

## SHHHH! Libraries in the closet

A recent comment by Jan Richards in the January 2010 Frontline told of her heart-warming experience of seeing an elderly library patron feel comfortable enough to spread out her sewing on the library tables and proceed to use the public space as a 'community living room'.

This got me thinking about who is actually included and who is excluded in our 'community living rooms'. In my role as Internet Librarian at Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria (GLHV), I hear a lot of stories from young people about the blocks to accessing information about themselves. I'm talking about same-sex attracted young (SSAY) people; young people who are questioning their sexuality. Ross, a seventeen-year-old, told me how he found a book about coming-out stories in his public library, but he was so worried about the reaction he might get from the librarian at the issuing desk that he didn't know what to do. Eventually his desperate need for information led him to tuck the book up his jumper and walk out of the library with the book hidden.

"My series of books titled Hot Hits is kept on the school library shelf, but as one school librarian said to me: 'I must confess that I keep this one (Hot Hits Re-Mix) under the counter because of the strong themes about same sex attraction and sexuality'. When I asked her how the kids would find it, she replied 'oh I know who they are and can easily suggest it to them.'" – author Bernie Monagle.

The same author tells another story of other books about same-sex attraction disappearing from the school library shelf almost as soon as they were put there. The books reappeared years later tattered and well thumbed. It took one brave pupil to take the books out or steal them and then pass it around for the not-so-brave to pick up and read.

The Dewey Decimal System as recently as the 1960s still categorised homosexuality under deviants and outcasts. Considering how far things have improved, even in our own profession (gay and lesbian subject headings 305 – 306), it's still a shock to realise that libraries aren't the welcoming community living rooms for all of us.

Over the last few decades the situation for gay and lesbian people has improved dramatically due to factors including decriminalisation in all States and Territories, equality legislation, and greater openness in the media. On the whole this is great news, but it also heightens the uncertainty many people face when deciding whether they disclose their sexuality. Lesbian and gay people still encounter hatred and abuse. Homophobia is still a big problem in Australia. Thirty-five percent of Australians aged 14 and above believe that homosexuality is immoral.

How can you make a difference?

There are many ways in which you can signal that your library is open and welcoming of GLBT people. Imagine yourself as Ross, the seventeen-year-old young gay man. Walk through your library and see it as Ross might. What would you like to see that signalled to you that this library includes you as a valued patron? Is there a section on lesbian and gay topics? Are books about gay and lesbian issues readily available and included in the collection? Are there posters or signs that include you? Are the free gay papers available and on display along with all the other local community papers? Does the library subscribe to magazines directed at gay and lesbians readers?

Not everyone will feel safe or comfortable walking up to the 'gay section' of the library. Can you set up a safe area in your library where an internet access computer terminal and online catalogue

is in a space where other people can't see what the patron is looking at? This way a GLBT patron can look up information confidentially.

You can visit an SSAY support group in your area and ask the young people what they would like to see in their library or take a selection of books of interest to them that they can borrow. You can suggest that they can reserve books online and collect them in person. By meeting you they can feel safe about coming to the library.

It's not enough to say that "oh we don't have those types of clients in our library". How do you know? These are all very simple steps which can be taken to make your library a safe and inclusive space for GLBT people and to truly create a welcoming living room for ALL the community.

The Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria (GLHV) website ([www.glhv.org.au](http://www.glhv.org.au)) although aimed at health providers and GLBTI people, does offer useful information and resources. GLHV also provides service provider training, again check out the website for more.

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