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Shannon Novak:

Sub Rosa



Interviews

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Between June 2018 and March 2019, Shannon Novak surveyed 125 people from the New Plymouth LGBTQI+ community on the question: 'Is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community?' Eight of the individuals surveyed were comfortable undertaking a more detailed interview. These are their responses.

Terry Parkes

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

Being gay in the 90's in New Plymouth was very difficult because it was all hush hush, so I just tried to live as 'normal' a life as I could.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

I didn't really meet other gay men until I had a cafe at the art gallery, and we would have coffee nights on the first Thursday in every month.

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

New Plymouth has come a long way. I never feel unaccepted. In fact, mostly people like me because I'm gay. It's quite 'trendy' to be gay now, also I do a lot of community work which I guess puts 'gays' in a more accepting light (I guess).

Tyler Ryan

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

Being gay in the 90's was neither hard nor easy due to just sorta keeping yourself to yourself. I struggled with a feeling of being misplaced in a world that was going to become new to you. I didn't get much resentment from my peers though I did feel out of place sometimes at social events, that feeling of not fitting in, or being talked about behind people's backs. Being gay in a place like Taranaki was hard, I felt that in a place like this the social acceptance was still very new and well, it's Taranaki, it's all rural around here.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

I met other gay people over a few different platforms during this period but namely mIRC. This was a great place to be able to talk to others like yourself, ask and share questions, and get support for that dreaded 'coming out'. It was a place that I felt 100% accepted behind the screen, you could easily talk to someone without stigma, it was a place that I felt safe. Aside from the on-screen life, a youth group here in New Plymouth was a great place to hang out, feel accepted, and just feel comfortable being around people. 'Bent' youth group was an amazing place to meet other people in this area that was also LGBTQI+ and I have to say, even to this day, I do miss that social meet up every second Monday!

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

Present Day, with my peers and my work place, I feel safe being gay, however, I would still not hold my partners hand while walking down the street. Even though a lot has changed, and the world has moved on quite a bit, I feel that the same stigma is still here as it's still a rural place. I work in the rural sector and I never refer to my partner as he/him. That may just be me, but I feel that this place is still not the place to be 'out there'. As for what needs to happen here, I don't think there is much you can do more than that is already happening, and by happening, I mean TV, media, celebrities etc. People are people and they are going to act the way they do. It's a slow-moving region in terms of social acceptance, but it is getting there.

Cameron S. Curd

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

I came out later in life in the 2000's so during the 90's I was still a student at school.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

I can't really answer this question as I was still at high school (1995-1999), but it was certainly something we talked about at school, and there was a feeling at my school that it was weird to be gay in the 90's. I remember a teacher calling gay people "those people" and he wondered when they were going to "come to their senses" – fortunately for me I wasn't out at this stage so I didn't feel like he was talking about me/and/or 'our people'.

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

New Plymouth is a small but modern New Zealand city with all of the mod-cons you expect in larger cities around New Zealand. It's still quite parochial in some areas and with the acceptance of gay men this view still exists in some quarters. On the whole, walking down the street holding hands with your partner is still frowned upon, but is getting better with time and advocacy from our community, and people whom are more accepting of us. Today everyone knows someone who is gay, which in most cases makes the stigma more acceptable for those families, however for those whom are more conservative the stigma and prejudice still exists, and in some quarters it's overt, homophobic, and offensive. The rise and rise of hate crimes around the world hasn't reached New Plymouth yet from what I know, but with the way things are in the world at present, I wouldn't be surprised to read about it in the paper. Hopefully we're a more tolerant and accepting city than others, but maybe I'm just more optimistic about humanity than some.

Anonymous

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

There was a very active and well organised group called the Taranaki Pride Alliance (TPA) providing support, regular meetings, entertainment and a regular publication, *The Rainbow Times*. This continued until 2000, by which time chat rooms had captured the audience and people could find companionship and, more importantly, sex, via the internet. I felt no animosity towards me as a gay man from any quarter of New Plymouth society over that period, with one exception, which came from a group of lesbian ladies, though I believe this was an anti-male sentiment rather than anti-gay. Over the following decades I've felt not a shred of anti-gay feeling, in fact it's been the opposite, overwhelming support. Maybe it's the circles I've moved in.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

There hasn't been a formal meeting place since the early noughties, though men always had ways to meet. Cruising spots existed all over town, and still do I suspect, but the major contact tool is, as for many heterosexuals, the internet. NZDating.com was, and is, available and popular. More recently the well-known apps are the way to meet, especially for younger guys. This allows the gay community to fly under the radar to a large extent, and the rest of town largely ignores or is ignorant of it, while some, quite frankly, join in!

