**PFLAG – OUR HISTORY**

PFLAG in Australia was founded in Perth in 1989. June Smythe was apparently the first person in Australia to contact and register with the US PFLAG Federation in 1986. She then tried for two years, without success, to find other interested parents to start a PFLAG branch in Western Australia.

In February, 1989, Margaret and John Pugh were told about June by an American author, with whom John was corresponding at the time. So John, Margaret and June met in March 1989 and resolved to try and get a PFLAG branch going in WA.

**I**n 1989 when a bill came into Parliament to decriminalize homosexuality, along with some other parents, Heather Horntvedtlobbied politicians, as the Government of the day did not have the numbers in the upper house. She was the only parent to actually  speak to the politicians needed to cross the floor by hunting them down either in their offices or at Parliament House.

One person was needed to cross the floor and although the bill was thought to be doomed, Heather did manage to get 2 politicians to cross the floor.

There was much educating to be done on homosexuality. During campaigning Heather met other parents of gays & lesbians. These parents and other known parents of lesbians and gays got to know each other and thus the first official meeting of a PFLAG group in Australia was formed from that time. The first meeting was held on 2/12/1989 at the home of John & Margaret Pugh  and they, June Smythe and Heather Horntvedt were the founding members.

Subsequently, following a move to Sydney, Heather started PFLAG NSW, the first meeting being held in August, 1990. She saw parents and young people at her home in Castle Hill and opened a post office box. It started off very small, but she worked hard introducing herself to Family Planning, universities, gay venues and G.P.s in the inner city of Sydney. Soon she became quite well known, always ready to be in the media, campaigning for gay rights.

 She wrote to many politicians in NSW and Canberra on various issues, and Queensland Justice Commission to support decriminalization of homosexuality in that state.

The Gay & Lesbian Counselling Service celebrated the opening of Albion Street, on 15th February 1991, which Heather and her husband Doug attended, and the first PFLAG meeting was held there on April 13th 1992, although it was a small group. Later the meetings were held in Heffron Hall. A lot of parents were still wanting to go to Castle Hill for the meetings, as they were not yet comfortable with meetings in Darlinghurst! It outlines in some small way, the journeys some of the parents took. Some were long journeys, others progressed sooner. A lot depended on their culture, religion, family backgrounds. Everybody had their own journey and had to be given their own time in which to make it! Each family had relatives, workmates and friends, and as they all became accepting, education was spreading.

PFLAG Sydney grew slowly, with other states using Heather’s leaflets and information to start up groups in those states.

 Mollie & Ken Smith started up PFLAG in Western Sydney. It was decided to start in Parramatta as that was considered a very central area and there was an awareness of families in the outer suburbs needing support.

Heather, along with two mothers, marched in Mardi Gras 1991 with her PFLAG banner which was carried by two gay men. Mollie & Ken Smith marched with her in the Mardi Gras in 1992, when there were 11 people!

In 1993 many people wanted to march under the PFLAG banner. Parent participation grew over the years as PFLAG became better known. The banner was updated in the mid 1990s as the weather had badly affected the first banner. Pamela Garske handmade two square banners for PFLAG Western Sydney on a golden background with blue initials. The words KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER were prominent.

Groups that began springing up all over Australia have made a huge contribution to educating society. Over the years because of groups like PFLAG, homophobia has declined. There is still much work to do but discussion is freer and more open now.

Some people came on in leaps and bounds, when they overcame their different problems, and embraced their child's social life and friends.  Others like Margaret & John Pugh (Perth), Heather and Doug, Mollie & Ken Smith, Nan McGregor (Vic) and Anne Gregory (S.A) put their heart and soul into educating society and helping as many parents as possible. They came out as parents, when it was just as difficult for parents as it was for their children. Looking at how much society has changed proves all the effort has been rewarded with so much more acceptance of our beautiful gay children. The journey was worth the time and toil. There were some tough rides from homophobic people and teenage bullies.

