

President's Annual Report - 2015

Introduction

2015 has been a challenging year. At the 2014 AGM I announced that I would not be able to carry on to the same extent that I had in previous years because of serious health issues and the likelihood of moving house. I was willing to continue as President with that proviso. It has been pleasing that others have willingly stepped in and filled the gap, not the least of whom has been Marion who has carried the load not only caring for me but for undertaking many more FFDLR tasks.

Bill Bush and others including Peter Taylor and Bob McFadden have also shouldered some of the load. I thank them and all of my office bearers and committee members for their assistance during the year.

Major events

My focus for the year was putting every effort into producing a book to commemorate 20 years of the work of FFDLR. The progress of the book was part of the agenda at all the monthly meetings where input and suggestions were discussed. I am grateful to all those who contributed to make the final production a worthwhile chronicle of the efforts of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform to bring about drug laws and policies that caused less harm to individuals and families. Major contributors to the book were Emeritus Prof Bob Douglas, Prof Desmond Manderson, Michael Moore, Bill Bush, Prof Gabriele Bammer, Dr Alex Wodak and former AFP Commissioner, Mick Palmer. The book benefited greatly from all these contributions and we are grateful to these people for the time and effort they gave. This culminated in a very successful book launch by Senator Katy Gallagher, who spoke very favourably of the book and the efforts of FFDLR over the 20 years, on 18th November at the ACT Legislative Assembly.

We are very grateful to the staff of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Association of the ACT for their help with the catering and the running of the launch. Many books were sold and orders are still coming in. Media coverage at the launch was disappointing but an editorial in the Sunday Times and the Age as well as an article in the Sunday Times raised our spirits. A thank you is deserved here to a couple of our members who phoned the Canberra Times and the ABC following the launch expressing disappointment with the media. An excellent article by John Stapleton also appeared in an online paper, The New Daily prior to the launch. As late as 25 November Marion was invited onto an afternoon program on ABC 666 with Alex Sloan - an hour long program called Canberra Close Up. It is possible that more media including book reviews will follow. We still need to distribute to libraries, universities and schools etc. and perhaps to those overseas family organisations with which we have had contact. The book can be purchased through the website at a cost of \$25 + \$2 postage.

The second major event of the year that we were able to undertake was 20th Annual Remembrance Ceremony for those who lose their life to illicit drugs. Much planning went into this event to make it the success that it was. Kate Carnell, former Chief Minister of the ACT, who

unveiled the plaque in 1996 was invited and accepted, Tony Trimmingham, CEO of FDS who lost a son in 1996 spoke about the trauma to families and Rev Graham Long from the Wayside Chapel in Sydney read out the names and paid a tribute that will be long remembered by all who attended.

This being the 20th ceremony it was pleasing to see it so well attended and appreciated especially by family members who wanted this opportunity to remember their loved ones. This has been an event that Marion has happily organised each year but feels it is time for her to hand over to others. I sincerely hope this event will continue.

Submissions

We were able to deliver 3 submissions and thank Bill Bush for his work here

1. Enquiry of the ACT Standing Committee on health, Ageing, Community and Social Services into the exposure draft of the Drugs of Dependence (Cannabis use for Medical Purposes) Amendment Bill 2014 and related discussion paper.

Bill and Marion also appeared before the committee on 31 March.

2. Enquiry into methamphetamine and its chemical precursors by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement.

Bill and Peter also appeared before the committee on 25 November.

3. Dierk von Behrens and Bill Bush prepared a submission to the Needle and Syringe program Working Group for which was sent on 22nd November. The invitation came from Justice and Community Safety and the Community and Public Sector Union

Meetings

Bill, Marion and Peter met with Nicole Lawler, liberal member of the ACT Assembly on 6th December to introduce her to FFDLR and exchange thoughts on drug law reform. Meeting with politicians is very worthwhile and needs to be an ongoing activity.

Bill, Marion and Peter met with members of ATODA to discuss how ATODA could help with FFDLR events and to discuss the future of FFDLR.

Bill attended a forum at a crowded ACT Legislative Assembly on 20th July on the intention of extending the restorative justice program.

Bill also attended the 20 year celebration of the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation in Sydney on 21 August, held at The Wayside Chapel

Drug policy Forum with Prof Beau Kilmer on keeping a legal therapeutic market separate from the illegal market was attended by members.

ACT ATOD Strategic Brainstorming Forums attended by Bill, Peter and Marion on 13 October.

Media

- Indonesian executions - How much blood will flow to shore up a failed policy - 24 January 2015

- Prior to Remembrance Ceremony - 20 years of fruitless law enforcement efforts to control drugs; time to be economically rational
- Prior to the Book Launch - Challenging drug laws - a momentous 20 year journey
- Op-ed by Bill Bush - the AFP would do it again.
- Some letters to the editor were published.

Correspondence

A letter was written to the producer of ABC Background Briefing on 7 June following a program called "On Thin Ice" pointing out the lack of content and suggesting a follow up program examining the full picture in respect of illicit drugs as a useful addition to the debate and which could introduce a new paradigm for illicit drug policy for Australia.

Membership of other organisations

We continue to be financial members of ACTCOSS, ATODA, HepC Council and recently the UN's Vienna Non-Government Organisations Committee (VNOGC) and have recently joined the Canberra Alliance. I have continued as much as possible to attend the ACT Drug Strategy Evaluation Group and Bill and Marion are members of the Uniting Church Presbytery Social justice Group which had drug law reform as one of its agenda items. Marion and Bill have been invited to a Uniting Church Synod meeting in Sydney to discuss ways in which the church might take drug law reform issues on board.

Other

We managed to produce a newsletter each month which keeps members up to date with progress and happenings throughout Australia and the World. The editorials are current and covered areas such as the so called ice epidemic and the worrying ways in which politicians are dealing with this problem, the rising rates of imprisonment in the Alexander Maconochie Centre, discussion of the National Drug Strategy and much more.

The website continues to be a vital source of information but keeping it up to date particularly this year has proved a challenge. Marion interacts on twitter. Many tweets about the book were 're-tweeted' and 'liked'. We now have 153 followers and are following 100 and have sent out 371 tweets.

.....

Changes to drug policy are happening around the world. The next important event will be the UNGASS meeting in New York in April 2016 - a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on the World Drug Problem.

Brian McConnell

President (25/11/2015)