

DUBBO Weekender

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Over the rainbow

Mardi Gras -
what's all the
fuss about? P10



OVER THE RAINBOW

Mardi Gras – what's all the



It started as a protest about equality, and while that's still the gay and lesbian community's white line, Mardi Gras is increasingly more about the celebration of diversity. The annual festival attracts thousands of tourists, immeasurable media and millions of dollars to the city of Sydney, but not everyone thinks it's all harmless fun. JEN COWLEY went along for the ride to find out what all the fuss is about.

WORDS & PHOTOS

Jen Cowley

IT'S five o'clock on a steamy Sydney Saturday afternoon.

Oxford Street – long synonymous with the city's gay and lesbian community – has been warming up for hours ahead of its biggest night of the year and everyone has one eye on the fat black clouds that hover above the skyline. The barricades are in place. Angular little mountains of milk crates dot the footpaths in readiness to offer spectators a better view for five bucks a throw.

Eager onlookers – a literally remarkable number of them diminutive Asians with cameras at the ready even at this stage – are already three and four deep along the famed stretch of Sydney bitumen. The whole place is

The “Dubbo” connection - Jess Oates, (Tim’s aunt) Kaylene Green, “Tina” (Tim Millgate), Susie Rowley and Tim’s mother Lee Munro



RAINBOW

fuss about?

swathed with rainbow flags, and Taylor Square is an explosion of colour, the road painted brightly in the now immediately recognisable multi-hued stripes.

In the bars and pubs and restaurants that line the famed strip, any pretense of restraint is fast evaporating, and there's not a suit in sight.

There are flares and flowers and flamboyance and flesh. Lots of flesh.

On any other night all this – the ostentation, the theatrics, the overt sexuality, the eye-popping costumes – would more resemble a freak show.

But tonight, it's not just acceptable to be outrageous and over the top. It's not just okay to be risqué. Tonight, it's expected.

Tonight is Mardi Gras. And anything goes.

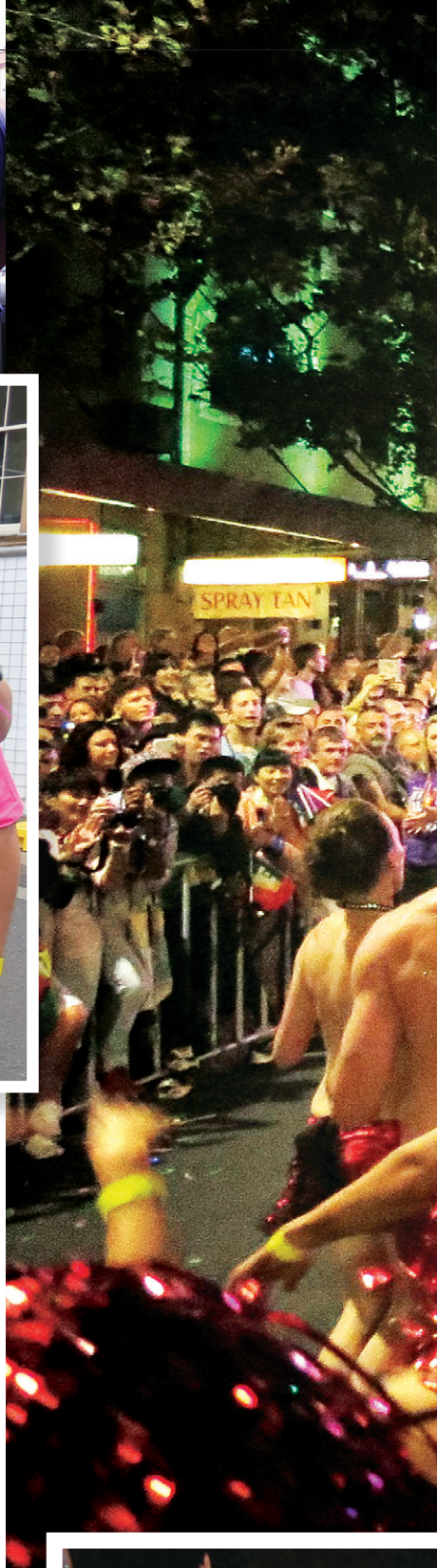
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THIS night has been a long time coming for Tim Millgate. The former Dubbo man has been involved with organisation of Mardi Gras for the past seven years, and it's been a dream for most of those years to lead his own float in the world famous parade. Tonight his dream comes true.

