



# THE COMMISH

**VICTORIA IS THE ONLY STATE OF AUSTRALIA WITH A COMMISSIONER FOR GENDER AND SEXUALITY, AND ROWENA ALLEN IS IT! SHE TELLS MATT MYERS ABOUT THE JOB'S INSPIRATIONAL MOMENTS, THOSE KINKY BOOTS, AND THE ELDER ANGELS.**

**DNA: How do you feel about being in this new and demanding role?**

**Rowena Allen:** It's an honour and privilege to be the first Commissioner For Gender And Sexuality. It's about education and awareness, and I'm given free range to work right across our community and the broader community.

**What are the biggest challenges you've faced?**

The trauma that affected our community after the Orlando shooting and the plebiscite. The plebiscite is huge. We worked with the community to fight against it. There's also the day-to-day discrimination that people experience. I have to pick and choose because I can't do it all. That's been my biggest challenge: picking just ten projects, not 20.

“Every kid who went to that formal knew the risk of a protest. They realised the Elder Angels were there to protect them.”

**The Victorian government's expungement of criminal records for past LGBTI "criminals" and the apology in parliament must've been a special occasion?**

That was where, I think, parliament was at its best, and the full parliament, too. Any members of government who didn't agree with it, didn't turn up. The government and the opposition were united in their apology. The saddest thing was when one of the gentleman told me it was a beautiful day but he was sorry his mother wasn't there to see it. She had suffered the shame, too.

**You headed up the Federation Square vigil for the Orlando tragedy. What's your strongest memory of that night?**

Three thousand people singing *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*. It was a very powerful moment.

The speeches were so on the mark, and the community support was phenomenal.

**On both occasions the rainbow flag flew over Parliament House; quite a milestone.**

They're great moments. The Minister For Equality, Martin Foley, made that happen. It's wonderful to be part of a government that is so progressive. We've had the Premier and state leaders saying, "equality is not negotiable" and

really revving up the federal government to get on with marriage equality.

**Would you agree that trans people are still marginalised, even within the LGBTI community?**

I spend more time, unashamedly, with the BT and I section than I do with the L and G because they are further behind. We're not out of the woods with the L and G, though.

**You won Hero Of The Year at Australia's first LGBTI Awards earlier this year. How did that make you feel?**

Shocked, to be honest. To my partner's horror, I didn't have a speech ready. Luckily, I remembered to thank everyone I needed to and acknowledged her support as well.

**What is your relationship like with the politicians and cabinet ministers?**

Nobody crosses the road when they see me coming – not from any side of government. Within the cabinet there's so much support for LGBTI issues, so I show them how they might be able to improve something in their portfolio and they pretty much get on and do it.

**What's one of the more uplifting stories you've witnessed in the job?**

During one of our rural roadshows, we went to Swan Hill to do a session for the Department Of Human Services, and there were two women who sat a desk apart and didn't know they both had gay sons, and were both struggling with it. Through that engagement, they were able to tell each other their stories. One of the best was when hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gave me a standing ovation at the Brother Boy, Sister Girl weekend. They had never had the opportunity to come together from across Australia and do such healing. That was a career highlight. There are also wonderful stories within the disability space, too. There's some kind of "moment" every week when I'm able to help an individual. When someone comes back and says, "You made that phone call and this happened," or "I got access to that hospital" or whatever it was, that's the power of the position. You can make things happen for people.

**There must be some funny moments, too?**

Trying to walk in the *Kinky Boots*! Jeff Kennett [former Victorian Premier] could walk in them better than me!

**Australia is one of the few countries to include Intersex when referring to the LGBTI community. For those who are not sure, how do you define the I?**

It's people who are born with a different chromosome make-up, that makes them both male and female. It's a very diverse community, where some people don't even identify as intersex. It's a very small group but with over 40-plus variations as well.

**The Stop Safe Schools Coalition attempted to prevent Minus 18's same-sex high school formal but it backfired. What happened?**

A group were protesting against Safe Schools, and inviting people to protest outside the same-sex

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**THE COMMISSIONER FOR UNICORNS AND RAINBOWS...**  
AT PRIDE WITH DOLLY DIAMOND; IN ANGEL WINGS; AND WINNING THE LGBTI HERO AWARD.

formal. Dan Flynn [Australian Christian Lobby Director] said he didn't have any control over the protest, so we didn't know if there would be a protest or not. There ended up not being one, which was fantastic, but I hadn't trusted it, and there were 560 kids booked for the formal. This group, opposed to Safe Schools, set up a website to get people to buy up the tickets so the kids couldn't go. But another website was set up to buy the tickets so the kids could go to the formal for free, and that one raised \$40,000 dollars. Every kid went to the formal for free, with money left over! The crowdfunding was fantastic and the formal was *very* well catered. Those kids were sugared off their brains!

**And who are the Angel Elders in that story?**

I asked 45 LGBTI elders and allies to make angel outfits. These started after Matthew Sheppard was killed and the Westboro Baptist church protested his funeral. The local community made massive angel outfits so that when they raised their winged-arms they'd block out the protesters. We made a guard of honour for the young people. They thought we were dags but they want us back next year because every kid who went to that formal knew the risk of a protest. They realised the angels were there to protect them. It's very symbolic that the LGBTI elders and community came and be with them in solidarity.

**Where do you think the LGBTI community will be 20 years from now?**

In a beautiful Pride Centre in Victoria, with a lot more support for peer and educated programs! I don't think we even know what the issues will be in the future.

**Since taking on this job, you must've met a diverse range of people. Who stands out?**

Michael Kirby [former High Court judge] and Cyndi Lauper – I'm a big fan. As well as the famous folk, there's the grassroots people such as the elders and international guests. Listening to their stories has been inspirational.

**Do you hang out with other state commissioners?**

Yes, I do. In fact, I think my superpower is getting them to do my work for me! I had about five of them march with me at Pride. the Commissioner For Seniors, the Commissioner For Human Rights – LGBTI people are in all those portfolios. Many of them call me the Commissioner For Unicorns And Rainbows!

**Who have been your greatest influences and mentors?**

My mother. She taught me to speak publicly and to stand up for myself. Joan Kirner [former Victorian Premier] was a mentor. Ellen, not just as a comedian but as a role model. There are many powerful women and men who've influenced my life.

**Do you have a motto or favourite quote?**

Equality is not negotiable.

**MORE:** Follow Rowena Allan on Twitter @rowena\_allen