

**I wish we were current**



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were current*

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### Cover Art:

Sam Orchard

Sam is a Dunedin artist who uses comic art to tell stories that celebrate difference and works on community projects that use art to create social change.

Figure 24. A comic art image in which a young t-shirted man is depicted imagining or perhaps remembering himself in a “thought bubble.” Within the thought bubble the imaginer is drawn sitting next to another young man on a two-seater couch. In this scene, the other man orientates towards the imaginer. Their knees are touching and his hand rests on the imaginers knee. A red love heart hangs in the air in front of the other man and two exclamation marks punctuate the air in front of the imaginer, perhaps explaining his wide-eyed stare.

## I Wish We Were Current

**I want people to know that it's ok to be gay and just because you got an ID doesn't mean you can't have a sexuality.**

### Emma

I remember one day I was playing in the yard with Emma. I was 10 and she was 8 years old. I asked Emma if it was okay for me to rest my head on her butt. I sort of wanted to cuddle her and I felt safe and happy around her. But then a family member saw and they started yelling, I was petrified, I wondered what the hell was going on. I was using Emma's butt like a cushion but this family member saw it as something else. I felt guilty when the family member started to yell. We also got caught a few times, kissing, and they wouldn't let us be alone together, but I kind of liked spending time with her.

Me getting into trouble for that kind of thing probably messed up my sexual growth more. Because it's when I started to get to high school and teen years, sexuality was taboo for me. I felt it was wrong to be straight, it was wrong to be gay, or anything. But I was young and curious!

### Cooper

When adults say, don't hang around someone because they are trouble, it makes you 10 times more want to hang with them. One time Cooper and I were in a corridor at school and he told me he shaves his pubes. And then he showed me, but I don't know why he showed me that he shaved them? I didn't see his penis or anything! I just saw the top part, above the genitals. I kept wondering what he was trying to do. I don't know what that's supposed to mean? I remember at the time, it was confusing, and I remember wanting us to experiment.

After finding out that Cooper wanted to shave his pubes I wanted to do the same. I don't know if it's a gay thing, I'm thinking straight guys probably don't care about it? I tried to shave my legs and probably my chest. Sometimes the skin is smooth but then goes all prickly.

### **Coming out**

The word gay can pop in and out of people's minds. People can be in denial or it can be completely hidden. When I think back, it's like I don't want people to know I'm gay because it can be a terrifying thing. I do remember wanting to be with other teens when I was a teen but I felt, this was gonna be impossible. I thought things like, no one would want me, how am I gonna meet someone when I'm stuck in a group home and when you're gay, people think you're creepy.

### **Puppy Love**

One day I was going outside to get something, and a girl from next door, grabbed me and started kissing me. I was like, stop! She just grabbed me and started bloody kissing me. I felt a little bit of puppy love. Well, it was strange, I don't know, I kept thinking I will be straight, normal. Actually, what the hell is normal? Does that exist? For quite a while I was interested or curious about girls. At the time, I thought all people had the same body parts, but and then I realized that females don't actually have a penis. I didn't have gay thoughts at this time, I just felt empty when I kissed girls.

### **Ethan**

When I was 16 I still didn't understand about my sexual orientation, well I didn't have a word for it, I didn't even know about gay. I didn't know the word existed. You don't know about your sexuality or sexual orientation if you can't meet people. But one day, this person Ethan, we were on the trampoline, we weren't talking much, and out of the blue he just said 'I'm gay'. I didn't give a second thought to it, I just said 'I'm gay too'. It's like something inside of me just forced me to say it. I could have done stuff, but I was afraid because of the way that Ethan's carers were watching him like a hawk, all the time.

### **The Diary**

When I was staying with some caregiver, I done this diary of all the confusing mess that was going on in my head. It was like my head was screaming all the time. It wasn't making any sense sort of screaming. It was loud screaming. I was trapped in my head. So, I had to write down in a diary to make sense of it all and figure myself out. It was like a kind of therapy for me in one sense. It started to develop my sexuality. Because of all the screaming, it was like a puzzle I had to put together.

