

# Knowing where we've come from:

RhED pays tribute to the collective energy and achievement of all those who have worked against discrimination and towards respectful community responses to sex workers in Victoria. In particular we pay respect to the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria and its forebears – to all their members and supporters, activists and volunteers, committee members, staff and coordinators. They built the platform for sexworkers' rights in Victoria and, indeed, provided modelling for the movement in Australia and internationally.

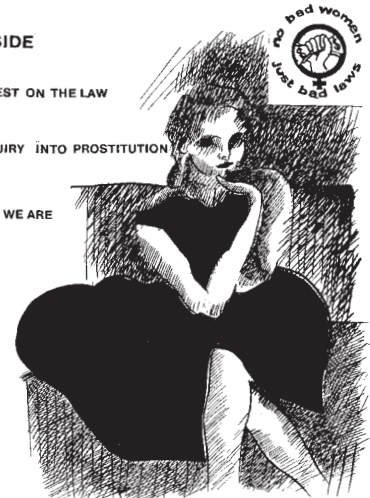
Di Surgey compiled some of the highlights of the last 22 years taking us from 1978 to 2001.

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Working draft for the first publication of Working Girl

- July 1978, a seminar was held at Melbourne University about Prostitution and the Law. From this seminar a group of women continued to meet at the Women's Centre in Latrobe Street and eventually formalised into a group called the **Prostitutes' Action Group (P.A.G.)** in November 1978 when the St Kilda Council organised a meeting to discuss the "problem" of prostitution in that area. The aims and objectives of P.A.G were:
  - To form a coherent idea of the most reasonable legislation to regulate or not regulate prostitution;
  - To demystify the nature of prostitution to the public; and
  - To maintain a support group for prostitutes as well as the formation of a prostitutes organisation.
- The P.A.G. later changed its name to **Hetairae** because women did not like to be identified as prostitutes. The group was now a prostitutes' organisation where workers and supporters would try and lobby for basic civil rights and a say in their working conditions. Because of a lack of financial support, Hetairae did not continue. *A Loose Women's Organisation*  
*The History of the PCV Part One, Working Girl, PCV*
- September 1983, the **Australian Prostitutes' Collective (A.P.C.)** was formed in Melbourne, at a meeting held at 369 Cardigan Street, Carlton. (Later meetings were held at Fitzroy Legal Service). Around the same time a similar prostitutes' rights organisation was established in Sydney... the A.P.C. was Sydney and Melbourne based and consisted of past and present workers as well as supportive people. *No Bad Women - Just Bad Laws*
- June 1984, first issue of **Working Girl** magazine published.
- 1986, Australian Prostitutes' Collective meeting venue changes to COSHG offices, 65 Gertrude Street Fitzroy.
- March 1987, APC receives grant of \$12,700 to provide service delivery to women in prostitution and is the only prostitutes' representative organisation in the world that has government funding. Soon after, APC receives funding from Health Department Victoria, AIDS Prevention Program (for sexual health education to brothels), NACAIDS (for a national conference) and AFAO (for AIDS Education to Men in Prostitution).
- April 1987, APC organises a significant seminar about the impacts of legalisation with a particular emphasis and a subsequent submission on taxation of workers in licensed brothels.
- May 1987, first AGM to set down the aims and structure of the APC as an incorporated association.
- June 1987, APC moves to 37 Wilson Street, South Yarra.
- March 21 1988, APC changes its name to **Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria. No Bad Whores - Just Bad Laws**
- May 1988, PCV moves to 131 Grey Street, St Kilda.
- October 1988, **First National Sex Industry Conference** (Theme: Sex Industry and the AIDS Debate) organised by PCV, funded by NACAIDS and held in Melbourne. The Conference allowed for a national network of prostitute groups to become more united. (The national network is known as **Scarlet Alliance**).

