

My name is Melissa Williams and I live in Melbourne, Australia. I am the President of an organisation called Positive Attitude, that was founded in 1983 by a wonderful woman named Yvonne Gardner, at the height of the AIDS crisis. The other pandemic of the modern era.

Positive Attitude is a support and social group for people living with HIV. The majority of our members are long-term survivors of the virus. In the last decade, the group has evolved to include the wider LGBTIQA community, particularly elders and those experiencing social isolation.

We host a weekly Friday luncheon, cooked by me, and one of our very talented members Paul, usually makes a delectable dessert. We also hold an annual Christmas Day lunch for those in our community who would otherwise spend the day alone. Sadly, a number of our community are estranged from their families due to their sexuality and/or HIV status.

Melbourne was the hardest-hit city in Australia with Covid-19, and we were forced to put a halt to our weekly lunches when infection numbers rapidly rose and lockdown commenced. Many of our community work in the professions where job losses were greatest, such as the hospitality and retail industries, so I made up food and toiletry hampers to distribute to those in need. I kept in touch with our regular lunch-goers by phone, particularly those living alone.

It was a long, dark Winter for so many in Melbourne this year. When our daily Covid infection numbers rose to be in the 700's, even my resolve began to waver. Human beings are social, tactile creatures who are not meant to be isolated from one another. At one stage, I thought that there was no way we'd be able to hold Positive Attitude's Christmas Day lunch, but I held onto hope in my heart that there would be some way to make it possible. So it was a great relief when infection numbers began to decline and we eventually reached those magical, blessed days of zero new infections and zero deaths, which locally became known as "Double Donut Days".

Restrictions were eased in stages and things were looking hopeful for Christmas Day festivities. Finally, with just over two weeks before December 25th, I got the approval that our event could go ahead. I literally had to hit the ground running to get it organised. Fortunately, I have some amazing friends who helped out, and the best volunteers in the world. A local business owned by a LGBTIQA community member holds an annual fundraiser to assist us with the expense of the lunch and they swung into action and put it on with less than a week's notice. Another Melbourne community organisation, Drummond Street Services also came to the rescue.

I'm so very grateful for the kindness and generosity of the many people who helped make Christmas 2020 brighter for our lunch attendees. It was such a fabulous day and so good to look around the room and see all those smiling, happy faces. Hope and gratitude are precious, beautiful things, always keep them close to your heart.