

# PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

## Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2019

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2019.....	1
Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2018 Bill Bush.....	3
Committee for 2019 – ELECTED AT AGM ON 22 Nov 2018 .....	4
Office and website assistance.....	4
FFDLR meetings.....	5
Relations with ACT Health.....	5
ADVOCACY .....	5
Meetings with politicians and other significant people.....	5
Letters written .....	6
Submissions to and appearances before Parliamentary and other official inquiries.....	6
ACT Pill Testing.....	6
Bill to legalise cannabis in the ACT.....	6
Productivity Commission inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health.....	7
National Mental Health Commission.....	7
Forums and Symposiums .....	7
Co-operation with other organisations.....	8
ACTCOSS Justice reform group .....	8
ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) .....	8
ACT Hepatitis Resource Centre .....	8
Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA) .....	8
Uniting Church of Australia NSW and ACT Synod, Uniting and the UCA ACT Presbytery Social Justice Group.....	8
CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn. ....	9
Canberra Mental Health Forum.....	9

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

Civil Liberties Australia.....	10
Harm Reduction Australia.....	10
Mental Health Community Coalition .....	10
Volunteering and Contact ACT.....	10
Remembrance Ceremony – 28 <sup>th</sup> October .....	10
<b>MEDIA .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Media releases .....	11
Media interviews: .....	11
Letters to the Editor.....	12
Website and Social media.....	12
Newsletters.....	12

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

### Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2019

Bill Bush

2019 has seen the consolidation of the unprecedented amount of action in support of drug law reform that occurred last year. Uniting's FairTreatment campaign continued to be the greatest cause of optimism. It focused this year on the exceptional full length *Half a Million Steps* film produced by Dominic Streeter. The film beautifully engages both heart and mind. Marion whose words and face are woven into it and Bill both attended the premier of the film in Sydney on 13 June. Much of our efforts since then have been devoted to encouraging decision-makers and the community generally to see it. To my mind as a parent the most moving aspect of this most moving collection of testimonies was the courageously frank interview with Tony Trimmingham about his own initial reactions appropriate and inappropriate to his beloved Damien's confession that he was using heroin. There can be no greater courage than that shown by Tony in turning his horror and rage into plugging the void he experienced in services and support for families and facing off the powerful forces that block sensible, humane change.

Those same motivations were what also inspired Marion and Brian McConnell to launch Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform keeping the faith and optimism alive and the outfit going for the quarter of a century since then. Inspirations all!

The hard truth, though, is that the nut has been so hard to crack. The sad truth is that personal stories of Brian, Marion, Tony and others in our midst gathered up on the journey of years, have not been enough to leverage political change. We are seeing recalcitrance today most clearly in the New South Wales and federal government's rejection of the evidence in favour and pleas of bereaved parents for pill testing.

These considerations have motivated Families and Friends to work to get more voices behind the imperative for change that would remove the criminal law as society's undergirding response to drug use and replace it with a response built on health, support and humanity. We have therefore been encouraged by the work of Australia 21 that devoted its most recent round table to the social harms that flow from criminal prohibition. Welfare agencies like uniting and the Councils of social service are natural allies of drug law reform. The same considerations explain the very considerable efforts we have put into elucidating the link between drug policy and the crisis in the mental health system. The Productivity Commission's current consideration of mental health acknowledges that co-occurring substance dependency and other mental health issues are the expectation rather than the exception. Accordingly we devoted a lot of effort this year the preparation of a submission to the Commission before which we appeared earlier this month. Similarly we have worked closely with a lively local Canberra group: the Canberra Mental Health Forum.

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019**

Another important aspect of our work has been to stress the economic costs of persevering with the demonstrably failed policy of prohibition. Such considerations are brought into stark relief in the inquiry of the Productivity Commission. Unfortunately, though, while implicitly acknowledging the link, the Commission seems bent upon dodging the issue by adopting the familiar trick favoured by governments of calling on clinicians and other service providers to resolve the tension created by regarding one and the same person as both a criminal and a human being worthy of health care and support.

