

Intro speech by co-chair Steph Sands

Mardi Gras really is about your mates.

It's the one time of year that you come together, throw a rug on the ground, grab some milk crates or spend hours angsty over your party outfits.

But really, what makes MG special is all those groups of mates (old and new) which spend months planning, building and choreographing the wonderful expressive and creative entries that make up the jewel of our organisation the parade.

The parade has showcased many creative entries over the year, it's the expressive nature of a community which take on our issues head on, and makes statements to the greater mainstream in ways which cannot be ignored.

For the past 32 years the parade has had groups of talented people make it the great procession it is today. Full of humour, sadness, wit, charm and colour. No-one knows creativity like us queers.

Our keynote speaker is a genuine "mate" of our organisation. Someone who has been a great friend and expressive ally of our parade for the past 23 years. Most of you will know him best by his creative entries. You can't forget Surry Hill song from last year, the Karma Kleaners, the Kate Moss line dancers, the only Gay in the village, , Dick Van Dykes on bikes, FART and Cher. Then there was my personal favourite, the happy little sodomites. Which sung all the way up the parade route to the tune of the vegemite song.

It is entries like these that make our parade unique and special. His entries have been iconic, multi layered, much photographed and memorable additions and they have received a massive 8 parade awards for their efforts.

Sometimes this group is a single person, and at other times up to 150 people share in this creativity as they did last year. But the consistent player in all this is someone with an Australian Larrikin Spirit which stage entries that connect with our audiences.

I'd like to welcome the instigator, chief artist and larrikin of Ethel Yarwood enterprises, one of Mardi gras' greatest mates and artists, who will talk about his history of the parade and why, after 23 years he keeps doing what he does.

Please welcome Sue-Ellen Cox.

MG2010 Festival Launch Keynote Speech

by Sue-Ellen Cox/artistic director
for ethel yarwood enterprises

I've never seen Fair Day from the stage before.

One loses the sense of enormity of this event when you're on the inside, head down, getting your hands dirty with your mates as you're building your parade entry. So to sight this vast representation of our communities from this perspective, I have to say is quite exhilarating. Not as exhilarating as when your parade group finally breaches that start area, when it's time to shine. But it's pretty close.

When we were asked to present the keynote speech for the 2010 MG Festival Launch, we felt such pride that the efforts of ethel yarwood enterprises had been recognised in this way.

As Steph explained, ethel yarwood enterprises is just a bunch of mates. The epitome of a grass roots organization. Mates who believe in the importance of having something to say. Mates who have the courage and conviction to stick their heads above the parapet. To stand up and be counted. And my mates and I share a passion for creativity.

Whether they're in the parade that year or giving us prizes for a raffle or buying a raffle ticket or donating money or some in kind service or sponsoring our float. This is ethel yarwood enterprises.

We all have a passion for something.

Like Wett Ones for example, who share a passion for swimming, tight budgie smugglers and change rooms. Pollys for bad drag. Dykes on Bikes for well... bikes and dykes... and beer.

In much the same way, the multitude of our community groups share a passion for something. As is evidenced here today, we obviously share a passion for Mardi Gras.

So this honour is more than recognition for our parade entries. We stand here as an example of your contribution to the fabric of the Sydney community. This is truly humbling.

So my new mate Steph here told you earlier that I was going to explain why we keep doing what we're doing. And I thought the best way would be to relate a few of the things that have happened over the years. These projects demand a huge effort and can exact a taxing toll. So there must be some reason why we keep coming back for more, right?

<snip> Ad lib
MG2004
Only Gay in the Village
Benson's contribution

MG2000
Happy Little SODOMITES
Relationships rally Bouchet
Toast
Gay Games genny failure



And then there are those little things that you experience, that shed light on the big picture issues. So indulge me to share with you that moment from last year.

In 2009 we staged Surry Hillsong – DENOMINATIONS UNITED. It was a pretty typical process. Come up with a quirky, inspiring concept and watch it transform with everyone's input, but the scale was something we'd never attempted before.

We came up with the theme the week of Mardi Gras 2008 because there was a lot of media about Hillsong and their treatment of gays through their arm the Mercy Ministries. So we had a year to plot. The concept was that we were the church of Surry Hills, a non-denominational, multi-denominational church where everyone could express their opinion on religion.

