



*Ann Maree Sweeney today (from Ward 17, a series of contemporary photographs
by John McRae www.johnmcrae.com)*

From *LOTL* - August 2010

For 25 years, ACON has played a vital role in helping people in NSW who have been affected by HIV. Just as vital is the role played by many lesbians, as health care workers, volunteer carers, activists, fundraisers and friends. *LOTL* asked two unsung heroes of the epidemic to share their story.

During the worst years of the HiV epidemic, lesbians across NSW contributed in many important ways to our state's HIV response. Perhaps one of the most moving is the care and support that many lesbians provided to people affected by HIV, especially the thousands of gay men who died from the virus in the mid 1980s through to the early 1990s.

“Lots of lesbians were working as nurses at St Vincents,” says HIV researcher and veteran HIV activist Garrett Prestage, “and when many health workers were scared and refused to come near gay men who they thought might be sick, lesbian nurses were very prominent in stepping up to support gay patients.”

“Also, at a time when gay men were being demonised as promiscuous disease-carriers, lesbians could have easily distanced themselves from gay men, but they didn't. Instead they stood beside gay men.”

Ann Maree Sweeney was one of those nurses. “I started working with AIDS patients in 1989. I was 21 years old, Catholic, just out of university and just coming to grips with my sexuality. I had

NO idea what I was in for. I experienced the depths of despair, but also the essence of love – true love. I wasn't ready for the roller coaster, but who was?

"I can't talk easily about nursing people who were dying of AIDS during the early '90s. It was like being on the front line during a war, except nobody won. Dykes were everywhere

during the AIDS crisis in this city. We were the least likely to contract the virus but the most likely to take it on, to help, to confront a community crisis head on.

“Sometimes five men were dying in a week at St Vincent’s. 18 year olds. 22 year olds. It was awful. People were literally shitting and bleeding to death. Nothing we could do would stop it. Not to mention pneumonia, the blindness or the AIDS dementia process. But at the same time as the horrid virus was tearing our hearts out, dykes and poofs were rocking together – partying, loving, caring and consoling. Our mates were dying, we were united. The poofs needed us strong women to do the dirty work... and we were willing.”

In addition to the health workers, many lesbians provided care and support for their gay male friends as they battled with and eventually succumbed to the virus. “Even after all this time the emotional impact is still quite intense,” says Annette Gunnis whose friend Byron passed away in 1992 at the age of 25.

“Byron and I met in Brisbane as children and he was the best friend a girl could have. At 18 he went to live in New York where he made a big name for himself making costumes on Broadway. Then one night I got a call. “It’s hard to tell you... it’s AIDS... my lover is dying and soon I will be too.”

Byron returned to Sydney after the death of his partner. “I promised I would be there for him no matter what. When his family didn’t look after him, he came to live with me and I cared for him. It was hard - he was dying. I had lost my father the year before so I knew death, but not dying, and certainly not someone dying before their time.”

Annette’s commitment to her friend continued after his death. She became an HIV activist and advocated for people with HIV to get better access to potentially life-saving treatments. “I found a way to remember him, to really honour his memory, and that was to fight for the rights that he should have had and for the drugs that he could have had.”

Caring for my dying friend and fighting for his rights after his death is one of the things in my life of which I am most proud. It also taught me that dying sucks and that you shouldn’t have to do it if there’s any way to stop it.”