During the year your committee had a hard look at the messaging of Families and Friends. As our name implies we were established and have proudly worked to achieve policy changes. This approach is driven primarily by the sense of injustice at the root of drug law enforcement. While not in any way resiling from that, we have recognised the force of the argument put by Joan Westaway that a focus on policy change is a turnoff for most people. This realisation, she told us, comes out of the difficulties that she is experienced in describing to friends and others just what Families and Friends is on about. She argued cogently that we need a practical focus that people can readily get their heads around. She therefore suggested that Families and Friends should stand for treatment that is effective, accessible and non-stigmatising. The more I have thought about this the more I have realised that implicit in it is the elimination of criminalisation of drug use. The stigmatisation of substance dependency is bad enough. Characterising a person as a criminal simply redoubles and intensifies their marginalisation.

### ***Committee for 2019 – ELECTED AT AGM ON 22 Nov 2018***

The following committee were elected to the Committee at the Annual General Meeting at Marion's place on 22 November 2018:

Bill Bush – President and Public Officer

Jan Lee - Secretary

Brock Bryce – Treasurer

Marion McConnell -founding member

Tess McDonald – member

Joan Westaway – member

Paul Wilkinson – member

### **Office and website assistance**

Genevieve Hudson who had done much to assist Marion improving our website during 2018 continued this valuable voluntary work after an unsatisfactory period of employment with a call centre. Her services had been secured

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

through Volunteering and Contact ACT and made possible by the insurance coverage that Families and Friends now pays.

### **FFDLR meetings**

A Meeting of the committee members took place on 18 January 2019 at John Ley's residence mainly to finalise unfinished business from 2018. Approval was sought and obtained twice by email: first of certain disbursements on 2 October and secondly of the 2019 annual accounts on 21 November 2019

Meetings open to the entire membership at St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lyneham. Unusually, this year we had no invited guest speakers which, being open to the public are a useful means of raising the profile of Families and Friends. These "general meetings" took place every second month: on a two monthly basis on 28 February, 24 April, 27 June and 22 August. At the February meeting Joan presented a discussion paper on possibility of the government introducing a new committee under ACAT to deal with minor drug charges.

### **Relations with ACT Health**

On 20 December 2018 Bill attended a forum arranged by ATODA with the then Deputy-Director General of Health Systems, policy and Research, Leone McGregor on future funding arrangements for service delivery

On 21 June Bill attended the inaugural meeting of the Drug Strategy Action Plan Advisory Group established under the ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan 2018 – 20 that had been released on 11 December 2018. The Group is co-chaired by Alan Philp, Assistant Director-General of ACT Health and an officer of Justice and Community Safety. Under the action plan the group should meet at least three times a year.

In working with ACT Health we have kept in close touch with the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drugs Association ACT (ATODA).

## **ADVOCACY**

### ***Meetings with politicians and other significant people***

14 June 2019 - Meeting of Marion and Bill with Deputy Chief Police Officer, Commander Michael Chew. We followed this up with a letter of 9 July to which we have yet to receive a response;

9 September 2019 – Marion, Tess and Bill met with Tim Wilson, The Liberal member for Goldstein in Victoria.

10 September 2019 – Marion and Bill met with Michael Pettersson, ALP member for Yerrabi about his bill to legalise cannabis;

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

- 9 September 2019 – meeting over dinner in Melbourne with Adriana Buccianti concerning her role in the remembrance ceremony. With Mary, Bill and Jo Wade;
- 12 September 2019 – Canberra launch in the Shine Dome of the book, by Antony Loewenstein. Part of the Canberra Drug Policy Series's. Bill, Marion and John attended;
- 23 September 2019 – working luncheon in Sydney with the author Jenny Valentish of the *book Woman of Substances: A Journey into Addiction and Treatment*. in Sydney. Bill and Marion attended stop;
- 14 October 2019 – meeting with the Health Minister, Rachel Stephen-Smith's chief of staff prior to her speaking at the Remembrance Ceremony

### Letters written

On behalf of FFDLR Marion wrote letters to the following re pill testing

Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews; NSW Premier, Gladys Berejiklia; Ian Leavers, President Queensland Police Union; Michael Daley, NSW Leader of the Opposition; Walter Secord, NSW Shadow Minister for Health. Responses were received from Andrews, Berejiklian and Daley

### ***Submissions to and appearances before Parliamentary and other official inquiries***

#### **ACT Pill Testing**

We cooperated with Harm Reduction Australia and others in calls for pill testing at music festivals in the ACT.