# thanks & farewell



*Working draft for the first publication of Working Boy*

- The Aims and Objectives of the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria adopted at the AGM of April 1989 are:
  - To lobby for a legal and administrative framework which does not discriminate against people involved in the sex industry;
  - To provide support, advice, information, advocacy and assistance to current and past sex workers; and
  - To educate the community about related issues and communicate the ideas and opinions of sex industry workers.
- All people who satisfied the Committee that they supported the aims and objectives of the PCV were eligible for membership.
- Constitution for the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria Incorporated 1989
- 1989, PCV moves to 10 Inkerman St, St Kilda.
- February 2000, the management of programs funded by the Department of Human Services and formerly delivered by the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria is transferred to Inner South Community Health Service. Programs continue to operate under the 'transitional name' of **Prostitutes' Centre of Victoria** or **PCV**.
- January 2001, the program and services are launched under the new name of **RhED Program** – Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry.
- March 2001, first issue of **RED** magazine published.
- Ugly Mugs program, which enables sex workers to report clients who are violent and PCV to disseminate information to other sex workers is introduced at PCV in 1988 and wins the National Crime Prevention Award in 1996.
- Demonstrated record of innovation in the development of responsive service models to street based and marginalised workers e.g. hosting outposted sexual assault counselling, Reiki, legal services, STD and health clinics at PCV site in St Kilda.
- The Sex Work and HIV Project (1993/1994) was the first project of its kind in Australia and aimed to “give a face to those individuals who had received a positive diagnosis as a means to openly fight the ongoing discrimination against positive people in the sex industry”. The project also worked to change community and industry attitudes towards positive sex workers to become one of practical support and informed choices, rather than reactionary fear and isolation. In 1994 Geoff Humphries, the Project Worker, organised the national conference “HIV and Sex Work – A Hidden Problem”. Geoff had earlier participated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Congress on AIDS in the Asia Pacific (Thailand) out of which the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers was born. We commemorate Geoff Humphries' contribution to PCV and to HIV positive sex workers. Geoff died at the end of 2000.
- Initiating a program which allows street based sex workers to carry out Community Based Orders at the PCV site, St Kilda (1997).
- Early development of outreach service models, with access to 95% of legal brothels in Victoria for blood borne virus prevention. PCV also initiated one of the first street outreach programs for intravenous drug users in the sex industry. PCV staff were involved in training other service providers. STD workshops were also delivered to sites such as Tarrangower and Fairlea women's prisons, drug rehabilitation services and so forth.
- PCV was the first sex worker organisation in Australia to adopt a NESB access and equity policy in relation to non-English speaking background sex workers as a consequence of recommendations by the SIREN Project (1994) and subsequently employed a NESB Access Worker with funding from the Commonwealth Government in 1994/95.

## Key Service Development

The Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria was founded on peer based and activist principles and these were reflected in staffing, management and service planning and delivery throughout its history.

- Rapid response to HIV/AIDS Prevention: The PCV ran the first needle and syringe exchange in the Southern Hemisphere. The exchange was the largest and busiest in Victoria at the time of its closure and relocation to the Salvation Army in 1992. (*Interview for The Professional, Alison Arnot-Bradshaw, Coordinator, PCV.*) Condom dispensary also operates from PCV site.
- Developed 'Safe House' scheme, endorsing those brothels which adhered to safe sex and safe service protections for sex workers. Safe Houses are publicised through a Client Telephone Information Service. The Safe Service Endorsement Scheme, introduced in 1989, built on the same model but targeted escort services, and males in prostitution.

## **Broad Advocacy**

- Key player in consultations around legislative change through membership of committees and working parties and the provision of submissions to various inquiries (e.g. Neave Inquiry, 1985). PCV representation was invited on the Prostitution Monitoring Committee, the Prostitution Control Board and the Prostitution Control Act Advisory Committee. PCV took up to 150 calls per day in response to demands for up to date information on the Prostitution Control Act (1994) and later successfully made recommendations for regulations in relation to health and safety of workers (1995).
- PCV was represented on the Street Prostitution Strategy Committee formed by the St Kilda Council in relation to street prostitution (1992). Over a very short period in the same year PCV collects more than 3000 signatures from local residents in support of the decriminalisation of street prostitution. The Street Safe '94 Rally through the streets of St Kilda followed similarly successful campaign activities in support of decriminalisation in earlier years (for example, Prostitutes in the Park).
- 1988, PCV is represented on the Australian National Council on AIDS (ANCA), later to become ANCHHARD.
- National project responding to the issues of non-English speaking sex workers in Australia, particularly women imported from Thailand to work in the sex industry illegally (1992 - 1994). PCV later becomes a member of the Global Alliance Against Trafficking of Women and a member of PCV is appointed Australasian Pacific representative on issues of prostitution to the World Health Organisation.
- Statewide Project reporting the Exiting and Retraining Needs of Sex Workers wanting to Leave the Industry (1996). Recommendations are taken on board by the Prostitution Advisory Committee (1997).
- Hosted a solicitor/legal researcher for a period of six months to monitor the impact amongst sex workers of changes to the Regulations affecting prostitution (1995).
- Recognition of PCV as lead agency with respect to research into prostitution and the health issues of sex workers, with concomitant involvement in a number of key research projects in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of STDs (now known as ARCSHS), Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research and individual universities.
- Training of health and other professionals in relation to issues for sex workers, particularly primary health workers, community development workers, medical students and members of the Victorian Police Force.

- “We are in the process of unionising the sex industry as the Miscellaneous Workers Union have decided to accept sex workers as members. This is a federal union and will hopefully be able to establish an award rate for workers in the industry. This is yet another way in which the industry is being legitimised and is a world first”.

