

THE NAKED CITY



MARDI GRAS

SHOW OF STRENGTH IN THE FACE OF AIDS: Behind the parade lurks the Grim Reaper. "The spectre of death seems more visible ... It's like facing death every day."

Fun conceals Grim Reaper

Thousands of Sydney gays today will either be nursing hangovers, still partying or recounting scenes from last night's Mardi Gras. But behind the fun, the AIDS virus is wreaking severe personal and communal damage. **MATT CONDON** reports.

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It was early evening and David, a gay, was relaxing before beginning his shift at one of Oxford Street's late-night gay bars.

"There's no doubt the price of deviating from a monogamous relationship in these times is death," he said. "HIV is out there and you're dealing with life and death - it's as simple as that. There is gloom over the gay community because of this but at the same time, I've never had a better time in my life."

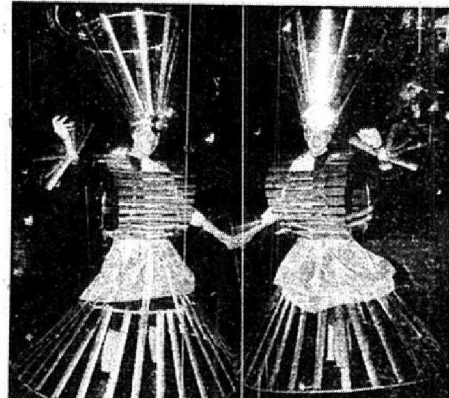
David, who has a steady partner, considers himself lucky. He joined the gay community in the mid-1980s and by then was fully aware of AIDS, the dangers and the required precautions.

"I came into it when the AIDS issue was at its peak," he said. "In the past four years we have all become aware of education programs and so on. Before that, there was a lack of knowledge and just assumption."

One of the predominant and inescapable features of Sydney's vibrant gay community in 1992 is death.

According to gays, most - if not all - of the gay community in Sydney have friends and acquaintances who are "ill" or have died of AIDS. And recently the spectre of death seems to have become more visible.

As David said: In four years I've gone from no-one I know being HIV-positive to having friends falling



DAZZLING COSTUMES: An explosion of creativity flows through the streets during the annual Mardi Gras.



Study shows gays going west

A RECENT study has shown that the centre of Sydney's gay and lesbian population has moved from the central city to the inner-western suburbs.

An *Historical Geography of a Symbolic Landscape: The Sydney Mardi Gras*, by Sydney University graduate Kym Seebohm, maps the development of the homosexual community from its emergence in the 1930s in Sydney's Central Business District to modern times where Oxford Street is no longer the centre of activity.

"In the 1930s, a respectable, largely white-collar clientele visited Castle-reagh and George streets between Martin Place and King Street while rough, blue collar establishments were found on George Street," he wrote.

"The George Street establishments were affectionately known as to be located in 'Salt Meat Alley'. These establishments existed up until the 1950s."

During the 1960s, gay hot spots began to emerge in Kings Cross, the

Central Business District, Surry Hills, Darlinghurst and Bondi Junction - suburbs which attracted transient populations.

Oxford Street eventually became the gay and lesbian mecca in the 1970s as the community grew in size and confidence.

But in the late 1980s, many gay men moved to two sub-districts concentrated in Leichhardt, Rozelle and Glebe and Erskineville and Newtown.

- ROBYN WILLIS

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DON Baxter, of the AIDS Council of NSW, likened the current accelerated AIDS death count to the devastation of war.

"It's just like how Australia's small country towns and communities were affected in World War I," Mr Baxter said. "Twenty per cent of your friends just die."

"I recently lost three friends to the AIDS virus in just one week."

Mr Baxter said the council was hoping to encourage the Federal Government to fund a comprehensive study into the impact of AIDS-related deaths on the community.

"Over the past 10 years, a whole new

group of young men have come into the community," Mr Baxter said. "They think they are invincible. They think AIDS is an older man's disease. Education has to continue in this area."

Professor John Dwyer, clinical director of Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital, said the higher number of apparent deaths may be evidence of the full gestation of the disease from peak contraction periods a decade ago.

"The peak incidence of infection was probably 1979 to 1982 and the time you're infected until the time you get AIDS is about nine years," Prof. Dwyer said. "It may be that a lot of people are running out of time."

Prof Dwyer said that at least 12,000 people were HIV-positive in Sydney, but the number could be much higher.

Prof Dwyer said intensive education about the virus within the gay

community had been effective.

"The measurable incidence of sexually transmitted diseases within the gay community is way down," he said. "This tells us that the gay community is being much more cautious about sexual activity."

"On the other hand, some people who have been terrified about the disease and behaving themselves are suddenly breaking away from that. We must make sure that people help other people maintain appropriate behaviour and safe sex."

DAVID, who saw the "patterns of sexual behaviour" in his job as a late-night barman in Sydney, said he was more concerned about the heterosexual community's attitude towards safe sex.

"The issue is sexuality, not whether you're gay or straight," David said. "Last week a guy on holiday from Britain was cruising around looking for a guy for the night. He'd left his wife and two children up in their hotel room."

David's friend, Michael, had similar reservations about AIDS education and the heterosexual singles scene. "Everybody I speak to in the straight scene doesn't use condoms," he said. "They're not used to it, although it has been part of gay life for a long time."

Statistics have proved this contention, with the incidence of many sexually transmitted diseases in the heterosexual community having doubled in recent years. Also, the greatest increase in HIV contraction has occurred among heterosexual women.

Larry Galbraith, editor of Sydney's gay newspaper the *Sydney Star Observer*, said many members of the gay community infected by AIDS were opting for euthanasia.

"A number of leading figures in the community, who contributed a lot to the community, have died in the past two years."

"The fundamental thing is that no public health program is going to have a 100 per cent success rate. However, the safe sex message has had a far greater success within the gay community than any health education program in the general community."

Health officials predict that rates of infection within the gay community will begin to level out and decrease - if they haven't already.

Peter, who is HIV positive and already suffers periodic bouts of illness, has a more negative view.

"I feel the scene is revving up again," Peter said. "There are a lot more one-night stands now. The whole scene has become more relaxed again in its view towards AIDS. There's a lot more sex around."

Michael said new spa and sauna centres had opened in Darlinghurst and were so popular "there are queues out the front on some nights".

On reflection, Michael said the huge dance parties of a couple of years ago had also enticed contact between the heterosexual and homosexual community.

"As a result a lot of young straight boys had their first contact with homosexuality. That period may lead to more people getting sick."

Michael said the gay Mardi Gras was also symbolic - a show of strength in the face of AIDS. "It allows us to stand up and be proud of being gay and the gay community," he said. "It gives people hope."

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