

Statement on the death of Dr Ivan Toms

Wednesday, 26 March 2008

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The Joint Working Group, a network of 15 LGBTI organisations in South Africa joins the LGBTI community and the broader South African population in mourning the unexpected and untimely death of Dr Ivan Toms at his home in Cape Town. Ivan was a passionate and dedicated activist. He was a prominent figure the LGBTI rights movement in South Africa, a member of the anti-apartheid struggle and a leader in the anti-conscription movement.

Born in Cape Town in 1953, Ivan was a medical doctor by profession and gave years of dedicated service to the people of Cape Town first as a practising doctor and then as a high level administrator being the Executive Director for City Health at the time of his death. In 1986 he was a founder member of the Cape Town based organisation, Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) an organisation formed in part to link the struggles of LGBTI people with those of the broader anti-apartheid struggle. In 1987 when LAGO was disbanded Ivan with a number of other activists organised themselves into the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (later the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Action) (OLGA). During his time with LAGO and OLGA Ivan was involved with meeting ANC leaders in exile to discuss LGBTI rights, he was instrumental in gaining OLGA membership of the UDF and in working towards the inclusion of LGBTI rights in the draft constitution of the ANC in 1991. Ivan was also an active member of the Western Cape Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality.

In 1987 Ivan refused a call up to service in the South Africa military in which he had served two years following his medical training. He was subsequently charged, found guilty and sentenced to 18 months in prison. He served nine of these before being released on bail pending an appeal which he ultimately won. During the course of his trial he was put through a long and public campaign of anti-gay harassment (including propaganda posters reading “Toms is a fairy” and “Toms AIDS Test Positive”) as well as obscene graffiti and death threats. The issue of Ivan’s homosexuality was raised in his trial by the state in an attempt to smear him. He remained true to his identity and his convictions throughout this difficult time showing remarkable bravery and strength of character.

As a sector and a community we honour the memory of Ivan Toms, a great activist whose struggle along with those of his comrades was to lay the foundations for the rights and protections enjoyed by LGBTI people in South Africa today. We mourn his passing as that of a great South African.