



**Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc.**  
*committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use*

**June Newsletter 2016 dedicated to  
Brian Peter McConnell OAM**

PO Box 7186, KALEEN ACT 2617

Email [president@ffdlr.org.au](mailto:president@ffdlr.org.au) Telephone (02) 6259 9899

Email [treasurer@ffdlr.org.au](mailto:treasurer@ffdlr.org.au) Telephone (02) 6258 9575

Web [www.ffdlr.org.au](http://www.ffdlr.org.au)

Twitter @FFDLR



*Marion, Brian, Josie and Bill, OAM award ceremony, April 2016*

Brian was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in the Australia Day Honours list in January this year. The photograph above was taken at the presentation ceremony at Government House on the 15th of April. He was awarded the medal for *service to the community through drug and alcohol support services*. In this newsletter, dedicated to Brian's life, I want to pass on the many tributes that FFDLR received from some of the people whose lives Brian had touched. The medal is a public recognition of his lifelong dedication to drug law reform. In this news letter the community that he worked with for over the twenties years has provided an intimate glimpse into the way that Brian and Marion have provided leadership, courage and solace to so many people.

Peter Taylor – President FFDLR

The emails that flooded through following the announcement of Brian's death were all passed to Brian's family. Marion asked that the following be included in this newsletter:

### ***From Marion***

My heartfelt thanks go out to all FFDLR members who have sent flowers, cards and emails with their condolences following the sad death of my husband, Brian on 7 June. Many organisations and individuals from the alcohol and drug sector also took the time to remember Brian and his family by sending cards, flowers and attending his funeral service. Our home is still filled with the perfume of flowers that have lasted these 2 weeks.

As I was, Brian would have been overwhelmed by the number of people who attended his farewell on a beautiful sunny winters day on 15 June. He would never have expected that he touched the lives of so many people. I am sorry I was not able to speak to you all.

Brian was a quiet achiever. He rarely made a fuss (he left that to me) but slogged on doing what he knew was right but realising that although the need for change to our drug laws was obvious to him, it was very difficult to achieve change.

I was extremely proud of the way he handled his diagnosis of mesothelioma. He took it in his stride but he didn't give in to it. He wanted to live and tried different treatments to help him enjoy life for as long as he could. His last treatment of a moderate measure of radiation however did not help him as doctors had suggested and he knew in the last week or two that it was time to go. He died at home with my daughter, Josie and I by his side. It was a privilege to have been his partner for over 50 years and to have supported and cared for him through the difficult months since his diagnosis. This was made easier by the many good friends who visited or made contact in some way. We miss him greatly.

The milestones he wanted to achieve in his last months were achieved - publishing the 20 year book in FFDLR's 20th year in November, 2015, celebrating our 50th Wedding Anniversary in March 2016, attending the investiture for the Order of Australia Medal in April, 2016 as well as settling

into our new home and making it an enjoyable, homely place to live.

Darryl, Josie and I thank you all for your kindnesses.

### ***Brian's Funeral***

Brian's funeral was held at St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lyneham on the 15th of June. Brian's favourite Paul Simon songs were played at the start of the ceremony. Let It Be by the Beatles and the familiar anthem, Amazing Grace, were sung during the service. Eulogies were given by Brians' son Darryl and his friend Bill Bush. A modern interpretation of the Beatitudes was read by Mary Bush and the service concluded with an Irish Blessing read by the Reverend Alan White.

A recording of the Eulogies is able to be heard on the FFDLR website along with transcripts. Below are two very short extracts.

### ***Darryl described what it was like being part of the McConnell family:***

Dad loved making things and fixing things (our garage, the gazebo, numerous cars, anything that was electrical and many more). He also experimented. Dad loved photography and when he was courting Mum, back in the 60s, he wanted a flash gun for his camera and of course as dad often did he decided to make his own. He asked mum to hold the flash while he took a photo of them having a picnic with friends when mum got thrown to the ground with an electric shock when the flash went off.

Dad built a computer from parts he had purchased from the US in the late 70s. The whole Higgins neighbourhood enjoyed coming over to Dad's Study to play the "Stomp Snails" game that he had programmed. A further experiment to get that little bit extra out of the computer unfortunately resulted in a smoke filled study and no more Stomp Snails. Dad was never idle, he always had a new interest or hobby some of which were, photography (he won a state award for a colour slide portraiture) fossicking, painting, cheese making, jam making, gardening, chooks, an avid reader (sometimes reading three books in a week) and listening to ebooks on his iPod often while gardening or going

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for walks.

He was a member of the University of the Third Age art group which he was attending weekly until the last couple of months when it became just too difficult for him. But in his last week he did draw on all his strength to touch up a painting that he thought was unbalanced.

### ***Bill included anecdotes illustrating Brian's approach to drug law reform:***

Fundamentally the drug problem should be approached as a health and social issue; the harmful processes of the criminal law should not be applied to drug users. This was and remains a challenging and contested message that stirs deep emotions. Brian's polite but persistent advocacy for evidence earned trust and respect among even sceptical audiences including a succession of ACT governments that did not always agree with him.