It's at Millgate's invitation – or more precisely the invitation of his alter-ego, Tina Turn-on – that Weekender is joining the 2104 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. He's celebrating his 30th birthday by hosting his own float as “Tina” – the big-haired, false bosomed, spangle and sequin bedecked incarnation of rock goddess Tina Turner that's been Millgate's increasingly popular drag act for the past five years.

But it's more than just the celebration of this one birthday. For the unfailingly cheery former





Dubbo Young Citizen of the Year, it's the culmination of a journey to adulthood that included a quest not to be comfortable in his own skin, but for others to recognise and accept that level of comfort.

Tonight is a measure of the popular young radio advertising executive's success – and success, as they say, is the best defense.

"For me to be able to stand up there tonight – loud and proud and celebrating with 120 of my dearest friends – it means the world to me. Being gay doesn't define me, but it's part of my identity that I'm proud of and this celebration tonight, it's so affirming."

Not that he needs much affirmation – outwardly at least. Since primary school, Tim Millgate has always felt like his own skin was a good fit. It might disappoint the script writers, but growing up gay isn't always any more angst filled than for any teenager – at least as far as Millgate remembers.

"You know what's weird," he says with his trademark grin and half-cough/chuckle. "I don't even remember. I don't remember being picked on or anything – and I came out at a young age too. But there was no backlash from friends – I was popular at school and I always felt accepted."

"There were comments from certain people and still are, but for me it's water off a ducks back because it's not my issue, it's theirs."

The reason for that confidence to feel accepted when so many others struggle is something that eludes him.

"Maybe it's just my personality – the whole nature-nurture thing. I know there's discrimination out there – and gay people are still discriminated against in a number of ways, marriage inequality being one of them, but I'm surrounded by such happiness I guess I don't really see it."

He concedes that his "happy place" doesn't extend to every young gay person's experience, particularly in regional Australia.

"If I'm honest, there's still a lot of bigotry in country towns and suburban areas – and it makes me sad that there are people out there hating themselves and feeling unloved and unsupported."

Those who love this unusually balanced bloke will tell you he's managed to be and stay a good, tolerant and forgiving person despite having to overcome some hurdles along the way.

Among them is aunt, Kay Green, with whom Millgate lived for his teenage years before he secured a berth at the prestigious Newtown School of Performing Arts in Sydney's inner west.

"We've been good mates for a long time," she says proudly. "His sexuality has never been an issue."

Green sees her nephew's journey to adulthood through a slightly different prism – she says it wasn't always easy, and that "coming out" was difficult, not because he feared repercussions, but "because being a teenager is fraught with angst anyway".

"I remember him telling me when we were sitting out the front of my house and we had a bit of a cry when he said, Auntie Kay, I'm gay. I said, of course you are, darling – I've known that for a long time."

"But some people have been less than kind and I'm proud of the way he deals with that – he remains compassionate and kind, always. It's given him an inner strength."

Green says that while she had significant role in her nephew's formative years, it's Millgate that's taught her some of life's most important lessons.

"It's from him that I've learned about relating to people. I'm protective of him in a society that still has homophobic tendencies, but I've learned to be a defend in a sensible, articulate way – not get angry but try to educate people about treating people equally. Homophobia is mostly about fear, but why? There are plenty of bad people in the world that we should be fearful of, not people who are a little bit different to us."

BY 6.30pm, "Tina" and her red lycra-ed, sequinned and glittered "Turners" are raring to go, pumped equally by an afternoon's revelry and the throbbing beat blaring from speakers above the bar at one of Oxford Street's trendiest haunts.

Having done a lap of the street to an appreciative roar from the eager crowd of Mardi Gras spectators already gathered along the barricades, the diva – resplendent in towering wig and heels (Millgate later admits he didn't walk properly for a week), gold sequinned mini dress and impossibly flamboyant yellow feather boa – takes the mic.

"It's time, Turners," she growls. "Thank you so much, I love you all so much. Now, let's marshal, bitches."

Caught up in the moment – maybe it's something to do with the red sequins and lycra – I join in the screams of adoration for our diva: "Tina! Tina! Tina!"

As we make our way down Oxford Street to the marshalling area in College Street, it's impossible not to feel a buzz of excitement that has the air fairly fizzing. The crowds gathered along the barriers are as diverse as the eclectic wave of red glittered marches for which it parts.