Some parents found the handouts very helpful, especially ones done on other parents’ stories. Copies were put on a table with the library of books so parents could take a copy if they wished. Most parents Mollie and Heather sent literature packs to after phone conversations, but as the years passed, some parents rang close to a meeting, and were brave enough to front up, so it was always good to have the handouts. After loads of people from all over the world joined us in Mardi Gras parades, parents got more courage to come to meetings. It became obvious that we are Parents and Friends and there were more and more friends, which helped to educate others also!

The library books were also so much help to new parents, or those really struggling and Bryce McDougall's book “My Child is Gay” was a great resource for new parents. Not all the stories are positive ones, and Bryce himself has a sad story, but it gave parents both sides. The sadness was so evident in the non positive stories.

“Ready or Not” is a book edited by Mark Macleod, which includes an interview with Heather and tells most of her story. The other articles are all gay and lesbian ones. Clover Moore did the launch.  Terry Stewart’s “Invisible Families” is a good resource, as is “When our children come out” by Maria Palotta-Chiarolli and the DVD Bouncing Castle.

PFLAG ended up with a wonderful library for both Sydney and Western Suburbs. There was something really for just about every parent , all with their own special problems.

PFLAG Sydney subsequently closed and all resources and funds were transferred to the Western Sydney group, which now gives assistance to new groups which have commenced around the country.

PFLAG Western Sydney initially met in the ACON offices in Parramatta. This was a cottage in Charles Street, Parramatta which was a small space with the walls adorned with posters warning young gay men of the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Some families found these posters very confronting. ACON was very generous in allowing PFLAG the use of their photocopier, at no charge, to print the newsletter. They were always available to help out in any way they could which was greatly appreciated.

PFLAG met in these rooms for a couple of years. PFLAG was growing but so was ACON and they needed to find new offices. Fortunately ACON found a much larger space in a union owned building in George Street Parramatta and once again offered the use of their space to PFLAG. The space was large enough for PFLAG to divide into two groups. Membership was increasing so much it was proving difficult to listen to everyone’s story, but two groups did not work because each wanted to know what was happening in the other group. The size of the room made it difficult to hear everyone speaking, which is why the two groups were trialled.

In October 1997 a Constitution was adopted and a committee elected to run PFLAG. Mollie Smith was the first President, Narelle Phipps, the first Secretary and the late Ken Smith the first Treasurer. We became incorporated soon afterwards. The need to raise money was evident as it was soon realised we needed publicity. The Committee first got very large posters made showing a family of two parents and two gay children. The photography was done by a professional photographer free of charge. Wherever PFLAG was invited the posters were taken. The message was to stop homophobia.

PFLAG started getting invitations to address high school teachers, initially. Some time later the invitations were to address senior high school students and often gay groups in universities and some local suburban groups for young GLBTI people. These generally were panel discussions and proved very powerful and PFLAG speakers were very popular and still are today. PFLAG, for a number of years, has been invited to address the Police Department Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers in Goulburn and Sydney. All these talks are very important and informative as can be assessed by the questions asked by the participants.

The next large spend would be a booklet. It was determined a booklet explaining the basics of homosexuality and busting a lot of the myths was needed so it could be sent to those enquiring about PFLAG and those trying to come to terms with having a gay child. So several times a year a stall was held outside the Parramatta Town Hall selling second hand clothes. It was also necessary to get other monetary assistance especially for the booklet and pamphlet. The organisation Twenty10 was a great support as was ACON once again. The booklet was achieved and has only undergone minor changes. It is still used today and is quite popular. After some time in the union building there was a fire which meant that building could not be used any more. ACON left Parramatta altogether and PFLAG found rooms in the Civic Centre at Parramatta Council. The biggest disadvantage of these rooms was there was no storage for the library, the pamphlets or booklets. The space was quite large enough but not very friendly. Over the years PFLAG has been fortunate to receive donations from community and other gay and lesbian organisations which is greatly appreciated and used wisely.

