



WORLD AIDS DAY 2020

Peter Rowland Address, spoken by Jacob White

Good morning,

It's wonderful to be able to return to Canberra to so many warm and familiar faces. It's also pleasing to see the strict adherence with which Canberrans are following the COVID restrictions - something that has served the city very well this year.

And it's a great privilege to be asked to speak here on this day and to be asked to give the Peter Rowland address. For my address I'd like to share a little bit about what World AIDS Day means to me.

This is a day that means different things to different people, and in the same way, it can be a very complicated day for many of us.

Sometimes those feelings can be painfully contradictory. The feeling of loss, and the feeling of survival. Knowing that so many of the wonderful medicines we have today, weren't available just a generation or two ago.

Despite those conflicting feelings though, I think there is a common theme in the experience of living with HIV. Something that throughout everything else, binds us all together. And reflecting on my own journey, I couldn't help coming back to this.

If you really get down to the crux of it, it's all about people.

The people who support us, who defend us, the people that protect us and those that stand with us.

So for my address today, named in honour of just one of those people, I wanted to reflect on some of those that have made all our work possible, and why now, more than ever, we need those people.

First and foremost I want to acknowledge those who are no longer with us.

I know for many of us, this day can serve as a painful reminder of those who have been taken away. While the departed are no longer with us, we will always have the memory of them, which we must learn from and honour.

There are **our defenders** - those that advocate for us. They are our allies. They are the AIDS Action Council and Thorne Harbour, they are ACON and they are Meridian. They are the policy advisors and the community advocates. They are the structures and the organisations that advance the cause of our dignity.

There are those of us who work in the medical profession, and I like to think of them as **our protectors**. They are the researchers, the scientists, the specialists and the doctors. For me they are Sarah Martin, Tuck Meng Soo. They are Denise Kraus and they are Peter Rowland.



And of course, some of the fiercest of our protectors are our nurses – where would we be without our nurses?

They are often the first ones we meet on this strange conscripted journey. They're the ones we call when we have a problem, or when we don't know what's happening with our bodies.

They're the ones that provide that invaluable care and support – and they're the one taking the blood. For me they are Phillip Habel from the Interchange General Practice.

Then there are our supporters, the rich community of friends, lovers, mates and allies - the ones that have been able to see past this illness and provide an understanding pair of ears. Without judgement and without fear.

Then there are our survivors. But we're doing so much more than surviving. I can see many of you here with me today, we're living rich and full lives standing on the shoulders of all who came before us. And we owe it to all of them to live the best lives with can.

These are the people that I think about when I think about World AIDS Day.

The departed,
our defenders,
our protectors,
our supporters,
and our survivors.

These people are the reason we're able to be here today.

And for my own purposes, they have given me the strength, the perspective, and the humility to be able to stand up today and speak about these complex issues.

Without these people I know I wouldn't be here, and without them I know I would be in a much darker place.

These people have been with me every step of the way.

Today I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect a bit on what that journey has been like for me, to share some of the more significant inflections with you. How these wonderful people have helped me on that journey, and some of the things I've learnt along the way.

The Day

For me this day is the culmination of a fortnight cram-packed with significant dates in my life.

As we gather here at the tail end of November reflecting on World AIDS Day, it also happens to be the month of my birth, and just last week I matured to the ripe old age of 28.



Perhaps unusually, I'm in the unique position of knowing when I became positive, and the tail end of November is also the anniversary of my first contact with HIV. So while I turned 28 last week, I turned 12 in HIV years too.

It's also the anniversary of what I often refer to as my second coming out. On this day two years ago, I locked myself in my bedroom and spent an entire weekend agonising over something that I'd determined to use this day for – I was going to use World AIDS Day to tell my friends, family, and the whole world really, about my HIV diagnosis a decade ago.

This fortnight is also the anniversary of Australia saying 'yes' to marriage equality, and now, I'm pleased to report, it is also the anniversary of Canberra saying yes to 'Yes!Fest'.

So when I think of World AIDS Day, I think of the stories and experiences that created these significant anniversaries in my own life, and I think about what those anniversaries mean for where we, as a community, are up to.

Seroconversion

I thought I would start by sharing just a couple of those experiences and I thought I'd start off with the one that I talk about the least – how I became HIV positive.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm in the relatively unusual position of actually knowing how, when, and from whom, I contracted HIV, and while we all remember when we were diagnosed, far fewer of us know these finer details.

