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Westpac Australian Community Idol 2009

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 15 June, 2009

Patricia Langdon

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Jonathan Hallett

**Community Representative, Board of Management
Western Australian AIDS Council**

Patricia Langdon:

Jonathan and I are thrilled to be in Melbourne and have the opportunity to present the work of the WA AIDS Council, otherwise known as WAAC. We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and of elders past and present.

We're very humbled actually to be in the final three. After we've heard the fantastic work that the other two groups, we're up against it.

My contact with the Council started as a volunteer over twenty years ago - I'm only 25 now - prior to being the chairperson for four years and then starting as a staff member. Jonathan started his contact with WAAC ten years ago, firstly has a client, then as a volunteer, then as a staff member and now on the board of management. In fact almost all of our board and two thirds of our staff either started as clients or volunteers so their connection to our community is cemented throughout the organisation.

In presenting the ongoing work of the Council, we'll be taking a trip down memory lane to show you where we've been, where we're going and what has changed.

AIDS is arguably the world's most devastating disease, having killed tens of millions of people around the world and leaving many children orphaned. It was first discovered in 1981 in the United States and combined the community's worst fears, a new, deadly infectious disease

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without a cure, nobody knew how it spread, it threatened institutions like the blood bank and disproportionately struck marginalised people such as gay men, drug users and sex workers.

The media went into overdrive with sensational stories and creating community panic. Despite this, communities mobilised everywhere to care for the dying and craft innovative education for those at risk. The affected communities were gripped by grief, organising candlelight vigils, wearing red ribbons for community awareness and making quilts for loved ones as a colourful and therapeutic response to the profound grief people were feeling.

In Perth the gay community decided to use funds it had raised for a retirement home to start WAAC to assist people. We became a fearless advocate for people living with HIV and other at-risk marginalised groups. While the general community was terrified, WAAC had no trouble attracting volunteers and worked tirelessly so that positive people could live and die with dignity.

Home care was provided for people with AIDS, people were provided with practical assistance and support groups were formed. WAAC also got itself organised and moved premises. So true to the groups we worked with, our second building was a brothel, or had been.

We established the universally unpopular but incredibly effective mobile needle and syringe exchange for people who injected drugs. We frequently drew attention from the police, local council and the media. We mobilised community volunteers to provide safe sex and HIV education for gay men. Social marketing and education resources were developed including a

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provocative full page ad in the West Australian of two naked men imploring them to get tested. The Health Minister was not happy.

Naughty nurses designed and distributed information and condoms at nightclubs and bars. We started help lines so that the public, including young people, could get anonymous information about their risk behaviours.

We also organised the buddy program where volunteers provided emotional support and retreats for positive people to help them through their illness.

WAAC began working with other gay groups on the lengthy process of law reform. This came to fruition only six years ago and fundamentally changed many lives.

Jonathan Hallett:

It wasn't until the mid-1990s that news filtered through the community that new HIV treatments were working. HIV positive people who had been on their death beds were now able to think about living with a sense of hope and optimism.

WAAC had to change. Our support services department became the positive services department. We encouraged HIV positive people to manage their illness with the new treatments and focus on healthy living. We advocated for people wishing to return to the workforce. People were assisted to make psychological adjustments in order to plan for a future.

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Services for gay and bisexual men were expanded to incorporate cultural diversity with tailored workshops, community development and specialist help lines. We provided outreach and clinical services in high risk settings such as male saunas. New resources were designed to prompt people to get tested and treated.

Family support via an annual family camp was started for HIV positive parents and their children to get together in a safe, confidential environment. Therapeutic counselling was available for people struggling with their HIV status or sexuality.

WAAC also participated in community events such as Pride. This had the purpose of raising awareness and involving community members, whilst having a lot of fun with glitter, satin and feathers as you'll see.

During this period the Freedom Centre, a youth drop in centre, was born. Our experience of young men attending safe sex education groups was that HIV was the least of their issues. Many had been kicked out of home when they came out to their parents and some were self-harming and others contemplating suicide.

