

A year later, we can all be proud

VIEWPOINT DAWN COHEN

I OWE a debt of gratitude to the Rabbinic Council of Victoria. Without them, there would have been no Stars of David float, with its extraordinary success in giving Jewish lesbians and gays a sense of place and pride.

In 1999 the Rabbinic Council of Victoria attacked Melbourne gays and their supporters for applying for membership of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria. We had reached out to the Jewish community to make a place for us, and we were met with hostility.

I knew then that we had to have a huge float in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras if Jewish lesbians and gays were to find a home, and, to make that happen, we needed a gay and lesbian organisation that would be bold enough to stand up to the tremendous pressure that was being placed upon us by the Jewish community to stay invisible. I called Sydney artist Lorraine Larri, and together we agreed to make it happen. She would be in charge of float design and construction, I would co-ordinate the rest. Larri suggested we call the organisation Dayenu, with all that it encapsulates about enoughtness, oppression and liberation.

Why was a float in Mardi Gras so essential? Like Tibetan sand mandalas, the floats of Mardi Gras are stunning creations taking months of patient, detailed work, and they are taken apart after their journey. There is an incredulity at their dissolution, and then, with their re-emergence the following year, a jubilant discovery of a continuity that cannot be dismantled.

Walking down Sydney's Oxford Street in the Mardi Gras, being cheered by half-a-million people, gives an experience of liberation, strength, human connectedness and empowerment that cannot be revoked, even by a rabbinic council. The inner courage that each individual gains from that is a lifelong, inalienable resource. Jewish gays and lesbians and their supporters needed to discover that.

Before the gains are made, there is

an arduous physical and psychological journey, however. The float must be imagined and brought into being with all the anxiety, risks, sweat, pain and joy involved. Individual gays and lesbians often face fears of family rejection and impediments to their career when participating in the float. Heterosexual supporters go through similar fears. Everyone faces what it means to come out in the open with an aspect of themselves which does not conform.

That labour was shared by all who risked participating in the "Stars of David" float, whether they walked down Oxford street with us or came part way by attending a Shabbat dinner the previous evening, or writing a letter of support. Each one of these people went through their own journey to get there.

We have taken impressive steps towards making Jewish Australia a humane and caring home. There is a long way to go, but we have done well.

My journey seemed to require total preoccupation with the float for the nine months preceding it. During the day I was strategically planning, negotiating and lobbying to ensure maximum media coverage, large numbers on the float and the physical and psychological safety and comfort of every participant. At night, I would lie awake in terror at the enormity of what we were doing.

What if it went wrong? What if neo-Nazis threw a Molotov cocktail? What if the rabbinate attacked us and the Jewish community turned its back and I was alone? And, almost as bad, what if nobody came, and four of us took the Oxford Street walk feeling like total fools?

But they did come, first cautiously and with great uncertainty in ones and twos; then, with greater confidence in tens and twenties and finally, hundreds. A core group of committed workers developed, including the very able Jude Kell and Malcolm Davidovitz, now co-conveners of Dayenu.

Extraordinary things kept happen-



Preparing the Jewish float for Saturday night's Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (clockwise from bottom left): Lorraine Larri, Scott Chase, Malcolm Davidovitz, Dawn Cohen, Colleen Foley.

Photo: Amelia Whitaker

ing: donations from unexpected sources, rabbinic and cantorial involvement in our Shabbat dinner, participants from every continent on the planet.

We received unprecedented TV, radio and print media coverage, ensuring that every gay and lesbian Jew, and their families and friends, could get a little piece of the strength, pride and wholeness that those of us who participated more directly had obtained.

And most amazingly of all, when the Orthodox rabbinate did attack us, the whole of the Jewish community

came on the journey with us, asking itself who are we and what do we want to be — a community under the total control of the Orthodox rabbinate or a more diverse community, where there will be the discomfort, complexity and ultimately the richness of including all Jews, with different ideas and ways of living?

When you, Jewish gays and lesbians and supporters, built that float; and when you, my family, Rob, Saul, Raymond, Mom, Dad and Abe, walked with us; and when you, Hilton Immerman, John Glass and Vic Alhadeff,

stood your ground; and when you, Jewish Community members, wrote each letter and took each action of support; I heard again and again a message which finally reached my deepest heart — that I am not alone and never will be alone again in my fight to be allowed to be myself.

A year later, there has been no devastating loss to the community as a result of open discussion, and many gains. The Dayenu Association has continued to grow with the talented co-ordination of its new conveners. One of its biggest achievements is the parents' support group set up by JewishCare. For the first time, a Jewish support organisation is taking up its responsibilities to walk alongside parents as they deal with having a gay or lesbian child.

There is still work to be done. Progressive synagogues must face the unacceptable contradiction between saying they accept us, yet discriminating against us by failing to recognise our marriages. Orthodox synagogues must realise that bullying will not make us go away. We are no longer willing to stay invisible in order to protect you from the uncertainties and riches of diversity.

The community as a whole, must, as a matter of urgency, begin to take responsibility for the way it has abandoned its children. Adolescent Jews going through the trauma of uncertainty about their sexual orientation are utterly alone. Emotional isolation leads to drug use, misery and, all too frequently, suicide attempts. Please: give to them what you have given to me. They need you to walk beside them every step of the way, giving them non-judgmental love, support and openness as they struggle to find themselves.

At the same time, the Jewish community can be proud. We have taken impressive steps towards making Jewish Australia a humane and caring home. There is a long way to go, as there is for any family learning to be open, but we have done well for our first year out of the closet.

■ Dawn Cohen is a founding convener of Dayenu.