

# Activism in the Top End

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The Sisters of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence, from the Convent of Equal Opportunity in the Northern Territory, first manifested in Darwin on 2 May 1992, when they blessed the Trades and Labor Council's annual May Day celebration dinner.

So inspired were the Sisters by their successful reception, that they manifested at a second restaurant and bestowed upon a completely unsuspecting public another blessing. This was followed two days later with their participation in the May Day parade, chanting to the puzzlement of some spectators, "We're here, we're queer, we're not going shopping".

After the parade the Sisters met with the Northern Territory Leader of the Opposition and provided a briefing on the issues at hand. Activists in the Territory are often rewarded by the ease of access to politicians and senior bureaucrats relative to the experience of activists interstate.

The fourth and final public manifestation of the Sisters during May of that year was at the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory.

## Exorcism

For some years activists in the Territory had been lobbying for the introduction of anti-discrimination or equal opportunity measures pro-

viding protection against discrimination on the grounds of HIV status and sexuality.

In 1990 the Northern Territory Country Liberal Government released a discussion paper and undertook community consultation as a precursor to introducing legislation. Two years later, the Government still had not legislated against discrimination.

On the occasion of the commencement of the 1992 May sittings of Parliament, the Sisters exorcised the House and blessed the parliamentarians, so as to assist the passage of legislation to be tabled.

Sister Onan of the Immaculate Palm, in an interview broadcast on ABC television news that evening, explained that the exorcism was necessary because the only reason that could exist for the two-year delay must be the presence of demons in the House.

## Single Purpose

It was shortly after the exorcism that the Central Australian Lesbian and Gay Group in Alice Springs and the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Darwin were established with the express purpose of lobbying for the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation. The Government finally tabled its draft legislation, providing protection against discrimination on all grounds with the single exception of sexuality.

An intense battle, including several public meetings and demonstrations, was waged for several months against the Government's position. The Alice Springs and

Darwin lobby groups, working together, were able to more effectively target local support for a change in the Government's position. Half page advertisements sponsored by local supporters were organised by each group for placement in the *Centralian Advocate* and *The Northern Territory News*.

Members of the Country Liberal Party eventually broke ranks. A Government backbencher in Alice Springs and the Party's senior vice president in Darwin publicly called for the inclusion of sexuality in the proposed anti-discrimination legislation.

*The 7.30 Report*, the ABC television current affairs program, broadcast two reports on the issue, and the coverage culminated with the broadcast live to air of a Coalition representative successfully debating the issues with the Government's Minister responsible for the legislation.

The final outcome was the retreat of the Government to a position of including sexuality in the grounds for protection against discrimination. However, one exemption was allowed, with the legalising of discrimination in employment on the ground of sexuality where the well-being of minors is a consideration.

The main job achieved, the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in the Top End dissolved, while the Central Australian group continues to meet only occasionally.

The Convent of Equal Opportunity's five founding Sisters, distinct in their white robes, tropical sunset

pink veils and sunglasses for anonymity, have all left Darwin bar one. The Convent itself has withstood excommunication as a rebel group. New Sisters continue to manifest from time to time, without sunglasses.

### Activism in Darwin

There are several points from this narrative which demonstrate the character of activism in Darwin. Living in a city of 80,000 people makes human resources scarce. The traditional population transience, marking much of the European residence of Darwin, also has a profound impact on activism.

Groups with a specific and short-term goal, and/or groups with built-in membership flexibility are often most functional. The skills base of the community is constantly eroded as people leave. The knowledge base in the community about itself is also adversely affected. Few people know the details of past activities, if they are aware of those activities at all.

One example is Stonewall Gay Pride Week in Darwin, which was first celebrated in 1985 with a film night and various social events. It was a significant effort to secure a venue to screen the films.

A major feature of the 1986 events was a visual arts exhibition by gay artists, including work by a gay artist from the former East Germany brought to Australia for the occasion. This event was the inaugural exhibition at the gallery space of Darwin's then new Performing Arts Centre.

Stonewall activities gradually faded after 1986, and now Stonewall is sometimes commemorated by a gay pride notice in the local newspaper, if it is observed at all. Only one member of the original Stonewall Collective continues to live in the Northern Territory.

### Advantages

Advantages, however, are to be found in population turnover. When issues arise and the situation requires it, human resources somehow are available. While perhaps lacking knowledge of prior local experience, new people bring fresh ideas and ways, and are not necessarily tied down by a historically-determined approach of the 'right way to handle this', or by some long-standing personality clash.



Sister Lubricata of the Fast Track, Sister Tumescence of the Holy Relief and Sister Onan of the Immaculate Palm (l to r), blessing Carole Miller of TOP FM, celebrating the first anniversary of Sexual Reality radio program.

The obverse to the lack of established leadership and role models is the development of self-reliance and confidence. Figuring out for oneself how best to meet whatever the current challenge may be, and seeing through an initiative of one's own making, is part of the experience of activism in Darwin.

What inexperienced activists and newcomers to Darwin lack by way of the skills base required to maintain a concerted push for human rights and social justice, is made up for by enthusiasm for the opportunity and the satisfaction in doing it for themselves. The cry "It can't be done!" or "We've tried it before and it didn't work!" is less likely to be heard. Paradoxically, Darwin is a city of-

fering opportunities to experiment, to create, and to innovate.

