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**Issue 17**  
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Editorial Assistance provided by  
Efrem Manassej

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17 October—Support Person's Reflection, Lewisham  
22 October—Lewisham  
30 October—Liverpool  
14 November—Surry Hills  
26 November—Lewisham  
3 December—World AIDS Day Ceremony—All welcome!

## Tree of Hope

The **Tree of Hope** (ToH) is a CatholicCare service which provides emotional and practical support to people living with HIV/AIDS, their family and their support person. This service is open to people of any faith or no faith.

We are based in Lewisham, with outreach at Surry Hills and Liverpool. The ToH is a place of hospitality and welcome, and offers a space for reflection, support and friendship.



### From the Coordinator ...

Welcome to the Tree of Hope's Spring newsletter!

Many of you may know that Tree of Hope was founded by Sr Margaret Mines who is a Sister of Charity. I would like to congratulate the Congregation of the **Sisters of Charity on their 175th anniversary** of ministry and service in Australia. I wish to express our sincere appreciation and gratitude for Sr Margaret Mines, for without her vision and the support of her Congregation, ToH may not be in existence and certainly not in its present capacity with the reputation that it has. Best wishes and congratulations to all the Sisters for their service and support to so many.

In July, I was most fortunate to be sponsored by CatholicCare to attend the **20th International AIDS Conference** together with ToH's volunteer Efrem Manassej. It was an experience never to be forgotten and we are both very grateful to have attended. Efrem has written a superb article which says it all. Thank you so much Efrem!

Another wonderful reflection has been written by Paul Allanson about our **Saturday Workshop** held in August. A group of 12 people enjoyed photography and poetry and produced an amazing slideshow. Thank you Paul - and for the beautiful photographs!

There is some good and some not so good news. After a period of discerning, regrettably, we will not continue with the social gatherings at **Liverpool**. However, we will relocate the event to Lewisham at the Tree of Hope meeting space from 5-8pm.

We are pleased to advise that ToH received a small grant from Carer's NSW to host an evening gathering. This will provide the opportunity to bring together the very important support person (friend or family member) of someone who is living with HIV or AIDS. Sr Carol Tomlinson will be facilitating a reflection evening titled **Mutual Presence**. Being 'present' to others can be considered sacred to many and it certainly is gift when experienced.

One last thing. In my recent unexpected absence due to family commitments, I would like to **sincerely thank everyone** for their warm messages and for continuing and managing the planned activities and events. Merrienne, Penny, Jim and volunteers Efrem and John, as well as the World AIDS Day Working Group made it all seamless! It's a testimony to the topic of Mutual Presence and that is what we are to each other.

If you would like to know more about Tree of Hope, please do not hesitate to call me on 9509 1240 or [treeofhope@catholiccare.org](mailto:treeofhope@catholiccare.org)

Warm regards,  
Marg

NB: All names used with full permission.

# 20TH INTERNATIONAL AIDS CONFERENCE MELBOURNE 2014

## Heroism and Hope

This biennial world conference took place from 20 to 25 July at Melbourne's Exhibition and Convention Centre on the south bank of the Yarra River. Over 14,000 people attended, including some of the leading scientific and medical minds in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Community, health and policy leaders and workers also took part in this inclusive and vital conference, introducing the theme 'Stepping Up The Pace.'



CatholicCare Sydney generously sponsored Margaret Pirotta (Coordinator, Tree of Hope Service) and myself to attend this unique, inspiring and informative event. We were privileged to be immersed in this 'world movement' (as described by President Clinton) to end AIDS and restore HIV free generations to humanity.

No one could have prepared me for the impact; the sheer emotional weightiness of this event. I was more than moved by the vastness of it all; by all those who have gone before and by the heroism of those living who fight HIV and AIDS everyday, often under the threat of persecution and prejudice, from every corner of the world. I did not foresee or really grasp the scale of the fight, nor the depth of wounding that stigma, criminalisation, ongoing persecution and poverty inflicts on people both infected and affected by HIV

and AIDS. Only now do I realise how prejudices, both cultural and legislated, actually help to spread HIV and stop the eradication of it.