For some of us, how this initial contact took place is a source of great trauma. Who did we trust that lied to us? Who hurt us? Why would someone do that?

For others it's a blessing in disguise. We'd rather not know so we don't have to think about it. It's in the past and not something that impacts our health today, so why dwell on it?

But of course, none of us get to choose which category we fall into, and how we deal with it is a different journey for everyone.

What happened to me probably could have happened to any young gay man growing up in Australia a decade or so ago. I was fortunate to have a pretty good idea of who I was at a young age, and I think we have the increasing visibility of queer characters in popular culture at the time to thank for that.

While that represented some progress, Australia was not yet at a point where a young gay man growing up in northern Wollongong could express those feelings and experiment with peers, like most of my heterosexual friends were doing.

We were beginning to see gay people on the screen, but we weren't yet ready to see a couple of boys kissing in the school yard.



But whether our families and peer groups are ready or not, the feelings and desires don't go away. And if they're not accepted, they just move into the shadows.

And the shadows is where I met him.

He seemed nice enough at first, confident and interesting, but in retrospect, probably a little too interested in the 16 year old he was chatting to online and who he knew almost nothing about.

None of this really triggers alarm bells when you're so young though. You haven't quite figured out you're gay yet, let alone when someone might be a predator.

It took a month or so of chatting, but I finally worked up the courage to actually meet this person. And at the time, and immediately after, I felt like it had gone relatively well. I felt safe and I felt like I had a positive experience.

It wasn't until about half an hour or so later, after we had parted ways that he sent me a strange text message.

I thought it was fairly cryptic at first. It wasn't until I pressed him on what he meant and he sent a final text message before blocking me, that he told me he had given me a gift that I'd get to keep for life.

And that was it.

What do you do with that information?

Immediately, I was completely overcome with a deep sinking feeling, in my head I knew exactly what he meant, but I wasn't even able to begin to process what had just happened.

So I left it.

Scared and afraid.

Buried in the back of my mind.

Somewhere in the shadows.

From that I learnt that the world can be full of terrible, terrible people, lurking in the dark and preying on young vulnerable people. I learnt that there's really not a lot you can do about those people. They're always going to be there.

But I cannot help but think that this terrible thing would not have happened if young queer people were allowed to express their feelings and their sexuality in an open way – free of judgement and shame.

And that if we weren't forced to live in the shadows, we might be able to escape some of this darkness.



I can't even begin to imagine the isolation experienced by the trans kid of today, who is only just starting to see people that they can relate to on screen and in pop culture – they are a constant reminder of how much work there is to do.

So visibility matters.

Visibility is important.

And we need the whole community, all of our people to bring about this visibility.

We need the memory of our departed.

We need our defenders, our protectors, our supporters, and our survivors.

Alex

Despite this fairly dark experience in my formative years, I've always been convinced that those terrible people are in the minority and that on the whole, people are good, have the capacity to be open minded, and want to see other people do well.

I still believe that.

That brings me to Alex.

I want to talk now a bit about what I learnt when I first met Alex.

When I first met Alex, my now partner, we were both much younger. I was 22, and he was just shy of 19.

We had been chatting on and off for a couple of months online, and I was impressed by his maturity and his intelligence, the lengths he went to stay informed about what it meant to be a young gay man and about his own sexual health.

I could tell Alex was someone who could see the science through the stigma.

And while I might have only been 22, by that point I had been HIV positive for six years. Seroconverting at such a young age meant that I didn't really have much sexual experience without HIV being a part of it. So at the wise old age of 22 I had the advantage of time to grapple with the role it played in my own sexual experience, and increasingly, I had become comfortable living with it.

Despite this, I still wasn't at a point where I was able to talk about it freely with someone I hadn't met, and much less with someone I didn't yet need to tell. So while we talked about HIV, I hadn't disclosed my own status to him.

It wasn't until shortly after we actually met, and after some fairly transactional Netflixing, that we were in a position where I had an obligation to tell him something about myself.

I don't think Alex will mind me saying that he didn't take the news well.

But it wasn't anger that he was overcome with, it was fear.



Total and complete fear.

Fear that I had put his life at risk and that his life was now in danger because of me.

