

'I couldn't tell anyone'

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For young people grappling with their sexuality, support can mean the difference between life and death.

"DYKE. Faggot. Poofter." The names thrown like missiles in the school playground were hard for Kat Ettwell to forget. As a teenager coming to grips with her sexuality, she watched in fear as bullies targeted her classmates for being different. She knew to keep her secret hidden.

From the age of 14 she thought she might be gay or bisexual but with homophobia rife in her small country town in Victoria's Macedon Ranges she was too scared to come out.

On top of the school bullying, two incidents are seared into her consciousness: a lesbian couple who ran the local video store had their shop trashed; and then vandals elevated the hatred when they destroyed a gay hairdresser's salon, killing her dog in the attack.

Ms Ettwell, now 24, was only a child at the time but the message from the two attacks was clear. "As a young person it definitely puts into your mind, 'No, I'm not coming out in this environment, I'm not going to question my sexuality, I can't speak to my friends about how I feel because then I'll be the subject of that abuse,'" she says.

"I couldn't tell anyone, not my best friend, my mother, my sister. Having seen what potentially could happen to me or my family and witnessing first hand the homophobia at school I just had to keep it to myself."

Like many young people struggling to come to terms with their sexuality, Ms Ettwell's fears about coming out led to severe mental distress. At 14 she was diagnosed with depression and, with other personal issues compounding her isolation, she tried to take her own life.

It would be another three years before she felt secure enough to come out as a lesbian. Her courage was boosted by work with her local council's youth advisory committee, where she was involved in setting up a gay and lesbian support group for young people.

The safe environment provided by the WayOut project - which aims to end the isolation and discrimination faced by young gay and lesbian Victorians in rural areas - helped pull her out of depression. "I don't know where I would be or if I would even have come out if I didn't have that support from my friends but also access to information and services the WayOut project provide," she says.

Ms Ettwell would like to see beyondblue take a leadership role and fund similar projects throughout Australia in a bid to help young people who are grappling with their sexuality.

"In my country town there was no information at the health centre, there was no information at school, no queer-friendly materials in my community and nowhere where I could identify with something that I had seen. It's so important those services are available."