But the problem is one day I had a bit of a tiff with the partner of my caregiver at the time and he read my diary. I found out through a family member later. And that's why I never went back to that caregiver's place again. My family member taught me not to be so trusting. I've learnt after this incident. I don't write anything down, ever.

## **Church and Waffles**

I did go to church for a while, but then I thankfully I moved away from that. They actually didn't know that I might be gay. I didn't feel like I could be open and tell people. There might have been the odd guy I had a crush on. Sometimes we would go to someone's place to have these waffles. That was the good thing about it, free waffles, can't complain. We also went to a bonfire thing, so it was good, but I just felt like if I told them I was gay then I'll probably get rejected and they'll probably kick me out and I won't get to go there anymore.

## **Counselling**

I remember I went to a counsellor and they tried to make me straight. They showed me pictures of women in bikinis, well it didn't work. I felt like I was being forced to be someone I wasn't. I felt this was very controlling. I realized that I needed to figure myself out on my own and not have someone else meddle in my head. I did go to another counsellor and they talked to me about relationships and showed me pictures of guys. Looking back, I wish my support person wasn't in the room with me, I might have opened up more.

## **Learning about consent**

I knew about consent when I was young, but it's not actually based on sex, it's based on other types of consent. And it's not completely whether you've been taught it, because sometimes consent comes to you naturally. It's like 'oh, I don't want to do anything that offends or upsets'. The first time it came to me was when I was on the trampoline with Emma. I do remember, I asked if it's ok to rest on her. And that is asking for consent. It's not invading someone's space.

When I was mentally unwell I didn't really think about orientation and relationships because my mind's not on that. This means when you're unwell, if someone's interested, you won't be able to consent to sexual activity or anything like that because you're not in the right state of mind.

## **Sophia**

There is something that did happen that I just keep being puzzled over, and I don't think it's anything you can call abuse, because we were both young. I think Sophia was a few years older than me, I think she might have been 15 and I was 11. But I didn't really feel into it and I don't know if that's because I was too young? She kept coming onto me and I remember thinking back that I just liked that someone was paying attention to me, even though it's probably for the wrong reasons. She was a bit of a predator, when you think it about it. She was a bit creepy.

Sophia and I were in this abandoned house, sort of abandoned, it was falling apart. Months before this person ripped off the wood boards and I was annoyed because we didn't have

much privacy. I think I asked if I can kiss her but then I didn't feel a sort of rush type of thing. I didn't know if I was too young and not started the changes yet.

### **Dennis**

I was in a van with Dennis and he started to touch me, he was rubbing my leg. He just touched my knee and I immediately got turned on. I actually only started going through puberty when I was 16. Well my body started earlier but my mind, that took a lot longer for me. That took longer to develop because I remember I didn't even have much sexual thoughts for a while. When I think about it, the way the carers reacted I felt it was deeper than our differences. I felt it was because we were two guys. I didn't think about it at the time, but I think that now because I have more knowledge, you know you gain knowledge over time.

### **Sexual Abuse**

I remember when I was about 8 - 10 years of age this older man tricked me into kissing him. I didn't know what he was gonna do and I knew what he did was wrong. I felt quite disgusted by it to be honest. I wanted to tell people about it, but because of my disability, my lack of communication, I didn't know what words to use. I felt I wanted something done about it, I wanted to tell people about it but I felt I'd get into trouble. The thing is, that person might be dead, but I still want justice and I'll always want justice.

My father abused me and my siblings, that is why we went into foster care. I keep thinking back from when I was 18 and people had this assumption about me, that I would be like my father. I just keep thinking it's because of all of that. I don't understand, because, I mean for crying out loud, I even kept an eye on children. When I went overseas I had to keep an eye on my nephew and because of the past, I didn't really want to. I didn't know how to keep an eye on him, because they wander and move around. When I was 16 I did have to look after a toddler for a while, it was hard work, but at the time my main priority was making sure he was okay.