*(History of Prostitution in Victoria, Alison Arnot-Bradshaw, Coordinator, PCV, 1997)*

## **Innovative Community Education Publications**

- ☞ **Working Girl**, a quarterly magazine for sex workers, published since June 1984, becomes the dual format **Working Girl Worker Boy** and remained in continuous publication.
- ☞ **Handy Hints for Sex Workers**, a booklet, was followed by many leaflets and handouts for new workers entering the industry including The Law, STDs & Sex Work, Advertising Tips for Escort Workers and Safety Tips for Private Workers.
- ☞ **Hussies' Handbook**, a booklet about legal issues for the sex industry, first funded by the Victoria Law Foundation and Victoria Legal Aid in 1990, is published in two editions (1995 and 1997).
- ☞ **PCV Student Packs**: countless thousands of compilations of research and other articles have been distributed as “student packs” since the late 1980’s.
- ☞ **Service Directories** for young women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and who are working in the sex industry published by PCV and by other agencies with PCV input.
- ☞ **SIREN’s Story**, a language and culture specific cartoon format guide to being a safe, smart and successful sex worker in Australia was produced in Thai, Tagalog languages (1993) and in Chinese (1996). Sex workers from Thai background and Filipino backgrounds produced **We Deserve to be Safe**, HIV/AIDS prevention audio tapes in their own languages. PCV documented issues related to women being brought illegally from Thailand to work in unsafe conditions as early as 1988 (PCV Annual Report, 1989).
- ☞ **STD Handbook**, a photographic guide and text about transmission and symptoms of STDs, was published with Commonwealth funding, in 1998 for use by sex workers and is used by all sex worker organisations in Australia.



# Advocacy in "action"



"Which brings me to the thankys.... To all the individuals and people in government, and other institutions and people who supported the concept of the Collective when it was no more than a few women and an ideal, right through to assisting our work now that we are established. For many it would have been easier to knock it or snigger at it, or sit on the fence, and possibly safer!" (Cheryl Overs in *Working Girl Worker Boy*, 1988)

# Memories

For me, the greatest achievement of the PCV was to provide a forum, a voice for sex workers. Essentially this voice said "The sex industry is a reasonable work option for many people and sex work in and of itself doesn't victimise the people doing the work". This voice allowed both sex workers and others in the community to think about sex work in a new, positive light. 'On the ground' the presence of this voice made real and positive changes in people's lives.

For individual workers it could mean a sense of community, or pride, or simply the knowledge there was somewhere they could go to get things off their chests or to access health and legal information – a service which not only didn't judge them, it actively supported them.

For the broader community it meant the presence of smart bunch of people with whom alliances were forged. Those alliances generated successful campaigns for legal change, social justice and human rights, eg: the right of HIV positive people to have sex, and the right of sex workers who have been sexually assaulted to access full justice. *Keith, a staff member*

.. the PCV's work around the issue of street prostitution, and the various community activities involving both residents and sex workers, health services and other local welfare agencies, in trying to raise the profile of those issues with the wider community. Some of the events that occurred were things like the candlelight vigil and rally, in the mid 1990s, where more than a hundred people walked through the key 'working' streets of St Kilda carrying candles in memory of workers who had been attacked and where there had been murders in that area. We walked up to the Town Hall and delivered a petition to the Mayor, asking him to lobby the State government to decriminalise street sex work – and we also accompanied some of those community based activities with press releases and the launch of the document '10 Reasons to Decriminalise Street Prostitution'. The combination of the activities really raised awareness of the issues for the general resident population of St Kilda and also the politicians who, although they did not change the legislation, would have had much more difficulty if they were seen to be complacent about the issues. It was a time when a lot of passionate people worked together very well.

*Maria, a staff member*

My fondest memory would have to be working with a diverse group of wonderful, talented people like Deb Mayson and Sarah Fair and Richard Keane and everyone and seeing their creativity and wisdom channelled into the important work we did in service provision, resource development and advocacy.

*Keith, a staff member*

My best memory is of a worker named Wendy who was very chaotic generally in her behaviour and didn't ever say a lot. She was friendly enough, she'd walk in and say hello but she didn't ever speak a lot, not with anyone at all. But on the evening when the candlelight vigil for street sex workers occurred she stood up and addressed the crowd and asked that they take the issue seriously and try and do something about it because of how dangerous the situation was. And she spoke with the Mayor directly as well. She was very articulate and very skilled in the art of giving brief sentences and getting the message across. To see the staff working with sex workers to motivate individuals to express their real needs was great. *Maria, a staff member*

The profile that the Prostitutes' Collective established, and it was a good profile that they got, in the general community and in the media, for the sex workers and the responsible way that they resourced education in the sex industry as well as in the general community, including the males in the general community. And the result of their single mindedness was that they reduced the transmission of HIV in Australia.

