

# Author, Holocaust survivor support gays

*MOSAIC* author Diane Armstrong and a Holocaust survivor joined about 160 lesbians, gays and supporters marching under the "Stars of David Come Out" banner on Saturday evening in the first Jewish float to participate in the Sydney Mardi Gras.

Led by American lesbian Rabbi Ariel Friedlander and a troupe of choreographed dancers, the float attracted participants from Israel, South Africa, the United States, Britain, Germany, Sweden and New Zealand, as well as from across Australia.

Author of the award-winning family chronicle, *Mosaic*, Ms Armstrong joined the float to support her lesbian daughter, Justine Armstrong, who was one of its organisers, as well as dancing on it. "I didn't know what to expect," Ms Armstrong said. "I have never been involved in the parade and I had negative expectations of the Mardi Gras. I had a lot of anxieties. One of my concerns was that having given my family history of having to conceal my Jewishness, here I was not only in a gay parade, but marching as a Jew.

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"But I was blown away. There was such a feeling of intense acceptance, and the crowd was so enthusiastic. I never expected such support. It felt like a victory parade. And it was: a victory for gays and lesbians coming out; a victory also for them as Jews, showing they have family and friends and are just like everybody else. And it was a victory for myself in overcoming my initial fears. I came to support Justine, but I got more out of it than I expected. I have long admired her honesty and her commitment to being open about who she is. I would encourage any other families of gay people to come along. You had to be there."

Holocaust child survivor Susie Wise: "Gay and lesbian people are expected to hide who they are and be ashamed of it, in the same way that I



Jewish participants in the Mardi Gras.

Photo: Dvir Bargal

## ■ More pictures, next week

had to hide my Jewishness," she said. "I know how it feels to have to do that, to pretend to be someone you are not, it feels awful. I hate discrimination against anybody.

"I heard Dawn Cohen speak at a Wizo meeting and decided that I would come on the parade to give support. The float was very tasteful, and the dancing was excellent. I have never heard Jews applauded like that by so many people. We came to support gay and lesbian Jews, but we got something for ourselves. I will definitely be here again next year, and I hope more family and

friends will join us."

Dayenu Association co-convenor and float organiser Dawn Cohen told the *Australian Jewish News* that "we started as a small, diverse group of individuals working towards a common cause; now we have set the foundations to becoming a community. We have returned from exile. We know there is hard work ahead, but nothing can stop us now."

World Congress of Jewish Gay and Lesbian Organisations treasurer Mike Kook of Britain said that to his knowledge, "it was larger than

any other Jewish gay and lesbian event in the world. It was exhilarating. I will suggest to the World Congress that we provide support to assist Dayenu in consolidating the ground they have gained. The only English event that has been comparable to this parade in terms of crowd warmth and support was Princess Diana's funeral."

At least 30 participants were either family members of Jewish gays and lesbians or members of the Jewish community who "simply wanted to express their commitment to equal rights in the community for gay Jews", Ms Cohen said.

About 80 people attended the Mardi Gras Shabbat dinner at Shalom College — the maximum number the venue could accommodate. "We had 250 calls from Jews wanting to come, with minimal advertising," Ms Cohen said. "Sydney's Progressive rabbinat went beyond the call of duty to express support. North Shore Temple Emanuel Rabbi Richard Lampert, Temple Emanuel Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio and Cantor Joseph Toltz led us in prayer, joined by Rabbi Ariel Friedlander. North Shore Temple Emanuel Rabbi Allison Conyer attended the dinner, while Temple Emanuel Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins sent a letter of support.

"It was a powerful spiritual experience, from which there is no going back. I remember looking at the three rabbis and cantor and feeling a sense of inclusion, for which I had hoped for the next generation, but never dreamed I would experience myself. I have never seen a congregation attend so carefully to every word sung and spoken. People were crying because some strictly kosher gay and lesbians were able to have a Shabbat dinner for the first time outside their homes.

"Others, who, having been rejected by the community had turned their back on it, were experiencing being with other Jews and celebrating Shabbat for the first time since they were children. Jewish gay and lesbians and our supporters have come of age. This was our barmitzvah, our batmitzvah. We are joining the rest of the Jewish community."