



**Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays NSW Inc.
(Incorporating Western Sydney)**

January 2012 Newsletter VOLUME 15-ISSUE 1

The next Family meeting of PFLAG NSW Inc. (Incorporating Western Sydney) will be on Saturday 28 January at 2pm in the Conference Room. The Guest Speaker will be Geoff Thomas. Wesley Lodge Motel. The Wesley Lodge is situated on the Cnr. Hawkesbury & Queens Roads, Westmead and is very close to Westmead Hospital and Train station. **Car entry is only from Hawkesbury Rd via a boom gate.**

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Email: jr_brown@bigpond.net.au

President's Report

"If we celebrate the years behind us they become stepping-stones of strength and joy for the years ahead." In our quest to gain equality for our GLBTI sons, daughters and family members, we can celebrate the many victories gained along the way, such as the passing of the Federal Same-sex relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws - General Law Reform Bill in November, 2008 and the NSW Adoption Amendment (Same-Sex Couples Bill) in September, 2010. Another small step was taken on December 3, 2011, when, at the Labor Party Conference at Darling Harbour, the Labor Party Platform was changed to incorporate Same-Sex Marriage. Trevor Khan, MLC, in his Christmas card to us, noted: *"Every small step makes a difference. Next year provides the chance for a few more."* So with that spirit of optimism, I would like to wish everyone a very Happy New Year and encourage you all to join with us in 2012 in our quest to gain full equality for our gay family members. Thank you to Acceptance Sydney for inviting us to their World AIDS Day Mass at St. Joseph's, Newtown on December 2. It was a beautifully prepared liturgy and a very moving experience.

Congratulations to Shelley Argent for her organisation of the successful ALP conference Fringe Event on Marriage Equality "Parents, Priests & Pollies", held at the Novotel, Darling Harbour on December 2. Speakers included the Hon Kristina Keneally and parents Geoff Thomas, Michelle Lancey (Newcastle PFLAG Co-ordinator) and Peter Moore.

A number of us attended the Rally for Same-Sex Marriage at Hyde Park and the March to the Federal Labor Conference at Darling Harbour on December 3. Congratulations to Michelle Lancey, a delegate at the conference, who made a stirring speech at the conference, reported in the SMH the next day and to Shelley Argent, who spoke at the Rally outside.

Thank you to Gillian who represented PFLAG at the special City of Sydney Christmas Reception on December 11 at the Town Hall.

I hope you all had a very happy Christmas with your families. We are mindful that, with Christmas being a popular time for young people to "come out" to their families, that there would have been many families, whose celebrations might have been tinged with some sadness, anxiety and stress this season. Certainly, a few that contacted us over the period were experiencing some distress and not because they didn't love and accept their children, but rather due to other issues allied to the "coming out". With our son's "coming out" now 13 long years down the track, we were amongst the fortunate families that enjoyed a most wonderful Christmas celebration. Our son and his partner moved into their new home just a week before Christmas, but somehow



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Out in Bathurst-How one family fosters acceptance in the Central West.

Story by Michael Burge

On September 17th 1993, two days after his 21st birthday, our son told his Mum, during a weekend visit home, then returned to Sydney, leaving a letter for me” Tony recalls of the very moment their lives changed, when Jeremy told them he was gay. “Bernadette held the letter, not being sure how I would take the news. This says volumes about his confidence in his dad.

“I read the letter one week later, and though a little numb, I managed it better than Bernadette. I felt terrible about some of the cruel comments I had made in previous years. I was as homophobic as the next bloke.”

Bern particularly had difficulty with questions of faith - “During that first week I would often think ‘I don’t know how I am going to deal with this ... what would the family and neighbours say?’” she recalls. “Gradually I realised I was only thinking of myself and not of Jeremy, who had already been through so much struggle.”

Jeremy Sutton (a Marketing Manager now living in Sydney) recalls his perspective - “Living in Sydney had allowed me to become who I really was, as I never felt like I could do that in Bathurst, so it was time to tell my parents. It was a relief, but it was also a bit like letting the genie out of the bottle. There was no turning back to how things were before. I also felt very guilty - seeing your mother cry is never easy.

“I thought they would really struggle with it on account of their traditional views and being good Catholics, and I’m sure they did. Deep down I hoped they would find a way to deal with it as they are also incredibly good people. I very quickly received a letter from my father in response to the one I left for him which was very supportive.”

Had anything prepared this family for the challenges that coming out brings?

Tony explains - “We weren’t equipped at all, having been conditioned by society and the official position of our church, and the prejudice promoted by anyone and everyone in authority.