Prime Ministers learnt that Brian would not compromise on essentials. A seat on the Australian National Council on Drugs would have been his if FFDLR omitted "for Drug Law Reform" from its title. Brian refused to oblige.

Even the Governor-General had to yield to his prophetic charm. Just two months ago the GG mentioned to the crowded reception room at Brian's investiture that Brian had founded his own support group. "Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform" corrected Brian politely and distinctly. "Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform" repeated the GG equally clearly before realising what he'd said.

For twenty years Brian and Marion organised remembrance ceremonies in the beauty of Weston Park. Showered by the blossom of a locust tree these have provided a public space to lift the cloud of guilt and stigma that infected so many loving homes.

20 years of Families and Friends under Brian had its setbacks as well as its successes. The rejection of the Heroin Trial in 1997 was certainly a dark day for Brian. The opening in 2001 of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross and its demonstrated success gave hope for change which has still to be followed up.

## ***Thoughts from Members***

### ***Tony Trimingham and Family Drug Support***

Brian was great friend, colleague and courageous battler for families and for more just drug policies. He leaves a great legacy and many sad people. To his wife Marian and his children we cannot imagine their grief and cannot find enough words to say. We think of them in their dark hours.

I am so glad that Brian was acknowledged with his Order of Australia before his passing; such an important acknowledgement of his fight. I will never forget his quiet but strong personality and his personal mentoring

### ***Chris Gough and CAHMA***

Brian was a staunch supporter of drug law reform, harm reduction and peer based drug user organisations such as CAHMA. Every year the Remembrance Ceremony was an emotional and moving occasion where the names of the victims of the 'war on people who use drugs' were read out and speakers presented their perspective on the failure of our politicians to provide leadership, despite the overwhelming evidence of the failure of prohibition.

Sadly, Brian did not live to see his hopes realised but all who share his vision want Marion, his family, and FFDLR to rest assured there are many of us keeping the dream alive.

With all our love, the community and the staff that is CAHMA.

### ***Dierk and Rosemary von Behrens***

It strikes me as impossible to summarise the impact of both Brian and Marion on our lives and that of the wider community, but, for us they both stand for and symbolise the strongest effort and attempt to oppose and abolish drug-phobia: addicts are human beings first and foremost, ones that are the victims of an unfortunate addiction. They are neither evil, nor vicious, but enmeshed by their chemical bonds - at least for the time being. They are in need of compassion, understanding and help.

This is a lesson we will never forget.

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## **Tina van Raay**

I often felt guilty about badgering Brian and Marion to start a group that families could relate to about drug law reform when working for Michael Moore and campaigning strongly on the subject. But he took up the challenge and ran with it in such a calm, measured and credible way, giving his ( and Marion's ) unstinting energy and focus to such an important issue. He has made a difference, albeit sometimes it doesn't feel so. Discussions in the community and media are much more measured since Brian called for fact based policies.

His unwavering support for Directions ACT while I was Executive Director was so appreciated. I could always count on Brian coming up with workable and imaginative responses to issues raised.

I am so grateful to have known Brian; he has inspired me to keep going on social justice issues, even when it seems one is a lone voice in the wilderness. I also personally thank him and Marion for giving me a chance to honour my brother's death in an honest way at the Weston Park ceremonies.

## **Nadia McGuire and ACTCOSS**

Brian dedicated much of his life to advocating for systemic drug law reform, and was influential in the adoption of a more humane approach to drug use in the ACT. He fought hard to change public discourse around, and perception of, drug users, particularly the stigma that is often attached.

Through his work with FFDLR, Brian also provided valuable support to families and friends of drug users, including holding an annual Remembrance Ceremony for people who have lost their lives to drugs.

Brian, alongside his wife Marion, has been an invaluable resource to ACTCOSS, shaping our priorities for advocacy and supporting our advocacy work. He was deeply respected by all in the community and government.

Brian's graciousness, dedication, passion and expertise will be greatly missed.

## **Maureen Steele**

I met Brian and Marion on December 16 1996. I remember it well. Myself and another NUAA staff member had driven down from Sydney to Canberra to attend the inaugural overdose remembrance ceremony and unveiling the memorial.

I was intrigued to meet both Brian and Marion. I was 27 and had not yet told my parents about my injecting drug use. A friend of mine had recently told her parents and they were no longer speaking to each other. She thought they might cope as her brother had come out as gay and they had accepted him. So I was truly stunned to hear about Marion and Brian, who had lost their son to an overdose and then had the courage to stand up and say "I will not be ashamed. I loved my son unconditionally and what happened to him should never have happened." I wanted to shake their hand and say thank you- on behalf of all of us who felt too ashamed to tell our families and feared their reaction. I still can't truly express what their actions meant to me at the time. Brian's speech at that first ever overdose memorial service gave me the courage I needed to tell my parents.

The last time I saw Brian, he and Marion took the time to have coffee with me on a visit to Sydney a couple of years ago. They reassured me that sometimes we all feel like we are "going it alone", especially those of us who are drug users and family members, dealing with the consequences of the current drug policy can be a lonely experience, but that we are actually many voices, and joined together, many voices can make the world change.