That gave me a new perspective on stigma and the impact it can have - how it can completely cut through rational thought. How it can impact even those of us like Alex who aren't HIV positive.

We later worked out that he had descended into a major panic attack, and he knew then, like he knows now, that I wasn't able to harm him, but that didn't matter.

That's the power that stigma can wield over us.

Stigma is pervasive, it's corrosive, it impacts all of us as a community, and all of us have an obligation to diminish it.

It's only with our whole community, with all of our people that we can do that.

With the memory our departed.

With our defenders, our protectors, our supporters, and our survivors.

I wanted to tell this story because it happened before the powerful message of U=U had entered the discourse, and because it shows us how far we have come in just five or six years.

That alone should give us cause for optimism.

But I also wanted to tell this story because it was this event that made me realise that as soon as I was able, I had a responsibility to speak about my experience with HIV.

Marriage Equality

It's that responsibility to speak up and to speak out that brings me to the final element of my experience I want to talk about today - and that's the way that I've tried to parlay some of these experiences into activism for change.

I'm going to talk about the marriage equality campaign and what I learnt there, Yes!Fest and the wonderful annual celebration born out of it, and some of the work that Equality Australia is doing today at the coalface of our movement's campaign for LGBTIQ+ rights.

While it can be easy now to look back at the marriage equality campaign as just another rung on the ladder of progress, we knew at the time that the change to our marriage laws was going to be difficult.

A lot of good people had put a lot of work to getting us up to the survey, and that was only the beginning of the journey. With only a fraction of the Australian community actually identifying as gay or queer, the problem we were trying to address was not a problem experienced by most of the people we had to convince.



So from the beginning we knew we had to make it about something that everyone could understand.

It had to be about experiences.

It had to be about stories.

The campaign had to be about people.

I will be clear though, that campaign should never have happened.

This is why we have a parliament. That is the process for resolving matters of this nature. We should not have been forced to stand up and justify our love and our very existence in the public arena.

Had a similar question been posed about the rights of almost any other minority group in our community, I don't believe a national survey would have been tolerated for even a moment.

Imagine the question we were all asked?

And then imagine substituting "same sex couples" for almost any other minority group we happen to have living in this country?

We simply wouldn't have allowed that to happen.

Outrageous.

But we did, and the fact that we did represents a derogation of responsibility by our leaders. I believe that history will take a very dim view of the decision makers that allowed that survey to take place.

If we are to salvage anything from what ultimately did take place though, there are a couple of things I would nominate:

1. It showed me the power of human stories.

The power that human stories have to bring people together and that while not everyone will be as passionate about an issue as we might be, if we lower the pitchforks and take a chance to listen to one another, Australians have a remarkable openness to the experience of others.

2. A whole generation of young Australians got to see us say 'yes'.

They got to see us come together as a people and say "you know what? You're alright". Being able to feel accepted, to feel loved and to feel included needs to be at the very core of what we're trying to do as a movement. It's a powerful message to young Australians and it will save lives.



3. It showed me that we must never take progress for granted.

I think that one of the greatest hurdles we come up against on our mission to make a better world, is humanity's dangerous inability to learn from past mistakes. The march towards a better and more open world is not linear, it is littered with ups and downs, with great leaps forward and with devastating retreats to some of our more baser instincts.

We must never take progress for granted.

These three things, for me, really underscore what we're trying to create at Yes!Fest, and they give meaning and purpose to the work we do today at Equality Australia, moving the dial towards a better world.

I've learnt that we can change peoples minds if we're willing to have those conversations.

It's so important for younger queer Australians to know that:

We see them

We hear them

And that we love and accept them.

Conclusion

Throughout all of this, I think of people like Peter Rowland who stood up for us and protected us, regardless of what it might have meant for his own life. I think of people like Alex, who can see love and warmth through stigma and hate. And I think of the hundreds of Canberrans who put their hand up day after day to make calls, knock on doors, and hand out fliers for a better Australia.

We can't remind ourselves enough of this history, of these people, and of the sacrifices that they have made, and how over decades so many came together in the face of adversity to create what so many of us are able to take for granted today.

We owe it to them, Now More Than Ever, to build on their good work,

To support those who need it.

To live the best lives we possibly can.

And to keep up that constant work of making the world a better place for all of us.

That's what World AIDS Day is all about for me.

Thank you.