

BOOK LAUNCH - 18 November, 2015

The Drug Law Wars: Twenty years of families fight at the front

The launch of FFDLR's book to commemorate its twenty years of activity was a memorable occasion. Friendships of original members of FFDLR were renewed and experiences recalled. The Reception Room at the ACT Legislative Assembly was brimming with conversation from all sectors of the community as a large number of participants enjoyed the refreshments and the strumming of the ukele by Alison Oakleigh before the official proceedings began. The display of books was attractively set up by members of ATODA and the books were selling well.

Carrie Fowlie, CEO of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Association, welcomed the audience and introduced Senator Katy Gallagher to launch the book.

Katy began her speech with the following perceptive words:

For anyone who wants to understand the history, development and implementation of Australia's drug laws this is the book for you.

For anyone who wants to understand the human cost and the personal stories of lives lost and families left heartbroken this is the book for you.

For anyone who wants to understand other alternatives to standard drug policy and laws this is the book for you.

Katy went on to say

'Drug Law Wars' chronicles the earliest days of a community led movement - from the days before Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform to the forming of the organisation, to the development and expansion of the families led model - not just across Australia but to other parts of the world. It's a history that has been shaped by the dedication, perseverance, eternal optimism and sheer persistence of a small group of individuals who managed against the odds to spread an alternate message to the one commonly understood across the community.

Katy's speech was not the typical political speech one often hears on such occasions but a very human response to the hopes and despair of a community organisation that had been trying to bring change in a difficult area.

Whilst the book examines in honest detail the gains made it also looks at the losses as well. Although on my reading of the book – these can't be seen as losses – sure the ultimate goal wasn't realised in every case – safe injecting room, heroin trial stand out as examples here – it is clear that every campaign, won or lost, continued to progress the principles of the organisation – through fierce advocacy and evidence based arguments – calm, considered and rational arguments at that – understanding and awareness of Australia's drug policies, the needs and rights of users and the needs and rights of families were enhanced.

Following is part of Marion and Brian McConnell's response.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that when this group began back in 1995 following the tragic loss of so many young lives would we be here today, 20 years later still advocating for change to our drug laws. The book tells of what has been for many of us a long unrelenting battle, a battle that I believe has proved to be one of the hardest if not **the** hardest social justice issue on which to make traction. Difficult issues like abortion and

gay rights have made progress over time, issues like poverty and homelessness whilst by no means stabilised at least are broadly discussed and debated.

Drug Law Reform is not the taboo subject that it was in 1995 but even though drugs are implicated in many of the most costly social issues it is still difficult to get political parties to openly discuss the full scope of the research and evidence that advocates a move away from prohibition. I hope this book gives them not only the courage to do so but gives them very good reasons why it is essential that they do so.

Many of us lost our family members because the drugs they received were unregulated and uncontrolled. We want drugs to be less available to our kids but if they are going to use drugs we want them to live through the experience without adverse health consequences. This would be more likely if drugs were treated as a health and social issue and not a law enforcement one and drugs were controlled and regulated by governments. As Johann Hari said "Criminalisation makes drugs much more deadly, and punishment

We are at a tipping point. Change is imminent. Even the Office at the United Nations has just this month put out a report - *What comes after the war on drugs* the introduction of which says "In April 2016, diplomats, experts and civil society actors from around the world will gather for three days at a rare Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, called to address the world drug problem (UNGASS 2016). This gathering reflects a growing sense in some quarters, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, that the so-called 'War on Drugs' has failed, and that global drug policy needs rethinking." This coming from a United Nations that in 1998 declared the world would be drug free by 2008.

Our personal hope is that the launch and reading of this book will help all of us, all of you to understand that the 'War on Drugs' is a war on our young people and real peace offerings need to begin

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The title of the book is styled on a war theme. It is a symbolic twist on US President Nixon's War on Drugs and is presented as a series of themes rather than a chronological record. FFDLR has been engaged in a fight for better drug laws and better drug policies, not unlike any world conflict, not unlike any war. The symbolism of the front cover artwork will also become clear when the chapter, *Remembering the fallen* has been read.

The Book can be purchased through the website at a cost of \$25 + \$2 for postage.