“We love our boy Jeremy, and told ourselves he was still the same person after telling us, but we were very challenged by community opinion relating to gays and lesbians, but there were some surprising exceptions.

“Luckily for us, our parish priest (being ‘pastoral’) was not constricted by the institutional church. He recommended we speak with another family from out of town who were experiencing the same situation. I clearly remember thinking ‘why would I want to speak to this farming family about this topic?’” Tony recalls. “How wrong I was!

“Well, we all leaned on each other, for support, during those first months. It was a relief to find that we were not the only family experiencing such a significant challenge to our beliefs, and the values of what a ‘normal’ family is.

“As we were all Catholic, we used to joke that ‘only Catholics had gay children’. Our initial journey was challenged by Vatican teachings of prejudice and discrimination. Yet in 1994 our local church brought (then Father) Paul O’Shea to Bathurst for World AIDS Day to conduct a workshop in an attempt to counter homophobia.

“As a result of this, and with encouragement from our parish Priest, a meeting on March 14th 1995 considered the establishment of a support group. Contact was made with PFLAG (“Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays”) in Sydney, and one month later eight people met for the inaugural meeting of PFLAG Bathurst. This was the first rural Australian PFLAG group.”

PFLAG groups worldwide have become the life blood for families and communities seeking to stay together through the coming out process and beyond, but outside cities, they often struggle against localised negativity and ignorance.

Tony describes one of he and Bern’s greatest challenges - “To eventually be open with our family and friends, while honouring Jeremy’s trust and privacy.

“Even now PFLAG is not very prominent in the wider community, especially in rural regions. It began in 1972 in America. Perth, around 1989, had the first PFLAG group in Australia, followed by Melbourne, then Sydney and Brisbane. We are the most westerly group in NSW, though we have tried to get groups going in Dubbo, Broken Hill and Mildura/Dareton.

“Homosexual issues don’t challenge us at all anymore, but we still encounter homophobic comments, even from friends. We are distressed when PFLAG brochures we display in our Catholic cathedral are removed and destroyed by fanatic parishioners, even though we are encouraged to place them there by clergy. “The wider community are basically ignorant of the true facts about same sex attraction. They take the lazy path of believing what shock jocks and prejudiced religious literalists promote as ‘gospel’, instead of informing themselves from reliable, accurate and up-to-date material. Jeremy has done us a great service in forcing us to re-evaluate our attitudes to numerous issues in our society. We believe we have become better people as a result.”

Jeremy is very proud of how far his parents have come with PFLAG - “My parents have always liked getting involved, whether it’s the local school, the church, and environmental groups. I even recall going to a peace rally

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with them once. I think they really like being able to help other parents when they first discover they have a gay child.”

And the journey continues, with all the Suttons getting behind the push for Marriage Equality in Australia.

“We don’t think that 10% of society should be denied what the other 90% receive” Tony says. “They weren’t born gay just so that the 90% majority would have a group to marginalize and allow themselves to feel superior to. They want their committed relationships acknowledged, just like heterosexuals.”

Jeremy agrees - “While a lot of discrimination against gay people has been removed, the fact some still remains gives some people a basis for their prejudices, and gives young gay people another reason to feel inferior or that there is something wrong with being gay. I think everyone knows that one day we will look back at this period with amazement that gay marriage was not legal, the same way we look back at amazement that women once were not allowed to vote.”

Anne Sutton (A primary school teacher living in Victoria) says - “It is ridiculous in such a modern multicultural society that we are still against such a simple thing as two people of the same sex being joined together in marriage.”

The last of the immediate Sutton family to know about her brother’s sexuality, Anne felt less need for PFLAG.

“Since leaving Bathurst I have lived in cities which have had an accepting nature towards gay and lesbian individuals. I think that we have been brought up in a generation which is accepting of homosexuality and has not felt the need for support or to formally offer that support to anyone else.”

From the perspective of his generation, Tony says - “PFLAG is still needed in rural and isolated areas. Communities in these regions can tend to be more conservative, and less tolerant of difference. Rural youth suicide undoubtedly has an element of homosexual despair – no one can ever know to what degree.”

Tony and Bern continue to spread the PFLAG message throughout rural mental health networks, but the results are often frustrating. “Where services are founded on a Christian platform, we often see a typical institutional religious prejudice. The lack of response on this issue can be very disappointing” Tony says.



“Even when same sex marriage is approved, PFLAG will still be needed. Parents will experience a range of emotions when they first hear news that their son or daughter is gay or lesbian. Support will still be sought and supplied by PFLAG. “During Jeremy’s adolescence relations between him I were rather strained most of the time” Tony recalls. “Following our acceptance of his sexuality, things have never been better. It’s great!”