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTIQ+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

In terms of what needs to be done to improve things, I really can't say. Things are better than they've ever been, and at present I see the position of heterosexual males being threatened more than gays! Perhaps one area for improvement would be for society to understand that most gays are not pedophiles! But continuing to be proud and active members of society is probably the way to affect change. In general, the law is favourable towards us. I can remember when it wasn't. The greatest loss to gay men over the last twenty years has been the chasms that have opened between younger and older men. When we were forced into clandestine get-togethers, we welcomed all into the same group, and that was common in groups nationwide. Although society made it tough for gays in those days, there was always support available. As we mainstreamed after 1986, there were a lot of psychology experts and health professionals pushed out into our society to manage gayness, mainly by splitting the groups into age stratifications. This effectively removed the young men coming out from gaining any wisdom from the general gay community. I actually think it was mostly to do with protecting young gays from sex, though in reality the majority of young guys are looking for sex (same for young hetero men!). Our sexual orientation was our commonality and attempting to deny this removed our community purpose. Who is and what defines our tribe? Personally, I'm out of touch with 'gay life' now, so I don't really know the impact of this strategy on the life of young gay men. I would imagine that society is more accepting, and things should be much easier and happier. Maybe.

Michael

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

It is hard to say if it was better or worse than anywhere else at the time. But in fact, I was still a kid/teenager in the 90's, and Stratford was home. It was pretty horrific to be honest. Bullying of all descriptions (death threats) and "fucking homo" or "fucking faggot" were pretty much standard greetings. At least New Plymouth had a gay bar, which I found out about at some point – but I never went there until I saw a tiny blurb in the newspaper advertising an evening for gay youth. I was still underage but had just come out to my very supportive (if somewhat sheltered) parents. Mum agreed to come along with one of her friends and ended up meeting one of her cousins there! I think that's when my parents realised that they did actually know some gay people. There was talk of establishing a gay youth group – and I ended up going along to a meeting involved in setting that up (with my dad) a few weeks later.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

This leads into how I finally met some other gay kids in the region. Until that point, I really hadn't met any other gay people at all. I think it was really tough being gay in Taranaki in the 90's. It wasn't unusual for me to feel completely alone. It seemed like gay people were just starting to get air time on TV, mostly not in a positive way (think Ricki Lake and Sally Jessy Raphael etc). But there was a British series on TV (late!) with a gay son as one of the characters (I can say that I did have a massive crush on him and was devastated when the show stopped after a few months only). Anyway, I was desperate for anything I could relate to. Once the youth group came along, I ended up with a decent bunch of people I could finally feel like I could be myself with. Most of my friends at school were ok with me being gay I think, but I know they got shit for it too, and eventually, I drifted apart from nearly all my straight school friends. It was pretty awful being stuck in Stratford to be honest. But at least I had a car so I came to the city whenever I could.

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

I moved away to Wellington to study as soon as I could, and eventually moved overseas. I'm living in Auckland with my husband now and although I get back to New Plymouth every now and then, I don't know if I can really say how much it's changed. I'm sure it has, as have most provincial NZ towns. It does seem like a more international place than it ever was before, and I think it does have the feeling of being more accepting and inviting.

Gazza

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

To be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's was like being in a time warp from the 70's. Due to the high population of fringe religions it was difficult. There were pockets of the population that were accepting that appeared not to have the religious hang ups and then there were those who were ashamed as to what others may think. There were open gays who were very 'out there' and almost attention seekers, while others slid under the radar by being conservative gays or bisexuals that hid behind a so-called Herron marriage. If you had a gay family member it was hush hush and behind closed doors.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

This depended on what you were looking for, be it one night stands or something more long term. With the invention of the electronic system you could meet men through classifieds on web sites, classified columns in gay friendly magazines/papers, travel magazines/web sites, and/or through work or personal associates/networks. 'Friends of Dorothy' was a term used as an undercover code for some.

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

On the whole I believe people's attitudes have changed. The young gay guy who worked as a make-up artist in the chemist at the mall sadly passed away from a car accident, but he was well thought of, wore full make up, and appeared accepted. I assume my assumptions are right otherwise he wouldn't be in the role. In terms of improving acceptance, a focus on education around mental health would be key.