After some time the Committee realised a new meeting place was required. The Wesley Lodge Motel at Westmead was considered, but it was also a church, which some members were dubious about. However there was a meeting room with a kitchen attached and it was close to Westmead station. They were approached and they agreed to a reasonable rent for this space. PFLAG is still meeting there and there is a space for the storage of the library of books and DVDs.

Meetings were held on a Wednesday night, but as numbers were falling the Committee decided to try Saturday afternoons, which did prove more popular. Numbers still vary from month to month.

PFLAG Western Sydney organised a Conference of all Australian Branches in Wagga Wagga in 1999. This was extremely well attended with a large contingent from both Sydney and Melbourne. Rodney Croome was the guest speaker. Another Conference was organised in June, 2004 to be held in Camperdown, Sydney.This was also a huge success. Linda Burney MP, and Sue Thompson (from the Gay & Lesbian Liaison Officers at the Police Department) were guest speakers. At the 2007 conference in Brisbane, Shelley Argent, President of PFLAG Brisbane, was elected as PFLAG’s National Spokesperson. Shelley still does this role and is working extremely hard to achieve marriage equality for our children. Shelley was awarded Queensland’s “Senior Australian of the Year” in 2011 for her services to the gay community.

Mollie Smith, after many years, stood down as President and Rudy van der Hart became President. He was followed by the late Keith Phipps and then Judy Brown. Narelle Phipps was secretary for the entire time, but retired from the role in November 2015 when Natalie Cooper became secretary. All these people have worked extremely hard for PFLAG and its success is because of their devotion to the work of PFLAG. PFLAG, under the presidency of Keith Phipps and Judy Brown has become involved more politically, especially with the marriage equality debate which is very time consuming.

The newsletter is now emailed to members and each editor has done a great job. It is very informative and interesting.

**THE BATHURST STORY**

In December 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 the parish Priest, a meeting on March 14th 1995 considered the establishment of a support group. Contact was made with PFLAG 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 localized negativity and ignorance.

Even now PFLAG is not very prominent in the wider community, especially in rural regions. Bathurst is the most westerly group in NSW, though attempts have been made to get groups going in Dubbo, Broken Hill and Mildura/Dareton.

**THE GUNNEDAH (NORTH WEST) STORY**

1999 saw the beginning of the Northwest NSW PFLAG group. Some years earlier GUNNEDAH HIV/AIDS Education and Support Group was formed by Elaine Urwin, Bernie Green and Rosemaree Dowling from the Sexual Health Clinic in Tamworth.

However there appeared to be a gap in the support for parents and friends of the homosexual community. Bernie, having the position he held, was a line of contact for information and help. Bernie held a “Sexual Diversity” meeting in Gunnedah, which was well supported. Prior to that meeting there had been a core group of interested ladies planning a course of action and so it all came together. Bernie’s talk was invaluable and that is when Faye joined.

Elaine had moved on, but enthusiasm was there with Bernie, Rosemaree, Faye and many others as well as myself working to help those who were floundering in their lack of knowledge, their grief at feeling alone and unable to communicate their thoughts and fears to anyone.

The first meetings were held in Gunnedah with about 20 attending. They came from Quirindi, Tamworth, Manilla and even further afield.

The local newspaper was more than co-operative in advertising the meetings. The meeting venue could not be advertised for fear of the troublesome element that abounds in local country areas. This introduced us to those likely to attend the meeting and thus made them feel more at ease on the night.

For the past years the meetings have been held in Tamworth.

PFLAG Western Sydney has always been a wonderful help and backup and a wealth of information.

As at the end of 2015 there are branches/contacts of PFLAG in New South Wales at:

Albury/Wodonga Bathurst Blue Mountains

Central Coast Coffs Harbour Great Lakes/Manning

Newcastle/Hunter Northside (Manly) Northwest (Tamworth)

Penrith Wagga Wagga Grafton

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