28 April 2019 – Second pill testing carried out at Groovin' the Moo festival

Contributed \$1,000 to Pill testing Australia

Marion attended a demonstration on pill testing at Parliament House on 17<sup>th</sup> September. Pill testing Australia demonstrated in front of politicians and media as well as other invited guests.

Marion is an Ambassador for Pill Testing Australia

#### **Bill to legalise cannabis in the ACT**

On 22 March 2019, we made a 27 page submission to the Standing Committee on Health, Ageing and Community Services of the ACT Legislative Assembly on the Drugs of Dependence (Personal Cannabis Use) Amendment Bill 2018. This was an expanded version of the submission we had made last year

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

supporting the exposure draft of the private members bill to legalise cannabis use put forward by Michael Pettersson, an ALP backbencher.

Bill Bush, Bernadette Bryant and Marion McConnell gave evidence to the committee on 26 March 2019

### **Productivity Commission inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health**

12 April 2019 – 64 pages submission. Jan Lee, Virginia Hart (who had helped prepare the submission and Bill appeared before the 3 commissioners at public hearings that took place on 15 November in Barton. We commented on the voluminous draft report that the Commission has published. We welcomed the willingness of the Commission to recognise the importance of psychosocial factors in achieving mental health but pointed out that the willingness of the commission to recommend adjustment of policy levers like housing to bring that about was inconsistent with their unwillingness to address the tension that frustrates the capacity of the mental health system to address the complex needs of people with a co-occurring substance dependency and other mental health condition. If the commission willing to recommend the need to address some policy levers that improve mental health, they should also adjust other policy levers that have an even closer bearing on good health. As far as the commission is concerned that tension is to be resolved by clinicians and support workers rather than by government removing the stressful threat of criminal sanctions for illicit drug use. We are contemplating the desirability of making further written comments to the submission. The commissioners were at least moved by the account Jan gave of daughter who took her own life in desperation for having failed to overcome dependency on heroin.

### **National Mental Health Commission**

Additional comments submitted on 14 September 2019 to the National Mental Health Commission in the context of its consultations on shaping a 2030 vision for mental health and suicide prevention in Australia.

### ***Forums and Symposiums***

On 29 January 2019 Bill and Marion participated in a seminar by Prof David Best, a British exponent of addiction recovery presented by the School of Regulation and Global Governance (regNET) of the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific.

On 5 February 2019 Bill participated at a Suicide Prevention In Australia Workshop at the ANU Centre for Mental Health Research

12 February 2019 - Bill participated in a focus group consultation is on a draft National Treatment Framework working document facilitated by Prof Alison Ritter in the Department of Health in Woden

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

10 April 2019 – A Canberra drug policy series seminar at University House: *Ten years of global drug policy: what have we learned and where are we get heading? Highlights from the March 2019 UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs*. Bill agenda.

23 July 2019 – Canberra Drug Policy Series forum at the Shine Dome on Cannabis Legalisation in the ACT: conversation with Prof Beau Kilmer;

August 2019 - Tess McDonald attended a planning day of the Queanbeyan Community Drug Action Team (CDAT)

12 September - Canberra Drug Policy Series forum launch by Antony Loewenstein of his book *Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs*. Marion John Ley and Bill attended.

22 August 2019 – Bill attended the only ACT consultation of the National Mental Health Commission seeking input into the development of going again long visit a national 2030 vision for mental health and suicide prevention. The consultations were held in Forde. We provided on 14 September written comments on aspects that could not be addressed during the oral hearings. These comments included a frank and fearless statement by Jan Lee about the suicide of her daughter Neri.