They gave me that responsibility, they trusted me and so I wasn't gonna break that trust. A close family member and I were hanging out one day and she started assuming that I would do stuff like my father did. It made me uncomfortable her saying all that because it was in a public place and someone could hear her. I told the family member I was never like that, I never am like that. With all that was going on, it actually was the first time I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to jump into the ocean and swim far, far away from land, and just see how far I could make it. But I didn't want to brave the cold water so I never did that, because I know how freaking cold the water would be.



## Accusations

These thoughts of ending my life were also caused by service providers, who were making the same assumptions and accusations about me. They were assuming that I was going to look at illegal pornography. I did look at women online, but it was adult women. It was R18 sites, it wasn't illegal. Some of these false accusations might have been because I was making things up to see how the service provider would react. But then they made a big deal about it and it just made things complicated and made things stressful for people. They wouldn't let me get the internet without signing this contract, and actually I didn't understand what I was signing. I felt like the service provider had control over my life. I felt trapped by the contract, if I didn't sign it they would think I had something to hide.

I got accused of looking at pornography on the computers at my computing course too. It's like they've got nothing better to do! They searched through the computers because, from my understanding, if you've accessed pornography, it doesn't matter if you clear that computer, they have a record of who's been accessing stuff. It would all be backed up. They searched and they found nothing. And because of all that stress, I only managed to pass my level two. I don't think I could do level three because of what the staff at the course put me through.

## Leo

Leo and I were friends through this support organization. They had these rules. They said no one can go into your room and you can't hug anyone. The room part was understandable, but when they said hug, I felt a bit creeped out. When they said that, it's kind of like, who the hell do they think I am? One day I saw Leo crying at one of the parties they run every year and I wanted to hug him, but I felt I couldn't even do that. I remember feeling a bit sad at that time.

We met years later again, surprisingly at a course I was doing. I met Leo there and I don't know why I had this really painful feeling in me all the time. It was annoying. It wasn't like an actual painful feeling, it was like a psychological painful feeling. It's like you're being ripped apart.

Leo invited me to a party. I got a few drinks and apparently, I was getting a bit tipsy. Leo was saying that I had to leave. Maybe I was drunkenly coming onto him, I don't know! But they say alcohol brings out your true feelings, it can release what you normally control. So, if you're in denial about being gay and if you were drunk, most likely you would find yourself waking up next to a guy.

But Leo was paranoid and I don't know what was happening, but he said I had to leave, but I didn't really do anything. I wanted to stay, but I've kept thinking that maybe the alcohol, because sometimes you can flirt without knowing it. Sometimes alcohol makes you a bit more relaxed about your feelings.

## Jeremy

Sometimes I have a type but it's flexible. Like someone might come along that doesn't fit my profile and yet I might find myself falling for him. It's like when I first meet Jeremy, I thought he was ugly. Ugly and old. Jeremy wasn't my type but I did like him, I think I was emotionally attracted to him. He smoked, sort of smelt, that kind of put me off wanting to kiss him when we dated. I don't know if our carers even guessed it was happening. I'm pretty sure they might have known what was going on. But they never said anything.

Well one time Jeremy and I had sex in the open air. His family were homophobic and we couldn't do it in the house so we just done it outside. And it's funny cause there were these people that biked past us and I don't think they knew we were there.

I liked Jeremy mostly because of his personality. But I wasn't 100% attracted to him because like, he didn't have the looks completely. I know when he broke up with me it hurt a bit. And I cried. I don't know why I cried, I don't know if it's cause I wanted someone to move in with me so I could get an affordable place, or if I cried because I actually did like him. I don't know what the actual reason is why I cried. And still don't know to this day!

## Hunter

When I was younger and staying at a group home, I went to a monthly dance and I did meet this guy, Hunter. I approached him and said 'hi', and then I actually asked for his number. We became friends. One day I went over to Hunter's house, and we were watching a movie. I didn't really see it as anything, I just saw him as being friendly. Hunter said to me 'I like you, you're cool'. And he slaps me on the leg. I didn't know what that's supposed to mean. I didn't know if that meant just a friendly thing or what. He did actually come to my house, but there wasn't much to do and I didn't know what we could do. I think he was lost too.

