

IN THE GAY KILLING FIELDS

Of the accused people in this story, only Alex Mihailovic and Dean Howard bear their real names. The others, at the time of the crime, were under 18 and as juveniles must by law be protected from publicity.

On Monday the teenage killers of a gay Sydney man will be sentenced. MARTYN GODDARD reports on moves to get society to challenge homophobia and violence.

IT IS where the battlers live. In Waterloo and Alexandria, tiny workers' terraces nestle beneath Housing Commission high-rise flats which rose in the 1960s in the name of slum clearance. Many migrant families, often devout Catholics from eastern and southern Europe, settled here.

Now, for the first time since it was built more than a century ago, this inner-Sydney working-class neighbourhood is seeing a wave of renovation and gentrification as younger people from the middle classes buy the old houses and do them up.

Some of the new residents are homosexual men. Some of the older working-class families do not like the changes to their suburbs and, when they are being polite, they call the newcomers "yuppies". Their new neighbours are as foreign to Waterloo and Alexandria as the migrants were 30 years ago — and as readily despised.

Poofter-bashing exists throughout all levels of Australian society, but in some places a lethal culture of this violence develops among teenage boys. It has been happening in Alexandria and Waterloo for years.

On December 28, 1988, a Tuesday night, a 50-year-old man called Bill Allen left his home in Newton Lane to drive a few hundred metres to Alexandria Park. There, around a public toilet on the edge of the park, he hoped to find another man to have sex with.

The toilet was well known in the area as a homosexual "hot" — and

Now he had moved to Sydney but after six months had few friends. He'd found a flat in Coogee and a job selling textiles.

The phone rang. The young voice on the other end was full of sexual promise and they made a time to meet: 10 o'clock. "How will I know you?" asked the voice. "I'll wear a tie," Richard Johnson promised.

The eight young friends hid behind a low brick wall in a landscaped section of the school grounds. They were screened by leaves and could see the road without being seen. "If he's a faggot," said Johnny, "bash the s--t out of him."

At 10 pm, they saw a white Mazda drive slowly past and park. They stayed hidden as Richard Johnson walked back to the toilet and as he went in they burst from their hiding-place. First across, running full-pelt, was 16-year-old Luis. As Johnson emerged from the toilet block, he "king-hit" him in the face and the startled man fell to the ground. He lay on his back, unconscious or heavily dazed.

The eight young men moved in. Alex Mihailovic drew back his foot for a kick. Johnny and another boy Jonathan jumped on Johnson's head. Tiny blood vessels in the linings of the brain burst, and a pocket of the

An aunt had seen a group of Tongans in the park; if the police came to call, they would say the Tongans had chased them from the park. The Tongans, they would say, must be the murderers. The next night, the eight met outside a club in Kings Cross and told Alex Mihailovic — who had not been at the first meeting — what to say.

The police were already moving, finding out who had been in the park that night. The next day they were told the concocted story about being chased from the park. But if the eight young men were chased, they would be running; Xuan Hoang Cao had seen them walking.

The police kept knocking. Again and again they were told the same story. They spoke to Mihailovic a week after the murder: "Do any of you boys who were at the basketball court have any information?" they asked. Mihailovic hung his head.

They brought Mihailovic into the Redfern station to be questioned by the man now in charge of the case, Steve McCann.

McCann, a detective sergeant, is a big red-headed man in his 30s who — despite his wife and family — has been tagged "the gay avenger" by some colleagues for his tenacity and success in a string of gay-bashing murders.

believe, are hundreds of bashings which are even less likely to be told about.

"In these gang bashings on the homosexual community," laments Steve McCann, the detective, "little or no help is given to our investigations by the victims of similar bashings. Any results, quite frankly, have been the product of hard work on our part."

