

## Never forget: The 78ers and the origins of Mardi Gras



(Supplied)

**'The First Mardi Gras: Was The Pain worth the Gain? An Afternoon with the 78ers' will be held at the East Sydney Community and Arts Centre on February 17.**

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Diane Minnis clearly recalls the terror she felt while sheltering in a shop door as she witnessed the police brutality unleashed on her fellow Mardi Gras marchers on that fateful Saturday, June 24, 1978.

"I realised even on the 20th anniversary how traumatised I was by what happened, because of the violence that I saw," she says. "I mean, the cops were picking people up and bodily throwing them in the police wagons, slamming the doors on their legs... They were very large, beefy men and they picked on small people, mainly women, but some slight guys.

Minnis will recall the days leading up to that very first Mardi Gras alongside other veterans, known as the 78ers, in an afternoon discussion during this year's festival entitled [The First Mardi Gras: Was The Pain worth the Gain?](#)

Then a public servant, Minnis – a proud lesbian and active participant in both the women's and gay liberation movement – had been off work nursing a broken foot following a motorbike accident. She wasn't about to miss the march, however. "I was at the meeting when it was proposed and I followed through."

Interestingly enough, given more recent debate about whether Mardi Gras has become too party-focused and not political enough, Minnis notes both elements were always part of Mardi Gras' fabric.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/sexuality/mardigras/article/2018/02/14/never-forget-78ers-and-origins-mardi-gras>

Indeed, the more politically-focused Gay Solidarity Group staged a protest that morning in recognition of the Stonewall riots in New York, 1969. Minnis attended that then went home to rest, returning later for the evening event that changed the course of LGBTIQ history in Australia.



Envisaged as a more light-hearted counter-balance, suggested by the Campaign Against Moral Persecution (C.A.M.P), Minnis joined the muster at Taylor Square at 10pm. The plan was to march along Oxford Street, and then party in Hyde Park. A solitary truck played two songs on repeat - “Glad to be Gay” by UK outfit the Tom Robinson Band, and “Ode to a Gym Teacher” by Meg Christian.

“We trundled off down Oxford Street, in fact a lot of inner-city straight people came as well, and it was just a totally different vibe to the morning demo,” Minnis remembers. “Even in that very first march, there was a quirky, campy sense of humour and there were a few people dressed up, a few Ziggy Stardust types.”

Chanting, “Stop police attacks on gays, women, and blacks,” crowds came out of the Oxford Street shops and bars to see what was happening and, despite having a permit, the police were already antagonistic. “They tried to confiscate the truck key and pull the driver out, but a bunch of lesbians pulled him back and there was a bit of argy bargy,” Minnis recalls.

Things took a turn for the worse when a call went up at Hyde Park to march on Kings Cross.





“The effect was electric.” Minnis remembers. Linking arms and chanting, they marched on the Darlinghurst Road fountain, beyond the remit of their permit. Police retribution was swift and unforgiving.

“The cops didn’t have their numbers on,” Minnis says. “They were out of control, they were so corrupt and violent. Interestingly enough, the denizens of the Cross joined in and fought back against the police. They were not with us as much as they were against the police.”

The import of that very first march didn’t sink in until after the fact, Minnis notes, but it inarguably raised the profile of Sydney’s persecuted LGBTIQ community, as did ongoing police violence surrounding the court cases of 53 protesters charged under the NSW Summary Offences Act.

“That allowed the police to just pick up anyone and do anything basically, so it could be used against gay men, lesbians, demonstrators, Aboriginals,” Minnis says. “They charged you with the trifecta – assaulting the police, resisting arrest, and unseemly words. It was just routine.”

An upsurge in LGBTIQ-led activism followed, with many heterosexual allies joining. Support came from the Council of Civil Liberties and pro-bono lawyers. By April 1979, the NSW Parliament repealed the NSW Summary Offences Act legislation. Decriminalisation of homosexuality followed in 1984.



“Because of all this activism and radicalisation there was a very effective community response to HIV,” Minis argues.

Back in 1979, the community debated whether to proceed with a second Mardi Gras for fear of further violence. Ultimately choosing yes, Minnis was a marshal with a megaphone that time. Yet more debate followed over moving it to summer in 1981 – Minnis favoured the original date.

Ultimately, she’s glad Mardi Gras has weathered several storms and will join almost 250 surviving 78ers at the head of the 40th anniversary Mardi Gras parade, just behind the First Nations contingent.

As far as Minnis sees it, it’s part of her duty to make sure the battle is never forgotten, and she’s often called upon to remind younger folks.

“They’re shocked to hear things like the Sydney Morning Herald published the names, addresses and occupations of the 53 people arrested on page three. They lost their jobs, housing, and were estranged from their families. It was a very nasty climate.”

If the 20-year anniversary brought back painful memories, then the run up to the 40th has been more about healing. “The Herald has since apologised, the police have, sort of, but we want a proper one, and the NSW Parliament has, a couple of years ago now in January. I went along on the day and it was more moving than I thought it would be.”

So, how would she answer the panel’s question? Was the pain worth the gain?

“It was, even though it was tough. Even now, after marriage equality has been made legal in Australia, Mardi Gras still has to be a beacon, particularly for young LGBTIQ people, for those living in regional and rural areas, for people in countries where homosexuality has the death penalty still, where lesbians and gays are persecuted.”

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**The 40th Annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras will air on Sunday, March 4 at 8:30pm on SBS.**