Brian taught me the value of the "soft voice." He taught me that no matter how angry we might feel that there is not point directing that anger at others. Especially when those "others" are simply by ignorant, not bad or evil. Brian showed me that quietly chipping away, chipping away is much more valuable, because the time will come when enough people have been educated, and a tipping point will be reached, and change for the better will occur. It has occurred. I have seen the change in the last 20

years, and all older users will agree. And, who can say what would have happened? But Brian and Marion made a stand when they did and made the world a better place.

Thanks Brian. Thanks for everything you did.

*Other thoughts:* I don't mean to get political while remembering Brian, but I think he won't mind. I have come to the conclusion recently that the nature of "evidence based policy" means that injecting drug users and their families will always be excluded from the policy debate. We are "too close;" too "subjective;" so our ideas cannot be taken seriously. We need to turn this thinking around. Because in actual fact, we know exactly what needs to happen, because we are the ones closest to the issue. So let's get our expertise heard.

### **Alex Wodak**

Brian was a jewel of a person, always modest to a fault, never pressing others to notice him or his work, yet always tenaciously working to overcome the policy that cost the life of one of his sons

I heard Brian describe a number of times how he and his family were dealt with so poorly when it became clear to police that this son had been using illicit drugs

When Brian and Marion lost their son, it was extremely unusual for parents to even consider that the international treaties and our national drug prohibition laws were somehow even in part responsible

That's not the case any more

More and more parents who have lost a child to drugs recognise that the international treaties and our national drug prohibition laws were very much responsible for their loss

And these days we have senior police, initially just retired but now even serving senior police agreeing with them.

Still the laws haven't changed

The Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation has

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now been trying to change our drugs laws for more than two decades

It's easy for policy makers to brush away doctors, or noises, or psychologists, or other health care workers, or retired politicians

But no politician can ignore the pleas of a dignified parent who has lost a child to drugs, or really to drug prohibition.

The organisation that Brian and Marion started had a huge impact in Australia and also a significant impact in other countries.

The movement for drug law reform lost one of its leaders but let's hope that inspires us and others to complete the task that Brian committed his life to.

RIP Brian - much loved and never forgotten

### **Susie van den Heuval and Neil Lade**

Susie and I first met Brian and Marion after our elder daughter, Melanie, died from a heroin overdose in March 1999. From memory, I think either Brian or Marion contacted us after a story about Mel was published in The Canberra Chronicle.

We then became aware of Family and Friends for Drug Law Reform and became more actively involved in trying to change things. Brian and Marion were very supportive then and continued to be afterwards. Susie and I have always agreed with the aims of FFDLR and tried to maintain our support as best we could. Susie spoke at the remembrance ceremony at Weston Park in 1999. Brian and Marion helped to steer us through. As a working journalist, I wrote several articles on Mel and heroin – including for The Canberra Times and Family Circle – and wrote many letters to politicians. We had meetings with then PM John Howard and then Opposition leader Kim Beazley. I'm not sure we achieved all that much, but perhaps we did.

Brian and Marion were always grateful for any help we could give. There was never any pressure on us to do more than we could. With extremely busy working lives and a realisation that our other

daughter needed more support, we put less focus on the drug debate. But we always knew that Brian and Marion were there for us.

Brian devoted a huge amount of his life to drug law reform and to try to change the policy focus away from “the war on drugs” and law enforcement. Susie and I will never forget Brian’s humanity, dedication and compassion in the struggle to make illicit drug use/abuse be treated as a social and health issue.

His friendship and support will always be remembered.

### **Joan Westaway**

One of the things that made Brian so effective in changing the perspective on drug law was the genuine respect he felt for other people. He listened with respect, even when he disagreed, and he generated respect. He listened to people’s problems – to my problems – with a calm intentness. I always felt as though I’d been heard. His ability to relate to people and organisations was why he was able to be instrumental in bringing about so many of the changes that have been made in drug policy and treatment.

The words sound so trite, but he was a truly good man.

### **Bob McFadden**

In 2002 at a U3A course on the History of the Drug Wars, I listened to Brian with Marion discussing his family’s tragic experience of losing their son, bringing home to me who the real casualties in this war really are. He saw Marion and himself at that time as ordinary, fairly conventional parents, just getting on with their family life with little understanding of the illicit drug scene. While not suffering the same tragedy, when I reflected on my own family’s experience I felt an air of similarity.

But that is where the similarity ended and we all know of Brian’s achievements in the years since the mid-nineties as a trailblazer for drug law reform. He stands out for his rigorous, evidence-based and enduring contribution to the public debate and the importance of families in this debate. He was widely respected by supporters and many of his detractors. We will not forget him, and those who

continue this struggle will be inspired by his work.

Some might say this shows that he was anything but ordinary, but he was still the Brian we had always known, with a variety of interests and dedicated to Marion, their children and grandchildren, his wider family and many friends. I prefer to remember him as an ordinary person doing extraordinary things.

### **Finally...**

What more can be said? Some final words from **Fiona MacDonald Brand:**

Brian and Marion McConnell have been, and will remain, an inspiration to FFDLR members for their unrelenting advocacy for Drug Law Reform.



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