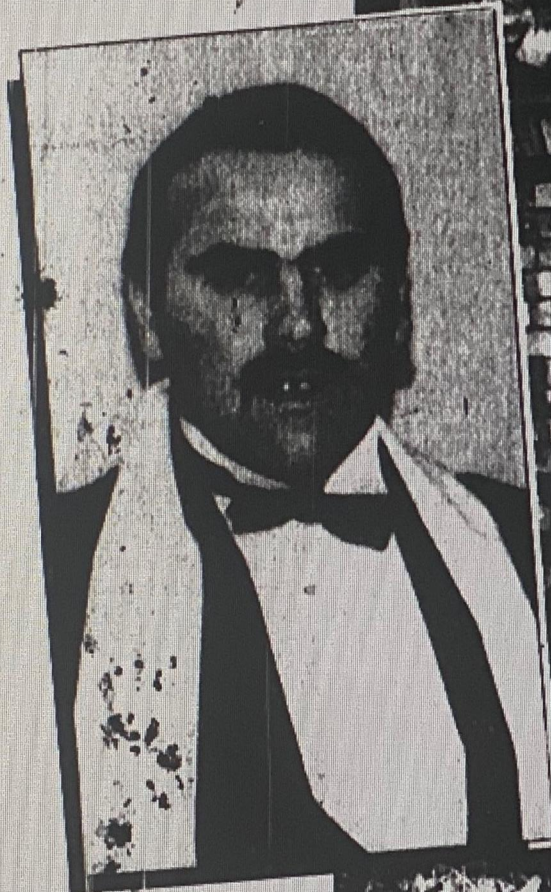
Meanwhile, McCann has been put in charge of a special Crime Information Unit investigating several brutal gay murders, including those at Alexandria. Detectives believe some of the crimes may be linked.

But cultures of youth violence can be challenged. After Wayne Tonks's death, teachers and many students at Cleveland Street High were ready to accept the need to confront the violence. Police and a local youth worker, Shane Brown, organised a three-day workshop for the school.

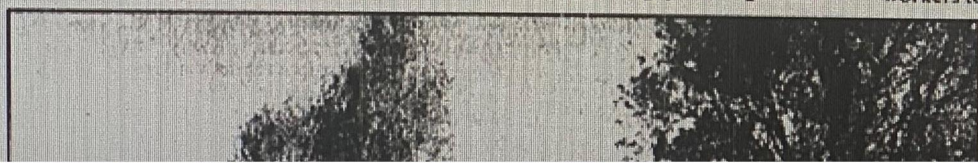
More than 200 students between Years 9 and 12 spent a full day at the workshop, which was held at the Alexandria Town Hall. Among them was one of the teenagers awaiting trial for the murder of Richard Johnson: he said nothing.

"They had a very hard time of it," Shane Brown said. "Some were very quiet, and others were very outspoken about their opposition to homosexuality. But it was very easy to challenge the hatred. Only 2 or 3 per cent of kids hung on to their homophobia. There was a real opportunity for those kids to talk about their attitudes to homosexuality for the first time. Days afterward, some kids contacted me and other youth workers to tell us they were gay. They had never had anyone to talk to before. Some kids, who weren't gay, talked to the police."

One boy told of his career of assaults and robberies of gay men.



Richard Johnson and the toilet block in Alexandria where he was killed.



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The toilet was well known in the area as a homosexual "beat" — and particularly well known to many of the students at the high school on the other side of the road. Teenage gangs frequently beat up the men but few potential victims seemed deterred. Some were confident enough to leave their phone numbers scrawled on the toilet wall.

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One boy told of his career of assaults and robberies of gay men, whom he had robbed of up to \$5,000 at a time. Perhaps the toughest, least receptive youngsters were four Aboriginal youths. They refused to abandon their hatred and continued to boast of their weekly Saturday night poofster-bashing expeditions. But a few weeks later one member of the workshop team, Bruce — a gay man who had once been a gay-basher himself — saw one of the boys at a bus-stop.

"Hi, how ya doin'?" a boy asked. It was the least responsive of the

four, sullen then but now smiling.

"I suppose you're still beating us up," Bruce said.

"Nuh," replied the boy, "we're not doing that any more. That workshop at the school, that was good, eh?"

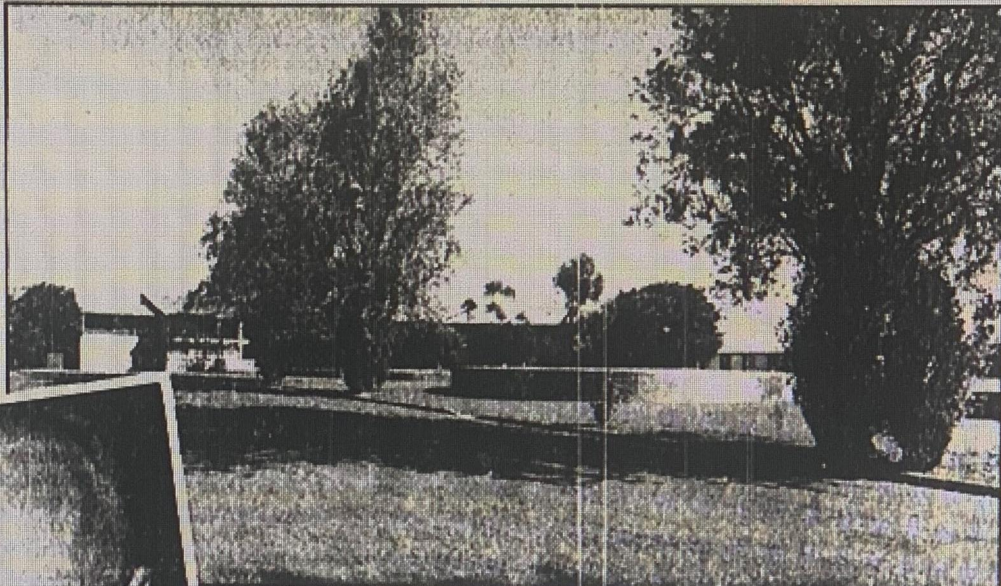
Despite the apparent success of the workshop, there has been no follow-up. "Oh, I don't think the school will follow it up," Shane Brown says. "It'll be up to us and to the police. But so far it has been very successful. I haven't heard of any gay bashings around here recently. There is definitely a changed attitude."

