

ACON 25TH ANNIVERSARY RECEPTION

ACON PRESIDENT MARK ORR

*Tuesday 17 August, 2010
Vestibule, Sydney Town Hall*

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to acknowledge that we meet on Gadigal land and pay my respects to their elders, past and present – and pay my respects to the elders of Aboriginal communities across NSW where ACON delivers its services.

When ACON was formally established in 1985, no one thought it would be here 25 years later.

What we did know was that our friends, partners and lovers were getting sick and, in short periods of time, dying.

We also knew that the fear and stigma surrounding AIDS meant that our loved ones were being discriminated against and being denied the most basic of health and human services.

Terms such as “The Gay Plague” and “Gay Related Immune Deficiency”, attempts to stop the Mardi Gras parade, and obituaries in the community press are all memories which flood back when we remember the 1980s.

Our community needed an organisation that could educate about HIV prevention, that could coordinate care and support for the sick and the dying, and that could have a strong and independent voice with which to advocate to government to challenge homophobia and pursue human rights as the foundation of our response to HIV/AIDS.

It was from this need that the AIDS Council of NSW, or as we all know it, ACON, emerged.

Those dreadful early days of the epidemic in Australia, with its epicentre in Sydney, showed the remarkable ability of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community to organise in the face of adversity, to heed a call to arms and to mobilise an effective response.

The response to HIV/AIDS in NSW can be characterised by the great passion and determination with which people living with HIV, and those communities most at risk from HIV, including sex workers and Injecting Drug Users, have participated in the response. It is a history built on courage, empathy, dignity, humanity and compassion.

Over the last 25 years, ACON has responded to the changing nature of the HIV epidemic through a steady process of evolution.

Without a doubt, an evolutionary leap was undertaken by ACON about ten years ago. In 1996 anti-retrovirals changed the nature of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia, allowing people to live with the virus long term. People's focus became living with HIV – although for some that living continues to be difficult and full of complexity.

ACON responded with the development of a more holistic approach to the health and wellbeing of people living with HIV and, consequently, affected communities.

We expanded our health promotion programs understanding that people living with HIV faced challenges in a range of life domains and health issues - and with a whole range of factors which impact on people's capacity to make healthy life choices.

In 2000 after a wide-ranging 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.

equality ● empathy ● partnership ● community ● diversity ● courage

By expanding 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 – seeing a strong connection between the two.

There are numerous stories that could be shared about the nature and impact of ACON's work – many sad, many inspirational, some joyous, but all precious to the people and communities which ACON serves.

The greatest story would have to be the grand coalition of people, groups, communities, clinicians, institutions and governments here in NSW – the HIV partnership - that has achieved what is universally regarded as one of the most effective responses to HIV/AIDS anywhere in the world – and achieved stability in HIV transmission rates for over a decade.

For a quarter of a century, ACON has been a key protagonist in this story and has made a significant contribution to that outcome.

But this would not have been possible without the bravery, determination, respect and commonsense which has underpinned the HIV partnership from the earliest days of the epidemic.

So it is with much gratitude and great sincerity that we thank the thousands of people and many organisations which have contributed to ACON's work over the last 25 years - many of whom are in this room.

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.

To our clients, members, supporters (including the GLBT community media) and community members, particularly gay men and other men who have sex with men, we thank you for caring for each other and working with us to build the health and wellbeing of our community.

To the thousands of staff, Boards and volunteers who have worked at and for ACON over the last 25 years. What an amazing bunch of people you are – thank you for your passion, your unwavering commitment and your ongoing devotion to ACON's work.

There have been countless ways in which people have contributed to the work of ACON and each and every one of them – each and every one of you - deserves our heartfelt thanks for caring enough to make our community a better place.

Over the last 25 years, our approach to improving health and wellbeing has evolved to meet the changing needs of our clients and the communities we serve, as well as the stakeholders with whom 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.

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.

We're working with our partner organisations to address the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with HIV in health care settings and the community.

We're addressing the needs of an ageing GLBT community and people living with HIV by assessing the viability of in-home care, culturally sensitive respite care, intergenerational home contact programs and building the cultural competence of mainstream aged care providers.

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.

equality ● empathy ● partnership ● community ● diversity ● courage

We're expanding our involvement in research so we can more effectively demonstrate the need for the services we believe are required.

And we're increasing our use of social media and online platforms to better connect with, inform and mobilise our community in all parts of NSW – and to expand the reach of our HIV prevention and health promotion programs.

Whatever challenges lie ahead, I'm confident they'll be addressed with unwavering commitment to ACON's values - courage, empathy, diversity, equality, partnership and community - values which have guided ACON's work over the last 25 years.

Thank you for coming tonight to help us to remember - and to celebrate ACON's achievements of the last 25 years.

We look forward to your continuing companionship on ACON's journey towards our vision – that time when we achieve:

- an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic locally and globally
- a healthy, resilient and inclusive GLBT community; and
- a society that protects and promotes human rights as the foundation for good health

What a great day that will be!

Thank you.

equality ● empathy ● partnership ● community ● diversity ● courage