

ACON celebrates 25 years of care

ANDREW M. POTTS

Colleagues in the community sector and politicians alike have congratulated ACON on 25 years of service to the community.

NSW Premier Kristina Keneally congratulated ACON on its 25th anniversary.

"NSW is a great place to live and work, and it's important that we foster safe, supportive and equal environments for everyone in our great state," Keneally said. "ACON has made an invaluable contribution to this by advocating on behalf of the gay, lesbian and transgender community in NSW."

NSW Opposition leader Barry O'Farrell congratulated ACON's board, staff and volunteers on "a remarkable milestone."

"Since 1985 ACON has played a crucial role in reducing HIV transmission in New South Wales through advocacy and public awareness campaigns and prevention programs for those most at risk," O'Farrell said.

"Over many years ACON has tirelessly promoted the health and wellbeing of the GLBT communities and has established itself as the peak body in its field."

Lord Mayor and state Sydney MP Clover Moore said the City of Sydney looked forward to continuing a close relationship with ACON in improving the health and wellbeing of the GLBT community in a growing number of areas.

"ACON has been a key partner helping us tackle street safety issues and reducing homophobic behaviour," Moore said. "Many community members identify ACON as a first port of call following an HIV diagnosis or through the process of coming out."

Congratulations came from the federal arena as well.

Wentworth MP Malcolm Turnbull recalled his family's long association with ACON.

"Lucy and I are proud to be associated with ACON during their 25 years," Turnbull said. "ACON has made a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of the GLBTI community locally and throughout Australia."

"We congratulate them on this



important milestone."

Federal minister for the status of women Tanya Plibersek singled out the health organisation's continued efforts to combat the spread of HIV.

"Congratulations to ACON for the fantastic work they have been doing on HIV/AIDS with the LGBTI communities for 25 years," Plibersek said.

"ACON has not only provided an incredibly vital health service but has also been at the forefront of preventative health through their highly successful community education programs."

AFAO executive director Don Baxter, also a founding member and former ACON president, recalled the organisation's early days.

"Sitting on that stage under the banner

'Fighting for our Lives' in the packed Teachers Federation Hall at that formation meeting in February 1985, little did we realise what we were creating.

"One of ACON's many strengths is the way the organisation learned to hear its critics — not always an easy thing to do — and respond to them responsibly, something that's not easy when criticisms are ill-founded or unjust."

NAPWA executive director Jo Watson said ACON had a proud place in the

those who have worked and volunteered with ACON over the past 25 years."

New Mardi Gras co-chair Steph Sands thanked ACON for its many years of support for her organisation.

"As one of the four organisations who helped rescue Mardi Gras in 2002 we will always be grateful for their community spirit," Sands said.

"We thank them for their continuing work with us, from the Safe-Sex Sluts and rovers at our parties, to the services they provide to our members."

AHRC president Catherine Branson QC praised the organisation for its contribution to encouraging greater harmony in the Australian community.

"ACON's efforts in providing information and support for people at risk or affected by HIV, and advocacy on their behalf, has led to the implementation of new initiatives that challenge systematic intolerance and raise awareness of diversity," Branson said.

A reception was held at Sydney's Town Hall on Tuesday night to commemorate ACON's 25 years of operation, and was attended by representatives from the health, government, business and community sectors.

"ACON began with a small group of friends rallying around loved ones dying from an unknown virus," ACON president Mark Orr said, reflecting on those 25 years.

"They came together to help ensure access to quality care and support, to lobby governments, to fight for people living with HIV/AIDS and to advocate for a community experiencing persecution and discrimination."

"ACON ... today plays an integral role not only in the Australian response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but also in delivering better health outcomes for hundreds of thousands of people in areas such as sexual health, mental health, lesbian health, alcohol and other drugs, homophobic and domestic violence, housing and home-based care."

"We do this by providing a comprehensive range of effective programs and services as well as influencing government policy and participating in legislative reform."

ACON has now served, supported, developed and improved health and wellbeing in NSW with generosity, skill, dedication, care and tenacity for 25 years.

The Board, Members and Staff of the AIDS Trust of Australia congratulate ACON on this remarkable achievement.

We extend our respect, love and thanks to all those who have guided ACON through those 25 years and our very best wishes and support to those carrying its work into the future.

trust 
AIDS Trust of Australia

A community that still cares



Safe sex poster, 1994

When ACON was established in 1985, no one thought it would be around 25 years later. That's because ACON was born of a crisis everyone hoped would be over quickly.

