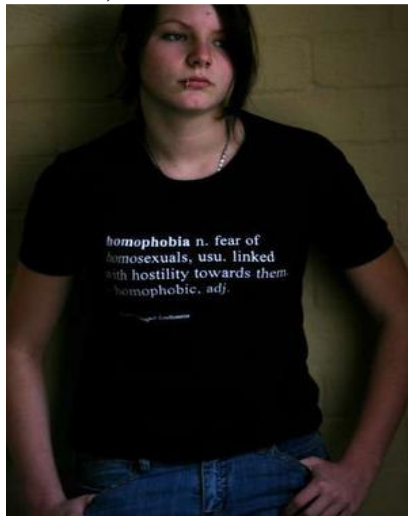


Helping gay kids become part of the in crowd

Orietta Guerrera
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Fighting prejudice: Peta Fisher.
Photo: *Pat Scala*

PETA Fisher's earliest memory of Kyneton is of a group of teenage boys mooning her gay "brother" and shouting: "You're a gay guy — you want some?"

It was 2004 and having just moved from Brisbane to be closer to her ill grandmother, she thought: "Where have we landed?"

Peta's family believed certain segments of the community just needed some time. Meanwhile, her brother Chris, with his "out there" dress style, was often scared to walk down the street. Only a few years earlier he had been welcomed as part of the family,

after being tossed out by his own parents because of his sexuality.

Many also wrongly assumed that Peta, because her mother is gay and her sister is bisexual, was gay.

"They called me a 'lesbian', a 'freak'. They'd ask me how my parents 'do it', and ask me if I join in," she said. "I used to cop that every day."

Struggling to settle into the rural centre, Peta joined WayOut, a small group of Kyneton teenagers and young adults that has been working to combat homophobia in country communities since 2002. Then 14, she was and still is their youngest member.

Yesterday, Peta, now 16, stood before 1300 community and local government representatives at the Communities in Control conference in Melbourne, telling them how WayOut has "worked wonders".

WayOut's rural youth and sexual diversity project is one of three finalists vying for the national Community Idol crown, an initiative of the online community resource centre, Our Community. The competition winner, voted on by the audience yesterday, will be announced today.

The group — which has gay and straight members — meets fortnightly, brainstorming ways to educate the community. They plan stalls at local events, script presentations for school groups, and design merchandise, such as rainbow wristbands and T-shirts with the slogan: "We're all human, it's time to prove it. Fight Homophobia."

Peta said that those who once terrorised her family now stood up for her, and the T-shirts and wristbands were "must-have" items.

Project facilitator Sarah Rogers, 24, said that while WayOut considered itself an activist group, it had also given young people a place to turn.

"Sometimes they see WayOut as a bit of a saviour, because it's allowing them to have a voice, and speak out about an issue that they never thought they would have the courage to," she said.

The project, which began as a pilot, now receives State Government funding and is branching out to rural areas statewide.