There are people of all shapes, sizes, ages, genders... there are grandmothers in sensible shoes and young blokes in Red Indian headdress; there

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Some people have been less than kind and I'm proud of the way he deals with that – he remains compassionate and kind, always. It's given him an inner strength."

– Kay Green (pictured right), about her nephew Tim Millgate.



What a drag

CLAD head to toe in the sparkly fabulousness of his drag alter-ego Tina Turn-on, Tim Millgate (pictured) is unrecognisable.

That's the point. As Tina, the 30 year old advertising exec gets to leave the real world behind.

"It's all about escapism and creativity," he says. "It's about the performance."

As a graduate of the Newtown School of Performing Arts, Millgate is no stranger to the stage, and it's stood him in good stead when it comes to pulling off the tough act of being a successful - rather than terrifying - drag queen.

But it's not a "gay" thing, he says.

"I used to think that, but there are straight drag queens who do a great job - married men with kids and families. And drag has been around for centuries.

DRAG, he says, is actually an acronym that stands for Dressed Roughly As Girl. "It was used in Shakespearean times when there were only male actors around - the concept of men dressing up as women isn't exactly new."

Indeed. The Footy Show boob-heads do it for cheap laughs and big bucks.

"Oh, puleease," gasps Millgate (or is it Tina - hard to tell). "That's not drag. Dame Edna is drag - she's fabulous. She's one of the most revered comedians in Australian history."

Tina came about from a stint

Millgate did at the Imperial Hotel in Newtown, home of the famed Pricilla, Queen of the Desert act.

"Seeing that excitement that a crowd gets from entertaining them and seeing all those smiles - I thought, I want a piece of that. I made my debut, as I call it, at the age of 25 as Tina.

"I'd love to be a professional drag queen, but it requires a lot of work and it's a really expensive habit. And you have to really invest in it to make it a full time job. I've focused more so on my radio and media career than my drag career."

One of the misconceptions about drag is that performers want to actually BE female.

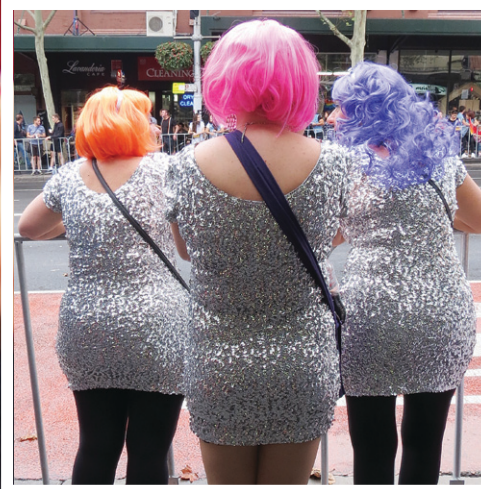
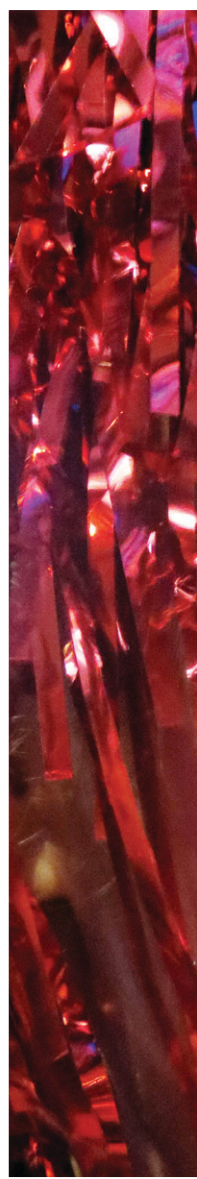
"No," Millgate groans. "No, God no. Are you serious? What you go through every month? No not at all. It's not a fascination with becoming female at all. It's not even a sexual thing. And it's not transgender. It's an act. I don't feel like a woman trapped in a man's body.

"It's the chance to step out of your own.. I become a different person when I'm Tina. You adapt that character. It's the same as an actor stepping into a character's shoes, you really have the chance to push the envelope and be that little bit different than you'd normally be.

"It's fun, and it's not hurting anyone. And, darling," Tina drawls, I've been told I have the best legs in Sydney!"

It brings people together. It's a celebration of diversity. It's about a sense of community."