ACON was created as a response to the then newly emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic at a time when we knew very little about the virus.

What people in the GLBT community did know was that our friends, partners and lovers were getting sick and, in short time, dying. That fear, stigma and discrimination meant they were being denied the most basic of services. Our community needed an organisation to provide education about HIV prevention, to coordinate, care and support for the sick, and to advocate with government.

So our community created the AIDS Council of NSW, which we know today as ACON.

Terms such as 'The Gay Plague' and 'Gay-Related Immune Deficiency' along with the notorious Grim Reaper advertisement and attempts to stop the Mardi Gras parade are all memories which flood back when HIV/AIDS and the 1980s are mentioned — and



president's message

MARK ORR



ACON was there, alongside a raft of other organisations created by our community to respond to the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

Those dreadful early days of the epidemic in Australia, with its epicentre in Sydney, showed the remarkable ability of the GLBT community to organise in the face of adversity, to heed a call to arms and mobilise an effective response. The catchcry of "nothing about us without us" is a mantra which still proudly resonates today in the vital work of our community organisations.

Indeed, it has been with great passion and determination that people with HIV and from the communities most at risk from HIV have participated in and driven our response to the epidemic as part of NSW's world renowned HIV partnership, comprising also of clinicians, researchers, NSW Health, and with the bipartisan

support of both major political parties.

Over the last 25 years, ACON has evolved to meet the changing needs and circumstances of the GLBT community and people with, at risk of or affected by HIV, including sex workers and people who inject drugs.

However, the one constant among all the transformation has been a desire to work with and support the people who we proudly claim as our community — people who have been, and continue to be, denied opportunities and services on the basis of their sexuality, HIV status,

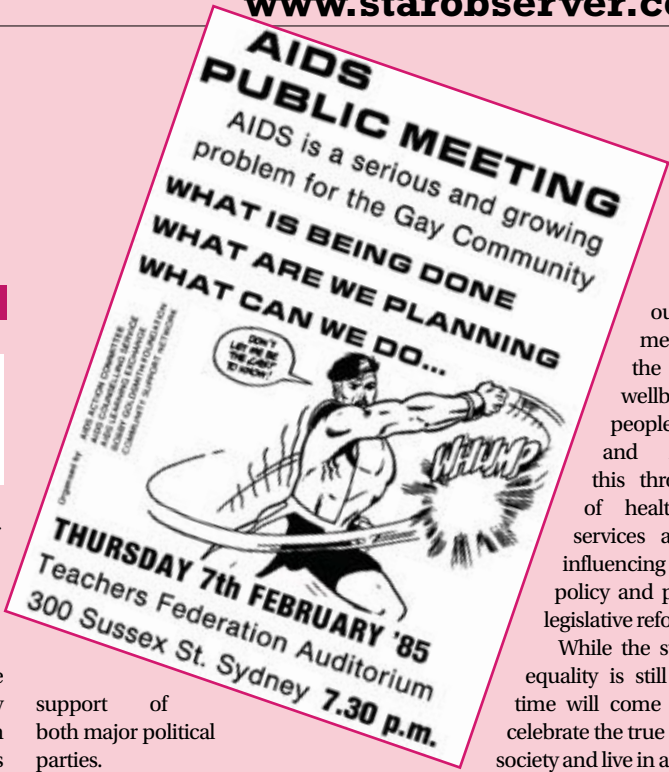
gender identity, sex work or drug use.

Caring for our community means building the health and wellbeing of the people we serve and ACON does this through a range of health promotion services as well as by influencing government policy and participating in legislative reform.

While the struggle for full equality is still not over, the time will come when we can celebrate the true diversity of our society and live in a country where

GLBT people and our relationships are fully recognised before the law, where services provided to GLBT people, people with HIV, sex workers and injecting drug users are free from discrimination and where young people finding their own unique identities experience a world which loves them for who they are.

That ACON has been and will continue to be part of that journey should be a source of true GLBT pride, and a sense of achievement for the broader community.



Safe sex poster, 1991

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COFFS HARBOUR



Images from a series of works by artist David McDiarmid commissioned by ACON in 1992 to promote HIV awareness and understanding.

Positive outcomes

When ACON began responding to the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS 25 years ago, sorrow and grief were overwhelming our community. The virus was consuming thousands of lives with sometimes more than 50 obituaries appearing in a single weekly edition of the Sydney Star Observer.

Dealing with this horrendous aspect of the epidemic quickly became a fundamental part of ACON's work. Staff and volunteers cared for people as they became sick, helping them to die with dignity while supporting their family and friends.