I met up with Hunter again a few years later at the library and then later we caught up on Facebook. Hunter sent me a topless picture of himself. I said to my carer, "friends don't send each other pictures of themselves" and they said "oh they could". But then I replied "they don't send pictures of themselves with their shirt off in bed". What I don't understand is why I don't find Hunter remotely attractive in photos but I seem more interested in him in person? I sent Hunter a photo of myself but I wasn't shirtless. People can share that. We chatted on video once but then Facebook removed my account. I actually had a second Facebook account anyway as back up. It's so addictive that you have to have two! So, I don't think you actually send pictures to each other if you're friends, that's how I see it. But if you're attracted to each other then you probably would.

At first I asked Hunter if he wanted to visit, just as friends, to hang out. I was sitting at the computer desk, Hunter touched my knee and asked me "is it ok to be gay?" I said "yes" and I made it pretty obvious I was into him. Hunter dropped his pants and said "I

feel sexy”, then one thing then one thing lead to another. It’s like sometimes you have an insatiable urge and you can’t really stop yourself. It’s like a magnet and it goes deeper than looks. I don’t know if Hunter was just being friendly, but he liked to come over, and after a while he just ended up turning up out of the blue. No notice. Like one day I was asleep, as you do in the morning. And he messaged me on Facebook and he was sitting waiting outside, and I’m like “oh my god, how long have you been here for?” But then I can’t forget that day, how good it was. I was standing in the kitchen and Hunter was kissing me all over my neck. I liked it, I can’t deny it either, it felt good.

One day when he came over he gave me a condom. And I didn’t really know what to make of it. I was unsure if I was getting mixed messages. I was trying to work out what he wanted, I wasn’t sure what I wanted. I was trying to work out if we were on the same level. Because to me, it’s all about, if you are on the same level, is this what you both want? An acquaintance was making me feel like Hunter wouldn’t be on the same level as me, which is why I probably didn’t do anything, because I wasn’t sure. I was trying to look out for him because I didn’t want to take advantage of him. But it must have been obvious, I mean, you wouldn’t give someone a condom if you didn’t want to bang.

**If you’ve got ID (intellectual disability), or whatever you call it, doesn’t mean you can’t love or be loved**

I want people to know that if you’re with a service provider, they shouldn’t be controlling of your life and they shouldn’t tell you that you can’t be gay. Families can also stop you being yourself too, if you have ID. Growing up I had to fight to try and enjoy being with girls. With boys, I had to fight the denial that I liked them. But now I know I’m attracted to guys. I’m gay, but I don’t like to stick to labels too much because people’s sexuality can change over time. I don’t know if there’s such a thing as soul mates, if there is I haven’t found mine!



## Key Messages

### He couldn't come out of his own shell

- We think the worst thing about this story is that the Storyteller never felt free to be who he really was. He was a gay man and couldn't be himself until he had the chance to speak up.
- [The Storyteller] couldn't come out of his own shell. It is important that people with a learning disability feel like they can come out of their own shell.

### You should be respected for who you are

- Whether you are a man or woman or gay or straight you should always be respected for who you are. We noticed that the Storyteller kept avoiding labels. He said 'whatever ID is' and 'whatever normal means'. We wondered if this was because he wasn't made to feel good about either being gay or having a learning disability. Being valued for who you are is very important. The story teller had two labels that he thought made it harder for him to get respected.
- We also thought that it was interesting the psychologist thought the way to correct the Storyteller was to show him pictures of women in bikinis. We didn't think that was respectful - of the Storyteller or women either.