PFLAG Central Tablelands (Bathurst) 6331 7267 or 0407 336 020.

FIRM FAMILY Tony & Bernadette Sutton with their children Jeremy and Anne, on a South Coast holiday.

Stand taken by Acting Bishop Kevin Manning

We should acknowledge the stand taken by acting Bishop Kevin Manning, in response to the recent gay discrimination by a Broken Hill Catholic school principle. A child was refused enrolment in a Catholic school by the principle on the basis that the parents were two lesbians, and so they didn’t conform to the school’s concept of what a family should be.

ABC reported that these parents (one a Catholic) wanted their daughter to attend a Catholic school because of the ‘values’ taught at such schools!

The following report appeared in our local Bathurst Newspaper today.

“GIRL ACCEPTED! A NSW Catholic school has been ordered to accept the daughter of a same-sex couple after the local diocese intervened.

The acting Bishop for the Wilcannia-Forbes diocese, Kevin Manning, said he was appalled by the decision taken by the Sacred Heart Primary School at Broken Hill to refuse a girl a kindergarten place on the basis of her parents relationship. The school has now offered the girl a place.”

We heard today on ABC that the parents have now decided to enrol their daughter elsewhere.

Se we still have entrenched institutional prejudice in rural Australia, but some people in authority are prepared to reject it. Kevin Manning was Bishop of Parramatta until his retirement. Luckily he has accepted the temporary post as acting Bishop of this very large NSW diocese.

Tony & Bernadette Sutton - PFLAG Bathurst

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FAIR DAY AND REQUEST FOR HELP

Fair Day is on Sunday 12th February 2012 in Victoria Park, Camperdown.

Fair Day is a family fun day full of entertainment, food, fashion and stalls. Lots to see, do, buy and eat! It is traditionally the Mardi Gras' season's biggest day-time event. Each year dedicated PFLAG people set up the stall early on the Sunday morning. We spend time chatting to our many visitors, giving out information, brochures and booklets, selling our rainbow merchandise, having a good look around, generally having a fun time, and then packing up at 4 pm. This year, we will have for sale our fold-up umbrellas, kites, neck lanyards, PFLAG badges, all in rainbow colours, our DVD "Bouncing Castle" and hopefully our new mugs.



Helpers are very welcome and essential!

Fair Day is also a major fund-raising opportunity for us. Come for a couple of hours or for the day and enjoy the camaraderie, and the chance to talk about PFLAG.

This year we need people power to help set up the stall early on the Sunday morning (say 8.30 am – the parking is usually pretty good at that time) and also to help dismantle the stall about 3.30-4 pm. Please phone Judy on 98691454 or Narelle on 98743624 to register your enthusiasm and your willingness to assist.

Marriage Equality

Thank you for your support throughout 2011, together we have achieved the following:

1. Changed the ALP Platform to support marriage equality
2. Gained the Tasmanian and ACT Government's endorsement of Marriage equality
3. Had same-sex marriages counted and recognised in the Census for the first time
4. CNIs being issued to same-sex couples wishing to marry overseas

As this unstoppable momentum continues into the new year we now need to help Coalition MPs to open their hearts and minds to the importance of marriage equality. We know Coalition leaders like Barry O'Farrell, Barnaby Joyce, Malcolm Turnbull and SA Leader Isobel Redmond all want MPs in their party to be allowed a conscience vote to reflect the strong public support for marriage equality. Shortly we will be announcing our exciting plans for 2012, but in the mean-time follow the below links to help make a difference now:

1. Sign the petition calling on Tony Abbott to allow a conscience vote – <http://www.change.org/petitions/the-liberal-party-of-australia-and-its-leader-tony-abbott-please-support-a-conscience-vote-on-gay-marriage#>
2. Contact Tony Abbott and Julie Bishop directly and request the coalition grants a conscience vote
3. Email all your MPs and Senators asking them to support reform.

We will enter the new year confident that we have the support of a majority of Australians and progress on our side! Thank you for your continued support,

Alex Greenwich - National Convener - Australian Marriage Equality



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MICHELLE LANCEY waved a photo of her two sons at a wedding. Why should she have only one photo of a son getting married, she asked her fellow delegates at the Labor Party national conference yesterday. Why couldn't she have a picture of her gay son getting married, too?

"This is a choice between love and hate," the Labor delegate from Newcastle said. "I see marriage as a human rights issue, not a legal one. I'm a straight Christian mother and I support marriage equality."