For many people, this will be the way they remember ACON. Indeed, the physical and emotional support provided to thousands of people by the then AIDS Council of NSW is an important and moving part of our community's heritage of which the people involved should be exceedingly proud and for which we should all be incredibly grateful.

However, there are other significant legacies which ACON has played a vital part in delivering. In the late 1980s, under the leadership of ACON, the NSW gay community achieved a remarkable thing. Within the space of a few years ACON's health modification campaigns facilitated a wholesale change in the way we have sex and how we talk about sex.

It's worth pondering just what happened. Essentially, HIV/AIDS can be stopped in its tracks by the behaviour of people with HIV or at risk of

HIV. But within the gay community of the 1970s and early 1980s, 'behaviour change' were dirty words (think electroconvulsive aversion therapy previously used on gay men).

The solution proposed by homophobes — stopping gay sex — was about as likely to succeed as stopping heterosexuals having sex. And it wasn't necessary.

Just like needle users only had to avoid blood being shared, all that gay men had to do was ensure that the sex we had — all of us had — avoided harm. The concept of harm minimisation in activities risky for health is one of a number of advances in public health bequeathed to the world by HIV/AIDS.

To be effective, behaviour change had to appeal to gay men. When talking about an activity in which gay men indulge because it's enjoyable and expresses intimacy — yet which is stigmatised by many outsiders — ACON understood the need for a positive approach to sex.

Safe sex needed to become intuitive — as in a culture of safe sex — so that it was normal for condoms to be used, normal to take steps to avoid virus transmission.

To devise campaigns and programs which would work, we needed to understand why gay men had sex and what it is was they were thinking when having sex. We had to understand the contexts in which gay sex takes place.

From the start, ACON worked with researchers



hiv/aids activist & former acon board member

DAVID BUCHANAN

to start answering those questions and designed gay men's education campaigns based on that knowledge and evidence. It's a model which is still used by ACON today, not just in relation to HIV prevention, but also in terms of its work around gay men's health, lesbian health, mental health, alcohol and drugs, and ageing.

But this wasn't the only new perspective on health being promoted by ACON in response to HIV/AIDS. The old approach to public health had been to identify the infected and isolate them for the good of the community. Along with the responses of other community organisations to the epidemic, ACON recognised the need for a new approach to public health based on human rights.

ACON understood the importance of everyone taking responsibility for their health and for the health of those around them. Putting responsibility on those thought to be HIV positive would have missed many who had the virus but had never been tested, and it would have divided the community.

ACON also recognised very quickly that empowering people with HIV, and those at risk of

HIV, stood the best chance of effectively containing the virus. ACON understood that people who feel good about themselves, who understand their sexuality and who have control over their lives have the best chance of effectively protecting themselves and their sexual partners, and caring for those affected by HIV.

ACON developed holistic programs for gay youth, Asian gay men and mature-aged gays. ACON also worked with other community organisations like Mardi Gras to build our community up, to make ourselves proud of who we are, to make a real contribution to the health of the broader community by improving our own physical and mental health and, thereby, the health of those around us.

Finally, ACON was instrumental in organising a collective response to HIV/AIDS and of working collaboratively with government, with researchers and with the health care sector. Globally, Australia's partnership model has been regarded as a real success and an inspiration to others.

Ahead of other major gay centres, Sydney has been able to stabilise its HIV epidemic and ACON is continually held in high regard around the world for its pragmatic, often cutting-edge approach to improving GLBTQ health.

info: For a more detailed history of ACON's response to HIV/AIDS visit www.acon.org.au

Services at ACON

Information & education

Every year, ACON produces and distributes a comprehensive range of GLBT health promotion campaigns and resources including 270,000 safe-sex packs for both men and women.

Counselling

ACON offers free one-to-one counselling for all members of our community as well as an after-hours service and group therapy programs.

Enhanced primary care

ACON helps people with complex or multiple health issues by coordinating their treatment and improving their access to relevant services.

Positive health and treatments information

ACON provides comprehensive information about living well with HIV including treatments, complementary therapies and dealing with side effects.

Home-based care

ACON's trained volunteer carers assist people with HIV to live independently by providing practical home-based support and transport services.

Positive Living Centre

Health promotion centre in Surry Hills in Sydney where people with HIV can take part in a range of programs, skills building courses, special events and social activities.

The Luncheon Club

Health promotion centre in Waterloo in Sydney where disadvantaged people with HIV can get free meals, groceries and healthcare assistance.

