

Resolution of Council

28 October 2024

Item 3.1

Vale Bill Whittaker AM

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

HIV and AIDS organisations, experts and advocates in Australia and overseas are mourning the passing of Bill Whittaker AM on 12 September 2024. For almost 40 years Bill had devoted his life to preventing the spread of HIV and ensuring that support and treatment was readily available to people living with HIV and AIDS.

From 1968 to 1976, Bill served as a clerk of the NSW Parliament. One of his mentors was the long serving Labor Premier Neville Wran, who he later said taught him much of what he knew about procedures, governance, administration and politics.

His career took a radical new direction when he resigned his parliamentary post to become a Qantas flight steward. Over the next few years, he travelled the world, immersed himself in the emerging gay party scene and became a Mardi Gras volunteer.

Given Bill's previous career, he had the skills Mardi Gras needed and was elected the Committee's Chair in 1985, eventually becoming the Chief Executive Officer.

Under his leadership, Mardi Gras established robust organisational structures, clear governance processes, rigorous financial management and secured incorporated association status. This work established firm foundations for Mardi Gras to become the world's leading gay (and later gay and lesbian) nighttime parade.

Bill resigned as Mardi Gras Chair in 1986 and later that year became the first CEO for the then AIDS Council of NSW (now ACON). As he had done with Mardi Gras, Bill transformed the organisation. When he resigned as CEO in 1990, ACON had grown from three employees to a staff of over 70 servicing its head office and three regional branches. Over those 4 years ACON established treatment information and legal projects which had an impact beyond NSW, built a strong advocacy and policy base and was involved in State and Federal Government decision making. The Sex Workers Outreach Project and People living with HIV and AIDs (now Positive Life) were established and received government funding.

As ACON CEO, he was a leading advocate and pioneer of harm minimisation strategies, now internationally recognised as part of Australia's world leading public health approach to HIV prevention.

Bill continued his HIV and AIDS work after leaving ACON. He served as President of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (now Health Equity Matters) from 1990 to 1992, and again from 2000 to 2003. He was also a major contributor to government taskforces and HIV policy bodies. During the 1990s, he played a crucial role in advocating for increased access to antiretroviral treatments, with this work being instrumental in shaping Australia's response to the evolving HIV treatment landscape.

In 2012, he led groundbreaking initiatives around CD4 count testing, which significantly improved the monitoring and health outcomes of people living with HIV. More recently he was instrumental in efforts to increase access to Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), which has helped revolutionise HIV prevention strategies in Australia and beyond. From 2013 until his recent death, he served as Special Representative of the National Association of People with HIV (Australia).

Bill's work extended beyond Australia. In 2001, 2006 and 2011 he participated in the United Nations Special Sessions on HIV, helping to design a global response. As a Commissioner with the UNAIDS High Level Commission on HIV Prevention, he and other Commissioners on AIDS in Asia presented then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, with a vision for an effective regional response.

In 1992, Bill's HIV work was recognised when he became a Member of the Order of Australia.

Apart from his work in establishing strong foundations for Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and Australia's HIV/AIDS response, Bill played a pivotal role in preserving the Star Observer, Sydney's oldest surviving LGBTIQ+ media outlet.

In 1987, when its then owner, the Melbourne based Gay Publications Cooperative, announced its intention to cease the newspaper's publication, Bill gathered a group of community leaders with the aim of organising a community purchase. They established Sydney Gay Community Publishing, with Bill as its inaugural Chair. The purchase was successful and the newspaper was published under its new community ownership from early 1988. It is still published, albeit now in private ownership.

While much of Bill's life was focused on Australia's and the world's HIV/AIDS, his key role in ensuring the survival and growth of two crucial LGBTIQ+ institutions, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and the Sydney Star Observer, must also be recognised. Australia's LGBTIQ+ communities are much stronger because of Bill's life work.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Worling –

It is resolved that all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Bill Whittaker AM and his significant contribution to the Australian and international response to HIV and AIDS and to Australia's LGBTIQA+ Community.

Carried unaimously.

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Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to Bill Whittaker AM.