Since the workshop, 20 local teenagers — mostly students from Cleveland Street High — spent eight months producing an education video to challenge homophobia, discrimination and violence. The 24-minute drama, *Truth or Dare*, will be launched next week by Justice Elizabeth Evatt, president of the Family Court.

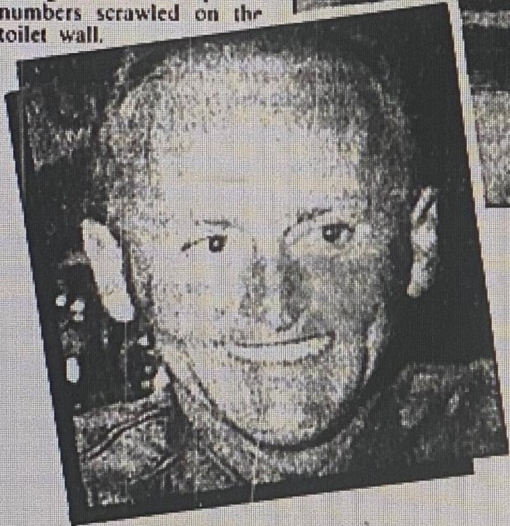
Before his death, Richard Johnson was unknown and alone in a strange city. Now his name and the manner of his death have inspired a new gay community organisation to fight violence, the Richard Johnson Foundation. Other groups, such as the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, are putting increased pressure on education authorities.

"Teachers need to identify whether their students are involved in bashings," says the lobby's Bruce Grant. "If the schools can identify and directly challenge the violence, there will be a major impact in a short time."

A director with the Department of School Education, Ms Hetti Cislowski, said the State's secondary curriculum already addressed the problems of homophobia and violence.



Wayne Tonks and Cleveland Street High School where he taught.



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Dean Howard, a burly 18-year-old, dropped hard on his knees on the right side of Johnson's rib cage. The loop of the rib cage compressed and seven ribs snapped. As Howard's knees continued to drive downward, the splintered ribs drove into the liver and gashed it open with a tear 15 centimetres long and eight centimetres deep. Blood began to fill the abdominal cavity.

Luke dropped on his knees on the other side of the chest. Wayne, a 17-year-old school football star, knelt and rifled the victim's pockets. They jumped on Johnson's groin so hard that his thick denim jeans split along the seams. His ear was ripped, his nose broken, his bowel and testes bruised and bleeding.

After two minutes the attack stopped and the young men sauntered off and split up.

Xuan Hoang Cao passed by the park again and saw the form of what he took to be a drunken man lying on the ground but did not approach.

At 11 pm, an hour after they had bashed Richard Johnson, Jonathan and Wayne went back. They found him on his side. He sat up, coughing and shouting as they approached, thinking perhaps that they would attack again. They rolled him back on his side and went home. They did not call for help, even anonymously.

Richard Johnson's heart had been pumping blood from the gash in his liver for over an hour. More than half the blood in his body now lay in his

"I was there but I wasn't involved," Mihailovic admitted.

"Are you prepared to tell us about it?" asked McCann. "Yes."

McCann left the room and returned with two Polaroid photographs from the case file. They were pictures of the dead Richard Johnson. "Have you seen him before?"

"Yes, that's him."

"What do you mean?"

"That's the bloke the boys bashed, but I wasn't involved."

That was the breakthrough. The other youths were confronted with Mihailovic's admissions and an accurate picture gradually emerged. All eight were charged but, despite the protests of police and the gay community, the four youngest — Luis, Jonathon, Mark and Luke — were permitted to plead guilty to manslaughter.