- Tim Millgate





are chino and polo shirted dads lifting waving children onto shoulders above the crowd for a better look. There are conservatively dressed gay couples and outrageously attired straight couples. They are white, black, yellow, brindle. Fat, skinny, tall, short, blonde, dark, shaved; old, young, middle aged; disabled, abled...

And they're all – all – in a great mood. And that's the point, says Millgate later.

"It brings people together. It's a celebration of diversity. It's about a sense of community."

When the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras first kicked off on a cold night in June 1981, it was held in solidarity with the global gay community's quest for freedom from discrimination and oppression. Now, 35 years later (and having long ago moved to the more climatically friendly early March) the parade is becoming more and more mainstream – and is often referred to simply as Mardi Gras. As an increasing number of straight people seek to join in the celebration, the emphasis on the "gay" nature of its origins seems to be waning.

Or is it? It's a point of some controversy within the gay community, and Millgate says the decision a couple of years back to drop the word "gay" from the parade's title was reversed in time for this year's 35th anniversary march – and it's a decision he supports.

"It's not just a Mardi Gras in the sense of a bunch of people walking up the street; it began as a protest, and it still is in some ways a protest against oppression. Look at the number of entrants in this year's parade who were making commentary on issues in Africa and Russia and those countries where homosexuality is outlawed. It's also an opportunity to highlight issues here in Australia, like gay marriage."

But by calling it the "gay" Mardi Gras, isn't that in itself a form of exclusion at worst, and in some ways perpetuating the marginalisation of gay people?

Millgate takes a characteristically optimistic perspective.

"That's a really glass half empty view. I prefer to look at the positives, although I can see both sides of the camp... haha, par-

don the pun," he laughs, then quite matter of factly admits he wasn't always a fan of Mardi Gras.

"When I was living in Dubbo, you wouldn't have caught me dead there. I didn't want any part of it. I thought it was a show of exuberant gayness, and there was all this negativity around that. I couldn't understand why you'd need to run down the street and shout to the world, "Hey look at me, I'm gay". I just didn't get it."

So what changed?

"Well, I didn't have the same sense of community pride then as I do now. I was still finding my niche. It's not that I ever felt lost – I've always felt loved and supported – but now I've been involved in the gay community in Sydney and with a whole bunch of organisations, I understand why it is so important to march and why I should be celebrating everything that's positive about being gay. If there's a negative, I can't see it."

SOMEONE who has no trouble seeing the negatives surrounding the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is the Reverend Fred Nile, leader of the Christian Democratic Party and a NSW Upper House member for 33 years – just two years less than the parade is old.

He's been a consistent, and at times seemingly lone, voice against what he and his supporters see as the "anti-family" nature of Mardi Gras, but it's the deliberately offensive behaviour of some revellers that he says lies at the heart of his opposition to the event.

There are other similar celebrations around the world, for example in South America, says the remarkably measured Reverend, that don't include the kind of "blasphemy" against which he's long protested.

"Just recently the Mardi Gras parade had a float depicting St Mary's Cathedral in which they were attacking Cardinal George Pell and the Catholic Church over its stand on moral issues. And all around that float were men simulating sexual acts and suggestive actions that are an insult towards the Catholic Church."

Is he suggesting, then, that the gay and lesbian have in effect indulged in the same

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kind of discrimination of which he and the Christian lobby stand accused?

"Definitely," he says evenly. "They're discriminating against the church, against Christians. There's another section of the parade where there are homosexuals dressed up as clergy, as priests, and sometimes as the Pope, and again, simulating various (sex) acts. I assume that's an attack on the Church, or its stand against homosexual behaviour. And that's offensive."

I put the question to Tim Millgate – that tolerance is a two way street, and that if the gay community wants to be rid of discrimination, it must in turn accept responsibility to accept diversity, and give the same kind of respect for beliefs and choices they demand.

"Absolutely correct," he says without hesitation. "In the circles I move in, we're all welcoming and accepting. But I know there are those out there who are not that way inclined, and who deliberately set out to offend people. That's like with anyone who's intolerant of others – it comes from their own insecurities."

I disclose early in my conversation with the Reverend Nile that while I'm not gay, I marched with a float in the Mardi Gras in support of a young friend, and the seasoned campaigner never flinches.

