

"We can't bury our heads in the sand"

Shira Sebban

THE issue is not whether there are Jewish homosexuals or whether some Jews openly paraded their homosexuality at the Sydney Mardi Gras.

"The issue is whether we should know about it, be told about it, talk about it; whether a newspaper with the word 'Jewish' in its name should report it, or whether we should bury our heads in the sand, pretend there aren't Jewish homosexuals and hope the whole issue will disappear."

Former NSW Jewish Board of Deputies president Professor Graham de Vahl Davis was addressing an audience of more than 250 at a benefit comedy night for the Jewish gay and lesbian community at Hakoah Club on Sunday evening. The function, which attracted a broad cross-section of the Jewish community, was called "The Stars of David Come Out ... to Play" (the Jewish float in the Mardi Gras was named Stars of David Come Out).

Jewish News wins media award

THE *Australian Jewish News* has won the Mainstream Media Award in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Awards.

Runners-up were ABC Radio 2BL's "Drive time" program and Tony Squires of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The "Stars of David Come Out" float — the first Jewish float to participate in the Mardi Gras Parade — was voted among the top three of the 200 floats, the winner being a float devoted to Aboriginal reconciliation.

Jewish float organiser and former Dayenu Association convener Dawn Cohen, who accepted the award on behalf of the *AJN*, said the newspaper received "tremendous applause from the audience, and many people were deeply appreciative of editor Vic Alhadeff's fight for freedom of the press. It was a great pleasure to be mistaken for the editor at interval."

As for the "Stars of David Come Out" float, "this was a very big success, given that it was our first entry, first design by Lorraine Larri, first choreographed piece by Eran Klausner and first organisational effort by Dayenu. Other floats have usually had many more years' experience," Ms Cohen said.



Diane Armstrong, Dawn Cohen, Professor Graham de Vahl Davis.

■ More pictures, next week Photo: Julie Gassner-Gering

The entertainers were international comedian Deb Filler and Sydney comics Shelly Silberman and Jackie Loeb. Other speakers were *Mosaic* author Diane Armstrong and float organiser and former Dayenu Association convener Dawn Cohen, with comedian and writer Geoff Sirmai as chairman.

Professor De Vahl Davis: "The Sydney Beth

when it mentions ... Jewish functions at which *kashrut* is not observed? Or when it reports the speeches of politicians, or even former presidents of the Board of Deputies, who might occasionally engage in a little pride or be a little economical with the truth? Are these offences somehow less abhorrent? Are there degrees of abomination?"

"Where is the outrage against the *AJN* when it mentions functions at which *kashrut* is not observed? Or when it reports the speeches of politicians who might be economical with the truth?"

Din and others seem to want the *Australian Jewish News* to be a 'good news' newspaper — to tell, in their words, only those stories which 'promote Jewish ideology and destiny.' But "it would be ludicrous to try to place that kind of limitation on the stories that may be published". Moreover, the *AJN* did not "favour Jewish involvement [in the Mardi Gras]; it reported it ... knowing ... that some members of the community would not be happy with it".

"To lie with a male as one lies with a woman", eating certain foods, pride and telling lies are all described as "abominations" in the Bible, he said. "So where is the outrage against the *AJN*

Passover should celebrate not only freedom from Egyptian bondage, but also "freedom from emotional bondage, repression, persecution, discrimination", Professor De Vahl Davis said. Citing South Head Synagogue Rabbi Benzion Milecki, he urged the community to involve Jewish gays and lesbians. "That is their right: to be part of the community like the rest of us, and not to be brushed aside or hidden away or to have their existence denied.

"Let the *Jewish News* write about Jewish homosexuals until they are no longer news. Let us hope for the day when the fact that there are Jewish homosexuals is no more interesting than the fact that there are Jewish professors."

This was the first time an Australian religious

or cultural group had organised a benefit for its gay and lesbian members, Ms Cohen said. "New ground has been created upon which Jewish gays and lesbians, partners, family and friends, and all Jews who have a commitment to freedom and equality, will stand and build on for generations to come."

Referring to the Beth Din's discontent at the amount of public attention Jewish participation in the Mardi Gras had received, she said: "If someone thinks the star they follow is the only one that should exist, and try to make it shine brighter than, and blot out, everyone else's, ... they impoverish themselves spiritually ... If they say only heterosexual relationships have the presence of God, they diminish the reflections of God they are able to see. The oppressor is as impoverished as the victim, and the whole world is reduced in beauty.

"And the opposite is true too: when people are able to open up to the value and beauty in difference in themselves and in others, and to stand up for equality, the richness of all the world and the whole of life is enhanced."

Ms Cohen paid tribute, among others, to *AJN* editor Vic Alhadeff for standing up for freedom of the press and making a contribution to *tikkun olam* (repairing the world); to Holocaust survivor Suzie Wise for carrying a pink Star of David in the Mardi Gras parade and for the "honesty of her words, integrity and passion for justice"; and to Diane Armstrong for joining the march and writing an opinion piece "that had such a simplicity and power and beauty that it got published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for millions of parents of lesbians and gays to gain strength from".

Ms Armstrong — who received a standing ovation — spoke about the "overwhelming" response she had received to that article, in which she described marching in the parade in support of her daughter. "I hadn't suspected that by sharing my feelings, I would open the door for many other parents, a door which they had locked, bolted and marked 'no entry'. It's fantastic to know that ... I've given others the confidence to open that door just a little and let in a little light into that forbidden dark chamber where fear engenders secrets which undermine relationships and ruins lives.

"It's hard to be open about having a gay child when you live in a comparatively small community like ours, which tends to show only its positive, conformist face so that you feel that you are alone. Except that, as I've discovered in the past few weeks, we are not alone. Far from it."

The evening was produced by Geoff Sirmai, together with the Age of Leisure Organisation and Hakoah Club.