

THE GAYS ARE FIGHTING BACK

A few homophobic truths

STEPHEN LONG reports on a new video aimed at eradicating anti-gay prejudice among teenagers.

They used to treat it like sport. Gangs of school-age youths from South Sydney would hunt down gay men and bash them — sometimes to death.

On Monday, committal proceedings began against four young men from the Alexandria-Erskineville area who are to be sentenced next week for savagely killing a gay man, Richard Johnson, in a park behind Cleveland Street High School.

The next day, the Chief Justice of the Family Court, Elizabeth Evatt, launched a video, made by young people from the same area, which challenges homophobia and the culture of violence.

Truth or Dare was made by about 20 young people from Cleveland Street High and Newtown High and an Erskineville boy who attends Cranbrook.

Some of them are gay, some are straight. Many of them knew the gang that killed Richard Johnson, and some had been involved in gay bashings in the past.

Zac, the central character of *Truth or Dare*, could be any one of numerous teenage boys. He likes sport, hates gays and has been involved in bashings in the past. Zac thinks gay love is unnatural and he blames homosexuals for the spread of AIDS.

When he finds out his best friend is gay, Zac can't cope. Then he is confronted by events that force him to reassess his attitudes.

"For the kids involved, the process was as important as the product," said youth worker Shane Brown. "It was a learning experience for young people who did not identify as gay to work with openly gay young people.

"The friendships they established in eight months dispelled myths about homosexuality better than anything else could."

Produced by South Sydney Youth Services and the NSW Family Planning Association, the video was funded by the AIDS Council of NSW, the Bicentennial Youth Foundation, the NSW Police Service and the Australian Association for Adolescent Health.

Although the video has been endorsed by the police, the

Department of School Education is yet to decide whether it will be approved for general release in schools.

Mr Brown said staff from the department's policy unit had advised that it was unlikely that the video would be officially endorsed, because it contained a scene with two young men kissing.

Julian Schuchard, 16, an actor in *Truth or Dare*, said this attitude seemed "so contradictory — it's homophobic itself". He plans to approach his headmaster at Cranbrook to ask if the video can be shown there.

Zara Williams, 14, another actor in *Truth and Dare*, said she thought the video would help to break the silence about homosexuality.

"At my school [Newtown Performing Arts High] some of the girls are gay," she said. "But no-one talks about it."