Damien Hegley

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

In honesty it was a hard time. Growing up through intermediate and secondary school I was always aware of my differing sexuality but finding an avenue that allowed that to be accepted was hard. In an all-boys school, I tended to hide away and keep to myself so as to not expose myself, head down and ass up as they say. In the late 90's I finally found an avenue to meet and talk with other gay guys my own age with the advent of IRC (Internet Relay Chat). This opened many doors for me to be myself and meet other like-minded individuals. It also allowed me to go to parties with other guys where a collection of IRC geeks would meet and have a good time and sexuality was never a big deal. It's through this medium that I met one of my closest and longest serving best friends.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

There were very few options, you couldn't exactly go clubbing at The Mill and hook-up. The only way to meet other guys was through IRC or the youth group that existed which was a small collection of people (less than ten from memory). If you wanted anything else then you had to look outside of the region and travel, in fact my first experience of a gay nightclub was in Palmerston North. It opened my eyes and was an awesome experience I'll never forget, even then though the activities were somewhat hidden away.

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

Generally, I believe that society is now accepting, and it doesn't matter whether you're from New Plymouth or Auckland. However, I think there's still the struggle of people to meet others and that there are few non-sexual avenues for people to feel included or part of a community. This isn't just a New Plymouth problem, it exists wholly across New Zealand. The problem we have with social media and the public exposure of people means many of our youth tend to still stay reclusive and keep their sexuality hidden. I'm not saying we have to be out and proud, but we should be able to feel comfortable in being able to tell the truth about who and what we feel and believe without judgement or criticism or workplace bullying of any kind. It's important to understand that regardless of being LBGT or any other label, we all have the same need and want to be loved and to be able to love the ones we want to without prejudice.

Max

What was it like to be gay in New Plymouth in the 90's?

In all honestly I couldn't 'be gay' in the 90's in New Plymouth. It was too small. Homosexual slurs were used by almost anyone, and the only way to really be gay was in chat rooms with other people in a similar position. It felt like there was always the fear (even in chat rooms) of 'what if they know me' or 'what if they know someone I know and tell them'. There was a very limited number of people who knew about me and we interacted very rarely. Most were also very much in the closet. The industry I worked in also didn't allow me to 'be gay' or be me either.

How did you meet other gay men in the 90's in New Plymouth?

Very much like above it was mainly in chat rooms. I remember getting my first home computer and looking for anonymous ways to interact until I got to know and trust the person online first. I got to know a few people, some older who were in relationships who in the end hosted dinners/evenings just to chat face to face. I wasn't aware of any 'gay clubs' or 'hangouts' nor was I interested in being seen in those places (if they existed in New Plymouth) in case people 'saw me go in'. Over time I became a little more confident and took more risks (by way of meeting people sooner) but it also made me realise just how small New Plymouth really was as conversations quite often morphed into "so do you know XXX" etc. The hardest thing though, was finding people my age.

Present day, is New Plymouth accepting of the LGBTQI+ community? If not – what do you think needs to happen for it to become accepting?

Hard one for me to answer as I don't often return to New Plymouth. I left Taranaki as I couldn't be who I was and be around 'like' people. I needed a place that allowed me to live without fear. The fear was not directly related to New Plymouth though, it was more generalised about being discovered, ridiculed, embarrassed, and ostracised, which I am sure would have been the case in many parts of New Zealand. On my trips to New Plymouth I have stayed in hotels/motels with my partner. There doesn't appear to have been any judgement from people. The request for just one bed has never been questioned and everyone has been friendly. I've been able to be myself and have identified others in passing who seem to exist in New Plymouth without issue. I'm not sure I'd be comfortable holding hands down the main street though! I've thought about living in New Plymouth in my later years and have always been proud of the fact I have come from Taranaki. For New Plymouth to become accepting though? I am a believer that for people to become accepting of someone, they need to know, be around, and understand them, so the more people who identify as gay who are in the community the more likely over time an acceptance of gay men in New Plymouth will occur. I don't feel the stereotypes have yet been broken and many people are stuck with an image of what a gay person should be like. One option might be a campaign highlighting that gay men are just men in your community who want to do the same job as everyone else and who have co-existed in New Plymouth for many years without you knowing.

Cover:
Shannon Novak *Michael* 2019
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Acrylic and ink on board
Courtesy, of the artist

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