



Mental Health Month ends with historic Pride March

BY YVETTE
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JOURNALIST



MENTAL HEALTH MONTH awareness activities in Western NSW were brought to a close with the Rural Rainbow Alliance (LGBTI & Straight Allies) Pride March held last weekend.

Despite the rain, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning and asexual (LGBTIQA) community, and their straight allies, brought their own rainbows to mark what is also the region's first ever Pride March.

The Rainbow Alliance is a branch of the Connected Communities Project and headspace Dubbo, and aims to provide support and reduce social isolation for the LGBTIQA community.

Rainbow Alliance spokesperson, headspace employee and active advocate for LGBTIQA rights, Nicholas Steepe, was integral in the march's conception.

"It's very important to those in the LGBTIQA community to feel supported and valued within the community they live," Steepe says.

"Nicholas conceived the idea and worked incredibly hard to make it a reality with the help a \$1000 grant from Mental Health NSW," says march participant and local campaigner Kris Stevens.

"Other groups involved included the Dubbo Domestic Violence Committee, Dubbo community Connections, Dubbo Sexual Health, ACON (Aids Council of New South Wales), the Transgender and Gender Diverse Network and Rainbow Unity.

"The march was promoted on Social Media where many of these groups connected. It was a great success and we hope it will become an annual event."

Annie Hartley, a clinical psychologist with headspace says the event is a positive for the wellness of the LGBTIQA community, their supporters (straight allies) and the region for bringing the conversation about LGBTIQA's into a wider community discussion.

"Having something really bright, and celebratory for LGBTIQA can make people stop and think, "what actually is my opinion on this?"

"To be able to do it in such a fresh, inviting way, actually gets people really to challenge themselves. They see people marching who they may associate with or are maybe friends with and think, "well, okay, perhaps I didn't know you were that sexual gender or orientation or a straight ally" and it starts that conversation. That actually is what gets change

going.

"Unless a community sits with itself and really thinks about where our values and beliefs come from and why we think the way we think, we're not going to have a great deal of personal growth and movement," says Hartley.

"That's really import because it's a great opportunity for individuals but also the community to be reflective about their belief."

Statistics show rural based LGBTIQA suffer high rates of mental health issues due to exclusion, bullying and isolation.

"In rural areas, the risk factor for LGBTIQA suicides is incredibly high for reasons such as isolation, bullying, lack of appropriate services or lack of a community presence as well," says Hartley.

"Being able to be visible, being able to have a collective of LGBTIQA and straight allies to show support really sends the message that even if perhaps you don't have that support within your immediate network, then within the wider community there are people you can talk to, be it community members, services, professionals; there is a wider network that you can be part of.

"I think in terms of mental health, having a social network is a real asset and a protective factor against issues such as depression, anxiety and even suicidal thoughts.



Dubbo Weekender, Dubbo

06 Nov 2015, by Yvette Aubussonfoley

General News, page 18 - 1,745.00 cm²

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“If you are struggling; whether you’re questioning your sexual gender or orientation or you’re hesitant to disclose your identity to your immediate network, there are people who you can be yourself with and express yourself freely within the community. That’s really important for our mental health and our identity that we are true to ourselves and we are authentic.

“People can be anxious about becoming a part of a social group because they might fear what other people might say. Whether they will say it or not,

they can have that fear, or they be depressed because they feel isolated or they haven’t quite worked through different variables to do with gender or sexuality yet and they’re still processing it all.”

Bizzi Mason, who addressed marchers after the parade, said the march meant she now felt accepted and supported as part of the Dubbo Community.

“In 1975 I didn’t even have the words to describe how I felt and there was no information and no support structures to guide me through her teenage years. I left the day after I finished my HSC in 1975 and returned 35 years later to

a town I can be proud of,” Mason says.

Morgan Williams, another march participant says: “My opinion is that all people are equal and should not be judged on their gender, sexual preference, race and appearance.

“We live in a world that should be supportive of each other no matter the circumstance and we should all have the same legal rights.”

About headspace Dubbo

headspace Dubbo has provided over 1,500 appointments and received over 500 referrals into the service since it opened at the start of 2015. headspace offers a range of mental health and related services from the centre which are all delivered free to young people aged 12-25 years.

The primary focus of headspace is the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians. headspace helps 12 - 25 year olds going through a tough time through a national network of over 80 headspace centres and online and telephone counselling service eheadspace.



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Jonas Ridge, Amy
Naden, Cindy Cohen and
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Kris Stevens and Bizzi Mason
Jones, Kim Collins.
OS: MORGAN WIL-
LIAMS



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Nicholas Steepe





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