

Professor Basil Donovan, 54, is a world expert on sexual health. Julie Bates, 57, has been a sex worker, an advocate for sex workers and a consultant on HIV prevention. It is 25 years today since the first case of AIDS was diagnosed in Australia; Basil and Julie were on the front line in the battle to halt its spread.

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**Basil Donovan
& Julie Bates**



Basil: She is known in our circles as Dame Julie Bates, and wherever The Dame makes an appearance she takes command. I was a Presbyterian boy from the bush and while I had heard the usual poofter jokes and seen westerns with saloon girls, it had never really crossed my mind that men would want to have sex with men or that people would pay for sex. Julie was my chaperone through this world.

In the early '80s I began doing health research in Sydney brothels, and what I found horrified me. Condoms weren't used at all and disease rates were as high as anywhere in the world; I knew from what was happening overseas that HIV was coming. It was then that I met Julie through the Australian Prostitutes Collective and I remember thinking that if anyone could change the world it was Julie.

She was on a crusade but, unlike most crusaders, her ears were always open to ideas and criticisms, and she is highly intelligent. Collectively we designed a prevention strategy but it required Julie and her team to go out and implement it, which was no easy task. But The Dame is very persuasive. She had a way of dealing with brothel owners that made them think they'd be a lesser person if they didn't co-operate. The results were astounding and within a few years condom use in brothels was mandatory and

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of my patients and my friends died, and I saw Julie nurse friends of hers, watching them waste away in their living rooms. Her capacity for compassion is unending. We had this shared experience and the only way any of us got through the early days of HIV was the camaraderie – the same way people survive prison camps, I suppose.

Julie has been there for me on numerous occasions when I have opened up about this, but I am unable to give details because I wasn't ever sober enough to remember. We coped, with benders, and then went back to face it all again on a Monday.

Julie is a brave and admirable person. There has always been this social loathing of sex workers and to stand up and be a spokesperson and an advocate in that field takes

there was an immediate fall in the rate of all sexually transmitted infections. It probably saved thousands of lives and stopped HIV becoming a generalised epidemic.

But for people working in the field at that time life was unbelievably grim. Hundreds and hundreds

real courage. I would often think, "Why would you do that?" But she had to be visible to be effective. She was prepared to stand up for the sake of her cause.

By the mid-1990s all this had taken a terrible toll on Julie, as it had on a lot of us, and she was on a big downward spiral. She was taking a bit too much of a holiday from reality. I am surprised she wasn't worse really. I was worried about her, but there was not much I could do and I knew she would pull herself out of it. She left for a few years to live in Greece with her boyfriend. I think she realised she had to get away from it all to save herself.

In many ways circumstance keeps bringing us back together. We are working on a study comparing the effect of different sex laws in different states. We were having trouble getting into the brothels in Perth and it looked like it might fail, until we put Julie on a plane to knock on a few doors. It's working now.

One of the wonderful things about moving from the bush to the city is that you get the chance to create a new family. I would regard The Dame as part of my family.

Julie: I had been fighting for the reform of prostitution laws in the early '80s when along came this big, dark, gloomy cloud of HIV. Basil was one of the first to realise that if we were to halt its spread we needed to educate sex workers, and that we were the people to do it. But there was more to him than that. He never had an ounce of prejudice and he always treated me as an equal. Sex work was something that I had done, but it is not the sum of me. Basil has always been interested and encouraging of the education and advocacy work I was doing and constantly reminded me that it was important and nagged me, endlessly, to document it.

I'd never really thought about this before, but without him my life would be so diminished. Jesus Christ, I think I'm going to cry thinking about this. He has been the catalyst for where I am today and how comfortable I feel in my own skin. A lot of that has been him elevating me to positions of being the "great and knowledgeable one". He's a thoroughly honourable man.

We have been on this incredible journey together and we just understand each other. We saw things that angels just weren't meant to see – watching as these beautiful, vibrant young people went from walking-sticks to wheelchairs on their horrible, emaciated descent to death. Some of them were 25-year-old kids. He saw the worst of it, with his patients, and then his own brother-in-law died of AIDS. It was just horrendous – sadness heaped upon sadness. But it wasn't as if we cried on each other's shoulders. We adopted this survival mechanism, which involved fitting a two-week vacation into a two-day weekend. Black humour and getting shit-faced somehow saw us through. We needed that period of numbness to be able to face the week ahead.

For a time there I fell in love with him. I have never told him that and I don't think he ever knew. Nothing happened. He was taken. You move on. We've never really talked about those personal matters – only once that I can remember. We were at a nightclub late in the night and my boyfriend of the time was a bit the worse for wear, splayed out on a pool table. I asked Basil to take his pulse and he said, "The best thing for you is that he take his last breath." Ha! That was the most intimate we ever got.

In 1988 I was invited to talk at a sex worker and HIV conference in Melbourne and they called me up to get an award for the work I'd done. My mum was in the audience along with Basil. I said, "Mum, I wish that this was for netball, but I am sorry, it is for being a good advocate for the rights of sex workers." She was proud, nonetheless.

It has been fun working with Basil again on this latest research project but I said to him, "Why couldn't you give me something easy? Why send me to Perth to knock on brothel doors?" He just let out this great cackling laugh and said, "Julie, who else would I send over there?" **GW**

Rampant – How a City Stopped a Plague, featuring Basil and Julie, is to screen on ABC-TV on December 3.