### Can't talk: There is more than one puzzle

- We felt the story tellers didn't feel he could talk about his sexuality. One of the ways you know whether you are respected is that you feel free to talk up and ask questions when you need to.
  - We noticed he said he didn't trust anyone.
  - He also said he wished his staff person wasn't in the room. That he might have opened up more to the counsellor if he wasn't there – which made us think he was frightened to talk to his staff.
- We weren't surprised that he said that he said figuring out who he was, was like solving a puzzle because he didn't have anyone to help him. Everyone should feel free to talk up when you need to.
- Disability services never seem to look for diversity. They don't look with rainbow glasses! No one talks about being gay or lesbian or other sexual identities. Staying silent closes doors.
- The Storyteller had to wait for another boy with a learning disability to ask him if it was ok to be gay.

- We also believe that disability services and others need to think about the questions people with a learning disability might have over their whole life time.
- We thought the Storyteller needed help when he was a younger that was different from the support he needed to figure out what was happening when he was older and starting to have sex. There is more than one puzzle to put together.
- He was fighting time. We thought that because he never seemed to get the help he needed when he needed it, he would feel behind other men his own age. We all remembered feeling that other people knew more about relationships and sex - and that not knowing things made us frightened to get into a relationship with someone else.

### **He didn't know what was ok**

- We realised the Storyteller had very few chances to learn how to get into a relationship with another man. He seemed to be confused about lots of things.
  - o He didn't know why Emma's dad was yelling
  - o He didn't know what Hunter slapping him on the leg meant or what he could do when Hunter came to his flat
  - o He didn't know what sending a photo or giving him a condom meant.
  - o He didn't know if it was ok to want to have sex with someone who was not on the same level.
- Not being able to talk to anyone would have made it so much harder to know what was ok and how to react.

### **The 'no hands on' policy**

- If people who self-identify as LGBTIQ are going to love themselves and get to love others in a positive way, staff need to think about what is the right environment for this to happen. You need to get the environment right!
- We believe the Storyteller wasn't allowed to have a positive sense of himself as a gay man. We thought that because he kept saying;
  - o When you're stuck in a group home and gay people think you are creepy
  - o That he and his friends watched like a hawk. He must have felt there was something wrong with him to have to be watched like a hawk.
  - o They checked his computer.
  - o He also said he wasn't allowed to hug anyone he lived with or he met in his service.

- People with a learning disability are often not allowed to touch in their own home. We called them the “No hands on” policy.

### **We think he must have been very lonely**

- All of the places the Storyteller connected with his community were places where he could not be his true self. His home and his disability service, his church, his family, were places where he felt he could not say he was gay. “We think he must have been very lonely.”
- We think the story teller had to have sex in public and other risky places because he had nowhere else. He couldn’t go to a motel and he couldn’t bring someone home. It had to be in the back of the van, or a house with no boards or outside in the park!
- We wondered what impact that had on the Storyteller’s sense of himself.
- Within the culture of disability support it is often impossible for people with a learning disability to bring someone home or to go to another disability support service. Services don’t trust each other. It’s like two tribes.

### **The same rights as everyone**

- Not feeling good about yourself, (thinking that you are creepy or are doing something wrong) can make you from think that you have the same set of rights as everyone else. In this story, the Storyteller didn’t have the same rights to;
  - o Privacy
  - o To watch what he wanted
  - o To say he was gay
  - o To be in a relationship with someone he chose....

### **It’s a circle that keeps on going**

- The more we talked about it, the more connected everything seemed. To us the Storyteller seemed to be stuck in a circle that kept on going. When we drew it out, it looked like this:

### **How do you break the circle?**

- What really troubled us was that the circle had led the story teller to thinking about killing himself. Some members of the research group said they had felt the same way in the past. The advice they gave was;
- To un-do feeling bad about yourself it helps to feel valued for a long time.

- We liked the way the Storyteller brought his story back to finding a soul mate. We wondered if what he needed was someone he could be open and loving with too. The kind of things that are about being intimate but not necessarily about having sex. It could be as simple as helping him to find someone he cares about. And someone who loves him so he can love his own self.
- Being able to talk openly and find someone who loves you for who you are should be doable.

### **What do you think?**