At the Cleveland Street High School, staff and students were in shock at the charges. Some of the accused were still going to the school, or had brothers, sisters and friends there. Teachers were increasingly worried about the violence but no organised attempt was made to confront it.

In trials late last year, the four youngest pleaded guilty to manslaughter and were sentenced to minimum terms of 4½ to eight years.

Alex Mihailovic, Dean Howard, Johnny and Wayne faced a murder jury in a sweltering courtroom in February, just over a year after they killed Richard Johnson. At the end of three weeks the jury retired. After more than 14 hours of discussion in an overnight lock-up, they returned with their verdicts: Mihailovic, Howard and Johnny guilty of murder.

A youth worker estimates that 50 per cent of local teenage boys have been asked by their mates to go poofster-bashing, or have actively taken part. One, a tall blond young man called Johnny, was charged by police after one bashing but admonished by a magistrate and released.

On that Tuesday, Bill Allen was savagely beaten. He staggered back to his home, leaving his car near the park. He was bleeding freely but did not call the police or an ambulance. At home, in his bathroom, he tried to clean the blood from his face and body but passed out.

The next day, the police found his body in the bath. After two years of police investigation, no witnesses have come forward and no charges have been laid.

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Richard Johnson's heart had been pumping blood from the gash in his liver for over an hour. More than half the blood in his body now lay in his abdominal cavity and his blood pressure had dropped critically. His heart went into spasm and his skin began to cool. He lost consciousness again, for the last time.

At 11.15 pm, Michael McNamara, an off-duty postal worker, walked his dog past the park. He stopped at Richard Johnson's body and tapped Johnson's foot with his. He felt for a pulse but could not find one. The skin was cold. McNamara ran home, rang the police and ambulance, and brought his wife — a nurse — back to the park. At 11.22 pm, an ambulance officer, Gary Willis, shone a light into Johnson's dead eyes.

The next day, Sydney's morning newspapers and breakfast radio bulletins carried the story of the murder in Alexandria. One by one, the eight young men heard they had killed Johnson and began, for the first time, to worry. That afternoon, at about the time a forensic pathologist, Dr Johan Duffou, began the post-mortem, seven of them met to concoct a story.

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ONE evening last May, four months after Richard Johnson was bashed to death, a 35-year-old schoolteacher, Wayne Tonks, invited someone into his flat at Artarmon on the North Shore. The next day, his body was discovered in the flat — bound hand and foot, a plastic bag over his head. He had died of asphyxiation.

Tonks's phone number has been found in a toilet at Artarmon. His death was a shock to the staff and students at Cleveland Street High School, where he taught. He was a popular teacher, though few students knew of his homosexuality. The Government has posted a \$50,000 reward on the Tonks case, but no witnesses have come forward.

Most such murders remain unsolved because people who have witnessed them will almost never come forward. Behind Sydney's five gay hate murders, the detectives

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A director with the Department of School Education, Ms Hetti Cislowski, said the State's secondary curriculum already addressed the problems of homophobia and violence. The Cleveland Street workshop worked so well, she believed, because a series of tragedies meant students were ready to listen. Elsewhere, it might have worked less well. "Bashings should be talked about, and schools have a real role in promoting awareness of the issues."

"We can put an end to this violence," Shane Brown says. "But education is the key. It's essential to be able to talk openly about the issue of homosexuality at home and at school."

Shane Brown believes that the era of gay-bashing around Alexandria and Waterloo is at an end. But the cost has been huge. As the dead men are memorialised, and eight boys spend their first years of adulthood in prison, their story is already being repeated in other suburbs.

Sydney's five gay-hate murders for 1990 comprised 5 per cent of all NSW murders for the year. How many of them, ask the detectives, the social workers and the gay activists, might have been avoided?

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Cleveland Street High School had moved from its depressing Victorian brick-and-asphalt buildings opposite the old Redfern Mail Exchange to a stylish new campus next to Alexandria Park. The eight teenagers — the youngest was 16, the eldest 18 — had known each other for most of their lives. Most went to the high school, or had just left; another two went to a North Shore Catholic school.

One suggested that they should get a phone number from the toilet in the park across the street and bash whoever came in answer. They sauntered across the road and Alex Mihailovic, a burly young man looking much older than his 18 years, memorised the number. They walked, still skylarking, to a nearby phone box but did not notice that a young man, Xuan Hoang Cao, saw their leisurely walk. At 9.15, Mihailovic made a call.

Richard Johnson was lonely. Now 33, he'd left his birthplace — Hamilton, New Zealand — a decade before. Like thousands of young gay New Zealanders, Richard made the trip across the Tasman; he settled for more than nine years in Melbourne.