"Yeah, that's okay," he says. "I have no objection to homosexuals having a parade, a procession, it's just that they should observe normal community standards and not take advantage of that opportunity."

Given the vociferous nature of Nile's opposition to Mardi Gras as reported in mainstream media, it's surprising to hear him speak almost kindly about the parade.

"You may be surprised to learn that I often attend Mardi Gras," he says (although that's not the surprising part. "I always make sure there is never anything on our banners promoting hatred or violence and I've never had any person insult me or attack me from the parade itself. Actually, a lot of people come up to me who are in the parade particularly lesbians – I know they are lesbians, because sometimes they are topless – and they want to be photographed with me. It's always in a friendly manner."

Therein lies the problem, says Nile.

"Those individuals who set out to be deliberately offensive and insulting should have a big think about what

they're doing because sometimes they do more harm to the homosexual cause."

BY eight o'clock, Tina's been cooling her stilettoed heels for nearly two hours awaiting her turn in the parade, and the "Turners" are getting restless, although the distraction of rehearsals for the Nutbush routine help enormously.

At least the rain's held off, and everyone's happily distracted from failing feet by not only the anticipation as the clocks tick down towards our 20 minutes of Mardi Gras fame, but by the mini-parade of similarly curious fellow marchers that have taken the opportunity of downtime for a sticky beak at the other floats.

Included in the marchers are representatives of most of the major political parties, along with corporate and non-profit groups, government agencies and emergency services. There's also a hefty uniformed police presence.

More than three decades ago, Sydney's first gay Mardi Gras was met with surprisingly swift and brutal police violence, but tonight, the constabulary is not only tolerant, its ranks are filled with demonstrably good sports. They're eager to

Too eager, according to the Reverend Nile.

He believes there's been a direct order issued for officers attending tonight's parade to turn a blind eye, as it were, to unlawful activity.

Asked to repeat the allegation, Nile says, "I can't prove it, but I'm pretty sure that on the night the police are told to not enforce the law otherwise they would be taking action in some cases, so it's a pity that there's a political instruction if you like to police not to carry out their normal lawful duties."

"There's a lot of activity that goes on at the homosexual Mardi Gras that if it happened on any other day, or happened in Dubbo, the people would be charged with indecent exposure or other charges. On that one day that the law is suspended, to allow men and women to parade through the streets of Sydney half naked, and the worst part of that is that often they are simulating sexual acts while they are doing it, particularly men with men and so on."

It's an allegation refuted by state Member for Dubbo Troy Grant, a member of the NSW government and former

police officer.

"Every officer swears an oath to uphold the law. No officers can be directed to arrest or not arrest a person – it's an individual police officer's decision – but officers are never told to ignore a crime. They might from time to time be directed to focus on a particular area of crime – like road safety, or alcohol related violence – but they're never directed to turn a blind eye or ignore crime."

"Those allegations are unfounded," says Grant. "I think Reverend Nile has misinterpreted the situation."

AT around 8.30pm – and without warning – the Tina and Her Turners wagon begins to roll, and for 25 exhilarating minutes and just two all-too-short kilometres of sheer unbridled joyful festivity, we're all part of a fun-filled chunk of history.

There are a reported 300,000 people lining this rainbow bedecked stretch of city street from the city to Fox Studios, and another 10,000 taking part in the 35th annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

And while the parade has its detractors and some of their concerns deserve consideration and respect, Tim Millgate believes this night, this event, has the power like no other, to bring about positive change and a move towards greater tolerance.

"Let me tell you a story," he says from his desk at work in the offices of the Australian Radio Network the week after Mardi Gras, all traces of glitter gone, and only the tell-tale blisters on his feet to indicate that Tina was recently here.

"I'd been struggling to find a driver for the float. A guy called Ben emailed in to Mardi Gras. He's 37. He and his wife live out in the western suburbs; they have four kids. He's a truck driver. He emailed in saying I've been to the Mardi Gras and I think it's wonderful and I would love to get involved. Please let me know where I can help. He drove my float."

"Salt of the earth, working class man. He said he has a gay brother and a couple of gay mates and he thinks it's ridiculous that there's still discrimination, and that we should be supporting everyone. He said his kids have been to the parade. They aren't old enough to understand it but when they are old enough he will be explaining to them that it's not strange, it's not weird, it's just a part of life."



PHOTO: AAP/ EHSSAN VEISZADEH

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– Reverend Fred Nile

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