Daniel made this amazing representation of heaven for Mark to ride on. He floated along on a cloud DJing to the following flock, like this mobile dance party. Mark had angel wings made from CDs and his flock of demi-gods had mini discs as medallions.

The chorus was P!nk's "God is a DJ". And throughout the track Mark mixed songs with a religious reference, gospel, Tibetan Buddhist and Indian chants, grabs about Jedi from Star Wars, disco like "Take Me to Heaven" by Sylvester, Bananarama's "Preacher Man", "Your Own Personal Jesus", Jewish and Arabic songs interwoven together with preacher's sermons and references to Dr Martin Luther King. We had this simple little dance move with torches that everyone learnt on the night. It was inspirational. It was cute.

There were about 150 parishoners. We had:

- 3 self-flagellating monks
- angels
- Televangelist Benny Hinn with a sign “GAY THE PRAY AWAY”
- Hillsong parking officers with visivests, light batons and halos
- Monks
- Priests
- a fallen angel
- Noah’s Ark
- an Amish bloke
- Christ carrying a cross emblazoned with different denominations of Australian notes
- 3 Muslims getting busy on prayer mats

And so much more.

We had it all. It was humourous, reverential, slanderous. Light, colour, movement, wit. We had incense and we were incensed. Like a microcosm of Mardi Gras. A forum for expression.

It was an awesome spectacle from the outside and we entertained each other with our costumes and the layers of detail on the inside.

This collective creativity of all the individuals involved is Sue-Ellen Cox. Not this bonehead Kabi you see before you.

And after it was over I said yet again, “No, not next year.” But of course we have float in the parade again this year. And again it’s special. And this is the reason why.

My dear friends Annie and Em coordinated another group of about 25 lesbians Greek Goddesses and Gods for Surry Hillsong. You may have noticed them or been one of them. They were just stunning in gold and white finery, feathers, breastplates and helmets. Like Glamazon Gladiators.

And one of these Glamazons was a 16 year old girl from Tasmania, Danielle. Now Tasmania is not Uganda*¹, but Dan was not out and lived in very religious family. She so wanted to be in the parade but did not want to be outed. So Annie and Em made Dan a special helmet to conceal her identity.

On Sunday night at a recovery party, I bumped into Annie and Em. And they were just so excited about what we achieved. They were just screaming “We ROCKED! We ROCKED! We ROCKED that street.”

*¹ [Uganda considers death sentence for gay sex in bill before parliament](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/29/uganda-death-sentence-gay-sex)

Source : <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/29/uganda-death-sentence-gay-sex>

Then they showed me a text message that Dan had sent them the day after the parade. Annie sent it to me and I still have it on my phone.

It read:

“Annie, last night was amazing! I had SO MUCH fun. SO MUCH FUN! Felt like a rock star and the best part is for the first time i felt really proud to be gay. Thank you SO much for organizing everything. You and Em did an amazing job. Cant wait to dance up a storm with you tonight. Love you heaps, dan xx”

Then Annie looked at me with tears in her eyes and said,

“We change people’s lives.”

Now Dan lives in Sydney. She goes to my gym.

My sister Karen was the Benny Hinn in Surry Hill song. It was her first Mardi Gras also. She said to me after I told her Dan’s story that she was so proud of ethel yarwood enterprises. And sis is marching with us again this year.

The history of this parade has been a rocky one. Overcoming so many obstacles. The 78’ers challenging police oppression in the street and mainstream disgust at ‘the different’, the fringe dwellers. AIDS and the backlash took its toll. We have weathered searing heat and cyclonic conditions like during the 2004 parade. We have weathered religious and political opposition as well. We have survived financial collapse. Prevailed over so many wardrobe and technical malfunctions. And survived probably the most challenging of all, community indifference and the gaysayers.

Amidst all the fun and frivolity, it’s the visibility that is important. Visibility honours our history and our struggles.

Visibility celebrates our triumphs and achievements. It acknowledges our sadness for the losses. Visibility sets the path for our future. I refuse to accept being tolerated, like flies at a picnic. Visibility proliferates pride and commands respect.

And that’s why we do it. Because it’s important. It’s important for the Dans and it’s important for the UganDans.