### ***Co-operation with other organisations***

#### **ACTCOSS Justice reform group**

Tess McDonald attended a meeting on 29 July that discussed the ACT Disability Justice Strategy;

She and Bill attended a meeting on 5 November to hear the new drug court judge, Acting Judge Lorraine Walker, speak about that court

#### **ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS)**

#### **ACT Hepatitis Resource Centre**

#### **Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA)**

We greatly appreciate the work of Carrie Fowlie and her team at (ATODA), the ACT alcohol and other drug peak organisation. In particular, in cooperation with the ANU School of Sociology and Uniting, it initiated the very well attended Canberra Drug Policy Series of public events of which those on 10 April, 23 July and 12 September are mentioned elsewhere in this report.

#### **Uniting Church of Australia NSW and ACT Synod, Uniting and the UCA ACT Presbytery Social Justice Group**

The fair treatment campaign being pursued by Uniting, the service arm of NSW and ACT Synod of the Uniting Church of Australia continues to be a game

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

changer. While it has yet to produce significant legislative reform in New South Wales, it has influenced public debates and perception around the possibility and acceptability of drug law reform. Marion had much to do with moving the Synod in 2016 to support enhancement of harm reduction and decriminalisation of small quantities of drugs for personal use. Indeed, those behind the campaign have termed her “a force of nature.” The influence of the campaign is reflected in the greater willingness of researchers to speak out about the negative impacts of prohibition and the more informed comments of the media. Bill and Marion have kept in close touch with Kyle Cox and other leaders of the campaign. Marion and Bill are both on the social justice committee of the Canberra region Presbytery. This committee has promoted the initiative at the local ACT level.

11 February 2019 – meeting in Sydney with Tracey Burton Executive Director of Uniting and Emma Maiden, its new Head of Advocacy.

9 May 2019 – FairTreatment partners meeting, Sydney facilitated by Prof Alison Ritter.

13 June 2019 – Premier of *Half a Million Steps* at the Chauvel Cinema in Paddington

29 October 2019 – red carpet screening of *Half a Million Steps* at the New Acton cinema.

Uniting has also co-sponsored with ATODA and Canberra universities the Canberra Drug Policy Series forums and seminars

### **CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn.**

On 5 December 2018, Bill and Birgit Havas attended a Families and Friends information stall at the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Comorbidity Interagency day in the Blackfriars Rose Garden of the Australian Catholic University Watson.

### **Canberra Mental Health Forum.**

Bill continued to attend the monthly meetings of this group consisting mainly of carers meetings under U3A auspices at the Cook Community Hub. Association with this group facilitates the pursuit of matters of common interest in the mental health, disability and corrections systems. Tess McDonald attended the meeting on 13 August 2019. Bill helped the group organise a well attended forum at which Prof Ian Webster and Michael Moore spoke and has participated in meetings of the group with the ACT Auditor-General inquiry into the corrections system and with Dr Elizabeth Moore, the new Co-ordinator-General of the Office of Mental Health and Well-being

**Civil Liberties Australia**

**Federal Association for Accepting Drug Treatment and a Humane Drug Policy**

(Germany). We received a message from our German friends on the occasion of our remembrance ceremony but unfortunately an email convey conveying a reciprocal one from us was unable to be delivered.

**Harm Reduction Australia**

**Mental Health Community Coalition**

**Volunteering and Contact ACT**

We are paid members of this organisation. There continues to be potential for further volunteers Genevieve Hudson, a volunteer helps considerably with the website.

***Remembrance Ceremony – 28<sup>th</sup> October***

Adriana Buccianti's preparedness to travel from Melbourne to speak as a bereaved family member at this year's 24th annual remembrance ceremony necessarily put the focus upon pill testing for which she has been a tireless and vocal advocate. Her son died at a music festival in Victoria. The issue could not have been more topical. Sadly thanks to the deaths that have occurred to young festival goers in Victoria and particularly in New South Wales where the police and Berijikian government have turned their face resolutely against the best evidence and advice of health professionals, parents and the New South Wales deputy coroner who, after long and careful consideration came out in favour of pill testing. Unbelievably, the New South Wales government defended strip searching, the use of sniffer dogs and a heavy, intimidating police presence which compound the harms of the pills by engaging in very highly risky behaviour and deterring them from seeking help.

