



## **2009 SYDNEY GAY & LESBIAN MARDI GRAS**

**Fair Day, Victoria Park.**

**Launch keynote address by Andrew Heslop**

**Sunday 15th February 2009**

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, poofs, dykes, trannies, that straight boy I met at Dirty last night, celebrities like Julie McRossin, Lord Mayor Clover Moore, Chair David Imrie and other distinguished guests.

G'day.

I am very proud and extremely honoured to have been asked to give the keynote address today, at the beginning of a globally renowned three week festival which is all about us.

Like many people who are 39 years old, I thought I knew everything about everything, and especially everything about being gay, until I went to see the film Milk.

After being absolutely entranced by Sean Penn's majestic portrayal of Harvey Milk, I realised how little I knew.

I also thought I knew about the origins of Mardi Gras until recently, when thanks to YouTube, I was able to watch the Seven National News bulletin from Sunday 27th August 1978, when Roger Climpson's lead story was about a gay rights march from Paddington Town Hall to Hyde Park ... and the clash between 300 protestors and 150 police at Taylor Square.

A clash that led to 104 people being arrested.

Arrested, because they were bravely standing up for not only their rights as marginalised, victimised and harassed gay men and women of the 1970's ... but for our right to have a party in this park today.

To celebrate our community.

A celebration that could only have been a dream 30 years ago. A celebration which brings the world to Sydney.

Nations United.

I read somewhere recently that we have a great reputation, collectively, for turning crappy suburbs and towns into gorgeous places to live.

Makeovers which are a catalyst for urban renewal in a way that the lovely Jamie Durie and his team can only dream about.

But the compliment, and it was indeed a compliment, was that as a group we're good at building communities and bringing people together.

Which took me back to that news vision from 1978 when, as a community, we were shunned by society, degraded and labelled as filth.

So much so that after the 20th October protest march which is considered to be the first Mardi Gras, the Sydney Morning Herald helpfully published in full the names of all 104 people who were arrested.

104 people who were suddenly outed to their family, friends and work colleagues. People just like us who lost their jobs simply because being gay was a crime in NSW ... until 1984.

Well haven't we come a long way in 30 years! But there's still a long way to go.

30 years ago the Herald published names of people arrested at a gay rights rally. Two weeks ago their Sunday paper, the Sun-Herald, published a photo of a man who isn't gay having a beach holiday with his housemate.

Sadly it seems harassing and vilifying a man because he isn't gay is an acceptable national, and global, past time.

Writing in the opposition paper, The Daily Telegraph ... which didn't have the initial pic but still covered the controversy anyway ... I tried to explain being gay is not like choosing a new pair of Nike runners or deciding which Krispy Kreme doughnut to eat.

It's not about choice.

I tried to explain to the Telegraph's readers that it can be a long, drawn out, harrowing and painful process influenced by the family unit, attitudes of friends, community expectations and a myriad of other things.

Some of us may never achieve it, others may take decades while some will come to the conclusion early on in life.

As we all know, the pressure can and does lead to suicide. But no matter whether you are an ordinary Australian growing up in the suburbs or a talented young person growing up in the spotlight through soapies, music, journalism or sport I believe you should be afforded the privacy to tackle these issues privately.

You shouldn't be forced into explaining your sexuality through the media, and being forced to admit, again, that you are not gay. When I started Neighbour Day in 2003 one of the five key aims was for the day to promote tolerance, respect and understanding.

In Melbourne, where the wider community was reeling from the shock of an elderly woman dying in her home and being forgotten by everyone for two years, they seemed three words which we didn't hear often enough.

Today I think that is true more than ever. Tolerance. Respect. Understanding.

One of the things I am most often asked in interviews about Neighbour Day is whether Australia has lost it's sense of community.

Which is often a strange question for a gay man because when you grow up in suburban Adelaide, trapped by appalling public transport in a city that suddenly shuts down so it can be home in time for the six o'clock news, you need to find a community.

The short answer is I am not sure Australia has lost it's sense of community, I think it's simply forgotten what it takes to make a community.

Watching the vision of families in Victoria who lost their homes, their neighbours and their possessions I was moved by their determination to rebuild their community.

That despite the devastating death toll in which neighbours, friends and relatives were killed, they overwhelmingly said their homes, villages and towns would be rebuilt.

We have a community here today which is as diverse as it is large. A community of brothers, sisters, mums, dads, aunts, uncles and grandparents.

We're a community here today because a man called Harvey Milk stood up for what he believed in and that cost him his life.

We are able to be a community envied around the world because, in 1978, a group of men and women in Sydney stood up for what they believed in, so that we can sit in this park today and celebrate who we are.

A celebration that brings \$30 million to Sydney and NSW every year.

What other community celebration does that?

We're a community renowned for the welcome we give to our brothers and sisters from around the globe in a three week celebration of freedom, diversity and acceptance that we legally enjoy every day of the year.

Nations United.

Ladies and gentlemen, the community you want really does start at your front door.

Ladies and gentlemen, Happy Mardi Gras!

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SEVEN NATIONAL NEWS With Roger Climpson ATN 7 Sydney  
Sunday 27th August 1978 Bulletin begins at 2.25 minute mark  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyVgfPjgO20>