Crossing the ‘gay - straight’ divide

By Ndeshi Uushona and Liz Frank

The Rainbow Project (trp) held its annual Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Awareness Week with the theme “Straight Talk with Straight Friends: Building Bridges” in June 2007.

At a media briefing before the launch, trp director Ian Swartz said that for the past five years the LGBTI awareness weeks have focused mainly on the LGBTI community and on building and shaping the LGBTI human rights movement. However, in 2007, the focus would be on opening up dialogue between the LGBTI and “straight” communities. He mentioned that the LGBTI community in Namibia did not only experience awful homophobia, but also love, respect and acceptance. The LGBTI week 2007 included four days packed with diverse activities designed to move Namibia towards the culture of inclusiveness.

Celebrating diversity through art

The week kicked off with an exhibition at the National Art Gallery of Namibia, which showcased the work of both “straight” and LGBTI artists and was officially launched by the Ombudsman, Advocate John Walters, who emphasised that the Office of the Ombudsman was there to protect the human rights of all people regardless of their sexuality, and that members of the LGBTI community had the full support of his office. The opening event drew over two hundred supporters who had the chance to dance, be entertained by musical performances and spoken word poetry, and to generally celebrate the occasion.

The following day, trp organised a charity drive for the Mum Junta Rhower Kindergarten and the Sunshine Kindergarten in Greenwell Matongo, Katutura. They handed out donations in the form of educational materials, blankets, mattresses and food for the children.

Day three saw trp celebrate its tenth anniversary with a party at its new premises at 30 Blohm Street, Windhoek West. The programme officer of the Finnish Embassy, Elise Heikkinen, was present to cut the birthday cake decorated with the colours of the rainbow.

What is the divide?

In the evening there was a panel discussion on the topic “Gay and straight - What is the divide?” Panellist Reverend Strydom, Secretary of the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN), said that in his view, everyone is created in the image of God and there should be no discrimination based on sexual orientation. He reported on a CCN pilot project in progress at a number of member churches on how to become more inclusive. However, Strydom drew the line at marriage, stating that according to the scriptures, only a heterosexual couple could experience true intimacy through the act of procreation.

Professor Nico Horn from the Human Rights and Documentation Centre at the University of Namibia said that our Constitution lays the foundation for all of us to embrace our common humanity, with Article 10 guaranteeing equality and non-discrimination for all. “The big fuss over the interpretation of the word ‘sex’ in this clause is irrelevant,” he said, explaining that the article names only a few aspects of our
humanity and is not a finite list. In his view, “the mothers and fathers of the Namibian Constitution wanted to include the issue of sexual orientation in the Constitution, and actually did include it in the non-discrimination clause of the 1992 Labour Act. From around 1996 there was a regression of tolerance on this issue,” Horn said.

Anna Nicodemus, a media representative now working at One Africa television, spoke to the responsibility of the media in challenging hate speech and breaking down stereotypes. Quoting Bob Marley she said that many media practitioners still had “enslaved minds”, and concluded by saying: “For me, LGBTI people are God’s beautiful creation with an extra tangy twist!”

Ngamane Karuaihe-Upi, a gender equality practitioner, explored the cultural meanings of various types of food in different societies to explain the lack of understanding and tolerance of diverse sexualities: “In India you could be put in jail or killed for eating beef!” he said. He challenged both his fellow panelists as well as the packed audience, gay and straight, to move beyond “Grade one” with regard to our personal spiritual development and understanding.

Friedel Dausab, an HIV and Aids activist working for IBIS but about to join the staff of TRP as programme officer for the health desk, called on health policies and health practitioners to address the needs of LGBTI people, which would also benefit heterosexual people. “Anyone who practices anal sex or oral sex needs to know how to do it safely, be they gay or straight,” he said.

**The birth of liberation**

This serious discussion was followed by a fun day at Zoo Park where clowns, jumping castles and lots of other interesting activities kept the kids entertained from morning until evening. In the evening TRP commemorated Stonewall, a series of riots between New York City police and groups of gay, lesbian and transgender people in 1970 that was a watershed for the worldwide gay rights movement. To honour this history TRP screened the film *Birth of Liberation*, a documentary produced by TRP highlighting its own origins and the history of the LGBTI rights movement in Namibia.

Saturday morning saw a celebratory parade down Independence Avenue to Zoo Park. Led by a stunning group of dancers, participants carried placards calling for dialogue between gay and straight people, and equal rights for all. The march ended with an open mic rally in the park, with live broadcasting by Katutura Community Radio.

**Telling our stories**

The week concluded with a story telling evening where members of the LGBTI community had the chance to tell their coming out stories and a number of dancing queens strutted their stuff with their usual elegance and style. TRP also handed out certificates of achievement to veterans of the LGBTI movement. The evening ended with a joyful after party at Studio 77, with a brilliant performance by local artist Lady May.

Throughout the various activities of the LGBTI week, TRP was guided by one overarching idea: “When we lose the right to be different, we lose the privilege to be free.” This quote by Charles Evans Hughes is something that TRP hopes we will all remember long after the LGBTI week has passed.

**The meanings of LGBTI**

There are many words in indigenous languages across Africa that designate people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations or practices. Below are definitions of terms commonly used in English.

- **Lesbian** a woman who is attracted to/loves other women
- **Gay** a man who is attracted to/loves other men
- **Bisexual** a person who is attracted to/loves both women and men
- **Transgender** a woman who chooses to dress/live as a man in her community, thus taking on a ‘male’ gender identity; or a man who chooses to dress/live as a woman in his community, taking on a ‘female’ gender identity. Note that all gender identities are culturally constructed and vary from one society to another, changing over time.
- **Intersex** a person born with a mixture of female and male physical characteristics, such as genitals, chromosomes and hormones. Intersex people challenge our understanding of gender.