

Resolution of Council

17 February 2025

Item 3.2

Vale David Polson AM

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Councillors will be saddened to learn of the passing of David Polson AM on 10 February 2025. A long time AIDS advocate and educator, David will be remembered as the founder and first Chair of Qtopia Sydney, The Centre for Queer History and Culture.

Born in Christchurch, New Zealand on 23 November 1954, David first came to Australia after completing high school to take up an acting scholarship at Sydney's Ensemble Theatre. Following a 12-month stint at a Neutral Bay theatre, David spent some years working in London. He returned to Sydney in 1981, working as barman at the new 5-star Regent Hotel. Three years later he was among the first 400 Australians to be diagnosed with HIV. He was then managing the Regent's Don Burrows Supper Club.

David's initial response to his diagnosis was to adopt a healthy lifestyle, which included exercise, managing his diet, taking vitamin supplements and using positive visualisation and meditation. Above all, he was determined to stay positive and surround himself with laughter.

This, in itself, would have been challenging. Apart from being diagnosed with a disease with no cure, HIV positive gay men had to deal with the stigma and prejudice created by a moral panic. The risks they faced - losing their jobs, their homes, being bashed - were very real. David chose to share his diagnosis with only 4 people, his sister Ruth Henning, her husband, his cousin and her husband.

A poster at his GP's surgery calling for gay volunteers for a study was a life-changer. It led him to meeting Doctor (later Professor) Cooper, the eminent Australian immunologist who identified the seroconversion process which followed HIV infection. At the time his attitude was "I will do anything I can to help medical science, help fight this disease."

Over the next 30 years, David honoured this commitment, undergoing 28 HIV drug trials under Professor Cooper's care. The trials were tough. He would wake with nausea every day and suffered from lipodystrophy, hearing loss, imbalance and kidney disease. By 2011, he was taking 48 tablets a day. He persevered, because the alternative was worse. By 2020, the HIV retrovirus in his body was undetectable.

The AIDS crisis had other impacts on him. Many of the men diagnosed with HIV, and who spent time in St Vincent's Ward 17 South, were personal friends. He would attend their funerals, privately vowing to himself that he would survive.

Over time he recognised the need to address the stigma associated with HIV, deciding this was best done by talking about it.

He became an AIDS educator and advocate, and for over 30 years shared his personal story of resilience and hope, dispelled myths surrounding HIV/AIDS, promoted a healthy and positive life while living with HIV, and replaced people's fear and ignorance with understanding and acceptance. He gave lectures at the Kirby Institute, Westmead Hospital, the University of Sydney and University of NSW. He was a member of the Positive Life NSW Speakers Bureau, an Ambassador for the St Vincent's Curran Foundation, a Community Ambassador for the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation.

This work was recognised with David being honoured as a Community Champion in the 2021 inaugural National Association of People with HIV Australia (NAPWAH) and Gilead Sciences Australia and New Zealand. He received the HIV Hero Award from Positive Life NSW at the 2023 ACON Honours Awards. Also in 2023, David became a Member of the Order of Australia "for significant service to community health through HIV education and advocacy roles."

Over his years of treatment, David Cooper became a close personal friend as well as his doctor. When Professor Cooper died in 2018, his widow, Dorrie, told David about her late husband's vision of a space to honour the history of those affected by HIV/AIDS. David was determined to make Professor Cooper's vision a reality.

He brought together a steering committee and enlisted as patrons former High Court Judge, Michael Kirby, and Ita Buttrose who had chaired the National Advisory Committee on AIDS from 1984 to 1988 and was subsequently Chair of the AIDS Trust of Australia. It was Michael who suggested that the vision be expanded to recognise the persecution and discrimination of queer people. This led to the vision being centred on 3 principles: memory, celebration, and education.

From his initial commitment to Professor Cooper's vision, David presided over its transformation into what is now Qtopia Sydney. It will be his enduring legacy.

I note however that there are already requests from the community for a specific memorial to honour David's life and work. I propose requesting the Chief Executive Officer to consult with Qtopia, HIV/AIDS community organisations and other relevant stakeholders about an appropriate memorial.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor) –

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of David Polson AM and his significant contribution to HIV and AIDS advocacy, education and research and to Australia's LGBTIQ+ community as the founder and first Chair of Qtopia Sydney;
- (B) Council express its condolences to David's sister Ruth and family, and Qtopia Sydney's staff, supporters and volunteers;
- (C) the Lord Mayor convey Council's condolences to David's sister Ruth and family, and Qtopia Sydney; and
- (D) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to consult with Qtopia, HIV/AIDS community organisations and other relevant stakeholders about an appropriate memorial to honour the life and work of David Polson AM.

Carried unanimously.

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Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to David Polson AM.