

# Bill Whittaker

**ACON CEO 1986 - 1990**

## **1) What impact did ACON have on the lives of GLBT people and people affected by HIV/AIDS during your time as president/CEO?**

ACON was formed 1985 by gay men and their friends at the height of public concern and hysteria about AIDS. Prevention programs were sporadic, treatment and care services were struggling to cope. Few governments were taking the epidemic seriously and there was very little funding. Human rights of gay men and people living with the virus were under attack. So gay men were under threat from many directions and there were understandable fears that the gay community would be wiped out by this deadly disease that people knew little about. Gay men and others affected by AIDS needed a rallying point - they needed an organisation that would fight for their rights and for their lives. ACON was formed for that purpose and has been highly successful over the past 25 years.

## **2) What were the greatest challenges that ACON had to face during your time as president/CEO?**

I became the first ACON CEO in 1986 (following my two years as SGLMG President) and served with ACON until 1990, when I resigned to become President of AFAO. At the time I joined ACON, it was racked by internal conflict, with tensions and hostilities among the board and other community based organisations. Everyone was united in wanting to fight HIV, but there were strong disagreements about how best to do this and who should do what. The gay and lesbian response needed to be united and energy channelled to the fight against AIDS, not at each other.

## **3) What were ACON's greatest achievements during your time as president/CEO?**

- A more cohesive state and national response to HIV.
- Demanding and getting a place at the decision making table with government - both State and Federally.
- Building a strong advocacy and policy base at ACON.
- Establishing national Treatment Information and Legal Projects which benefited the whole country.
- Getting money and staff - we had three staff when I became the first CEO and over 70 when I left plus three branches.
- Helping to set up and get funding for PLWHA (NSW) (now Positive Life) and SWOP (Sex Workers Outreach Project which I hoped would become independent).

## **4) What was it like working at ACON during your time as president/CEO?**

Frightening, exhausting, energizing, challenging, rewarding and an absolute privilege to lead a brilliant and extraordinarily gutsy staff team. I had great support from Board members like Don Baxter, David Buchanan and Lex Watson.

## **5) What is your favourite 'ACON moment'?**

Three really - being driven to the ACON XMAS party on the back of a Harley motorcycle dressed in drag - and doing a magnificent drag performance with several of my staff, being ordained a pope of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence during my farewell party from ACON and working with ACTUP in many covert operations!