hear my story they are more trusting."

Mr Martin counsels teenagers as young as 14 in these matters.

"I once asked a young gay boy why he had attempted to take his life and he said that he had just watched the Prime Minister on the television saying that gay marriage was not an option. He felt that the future offered nothing for him if he was unable to live in a loving relationship. How sad," Mr Martin said.

Statistics show that young gays whose parents abandon them are almost 10 times more likely to commit suicide.

"It is traumatic for young gay people who do not have their family's support.

"There is a deep need for parental approval," he said. "From the age of 13 many of them find themselves homeless. That is hard to take when you are already going through much inner turmoil and probably prejudice from other sources."

Thankfully, said the Brisbane psychologist, the attitude towards homosexuality was slowly changing. He believed hit TV shows like *Glee* were saving lives.

"Gay kids watching the turmoil faced by homosexual teen character Kurt Hummel are bolstered by the idea that they are not alone. Suicide can be a big problem in gay youths who feel their situation is hopeless. A prime time television character like Kurt can reach out to kids in a more effective way than any lecturer or professional," he said.

Support group Open Doors in Brisbane city offers a helping hand to Queensland youth. It helps build resilience in young people with diverse genders and/or sexualities.

Three quarters of these kids have experienced some form of depression.

Julie Ouston of Holland Park West in Brisbane is horrified that any parent would turn their back on a child because of their sexuality.

Her daughter Shelby 'came out' this year at the age of 17.

"I knew for years that Shelby may be gay. I suspected as far back as when she used to play with Tonka trucks.

"There was something about her that was different from her sister," Mrs Ouston said.

"I waited until Shelby was ready to tell me and I immediately offered my support as did her step dad. The transition has been smooth sailing. I am very proud of her," said the Brisbane mum.

"Of course I had the usual thoughts of any mother. Will she get to be a mother? Will her life be hard? But in this day and age a family is possible and I know that she will be happy.

"Maybe it was easier for her because she grew up in a family that showed no homophobia."

Shelby is heading off on her first trip to the Sydney Mardi Gras this week.

Joe Diskett, 18, of Jindalee, in Brisbane's western suburbs, understands the difficulties of being young and going public with their sexuality.

"My mum kind of made it easy for me, she pulled me out of the closet. I suppose I knew for definite that I was gay when I was 13.

"We were living in Scotland then but I wasn't ready to come out to my friends. Only my best friend knew.

"When we came to Australia and I started at Indooroopilly State High, I was a little older and was ready to be open about it. The school was great.

"Of course, there were the usual comments and bad attitudes but generally I was very well accepted.

"Mum and Dad have been rocks. They have been with me every step of the way.

"I know of kids who have been forced out of home because they were not accepted for who they were. It is awful for teens to find themselves on the street.

"There must be the feeling if my parents don't like me then who will? That's tough," he said.

Joe believes that Queensland lags behind the other Australian states when it comes to homosexuality. But with each decade things will improve.

This year the Sydney Mardi Gras Festival has 80 events running over two weeks, culminating in the world famous Parade and Party on Saturday.

The gay community in Brisbane has its sights set on the Big Gay Day on March 13.

The Biggest Gayest Party/Charity Fundraiser of the Year is held at the Wickham Hotel and surrounding streets in Fortitude Valley.
