


GHN 25

BUILDING A FUTURE ON THE PAST

WEBINAR

FRIDAY 27th NOVEMBER 2020 11.00am - 1.00pm

A series of presentations to mark Gay Health Network's 25-year celebration, World AIDS Day and the 12th Noel Walsh Memorial.



PRESENTATION BY NIALL SWEENEY TO GHN 25 WEBINAR

Hello everyone. I am honoured to have been asked to briefly present a bit of my story in all of this today, not only in celebrating Gay Health Network's 25 years, but also in marking World AIDS Day and remembering Noel Walsh. It has to be said that the work you do has been instrumental in my own survival, as well as so many of my friends, loved-ones and colleagues, so I salute you and thank you for that.

I can only speak here from my own personal and professional point of view, and only about any of the design work that we did with GHN, which was during its early years in the mid-1990s. But then I also speak on behalf of the great Alternative Miss Ireland family, and how the arc of our own story of collective discovery ran in parallel and intertwined with that of the formative years of Gay Health Network, with local and global queer liberation, the arrival of HIV and AIDS, and the drive for social, cultural and political change.

My mother always told me to "be modern" and then to "do good work", with as much emphasis on the "doing good" as the "doing work". She was an environmental activist throughout her life — and she would go on to be co-founder and then president of the European Environmental Bureau for 10 years — so ideas of how your life *and* your work, *your very existence*, can combine to create positive change, has always been in my blood.

We started Alternative Miss Ireland in 1987 when I was just 20 years old — the same year that I had worked as a designer at the original Gay Community News in Boston alongside many great activist thinkers and protagonists there — and now I was finding myself in an Ireland before decriminalisation and yet already in the throes of the AIDS crisis, yet it wasn't until the 1990s that things really started to get going.

Alternative Miss Ireland, and the many pan-gender, poly-sexual events and clubs that we staged in Ireland, kicked off with gusto in the mid-1990s, continuing well into the 2000s, and continue to form the core ideas of thought and process throughout all of the work I do here, locally and globally. It has to be said, to be honest, that one of the driving reasons for starting so many of the clubs was *sexual*. We were young and hungry for the world, but we also knew that sexuality and sex were revolutionary actions in themselves — as well as being great fun and a celebration of life. Dressing up and having fun was, and still is, a political act.

So, in the 1990s, HIV/AIDS was already a core part of our agenda. We had all been away discovering the world — and the exciting and creative sexual joy that it offers — joy that now also came with a specific threat — so when it came to work at my collaborative studio in Dublin, and the events that we would create and run, ideas around the promotion of sexual health and HIV/AIDS education & activism were naturally part of that, as, quite literally, *our very lives depended on it* — regardless of how *any* of us identified as we ran under our manifesto of a United Future Gender Agenda.

The handing out of flyers was a key part of the mechanism of promotion and communication at the time, something that we invested a lot into, and went all out on, and working with GHN in its early years, we were able to integrate *into* that mechanism the pioneering work of Gay Health Network. And in turn, the design work that Ed Shipsey and myself produced in the mid-1990s for GHN also became part of *our* broader agenda. Just as my mother had taught me, the design work we did, the creative endeavour that we brought to the GHN stage, had to be good, had to be the best, with currency and with no compromises.

It is fundamental that the visualisation of information and messaging is as good as the message itself, they should and must be part of the same thing in order for them to succeed, to have relevance and to engage their audience — together they are greater than the sum of their parts. Like any great club flyer, they are a call to action at the moment that it counts, and the strength of the design becomes an expression of the strength of the message. On top of this, life is literally at stake here, so it is imperative that both message *and* design are as good as can be.

The *Rubber-Up* wallets that we designed with GHN, and the flyers and cards and booklets for *Play Safe / Play Sexy* (black & white) with their celebratory sexual imagery and upfront no-holds-barred language were all worked on with the same design approach that we had with all of our work, especially the clubs, and this meant that they felt like that they were coming from the inside, from knowledgeable and activated comrades, rather than a government directive — which I feel was right for the time.

So, I think this helped in people *taking on* the information, of feeling like they could trust this information, that, just as *they* were, it was part of the forward movement of the community to carry and to use this sexy information. The free condoms & lube in their shiny metallic green wallet adorned with bodily fluids looked exactly like many of the club flyers and posters that we were making. We designed them to vibrate with the time, with their audience, which included ourselves. They also pushed boundaries, which is another key factor — they pushed the boundaries of both the community they spoke to as well as the world around. Pushing boundaries is how you build the future.

Over 25 years, Alternative Miss Ireland (AMI) grew into a hugely significant annual moment in the queer calendar — not only to joyfully celebrate ourselves for ourselves, but also in its dedication to the promotion, fundraising and growth of HIV/AIDS organisations and information in Ireland. And GHN was a constant and significant collaborator with AMI throughout her glorious life.

Times are indeed different now — this year particularly — and the social, cultural, political *and* sexual landscapes have changed, together with the mechanisms of the delivery and distribution of information — and yet the principles have not.

Just as we at Alternative Miss Ireland had built our own stage to dance upon because we knew that no one else was going to do it for us, it is the same principle with sexual health. At the moment that it actually counts, no one else is going to do it for you.

So, for me, the mission is to enable folks to build their own “sexual stage” to dance upon, equipped with uncompromised and well-designed knowledge — a call to action at the moment of the action itself!

It will always be a challenge for GHN and the spectrum of other organisations represented here today — large and small, national and local — to deliver their message with currency and authority, with joy and without compromise. And I have to say it’s a challenge that you are all constantly rising to.

So HAPPY SILVER JUBILEE GAY HEATH NETWORK!

25 years — you are the same age as Alternative Miss Ireland was when she retired almost nine years ago — and though retirement is something that is definitely *not* on your agenda right now, you can build upon such an incredible past as you now break-ground into the future.

x Niall

Niall Sweeney, Pony Ltd., London SE16 2XB