

Embracing the winds of change in Warrnambool



Bill Abrahams: "It's 2:20am, I'm wearing my pearls out in Warrnambool and I haven't even been gay bashed!"

I am so glad that the postal vote on same-sex marriage happened while I was living here in Warrnambool, because I needed to make peace with this town.

Growing up here in the 70s, 80 and 90s was not easy for those who knew they didn't fit the mainstream, but couldn't articulate why, other than knowing to talk about it would lead to trouble.

Even for those of us who had long family ties here, there was a pervasive sense of not belonging to the main tribe, of being an outsider.

I used my humour to get through my years at Warrnambool High

School when I knew I had an attraction to girls, but didn't know what that meant, or what it was, or how it would be, and it scared me and I knew I had to hide by fumbling my way through a string of boyfriends and side-stepping the deb ball.

I have since learned that we were all hiding – all of us – Glenn, David, Michelle, Julie, Damien, me – there are probably many others, because to not hide was to face exclusion, to feel ashamed, to be hurt by those who were stronger and more powerful.

Most of us had to run away from Warrnambool to find out who we were. I was gone for 25 years.

This is why the postal vote on same-sex marriage penetrated so deep into the psyche and the skin of those who were at the centre of the poll: we have been there before, except this time it wasn't just a small country town judging us, but the entire nation, as to whether we were worthy of the same rights as everybody else.

And that is why the significance of this vote went well beyond the right to marry, which is something many LGBTQI people still feel ambivalent about. This was a vote on equality and whether, at last, we could stop feeling ashamed and excluded.

Last Wednesday at 10am, we all held our breath.

And then came the sweet release of a YES.

YES. YES. YES. YES.

Two thirds of our corner of the world voted YES.

YES pulls up windows and let's the breeze blow in.

YES opens the doors on our hearts.

YES turns down the volume on hate and ramps up the volume on kindness.

No wonder most of us spontaneously cried when the result came through – including warhorses like Senator Penny Wong and writer David Marr – because a “NO” vote would have been unbearable.

The temptation for many of us living in Warrnambool was to head to Melbourne and await the results on the steps of the State Library together with thousands of others, then – we hoped – party long into the night.

But as my friend Bill Abrahams said later, “it was important to be here” and he was right.



Heading out to the YES party in Warrnambool.

It was important on Wednesday night to be able to stand in what was, when I was growing up, Brebner’s Paint Shop – now the Dart and Marlin bar – and wave a huge rainbow flag while people from all walks of life in Warrnambool joined in the celebration.

Twenty years ago, maybe even ten, this would have been inconceivable. Somebody would have been hurt.

As horrific as the postal vote process was, I am glad it happened, because it gave Warrnambool a chance to grow in ways that I suspect will become even more apparent over time. From the rainbow flag flying above the Warrnambool City Council, to the extraordinary events at the temporary Haven space within the Warrnambool Art Gallery, to the ongoing presence of Yumcha at Brophy, we have shown we were ready for this.

A few days after the vote was announced, Bill posted a photo on Facebook of him sitting in a Warrnambool bar just after 2am. His hair is in an Elvis coiff and he is wearing pearls and a fake fox fur while, behind him, a bouncer dressed in black leans on the bar, gazing off into the middle distance.

“Donna please take a photo. It’s 2:20am, I’m wearing my pearls out in Warrnambool and I haven’t even been gay bashed!” he wrote.

This is the new Warrnambool – a better Warrnambool – and we can all live with that.