Housing service

ACON provides short-term accommodation for GLBT or HIV+ people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness plus advice in relation to rental accommodation and public housing.



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1 ACON's Positive Women Mardi Gras parade float, 1996. ACON has supported women with HIV since 1985 by providing a range of services and support groups.

2 The ACON Packers, 2008. This group of volunteers has met at ACON twice a month since 1995 to make up ACON's safe-sex packs. They have made over three million packs.

3 Safe Sex Sluts, 2002. Established in 1988, the ACON Safe-Sex Sluts are teams of volunteers who distribute condom packs and safe-sex info at GLBT community events. They have handed out more than two million condoms.

4 ACON Rovers, Sleaze Ball, 2008. Established in 2003, the ACON Rovers are groups of specially trained volunteers who attend parties and community events to help people who may be experiencing problems due to alcohol and drug use.

5 Recently retired Bingay Hostess Mitzi Macintosh with Bingay's original barrel boy, 1999. Bingay supporters have helped raise almost \$1 million since 1999.

6 ACON's first Mardi Gras Float, 1986. Since this first entry, ACON's Mardi Gras float has grown to one of the largest in the parade.

7 Community Support Network volunteers, 1985. Since 1985, more than 1450 volunteers have provided home-based care and transport services to over 2550 people seriously affected by HIV.

8 Dionne Warwick with former ACON president Adrian Lovney and Bill and Ben, the Positive Men, 2003. Since 1985, ACON has produced and promoted hundreds of campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of HIV prevention and of people affected by HIV/AIDS.

9 Participants role-play during a Fun & Esteem workshop, 1993. Since it was set up in 1988, more than 10,000 young men have taken in part in ACON's gay youth programs.

10 Red Ribbon volunteer, 2007. Since World AIDS Day started in 1988, more than 10,000 volunteers have raised millions of dollars for ACON's HIV work by selling ribbons and taking donations.

congratulations

to ACON on their 25th Anniversary

SGLBA are pleased to be able to partner with ACON in this year's Honour Awards Gala event, through the Honour Best Business Award.

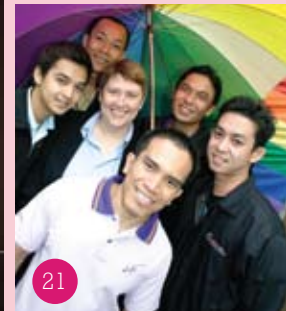
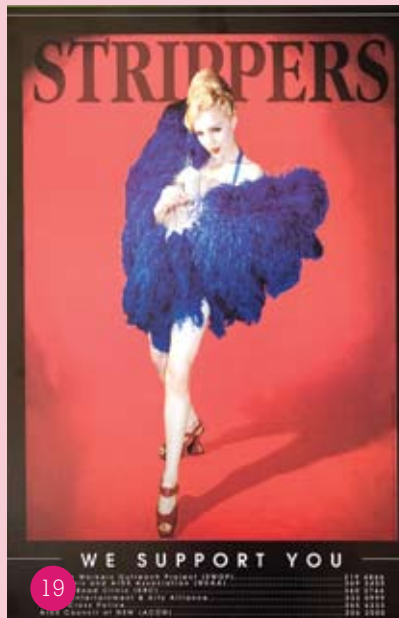
Honour - Recognising business excellence within the GLBTQI community.

SGLBA Business Awards will be presented at the Long Table Canapés networking event, Tuesday 24th August.

Email enquiries to: longtable@sglba.com.au

www.sglba.com.au





Services at ACON

Vitamins service

ACON supplies a range of vitamins and supplements at discounted prices to people with referrals from their GPs.

Developing communities

ACON works with all kinds of people, groups and communities throughout NSW and in the Asia Pacific to support them in building the knowledge, skills and networks that can help improve their health and wellbeing.

Anti-Violence Project

Whether it's on the street, in the home or at the workplace, ACON works with NSW Police and local councils to reduce violence against members of our community.

Substance support

ACON provides free in-house GLBT-focused counselling and support services for people with problematic drug use.

Syringe program

ACON provides free clean injecting equipment to people who inject drugs plus information on safe drug use as well as referrals to treatment facilities.

ACON Rovers

This team of trained volunteers attends parties and community events to help people who may be experiencing problems due to alcohol and drug use.

Lesbian health

ACON provides a range of services and support groups for lesbians and same-sex attracted women.

Sex Workers Outreach Project

ACON provides health promotion information and services for sex industry workers.

Knowledge centres

ACON's libraries contain a wealth of information about GLBT health and wellbeing with a strong focus on HIV/AIDS plus free internet access.

