

Leaving home

Steve Wright examines recent changes to the immigration system and their impact on the GLBT community.

Changes to the *Australian Citizenship Act*, announced in March this year and coming into effect on July 1, mean that GLBT immigrants may face new hurdles in their quests to become Australian citizens.

The major amendment to the Act increases the compulsory length of time an applicant must live in Australia before applying for citizenship. Such changes will only affect potential citizenship applicants who have not already gained permanent residency status prior to the revised Act taking effect. Current holders of Australian permanent residency will not be affected, as long as they apply for citizenship within three years of the Act's introduction.

If the above sounds confusing, count yourself lucky that the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Task Force (GLITF) Victoria are on hand to help members of our community figure out the increasingly complex immigration process.

For over twenty years, GLITF Victoria has assisted same-sex attracted migrants gain Australian citizenship. Five registered migration agents currently work in an advisory capacity for the organisation, offering assistance to gay and lesbian couples seeking Permanent Residency status for the non-resident partner of an Australian citizen, an Australian permanent resident, or an eligible New Zealand citizen.

Andrea, who volunteers as the organisa-

tion's Newsletter Coordinator, and her partner Lyn are one of 80 couples currently seeking a partner migration visa with GLITF Victoria's assistance. Acting as Newsletter Coordinator enables Andrea to give back to GLITF, and for good reason: the organization has an estimated 98% success rate with couples identified as meeting the application criteria.

She views the latest changes to immigration reform with mixed emotions.

"Personally, these changes will affect me because I'll have to restrict my movements in and out of Australia," Andrea says. "I do have family in the UK, but they're coming to Australia, so I'll still be able to see them. I know a lot of our GLITF members have family that live in Asia, and they like to travel back to see them to build upon those relationships. Life will be very difficult if they're not able to do that as often."

Another change to the application process includes a proposed citizenship test designed to quiz future applicants' knowledge of 'Australian values'. While subject to a process of community consultation, a visit to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's [DIAC] website reveals that, of over one hundred and forty community groups involved in developing the planned citizenship test, not one represents the views of Australia's gay and lesbian communities.

"It appears that plenty of religious groups, migrant communities and councils were contacted, but not one gay community [group]. That says to me that they don't consider the gay community to be part of our community at large," Andrea says.

Just as concerning is the fact that "heavily religious groups [were included, that] may have a bias against the gay community," she adds.

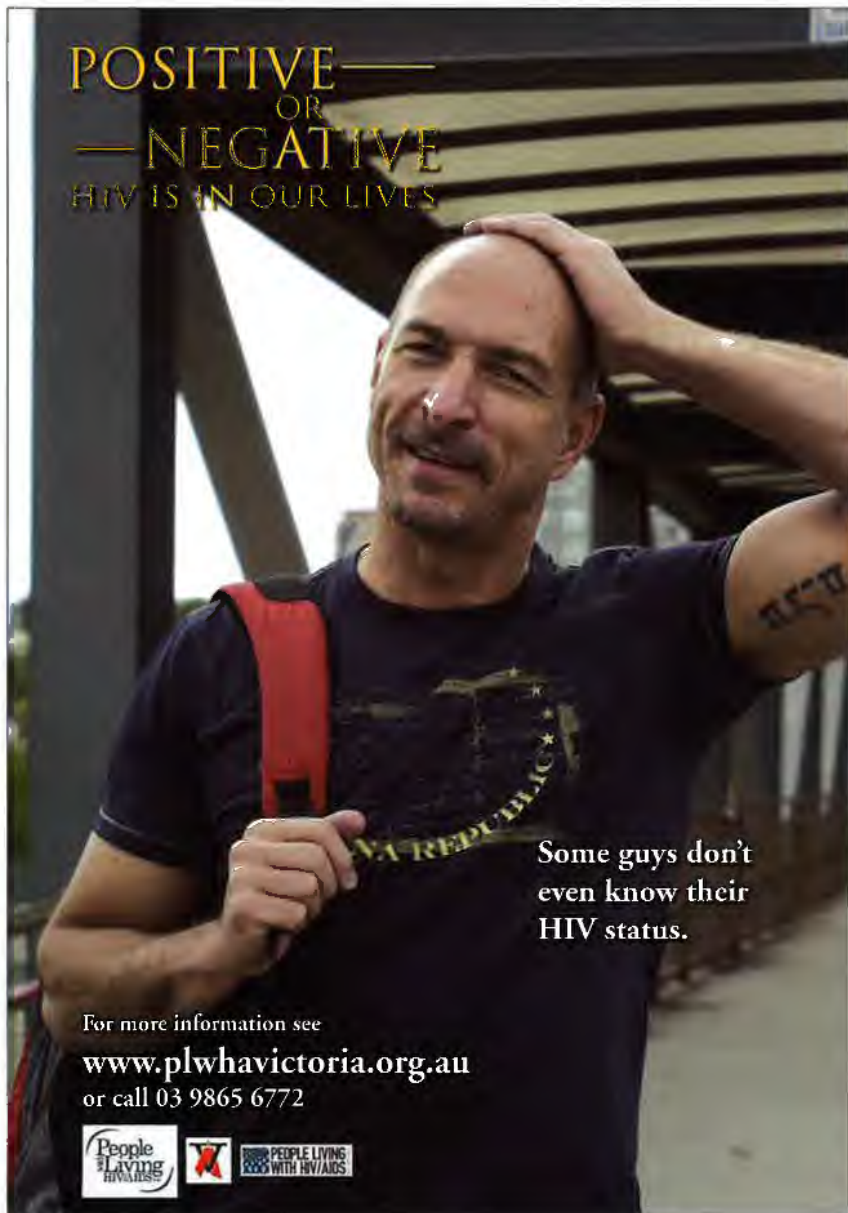
Kate Walsh, Media Advisor to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, advises that concerned GLBT individuals and organizations can "access the questionnaires provided on the [DIAC] website", to ensure that GLBT perspectives are considered before the test is introduced. "No exclusion of any sort was involved in the process," she stressed.

DIAC staff will be on hand to discuss changes to the *Australian Citizenship Act*, and to answer questions at an upcoming GLITF Victoria general meeting on July 1. New and existing members are welcome.

www.glitfvic.org.au



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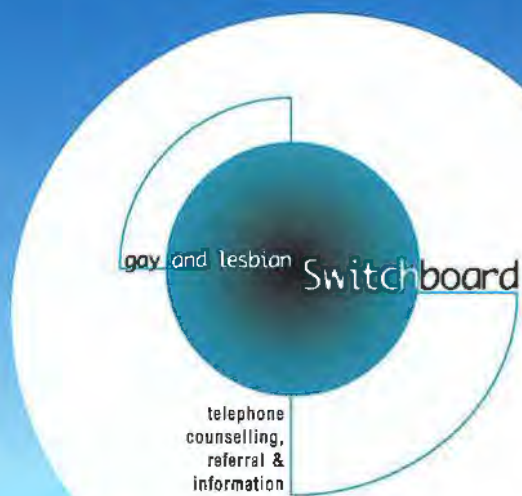
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"The weird thing is that v



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