

After four years of trying to break down police prejudice towards homosexuals, Fred Miller retires next week satisfied with the work of the gay liaison units. SANDRA HARVEY reports

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But dissolving prejudices is Fred Miller's speciality.

For four years, the 63-year-old former Sydney Council alderman and Labor MP has been working to change police attitudes to homosexuals.

In March 1985, Mr Miller was appointed co-ordinator of the newly formed Police Gay Liaison Unit. He accepted the position in a climate of deep-rooted prejudice against homosexuals - by some sections of the force, at least.

There were frequent complaints of police "poofer bashing" and officers refusing to help homosexuals.

"The attitude then, of some police, was that they just didn't like gays simply because of their homosexuality. Their lifestyle wasn't compatible with theirs," says Mr Miller.

Now, four years later, Mr Miller retires from his post next week much relieved that the "macho image" perpetuated by "old school elements" in the force is breaking down.

"It has improved," he says, attributing success, in part, to the changing and more tolerant social values.

How our macho police learnt to accept gays

"The general community, itself, now is more accepting about gays. Some people mightn't like their lifestyle, but now they tend to let them do their own thing, anyway."

In 1984, police were one of the biggest problems facing Sydney's homosexual community, according to Mr Miller. Having spent the previous four years as the State Member for the inner-Sydney seat of Bligh, the heartland of the gay community, Mr Miller was well aware of the problem.

"I get on well with both the gay community and the police from my time in Parliament," he said.

"And the fact that I am straight helps with the police."

"My aim from the start was to get co-operation and stop the antagonism, which at that stage was high with allegations of harassment of gays by police, which I don't doubt did occur."

He began a program of on-the-job

lectures, dealing with individual complaints and officers. Initial police reaction was predictably apprehensive.

"The majority of complaint cases are resolved by talking to the police concerned with an on-the-job lecture," he said, "but we haven't had to do many lectures for the past 18 months."

A lot of objection to homosexuality has to do with the lifestyle that older policemen led.

"When we first started, we were doing them once a month."

Two years ago, when the AIDS scare first erupted, the liaison unit took a big step backwards.

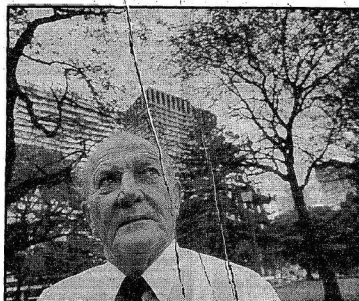
Mr Miller believes police are justified in their concerns about contracting AIDS in the line of duty, but says these concerns can be allayed by educating officers about the actual risks of contracting the disease and the preventative measures that can be taken.

"We had to send out people to lecture incoming police to allay unfounded fears," he said.

Since then, the program has blossomed, expanding to country areas with police gay liaison units now existing in Newcastle, Dubbo and Wollongong, with Lismore and Broken Hill next on the list.

"When you can manage to establish liaison groups in towns like Wollongong and Newcastle - tough mining and steelworks centres - then you know you're making ground. The next step is Broken Hill."

In Sydney in recent years, Mr Miller says the gay community has spread from Darlinghurst, Surry Hills -



Mr Miller ... being straight has helped. Picture by STEVEN SHEVART

where he lives with his wife - and Kings Cross, to include Balmain, Newtown and Waterloo.

"There now are groups formed in the western suburbs that had been in the

closet until about 18 months ago and we also have representatives on the Police Gay Liaison Unit for that area."

Mr Miller believes community policing has generally made police much

more tolerant towards minority groups.

But, while there have been big changes on both sides, there is still a minority of people in the force who remain inflexible in their views.

"A lot of objection to homosexuality has to do with the lifestyle that the older policeman has led - strict upbringing with lots of discipline. It's pretty hard to change those attitudes."

For the same reasons, Mr Miller believes the time is not yet right for gay police officers to "come out of the closet".

"There are gays in the police force. I've had calls for assistance from several gay officers. But, it's not that long since attitudes towards them began to change, and if those people came out of the closet now, I believe they would be subject to a hard time by some of their peers."

"In New York, police have their own gay section of the police association and I'm sure a similar thing will one day operate here."

Eventually, Mr Miller says he hopes to see lectures by gay community representatives at the Goulburn police academy, explaining their lifestyle.

"I think that is a must and it's just a matter of time before it comes about," he said.

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Police gays

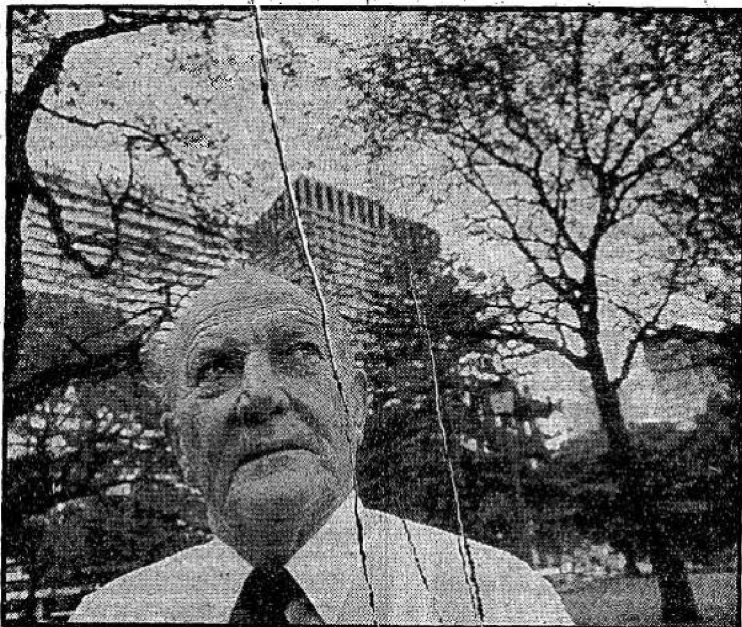
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