

Item 3.1**Vale Ronald Patrick Austin****File No: S051491****Minute by the Lord Mayor**

To Council:

I pay tribute to the life of Ronald Patrick Austin, gay activist and proud '78er, who passed away on 13 April 2019, aged 90.

Ron was perhaps an unlikely gay activist. Born into a Roman Catholic family in 1929, Ron grew up in Maitland, the eldest of five children. At the age of 16, he entered a Redemptorist monastery, completing six months as a postulant before being admitted into the novitiate and subsequently taking simple vows. Around 1951, he left after concluding he had no religious convictions and returned to the family milk business for a short time.

Ron had other plans. He enrolled at Newcastle's National Art School, completing an arts program under sculptor Paul Beadle before heading for Sydney's National Art School in Darlinghurst. To supplement his income, he took up part-time employment which soon became fulltime. He worked for the Children's Library and Crafts Movement, before spending most of his adult life working in an after-school care centre for teenagers in Erskineville, first as supervisor and then as supervisor-in-charge.

Early in his adult life he also accepted he was gay. Like many gay men, it was not easy for him as a young adult. There were no positive role models. If homosexuals appeared in films or plays, they were usually figures of fun, or met a tragic end. There were no easy places to meet, apart from a few discreet bars or the "beats".

Consensual male homosexual sex was still illegal. Gay men could still be arrested and gaoled for "soliciting" or "inciting" other men to have sex with them. Frequently the other men were undercover police. Gay men "doing the beats" were frequently soft targets for bashers and robbers, as well as the police. People were ostracised by others, and often lost their jobs if they were revealed to be gay or lesbian. There were no anti-discrimination laws.

In 1970, Ron heard about a new group being formed: CAMP, an acronym for the Campaign Against Moral Persecution. It was Australia's first gay and lesbian rights group.

Ron joined CAMP in 1971 at its headquarters in Darling Street, Balmain on the day that its members were writing the organisation's constitution. CAMP became a central focus of his life. In its early days, CAMP sought to be many things: an advocate, an educator, a self-help group and an alternative to the bar scene. Phone-a-Friend, which evolved into the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service, was an early activity.

Ron was involved in all of it.

He began as a volunteer phone counsellor. Talking to other lesbians and gay men about their experience convinced him that political action was needed to change laws and change attitudes. He became involved in CAMP's Action group, the political group within CAMP. He took part in demonstrations against the sacking of a fellow activist, and against aversion therapy, the shock therapy that some psychiatrists believed could cure homosexuals.

He was involved in preparing CAMP's submission to the 1970s Royal Commission into Human Relationships and was a witness talking about his experience as a gay man. Not surprisingly, the Catholic Church tried to stop CAMP from giving evidence. He was a member of the delegation which met Neville Wran soon after he became Premier of NSW to lobby for law reform.

Ron was also part of a small group that attempted to educate the wider community about homosexuality, giving talks to tertiary students, Apex, Rotary Clubs and other groups.

Yet Ron questioned whether progress was being made, despite all this work. He also wondered how to involve the younger gay crowd who were attracted to the gay scene emerging in and around Oxford Street.

In June 1978, Ron and his friends were part of the audience at Sydney's first gay film festival, held at the long-gone Paris Theatre. One film included footage of the San Francisco Freedom Day Parade. Ron was particularly taken with the colour and costumes, particularly one man dressed as a butterfly. He carried a placard which read "In a world full of caterpillars, it takes balls to be a butterfly".

This image inspired Ron and an idea formed. A few nights later, he shared his idea with friends. They should have a street party, in costumes that would attract people out of the bars.

"Oh, you mean like a Mardi Gras?" Marg McMahon, one of his fellow phone counsellors asked.

Around that time, another group of activists were planning for the International Day of Gay Solidarity on 24 June.

One of Ron's friends suggested that they go and talk to this group. They weren't enthusiastic. One person thought the idea was silly. Another said they were too busy to take on organising it.

Fortunately, the late Lance Gowland, another of Ron's friends said he would do it, so it was included in the Solidarity Day program.

The poster promoted the event as a "night time parade and fiesta".

A large crowd gathered at Taylor Square on the night of 24 June. A truck driven by Lance Gowland led the Parade. A banner which read 'Repeal all anti-homosexual laws and stop police harassment of homosexuals' decorated the truck that led the parade. A sound system blared out the song Glad to be Gay. With Lance Gowland as driver, it was the first Mardi Gras float.

The crowd followed the truck onto the road, and walked, marched and even danced down Oxford Street and into history.

Ron and his friends were among them, with Ron dressed in a green caftan and his face painted white. Yet, with few others in costume, that first Mardi Gras was not the fiesta he imagined. Within two to three years, however, it was on its way to becoming the Mardi Gras it is today.

Ron was always modest about his role in Mardi Gras, and always stressed that the first Mardi Gras only happened because other people were prepared to organise it. Yet, without Ron's initial idea, we would not have the world's most fabulous celebration of LGBTIQ Pride.

Ron's legacy will be remembered. He holds an honoured place in Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 'Hall of Fame' and each year, The Ron Austin Award is given to the most fabulous float in the Parade.

But Ron must not only be remembered for his contribution to Mardi Gras. He must also be remembered as one of a small group of early gay and lesbian activists who took the risks, staged the first protests, started the campaigns, and offered support to many other lesbians and gay men. Without them, we would have no LGLBTIQ community, and Sydney would be a less accepting, open city.

Recommendation

It is resolved that all persons present in the Chamber stand for one minute's silence to mark the life of Ron Austin and his outstanding contribution to gay activism in Australia and the beginnings of Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor