

ACON 25TH ANNIVERSARY RECEPTION

ACON'S FIRST CEO BILL WHITTAKER

Tuesday 17 August, 2010
Vestibule, Sydney Town Hall

I've been asked to talk about the role that ACON played in Australia's response to HIV/AIDS, particularly during the late 1980's and early 1990s.

When i'm asked to talk about the earlier years of the HIV epidemic, i often use that famous quote from Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities.

That quote goes:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom , it was the age of foolishness, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair"

.And so it goes.

25 years ago, Australia was still experiencing a wave of AIDS hysteria. Discrimination against people with HIV and groups thought to be at high risk to HIV like gay men, sex workers and drug users was rife, and it was relentless.

Back in 1985 we didn't know how many people were infected with HIV in Australia. The HIV virus that caused AIDS had only recently been discovered. A test for the HIV virus was just becoming available. But with no treatments, little understanding of the virus itself and few protections for people who tested positive – taking the HIV test was a difficult and even dangerous step to take.

The gay community was understandably scared and despairing, as our friends and loved ones got sick and died in growing numbers. On top of the discrimination and stigma that gay men had endured for so long, when AIDS struck, it seemed like the cruelest of fates. Like many others, i feared our community would be wiped out. Other marginalised communities, particularly sex workers and injecting drug users, were being villified as well. So in many respects, it was the worst of times. So this was the picture in which ACON emerged.

Now I remember very well the public meeting that formed ACON in 1985. I had only recently begun my journey of activism as President of the mardi gras, and so I went along to the meeting to show support. It wasn't a very promising start for ACON. Endless quibbling about the minutiae of the constitution, quite a bit of shouting. The meeting chair, Lex Watson, pulled his hair out and smoked hundreds of cigarettes as the meeting went on and on. People got very frustrated. In the end the meeting had to be adjourned for a week or so as I recall.

But even with this rocky beginning, the AIDS council of NSW – ACON - was formed. By 1985 our communities were already organising and fighting back. AIDS information and prevention campaigns had begun, with very little money and almost entirely produced by volunteers. Organisations like the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, CSN and Ankali had been set up to care for people with HIV who were sick and dying. These organisations joined ACON because it was clear that a peak organisation was needed to lead community action against AIDS and urge the state and commonwealth governments to act.

But no, our communities didn't give up – far from it. We rallied – we lit candles and we marched, we made quilts, we lobbied and most importantly of all – we learned. We learned everything we could to help our work as activists. We mobilised our communities and we welcomed women and men from all walks of life to fight back with us – as the famous actup slogan goes.

Most importantly, we didn't forget how to live, how to have fun, and how to celebrate our community and our diversity. That was so important for keeping morale up.

equality ● empathy ● partnership ● community ● diversity ● courage

From 1986, ACON grew rapidly over the next several years. Many more staff, ACON branches and a whole host of information and support programs were set up. But growth for growths sake isn't worth much. It's what's delivered to our communities, to people with HIV and to wider society, that counts.

What counts is that the gay and other affected communities grew stronger, not weaker, during the first decade of ACON's work. ACON built bridges to all major political parties – we helped build the bi-partisan political approach to AIDS. We built a strong relationship with the media to counter the nonsensical views of some politicians and an impressive range of crackpots and pseudo experts.

ACON built up an impressive range of innovative education and support programs. These benefited not only the NSW response - but also the national response. After a slow start, the NSW government – coalition and labor governments – began to give money.

Let me give you a few examples:

- ACON hosted a national legal project which played a crucial role in the development of sensible laws around HIV testing, discrimination, and sexual equality. How fortunate was ACON and Australia was to have people like David Buchanan, Lex Watson and John Godwin involved in this work over many years.
- ACON also hosted a national treatment project worked to advance knowledge about HIV and its treatment. We lobbied drug companies for experimental treatments – and for a while actually imported copies of experimental treatments from the USA to help people with AIDS in desperate need. The treatment project began working with doctors and researchers to advance research and put better health care systems in place to care for people with HIV.
- A groundbreaking social research project with Macquarie University was set up very early in ACON's life, and proved to be invaluable to help shape education and support programs. These kinds of research partnerships continue today.

Finally, we should all be very proud of ACON's 25 years of HIV and STI prevention campaigns. ACON's pioneering work in youth peer education, outreach to older gay men, outreach to sex on premises venues and gay beats were spectacularly innovative – and they produced results. These programs have an international reputation and have been adopted widely in many parts of the world.

In the first several years, ACON grew into a powerful and influential organisation – as it is very much so today. However, it has also supported other communities to become empowered. I am thinking here of examples like the formation of NUAA and the setting up of HIV positive organisations in particular.

ACON actively supported the setting up of the NSW HIV positive organisation, now Positive Life, and the early version of the national association of people with HIV, NAPWA. For some years, these organisations operated out of the ACON office. ACON supported them yes, but ACON also benefited from having so many HIV positive people working closely with the organisation. Unfortunately, too few of these positive people are alive today – but I think they would be proud of what has been achieved at ACON and by the strength and vitality of the gay and lesbian community today.

Before concluding, I would like to mention a few very special people who contributed so much to the first ten years of ACON.

The first of these is Lex Watson, a great gay activist who was the founding President of ACON and who contributed so much to ACON in the first 10 years.

The mercurial Ross Duffin is another legendary contributor to ACON. Ross served on the ACON staff and board in many guises. Ross' innovations in prevention education and treatments are too many to mention, but continue today.

equality ● empathy ● partnership ● community ● diversity ● courage

Levinia Crooks was an exceptional President of ACON – with her legendary energy and commonsense, she helped guide ACON during its formative years and provided immense support to myself as executive Director and also to the executive Director who succeeded me, Don Baxter.

So that brings me to Don.

Now Don and I have had our moments – I like to call it a “creative tension” – Don might describe it somewhat differently! But the fact of the matter is that Don and I have worked together for 25 plus years – in various guises – and if I have contributed well to ACON, then Don has contributed just as much. How very fortunate ACON was to have Don as a founding Board Member and then as ACON President, then as Education Programs Director and finally as executive Director for much of the 1990s.

In the last ten years or so ACON has continued to evolve and face new challenges, not the least being the increases in HIV infections. New leaders like Peter Grogan, Adrian Lovney, Robert Griew and Stevie Clayton have brought new ideas and a new vision for ACON. And this is so important. An effective organisation must evolve and renew. Mark Orr will no doubt add to these comments in a moment.

In taking on an expanded mandate to build the health and wellbeing of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, ACON is being careful to maintain the fight against HIV at the core of what it does. This is crucial because the fight is far from won. New HIV infections are happening every day in Australia and there are people with HIV who continue to get sick and need our support.

So 25 years is a long time. Few of us involved in the early years of ACON would have thought that HIV would still be with us 25 years later, that so many people would die, and that so many battles would have to be fought, lost and won.

Ultimately, the success and strength of ACON today mirrors the success and strength of our community. Today our communities are stronger than ever, we are making unstoppable advances towards equality, and advancing our human rights. We're celebrating our diversity and creativity as strongly as ever. We're committed to caring for each other.

So let me conclude by saying we should be very proud of what our communities have done over the past 25 years. But equally, we mustn't stop now. Let's re-commit to doing even more in the future.

Keep going and be determined to do even more in the future.

equality ● empathy ● partnership ● community ● diversity ● courage