Research supported our experience. Members of the gay and lesbian community are at significantly higher risk of self-harm and suicide, not because of their same sex attraction per se but due to the marginalisation and stigma they experience.

The Freedom Centre is an entirely youth run service operating for the last fifteen years. Initially focused on young men, the program expanded to include young women and transgender youth. It continues to be funded as an early intervention strategy aimed at

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reducing suicide risk. Sexual and gender diversity training is also provided for professional groups. Freedom Centre Alumni are now working throughout the world as teachers, academics, community workers, lawyers, diplomats and doctors.

WAAC also expanded our services to include Aboriginal people, employing Aboriginal staff to deliver culturally sensitive services and build capacity in the Aboriginal community.

Prisoners and prison officers were provided with training and WAAC successfully advocated for condoms to be made available inside prisons.

WAAC sent HIV positive speakers into schools, putting a face to HIV, challenge stigma and prejudice. People often tell us that one of the most significant and enduring memories of school was the day they met a person with HIV.

We have also produced a personal perspective DVD and schools package called *Being Positive*. We've been sending outreach teams to schoolies week for the past nine years to ensure young people are safe during their celebrations. 'Keep it Safe' summer teams also attend youth festivals such as the Big Day Out and university orientation days.

In more recent times we've been working with medical students to ensure that their knowledge and understanding of HIV and AIDS issues is up to date.

This period also heralded the start of Style Aid, our annual fundraiser which has the dual purpose of raising funds and HIV awareness in the general community. We have forged a

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partnership with the WA fashion industry, designers, models, hairdressers, makeup artists, sound and lighting technicians to create the event.

Now in its twelfth year Style Aid has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support our work and reduce our reliance on government funding. We also use proceeds to pay for programs that would otherwise not get funded.

Along with Style Aid, World AIDS Day on December 1 provides an opportunity for the community to contribute to and participate in the HIV AIDS cause.

Patricia Langdon:

In 2005 WAAC held a twentieth year retrospective called *Reflection, Remembrance and Celebration*. We also wrote our history, called *Being Positive*, to honour the many people that went beyond the call of duty in often very difficult circumstances to support people with HIV as well as those vulnerable to being infected.

It also provided a chance for the current staff and volunteers to celebrate our successes and triumphs with the pioneers, as well as reflect on some of the difficult times. We use opportunities such as these and World AIDS Day every year to acknowledge and thank the many members of the community that contribute to the worldwide AIDS cause and those who contribute to our work.

We have entered into partnerships with private companies and Aboriginal health agencies, travelling to remote parts of the state to build local capacity. In our Design for Life program,

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local Aboriginal people are educated around HIV AIDS and use this knowledge to design posters, stickers and condom packs. Our Aboriginal staff members work with their colleagues throughout Australia to demystify HIV and AIDS and in so doing reduce stigma and discrimination in these communities.

We provide services to half a dozen sixty to seventy year old women, called the Golden Girls, who have discovered their HIV status late in life. They have formed a very close bond and attend retreats, treatment forums and life coaching along with other HIV positive people.

Our 200 volunteers from varied backgrounds range from seventeen to eighty years in age. They offer their time and commitment to activities such as condom packing, needle exchange, home care and safe sex angels.

For the past five years WAAC has provide online outreach services to positive people, gay and bisexual men and young people via chat rooms and forums. Our Freedom Centre has a vibrant online community. It has recently facilitated Faces for Freedom, a project against homophobia and transphobia as part of the National Human Rights Consultation. This provided an opportunity for transgender people, who are increasingly seeking services from the Council, to be heard.

WAAC has also designed a new program in response to the increases in diagnoses among heterosexual men who have acquired HIV whilst travelling in high prevalence countries.

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The WA AIDS Council sometimes attracts strident criticism but mostly support, occasionally from the most unlikely of places. We are here for the long haul and intend to stay responsive and relevant to our community's needs.

We would like to thank Our Community for the opportunity to share our story and Westpac for sponsoring the Community Idol Award, and the staff for coordinating the entry and for the visual presentation. And to the many people who have contributed to making the Council a vibrant and robust organisation.

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