11 ACON staff members at Taylor Square, 2000. Since 1985, hundreds of ACON workers have distributed health promotion information at thousands of community venues and events.

12 MAG members celebrate their 17th birthday with the Hon. Michael Kirby, 2008. ACON has auspiced the Mature Age Gays support group since 1991.

13 Out West support group, 1994. ACON has provided location-based and outreach services to Western Sydney since 1989.

14 Age of consent parliamentary campaign delegates, 2003. Since 1985, ACON has successfully advocated for changes to hundreds of laws and government policies that have discriminated against GLBT people and people affected by HIV.

15 ACON Aboriginal Project workers at the Yarburn Festival, 2007. ACON has provided specific programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since 1997.

16 Lismore Mayor and ACON Northern Rivers staff launch an anti-homophobia campaign, 2000. Since 1987, ACON work has worked throughout regional and rural NSW with offices in the Hunter, Illawarra, Northern Rivers and Mid North Coast.

17 Members of ACON's Silk Road group, 1995. ACON has provided specific programs and services for Asian gay men since 1992.

18 Ins and Out group facilitator training, 2005. ACON has provided specific programs and services for lesbians and same-sex attracted women since 1987.

19 SWOP poster, 1995. In partnership with the Sex Workers Outreach Project, ACON has provided programs and services for sex industry workers since 1990.

20 Candlelight memorial. Since 1986, ACON has helped produce annual memorials throughout NSW for people lost to HIV/AIDS.

21 Former ACON CEO Stevie Clayton with members of Thailand's Rainbow Sky HIV/AIDS organisation, 2007. ACON has supported HIV prevention efforts in the Asia Pacific region since 1993.

The board, staff & shareholders of 

Would like to congratulate

acon

on 25 wonderful years of working together



A statewide service supported by SYDNEY SOUTH WEST AREA HEALTH SERVICE NSW@HEALTH

Congratulations to ACON for its outstanding achievements over the past 25 years in supporting our communities. Here's to the next 25 years...

People power

I know it's been said before, but I'm going to say it again. The people who have worked at and for ACON over the last 25 years are amazing and their contributions to building the health and wellbeing of the GLBT community and people affected by HIV cannot, and should not, be understated.

I'm just one of thousands of staff and volunteers who have held a dying man's hand, put together safe-sex packs, or helped someone having problems with drug or alcohol use at Sleaze or Mardi Gras.

Maybe they stood in an information booth at Fair Day, sold red ribbons on World AIDS Day, or took the dog for a walk for someone who could no longer manage to do it. Perhaps they slung a Safe-Sex Slut sash over their shoulder and threw condoms to a waiting crowd.

Maybe they counselled a young woman or man finding their way to coming out, or located safe and secure housing for someone experiencing harassment, or even violence, because of their sexuality or HIV status. They could have badgered politicians and health bureaucrats to get a program funded or helped educate international visitors about some of the more adventurous activities of gay men.

Perhaps they waited on tables at Bingay or helped prepare a much-needed meal for a disadvantaged person with HIV.

There have been countless ways in which ACON's staff, board members, volunteers and supporters have contributed to the work of ACON over the last 25 years and each and every one of them deserves our heartfelt thanks for caring enough to make our community a better place.

In the 21 years I've been associated with ACON, as both a paid and unpaid worker, I've seen the organisation grow, celebrate great achievements, rise to great challenges and constantly push toward an HIV-free, politically, legally and morally just society. One thing has always remained the same though, and that's the core belief that what we're doing is valuable and essential.



**long-serving
acon staff member
and volunteer**

TESS ZEMS

It's this belief which powers the people who work and volunteer for ACON. In the early days of the organisation, ACON was not an easy place to work at. The sickness and death caused by HIV was devastating and the impact on workers and volunteers was often severe. Thankfully, the horror of those early years was eased by medical advances.

Nevertheless, ACON's commitment to fostering a culture of care within our community has remained strong courtesy of the conviction and hard work of our staff and volunteers.

While it's been 25 years of extraordinary commitment and dedication, it has to be said that there's also been a fair amount of fun along the way! There have been some mighty characters through this joint, let me tell you.

We even have a phrase to describe the many occasions of sublime ridiculousness that can only come from working in what is best described as an 'unconventional' workplace. It's called an 'ACON moment' and they make working or volunteering at ACON a truly memorable experience.