To a standing ovation, Mrs Lancey told the delegates at Darling Harbour: "Vote with your heart."



"I'm a straight Christian mother and I support marriage equality" ... Michelle Lancey, conference delegate. Photo: Jacky Ghossein

Although the vote on the Prime Minister Julia Gillard's proposal to have a conscience vote in Parliament was close - succeeding by only 208 to 184 - another motion to change the platform to recognise gay marriage was passed on the voices.

"This is a deeply personal debate for us and our families," said the Minister for Finance and key proponent for change, Penny Wong. "It is about the people we love and that is why it matters so much. Equality doesn't diminish straight relationships - it values ours. 'Change is long overdue. It has been a long and difficult debate. Our platform makes it clear all are not equal. Until now our party accepted this, and we must accept it no longer."

But it is a step closer. At 9.30am yesterday, Ms Gillard - who opposes a change to the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples - rose to make the case for a conscience vote.

"For many in this hall and many in the Australian community it speaks to their life's aspirations, for what they want to do in their own lives. Or it speaks to the aspirations of someone that they love very dearly in their family," she said. "At the same time we recognise this is a deeply personal debate, because for many, who have been driven by religious and philosophical views across the span of their lifetime, holding those views very deeply and sincerely, this is a debate that touches on those views, too."

The motion was seconded by the Minister for Defence, Stephen Smith, who says he will now vote in support of same-sex marriage. He urged delegates to support a conscience vote as "the best way forward for the community and the Parliament". The debate between hearts and minds then began.

The head of the powerful Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association, Joe de Bruyn, a conservative Catholic, warned that low-income people, people living in suburbs and those from ethnic backgrounds would abandon Labor if the platform was changed.

Mr de Bruyn warned delegates Labor had a "fighting chance" of winning the next election but that would go if the platform was changed. He was jeered by delegates when he said of activists calling for gay marriage: "When middle Australia looks at the images, they will say, 'That's not us.'"

Mr de Bruyn later told *The Sun-Herald* he would continue to argue against the change but would not leave the party over it. The Labor MPs Deb O'Neill and Helen Polley also argued against the change. "I am not bigoted or homophobic," Ms O'Neill said.

She estimated 70 per cent of her electorate was against the change. "Community support is underrated and we ignore it at our peril."

The Labor elder statesman John Faulkner spoke to roars of approval when he said gay marriage should not be left to a conscience vote.

"It is not for governments to grant human rights but to recognise and protect them," Senator Faulkner said. "Human rights can never be at the mercy of individual opinion or individual prejudice ... A conscience vote on human rights is never conscionable."

Once the result of the vote was announced Ms Gillard embraced Senator Wong.

Senator Wong later paid tribute to Ms Gillard's role: "I think it says something of the measure of the woman that she's allowed the conference to do what it wanted to do, which is to have a full and frank debate."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/all-fair-in-love-but-now-for-the-war-in-the-house-20111203-1ocio.html#ixzz1fWYGpkYv>

Upcoming Events

- **Fair Day on February 12 and Mardi Gras on March 3**

Civil Marriage Celebrant - Rev Robert Clark from MCC Good Shepherd, Granville, is a **Civil Marriage Celebrant**. You can check out his website: www.weddingswithflair.net

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Renewal Notice Reminder Please do not forget to renew your membership for 11/12! Thanks to all the members who have renewed already. If you joined after 30 June, 2011, you are deemed to be financial until end of 2012.

EMAIL ADDRESSES

If you are on email, please help us reduce our costs by sending us an email with your details (which will remain confidential) and all future information will be emailed to you.

NSW Inc. PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays) is a group of people who share common experiences and provide support for each other. We listen and love. We help families have open, positive and loving relationships with their GLBT children and we work for their civil and human rights.

PFLAG NSW: Family Meeting - Saturday 28 January @2pm

PFLAG Penrith: Vicki on 02 4730 4660 or Carol 02 47354680

PFLAG Northside: Maree Ph. 02 99397706

PFLAG Central Coast: Helen 0431 863 799 pflag.nsw.centralcoast@gmail.com

PFLAG Northwest: Val Harris 02 6769 7552 or Fay Heywood 02 6785 7325

PFLAG Blue Mountains: Ruth & Ron Green 02 4757 4864

PFLAG Bathurst: Tony Sutton 02 6331 7267 nottus2@bigpond.com

PFLAG Great Lakes/Manning: Greg & Lauranne Byrne 0427 918 568
gregbyrne3@bigpond.com

PFLAG Newcastle/Hunter: Contact Michelle Lancey - pflag.hunter@gmail.com

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