

# CLOTHING OPTIONAL THE DEMISE OF GAY RESORTS



BY PETER BENN

**P**ARLIAMENT HOUSE closed on November 3, 2020.

No – not the home of our government, but the infamous gay clothing-optional resort in Orlando, Florida – self-proclaimed as the world's largest gay resort. To a worldwide group of mature-age men, this is the passing of legendary history.

Over the last 45 years, these men flew the world to enjoy resort-style living where they could meet other like-minded, and broad-minded gay men. Their itineraries made sure that at least a few day's stay at these all-gay hotel/motel/resorts would result in the probability of sex 24/7, saving any sleep requirements for the onward plane journey.

These infamous resorts included *Hotel Honolulu* (Hawaii), *Coral Sands Motel* (Los Angeles), *INNdule*, *CCBC* or any resort in Warm Springs Drive (Palm Springs), the *Trades Hotel* (Blackpool, UK), *Golden Bear* (Amsterdam), *Island House* (Key West), – and probably the most infamous of all, *Parliament House* in Florida. The latter offered six bars, drag shows, a theatre, café, 112 rooms, clothing-optional pool, and men on the prowl for sex – day and night – and where the likes of Cyndi Lauper and Sandra Bernhard entertained.

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Such places were melting pots for the world's itinerant gay men. In a world of prejudice, homophobia, and prudery, these were oases where you could be yourself, feel safe, be naked, openly cruise for sex, enjoy conversations with flight attendants, corporate lawyers, or everyday gay men from the four corners of the world. They were insulated worlds where for once you were in the majority, respected and pampered. In Palm Springs, you could watch porn being filmed poolside, in Hawaii live your fantasy in the Bette Davis suite or, in Los Angeles cruise the fully enclosed motel where the doors of the 40 suites were rarely closed. They offered queen and king size beds suitable for orgies and intimate sleepovers – no questions asked.

Some, like the much-lamented *Hotel Honolulu*, assisted in that pre-internet age by sharing gay information. Their suites all had thick diaries where each occupant could add their comments about friendly restaurants, unsafe cruising areas, cheap clothing outlets, gay bars, rip-off merchants, backrooms, and gay-friendly everything worldwide. They were compulsive reading and provided an invaluable service for spreading information throughout the then underground gay world.

And if you were fortunate, you might also meet men who could become life-long friends, several of whom continue to enrich my life. Long live the remaining clothing-optional gay resorts! \*



## POSTCARD PEN PALS CONNECT IN ISOLATION

BY ABBY EDWARDS

During this disruptive time of social distancing and isolation, Your Side Australia launched a pen pal program to keep the elderly connected with the outside world. Through their *Postcard Pen Pal Project*, Your Side have facilitated connections and friendships between elderly and people outside their immediate circle. The initiative started in April, and grew quickly into a large network of active pen pals developing connections by sharing their stories, interests and experiences. It is clearly a project that has re-framed the way we view ageing, delivered joy and positive mental health benefits and, for one pen pal duo in particular, has become something quite special indeed.

Lesley Saddington (84) from Berowra NSW says the *Postcard Pen Pal Project* has made a big impact on her life. The greatest thrill for her from participating as a pen pal is that she is communicating with people from a different generation. To her surprise, Lesley got matched with Dr Karen Hawke (42), a post-doctoral research fellow from Adelaide, who has two young children and interests very similar to Lesley's.

“When I heard that I was over the moon! It was like a fresh breeze blowing in on the COVID-19 isolation. I was expecting another oldie like myself, and that our letters would communicate about our frailties and forgetfulness, and all the things that happen when you get old, but instead I got a wonderful young family, living on an acreage with fruit trees – things that I love because I worked for the Department of Agriculture and used to advise about growing fruit,” says a delighted Lesley.

Aside from agriculture, Lesley and Karen have many other shared interests. They both have a science background, and Karen has loved the little anecdotes Lesley has shared with her about what pathology was like at Sydney Hospital in the 1940s. They also “share a great love for music, are both mothers, and have both experienced hardship and loss, so we have plenty to write about!” says Karen.

The connection with Karen has helped Lesley to manage in isolation, but in an exciting development her new friend has been a great inspiration and sparked her to finish a project very close to her heart that she started years ago.

Lesley lost a son, Anthony Carden, to AIDS in 1995, and because he was a leading activist during the AIDS epidemic she decided to write his biography and share his incredible story. However, having convinced herself that, “as an old lady, [she] wouldn't have much credibility with a publisher,” she put the project aside. When Karen, who has done a lot of work in HIV as an epidemiologist, heard about this, she told Lesley that she would love to read it. Now, Lesley is polishing up her manuscript and excited about sharing her son's story with new pen pal Karen. There has clearly been an instant connection and immediate trust between these two amazing women from the very beginning.

“Karen and I have exchanged a number of letters now and we are sharing all these wonderful things - I am so grateful and it has made such a difference to isolation,” shares Lesley.

Your Side asked all participants to share some information about themselves and made matches based on mutual interests. Every participant then received a welcome pack that included a short biography of their new pen pal, some postcards, self-addressed envelopes, basic instructions, “and then we left it up to them to do the writing,” says Danielle Ballantine, CEO of Your Side Australia.