In another 25 years, I sincerely hope that our core reason for being — HIV — is no longer the issue it continues to be today. However, there will no doubt be many other issues which will impact on the health and wellbeing of our community, and I'm sure another group of dedicated and passionate people will still be raising the flag, pushing for reform and enjoying their ACON moments.

info: For more information about volunteering or working at ACON, visit www.acon.org.au



ACON home-based care service volunteers in 1986 (above) and in 2009 (below).



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The changing face of ACON

The turn of the millennium 10 years ago was generally perceived as an opportunity to look to the future and embrace change. It was during this time of forward thinking that ACON undertook the biggest leap in its evolution as an organisation. And the catalyst for that change was the life-saving medical advance we know as anti-retrovirals.

Four years prior to 2000, anti-retrovirals changed the nature of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, allowing people to live with the virus. This meant HIV was no longer such a defining health issue for people with or at high risk of acquiring HIV, such as gay men. While this was an extremely welcome development, it gave rise to another issue, one with which we still grapple today.

How do you keep people engaged with a health issue which has lost much of its menace?

The solution proved to be the adoption of a more holistic approach to the health and wellbeing of people and communities affected by HIV. Through a largely organic process, ACON responded to the challenge by expanding our health promotion programs so that HIV prevention was in the context of sex, relationships, mental health, housing, alcohol and drugs, violence, social isolation and a whole range of factors which impact on one's capacity to make healthy life choices.

In 2000, and after a wide-ranging



acon
CEO
NICOLAS PARKHILL

consultation with our community and stakeholders, ACON formalised this approach when we officially became what we are today — a GLBT health organisation with a central focus on HIV/AIDS.

Three years ago, we even changed the name of our organisation from the AIDS Council of NSW to simply ACON to better reflect the broader nature of our work.

By expanding our remit beyond HIV, we have been able to improve not only our work in HIV prevention, treatment and care, but we have also been able to work to improve the general health and wellbeing of the community we serve. This has been a remarkable achievement, particularly within the context of the prejudice and discrimination that our community has traditionally experienced.

This holistic approach is now being adopted by HIV/AIDS organisations in many other countries and we look forward to a time when the agenda of the GLBT health movement is integrated into general health practice around the world.

Over the last 25 years, our approach



Community members launch the ACON-produced Wear It With Pride campaign in February this year.

to improving the health and wellbeing of our community has evolved to meet the changing needs of the clients and communities we serve as well as the stakeholders with which we work. This process will continue into the future as our programs and services adapt to whatever challenges and opportunities lie ahead, be they medical, social, political, or technological.

For example, we're developing new

approaches for working with groups at high risk of acquiring HIV so we can move beyond a stable rate of HIV transmission in NSW to a significant reduction in HIV infections. We're addressing the needs of an ageing GLBT community by assessing the viability of in-home care, culturally sensitive respite care and intergenerational home contact programs.

Our new Pride In Diversity workplace

equality program is helping improve the mental health of GLBT people by making workplaces more GLBT-friendly. We're integrating lesbian health priorities into all of ACON's relevant programs, services and activities.

We're expanding our involvement in research so we can more effectively demonstrate the need for the services we want to provide. And we're increasing our use of social media and online communities to better connect with, inform and mobilise our community.

These are just some of the new directions in which ACON is headed and no doubt in the future we will adopt new ways

and means whenever they are needed. But whatever challenges lie ahead, I'm sure they'll be addressed with the unwavering commitment to courage, empathy, diversity, equality, partnership and community which has defined ACON from its earliest years.

info: For more information about ACON's future directions, refer to ACON's Strategic Plan 2009-2012 at www.acon.org.au

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Steven Lewis
Wentworth



Anthony Albanese
Grayndler



Tanya Plibersek
Sydney

In our first year, the Labor Government removed discrimination against same sex couples in over 80 pieces of commonwealth legislation.

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Anthony Albanese in Grayndler, Tanya Plibersek in Sydney and Steven Lewis in Wentworth seek your support to continue delivering for our community.



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These are just some of the hundreds of health promotion campaigns which ACON has produced over the last 25 years. It's been an incredible journey and we'd like to thank the thousands of people and organisations which have contributed to or participated in ACON's work during that time. To our staff, Boards, members, volunteers and supporters, we thank you for your time, effort, expertise and support. To all our organisational stakeholders, especially the successive NSW governments, NSW Health, Positive Life NSW, researchers and clinicians, we thank you for your remarkable and committed collaboration. And finally to our clients and community members, thank you for caring for each other and working with us to build the health and wellbeing of our community.

courage • empathy • diversity • equality • partnership • community



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