



***John Manwaring***  
**Closing session speech**

**Embargoed until 15.30 AEST, Friday 25 July, 2014**

Thank you, and thank you all for coming to Melbourne, for sharing your experiences, your wisdom, and your strength. My name is John Manwaring, and I am HIV-positive.

I was asked to speak today as a member of the community most affected by HIV in Australia, that is: young gay men. As is obvious from my accent, I'm originally from the US, but have made Australia my home.

Until recently, my home country didn't allow HIV-positive people to visit, much less migrate to it. When the ban was lifted, President Obama referred to it as a policy "rooted in fear rather than fact."

This cuts right to the heart of the matter: FEAR. Every day, those of us living with HIV have to contend with fear, and the irrational, often cruel, reactions it incites.

These reactions take many forms, whether a senseless remark, or a law that enshrines hatred and perpetuates stigma. These laws, these seemingly insurmountable barriers, they're devastating. They fly in the face of all the progress we as a community have worked, fought, and died to achieve.

When governments legitimise homophobia and transphobia, when they criminalise sex work and drug use, when they stifle the rights and voices of women and youth, when they take these marginalised segments of society and try to SUFFOCATE us into nonexistence, they promote fear. They promote hate. They put policy above humanity. They enable stigma to THRIVE.

It's tempting to give in, to give up, to fall silent, and quietly hope that in time things will get better. The people, groups, and governments that oppress us, they want us to (start getting louder) think we are powerless, that we should sit down, be quiet, and fall back into the shadows.

But, if the past has taught us anything, it is this: silence equals death. When many here come from places where speaking out is dangerous, it is a hard truth to accept.

But as I've heard people speak over this past week, I have realised an undeniable truth: we are more powerful than we know. Right here, at this moment, exists the power to change the world.

It doesn't require any special skill or talent. It requires from us only one thing: honesty. A simple conversation, one that is open, fearless, and forthright, will change the hardest of hearts and coldest of minds.

When those of us living with HIV come out into the light and share our stories, we dispel the fear, the stigma, and the hate.

In their eyes, we are no longer stereotypes and statistics; we are human.

Starting now, I urge each and every one of you: Don't be scared anymore. Be yourself. Be proud. Share your story. It isn't up to governments and NGOs to fix this for us. This is OUR cause. This is OUR time. Together, WE will put an end to HIV.