An example of the challenges faced was seen in one woman from Uganda, a PLWHA, activist and community advisor, who spoke to us and floored us with her passion and her story: She could not afford the high cost of treatment for HIV, and she could only get state sponsored antiretroviral medication if someone on treatment died first. Only when she had long suffered and was 'on her death bed' did she finally receive treatment. In time she improved and became an activist for HIV awareness. Subsequently she had to flee Uganda due to being charged with criminal activity. After many years as a refugee in London, she returned to her country (as the laws had slightly changed in her favour) to form the 'Mamma's Club' to help mothers and children affected by the virus. Presently, she has to be careful in her advocacy, as HIV criminalisation laws still exist and are rigidly enforced in Uganda.



A second example of the personal magnitude of the struggle was a doctor from Vietnam, who lost her own son to AIDS. Instead of turning aside in her grief, she joined a non-government organisation and began to advocate politically to end the cycle of IV drug use and HIV infection, so that other people did not meet her son's fate. She was a victim of severe official and unofficial harassment but managed to survive long enough to see HIV decriminalised and subsequently recognised as a health issue in need of harm reduction strategies.

As attendees listened to speaker's stories they often dabbed their eyes and felt the desperate poignancy of the individual struggle to deal with an incurable, debilitating virus, isolation, deep stigma and the threat of being hounded out of a community they had been part of all their lives.



The message that emerged loud and clear from the conference was that human rights, accessible health care and a quantum change in attitudes are vital to ending HIV. Science alone is not enough. Prejudice against gays and lesbians, bisexuals, women, transgender people, ethnic minorities and those living with disabilities must be eradicated in order to end HIV. Chief among requests by speakers was the call to people living with HIV or AIDS (PLWHA) to engage in the political struggle and to be heard. They were urged to become decision makers themselves, because only PLWHA truly understand what it is like to live with this virus.

Yet throughout this overwhelming event was a persistent and growing hope. President Clinton addressed the Conference and talked of 'the last hill to climb.' Due to recent scientific advancement we are getting close to an HIV cure and vaccine. Although the moment when the cure will be found cannot be predicted, leading scientists reason that knowledge of the virus and its treatment have grown so significantly in the last two years, that an end to HIV will occur in the near future. Hence there was an air of renewed hope, even a little excitement in the tone of the conference.

And I was left ultimately with a sense of mixed emotion. Sadness and hope mingled within, and the sense of loss and of heroism under pressure was palpable too. In the end grief was clearly acknowledged, but it was the ever present heroism of the human struggle and a sense of rising hope that remain strongest in my heart and mind.

**Efrem Manassey**  
**Volunteer**

## SATURDAY WORKSHOP

### — Imaging Stillness: Windows to the Soul

On a wet and cold Saturday in August a dozen friends gathered at Tree of Hope at Lewisham. After coffee and an introduction to our expert teacher (and fellow visual observer) John Charadia, we settled, listened and mulled over our thoughts, letting creative juices flow and evolve with poetry and reflection.

Digital cameras were handed out. Unexpectedly the rain stopped, so we jumped at the chance to show that Magic Happens! And ESSENCE was born. It has come to my attention that in creation, from the smallest creature to the tallest tree, Life Matters! All our emotions and soul connection was captured through the lens.

After a delicious lunch and conversation amongst friends, it was back to bringing it home visually and vocally evoking precious words and thoughts. Hearts opened, souls connected and friends bonded. We titled our creation ESSENCE and it came alive in a slideshow. It was powerful to experience the wisdom of the group through this medium. Big hugs to Merrianne and Margaret for the motivation; for showing us all how much we are all capable of.

This was time well spent with friends - isn't that what we all crave? This is lacking in our crazy world today. There are plenty of great people out there seeking acceptance for many reasons.

**Let's melt isolation together!!!**

**Paul Allanson**  
**Participant**



# Up Coming Events

## **SURRY HILLS:**

10 October - Social Gathering (6-9pm)

14 November - Social Gathering (6-9pm)

## **LEWISHAM :**

17 October - **Support Persons' Reflection—*Mutual Presence***, facilitated by Carol Tomlinson (5-9pm)

Booking required. (supper incl)

22 October - Drop In (11am—2pm) (incl. light lunch)

26 November - Drop In (11am—2pm) (incl. light lunch)

3 December - **World AIDS Day Ceremony** — Acknowledging, Remembering and Giving Thanks

RSVP appreciated (2pm)

## **LIVERPOOL:**

30 October - Social Gathering (6-9pm)

For more information or to RSVP please call Marg on 9509 1240 (direct) or [treeofhope@catholiccare.org](mailto:treeofhope@catholiccare.org)