*Beth, a Committee member*

I think it was the way they engaged with me, even though they knew I wasn't a sex worker I was always able to go into the brothels – it was more or less like mates, there was no them and us. You could just sit around, have a chat - it wasn't voyeuristic – and being able to go into the brothels like that (and do education as a nurse) meant there was a real reduction of STDs amongst sex workers. And then there was the involvement in a farewell that was put on for me when I went away – at the time it was very sad, 'cause I didn't think I'd ever be coming back to this job – but at the same time, having so many people there, it was a real reflection of the way the sex industry, the (Health) Department and the community industry were working together – it was so special, and it was real one upmanship that the Prostitutes' Collective hired the male stripper and I had get on the stage with him. And they did it well. Anything the Prostitutes' Collective did in a big way, they did it well.

*Beth, a Committee member*

I think in the early days, 1992 – 1993, we were a really strong organisation, and we were probably the strongest out of all the sex worker organisations in Australia. We held the flag, we were the first sex worker organisation in Australia. We had this excellent reputation and we were held in very high esteem and the other sex worker organisations were much smaller. At the time, even without much money, it was the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria that was the stronghold for sex worker rights – we were the core organisation. For me working there, it was very dynamic and powerful organisation – Edwina (the Coordinator) was a really strong character and really good for the organisation in those early days of my involvement. *Jo, a staff member*

As an individual project I think the arts project was outstanding and I think that it gave people a voice that otherwise they didn't have .... it allowed people to come together to talk about things and to express themselves. I think a day to day thing that was also outstanding was the drop in centre - I think that was just the heart and soul of the place and a lot of people depended on it. It was a hassle for us to run, but in the end I really enjoyed being part of that. Working Girl, Worker Boy Magazine, and certainly the STD booklet, those things were also quite outstanding.

*Kirk, a staff member*

I'm biased, of course, but I'd have to say the successful negotiations to get Ministerial approval to publish 'Siren's Story' for Thai women. That resource was about being a smart, safe and successful sex worker in Australia. Given the political context around illegal immigrants, it was a substantial challenge. It took five months to get that approval – but we didn't back off. The Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria in 1992 were extraordinarily strong and brave advocates.

*Di, a staff member*

My best memory is of really strong, powerful women. They were so empowered and so knowledgeable and so forceful, but in a really positive way – they were just so strong. They were the guts of the industry and it didn't matter how much stigma and discrimination was out there, they just didn't blink – it just didn't matter.

*Jo, a staff member*

The barbeques and get togethers we used to have quite often on Fridays. Sometimes there was entertainment, it was educative, there was a feeling of togetherness, at least for the time that we were together, a sense of belonging and of family that people experienced. Those get togethers were for everyone, they were a regular thing and I used to love them. Friday afternoons, getting together – it was a chance to talk at

another level, a more enjoyable thing, and there was a lot of information that you could pick up in situations like that – there was a real fire and a passion in the old belly at that time.

*Kirk, a staff member*

Working with such an amazing range of people – from the bureaucrats to grass roots women from the community who produced the audio tapes in different languages, to cartoonists, organisations in Thailand and the Philippines, all the sex worker organisations around the country – it was an amazingly participatory project and, personally one of the richest work experiences I've had. The thing that made it so amazing was the enthusiasm of the Thai women and the Filipino women who recognised the importance of HIV/AIDS education within their own communities. And they were such fabulous company. *Di, a staff member*

The march for getting prostitution decriminalised – they had a march about saving people who work the streets – that was one of the best things that the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria has done. *Alison, a service user*

I came here with another service user in about 1997 – she was doing her CBO here. Then I started going to the clinic, and I got to know everyone here. I think the best achievement of the Prostitutes' Collective has been to be able to help us, even though there's been rough times here. They managed to get through it. They hung in. That was an achievement.

*Jye, a service user*

My best memory is about talking with Chach: he was the first person I really ever talked through my problems with. It made a real difference in my life 'cause he worked with me to get me off the streets and to get me into accommodation and he helped to get me into emergency accommodation and if that hadn't happened at that time I would have stayed on the streets. He made the biggest impact on my life and I ended up doing volunteer work there instead. *Alison, a service user*

When Kirk got me a flat to live in, that's my best memory – and last year's art project – I was really surprised by how much effort everybody made. All the people came each week and everyone did put the effort into it – and then at the end it was a really good night.

*Jye, a service user*

**RhED invites comments from service users, past employees, management and volunteers - if you have a memory of PCV and want to have this recorded for posterity, please contact Di Surgey on 03 9534 8166.**