It was very pleasing that for perhaps the first year since our existence this is ceremony saw common ground between what a grieving family member advocated and the politician who spoke after. For once the ACT government and Adriana were on the same page. As the Health Minister, Stephen Rachel Smith explained, the ACT government has approved and supported pill testing at two music festivals held in Canberra. If it had had its way testing would have occurred at several other festivals were it not for opposition from the Federal government which controls what happens on land of the National Capital Authority where dance festivals have taken place., Most recently on Friday just past, the 23 November at the Spilt Milk festival in Commonwealth Park.

Indeed, the past year has seen a stand off between ACT territory government and its Commonwealth parent. The Commonwealth rebuke has shown that the grant of self-government has been shown to be severely qualified. In addition to its disapproval of pill testing it is threatening to undermine ACT legalisation of cannabis in the hands of adults by using its power to give directions to the Australian Federal Police that is

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

contracted to provide policing services to the territory to enforce Commonwealth law. Commonwealth legislation imposes a penalty of up to 2 years imprisonment for merely possession even small amounts of cannabis.

The ACT is finding itself as a test case for even the states because the overbearing Commonwealth legislation that has been in place since 2005 and never enforced, at user level, could also be applied to close down harm reduction state initiatives such as medically supervised injecting rooms.

There is a Malaysian saying that when elephants fight, the mouse deer suffers. It must never be forgotten amidst all the arcane legal sophistry that young human lives are at stake.

The Rev Roger Munson's reading of about 280 names was profoundly moving.

### **MEDIA**

As an advocacy group, Families and Friends strive to draw media attention to the injustice and inadequacies of existing drug policy and to the presence of voices of families calling for reform. It has become much more difficult for the Association to gain media attention. On the other hand, thanks to the highly skilled assistance provided by the Uniting FairTreatment campaign, last year and this year, the ceremony was well covered, with radio and television interviews of Adriana, Marion and Bill and an interviews with *The Canberra Times*. This secured coverage on Channel 9 news, a mention on Channel 7 news and a good article in Tuesday's *Canberra Times*. Bill was interviewed at 3 PM on the local ABC drive program in which he gave a plug for the gala screening the next day of *Half a Million Steps*. On 29 October 2019 Marion and Bill attended an AAP media Masterclass at the National Portrait Gallery.

### **Media releases**

18 February 2019 - Justice Reinvestment: compulsory drug treatment by another name?

24 October 2019 - The ring fence is giving way: 24 years of remembrance; lifetimes of grief.

8 November 2019 – Push back against NSW coroner's findings in favour of pill testing confirm why her recommendations must be implemented immediately!

### **Media interviews:**

27 May: Bill and Marion with ABC Gold Coast about the recommendation of the Queensland productivity commission in favour of decriminalisation.

28 October: various interviews mentioned above of Marion, Adriana Buccianti and Bill in connection with the annual remembrance ceremony.

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

### Letters to the Editor

We were relatively unsuccessful compared to previous years in having letters published in *The Canberra Times*. Bill estimates that he managed to have printed only about four of the 17 letters that he submitted even when responding to correspondence from writers of Drug Free Australia. Marion had a couple of letters published. One of our original members, Michael Gardiner also had a letter published. The explanation for this less receptive approach may have something to do with the change in editorship of the letter pages. Other organisations like ACTCOSS experienced similar difficulties.

### Website and Social media

Marion has taken to social media like a blackbird to a bird bath. She has discovered a hitherto under recognised twittering talent. On the latest count she had sent 2208 tweets, and who boosted her followers by some 75% to over 512. Some of her followers are influential journalists. It is important that we pay more attention to increasing our profile on social media platforms like Facebook.

The Twitter handle is: @FFDLR. It is important that all our members use whatever social media channels they are comfortable with, to promote the cause of drug law reform.

Never forget that conversations with friends, neighbours, work colleagues and relations around the meal table or over a cup of coffee are just as important. The personal contact is very powerful at getting the word out.

### Newsletters

To tailor our cloth to our capacities, we have ceased to issue a newsletter every month. This year we continued to produce one every two months. Articles for the newsletter would be welcome as well as editing assistance. Since the previous general meeting 5 newsletters have been issued, namely in February, April, June, August, and October 2019.

Bill Bush

24 November 2019