### Precursors

A fundamental condition for activism in the community is the need for a stable social base and a secure self-image. With the exception of Stonewall Gay Pride and the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, social needs have always been the primary focus of gay and lesbian groups in the Top End.

The first formal groups, the Boomer Motor Club and Darwin Gay Society, both established in the late 1970s and now both defunct, were social in focus and had little, if any, activist role to play. Stonewall Gay Pride, in the days before the Northern Territory AIDS Council was developed and established, was ahead of its time.

Community identity was so insecure in 1985 that there was widespread concern that the Stonewall initiatives would provoke a backlash in the general community against the gay community. Darwin Gay Society sought to monitor and veto the media activities of the Stonewall Collective.

Amongst some gay men at the time, though, it was a standing joke that should Darwin Gay Society ever participate in the annual Bougainvillea Festival parade, the float would be a wardrobe in the back of a tray ute, with gloved hands waving to the spectators from a door slightly ajar.

### Maturity

As it eventuated, the Gay Society, before it was wound up in early 1993, did participate in the 1991 Festival parade, but not with a wardrobe. It was the mainstream community which had difficulties with the community's public face: as the Gay Society float passed the official dais, Darwin's then Lady Mayoress was restrained by the former Lord Mayor from raising her hand to wave

back to the Society's float participants.

Between Stonewall 1985 and the Bougainvillea Festival Parade 1991, a significant development occurred in the political maturity of the community. Inexperience and fears of backlashes notwithstanding, AIDS forced the community to develop community service policies and programs, to meet public funding accountability requirements, and to lobby and challenge the public irrationality.

The people who formed the core of the Stonewall Collective were essentially the same people who worked long and hard for the establishment of the Northern Territory AIDS Council. One of the first challenges to be met included developing the skills and confidence necessary for creating and sustaining a community-based organisation.

### Voices Together

The huge distances separating the few people resident in the Northern Territory has proved to be another factor influencing the nature of activism in the Top End.

The difficulty of meeting the needs in Darwin and Alice Springs of two distinct communities separated by 1,500 kilometres has been met by the creation of two AIDS Councils in the Northern Territory. Experience has shown that community involvement is better fostered and needs are better met through separate and local structures.

The Top End collaborates with Central Australia, not speaking for them, but in joining with them, to augment individual voices. This requires effort in liaison and at times recognition of different needs. As with the experience of lobbying for anti-discrimination legislation, two voices in unison prove stronger than one voice.

### PLWA

Another challenge which has proved to be ongoing is finding the voice of people living with AIDS. Friends, a network of HIV positive people living in the Northern Territory, started in 1987 as a group of

four men in Darwin who decided to get together.

The group provides information and support between its members, and by 1992 had grown to a core group of about twelve people, with networks linking to other positive people. As with other groups finding their feet in the Top End, Friends has waxed and waned with the energies and presence of its members.

Friends' most public profile occurred in 1991 when Expedition Alligator, a team of people affected by AIDS from Britain, arrived in Darwin and travelled overland to Uluru. The opportunity of community education was taken, and the establishment of a Positive Support Group was probably the biggest outcome of the Alligators' visit to Alice Springs.

There has not been any group in the Top End which parallels the activist or lobby initiatives of ACT UP. This is largely due to the fear of possible recriminations arising from identification. The wearing of sunglasses by the first Sisters to manifest in Darwin is indicative of the concerns for privacy, and the fears of retribution in a small community.

### Support

Locating AIDS council spokespeople on issues requiring knowledge of a particular area, such as legal issues or health policy, has been problematic for the same reasons. The council has especially enjoyed effective public representation from time to time by its management committee. Committee members in the past have often been professional people who are resident in Darwin for a limited period, and who are less likely to be concerned with long-term repercussions.

Until recently, experience had been that whenever the community needed a spokesperson, a frantic ring-around would occur in an effort to find someone who was able, willing and available to discuss an issue or topic with the media.

The fear of retribution is real, and cannot be played down. In a small community one learns quickly

who one's friends are. It can be a surprising lesson, with more support forthcoming than is sometimes expected.

During the anti-discrimination debate many mainstream groups, including the NT branches of the Australian Early Childhood Association, the Australian Teachers Union, the United Nations Australia Association (Status of Women) Committee, together with the YWCA, Darwin Family Day Care, and Family Planning Association, amongst others, publicly declared their support.

### No Luxury

Mainstream support in a small population centre is a necessity, not a luxury. While the mainstream media has not always been supportive, the community has come to expect sensitive reporting from community radio station TOP FM in Darwin and Katherine. *Sexual Reality* radio program, broadcast by TOP FM since 1992, is sponsored mainly by the NT AIDS Council. The program focuses on issues about HIV and safe practices.

The first anniversary of broadcasting by *Sexual Reality* was celebrated in May 1993. The Sisters manifested to chant their blessing over the air, and in passing slipped a quick personal blessing to the station's manager.

Living and working in the Top End, one is constantly aware that people and various community groups cannot survive without each other. The richly diverse support of an organised and developed community as found in the large population centres is lacking. Indeed, when the Convent was struggling to establish itself, the Sisters' robes were supplied by a friendly mainstream group.

Activism challenging reactionary policies and practices is more a matter of working with others who are not always directly affected by HIV, so that a service is established or a policy is developed. It is an experience essentially characterised by the demonstrated support of mainstream friends and colleagues. ■