

A photograph of a man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a blue and white checkered button-down shirt. He is speaking into a blue microphone on a stand, gesturing with his hands. The background is a simple, possibly backstage, area with metal structures and a white wall.

Secret diary of an activist

The battle for marriage equality is often in the headlines, but few appreciate how much work is being done behind the scenes. We asked Australian Marriage Equality spokesperson Alex Greenwich for an account of the ongoing campaign.

CANBERRA SPEED DATING

On the 6am flight into Canberra I read in *The Australian* that deputy opposition leader Julie Bishop has an open mind on marriage equality, thanks to chats with Professor Kerry Phelps. I look forward to meeting her later in the day.

I share a cab to Parliament House with Simon Sheikh, head of Get Up. He is here to discuss solar panels and I'm here to sell marriage equality, along with activists Rodney Croome and Malcolm McPherson.

We start our day by meeting a very welcoming Andrew Wilkie, independent MP from Tasmania, who congratulates us on all we are doing and stresses how much work we have ahead of us.

The first of our 14 meetings is with a Liberal MP from a rural NSW seat. We discuss how country people are good people and she shares a story about two gay ambulance workers who are together and loved by her electorate. However, she needs more information and time before she makes up her mind.

Next meeting is with a Liberal power broker who briefly comes into the meeting and says, "I am not on your side and am busy, but have a chat with my staffer." Canberra is full of hardworking staffers, many of them gay.

The meeting with Julie Bishop comes around. Of all the MPs we meet today, she is one of the most candid, honest and open-minded. She gives us a good hearing and

On the flight home I'm surrounded by politicians. The one next to me does not want to talk, she is busy with a sudoku. Opposition frontbencher Bronwyn Bishop is in the row ahead of me and I help her with her bag. She says, "Thank you ever so much." Although the temptation is there to hold onto her bag and tell her what I think about her opposition to equality, exhausted I just respond, "No problem, Bronwyn." As I leave the plane a Canberra insider taps me on the shoulder and shares intel on key MPs with me.

VALENTINE'S DAY AD LAUNCH

I have pre-warned my fiancé, Victor, that on Valentine's Day I have to do the breakfast TV rounds, but promise him a nice dinner. One of the tough aspects about advocating for relationship equality is that it takes away time from your actual relationship.

I head to the ABC studios and wish the host a happy Valentine's Day. I keep the interview very positive and the feedback is great. I head to Martin Place, where I join the Get Up team for the ad launch. A small but growing crowd is there. We have a huge cake being delivered and valentines for people on their way to work. As the ad launch starts I realise how much media is there. The response is great and everyone loves the ad.

Following an exhausting day of media interviews and strategising, it is time for me to

and share their stories about why equality is important to them. One mother tells me she met with her local MP, who is privately supportive. I realise we are training an army of marriage equality ninjas around the country, who are collecting and sharing information.

TURNBULL DAY

Former opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull invites us for a meeting to discuss marriage equality. We have met him every year for the past three years. He shares with us information on the poll he has been running, showing 75 percent support for marriage equality in his electorate. He tells us it's not all from the Potts Point gays but from families who believe in equality. He still has questions about civil unions and we again make the point that they entrench discrimination and will not solve anything. The meeting is the friendliest and most positive we have had with Turnbull. We are encouraged he is seeing the level of support in his electorate.

ABBOTT DAY

Two of our key supporters, Nathan Thomas and his dad Geoff, have a meeting with opposition leader Tony Abbott, the far more conservative man who took Malcolm Turnbull's job last year. This is one of the first known meetings between Tony and marriage equality supporters. I have a beer with Nathan and talk strategy, then hand him 2,500 letters from supporters across Australia. Nathan and Geoff are an unstoppable father and son team. They call me right after their meeting. "Tony said that if enough Liberals come to him and support equality, he will consider a conscience vote," they say. "He gave us a good hearing and told us he was impressed by our case."

Realising this is a major concession from an extremely conservative political leader, I call a senior writer at *The Australian*. She gets right on the story and calls Abbott's office to confirm the meeting and then interviews Nathan and Geoff, who also send through a photo of them with Tony Abbott. Tony must have thought to himself, "bloody gay mafia strikes again," but he would have been pleasantly surprised that the article focussed on the fact he is meeting with people on the issue, while the Prime Minister isn't. Even if we accept that he may never change his mind, at least he is starting the conversation.

TAKING ON THE SDA

I've exchanged emails with the CEO of David Jones asking for his company's support for marriage equality. He agrees. This is important because the retail sector union, the SDA, will use their votes at the ALP national conference in December to vote against equality. His support highlights an employer recognising rights that the union opposes. We issue a press release and I fax it to the SDA headquarters. >>

"We are training an army of marriage equality ninjas around the country."

promises to stay in touch.

Up next is a meeting with a Labor MP who welcomes us in and declares his support for equality. This gives us all a great boost and we get his opinion on strategy going forward.

After another five or so meetings we head to a Liberal MP. We have no idea where he stands, but he makes it clear very early on that he opposes us, saying this is based on "biological, not religious reasons". When asked to explain, he says marriage is about making babies. I get a bit frustrated and ask, "What do you think is more likely - marriage equality happening or the Marriage Act being amended to mandate procreation." He doesn't like that question and the meeting ends.

On the way to the next meeting we stop by Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young's office for some moral support and encouragement, which is provided.

In the afternoon meetings we encounter a range of responses from, "Yes, I support you but don't want to be targeted by the Australian Christian Lobby," to, "No, you are just different." One point everyone makes is that the Australian Christian Lobby are getting organised and we have to get ready for a fight.

remember what I am really doing this for. I turn my phone off and head to a romantic dinner with Victor, the perfect end to a crazy day.

WORKSHOP AND FORUM

Following on from the MPs telling us they need to hear from more supporters of marriage equality, we have designed workshops to be run around the country training people to meet their local MP. The sessions are put together by Daniel Witthaus, who has traveled around rural and regional Australia tackling homophobia.

Shelley Argent and Rodney Croome are the main speakers. I am invigorated by the passion and energy in the room. One couple says, "We are here because our eight-year-old son keeps asking us, 'Are you going to be engaged for ever?'" The sessions prove that more and more people are coming on board to fight for equality. The afternoon session is in Newtown at the Bank Hotel. We get another huge turnout. Shelley and Daniel are joined by Greens Upper House MP Cate Faerman. She knows how to deal with difficult MPs, as her office state parliament is across the hall from long-time gay rights opponent Fred Nile.

Lots of people come up to me afterwards



Nathan and Geoff Thomas taking the pro-marriage message to Tony Abbott.



Alex with Doug Cameron during his day of Canberra speed dating.

>> Later in the day I head to an event that's part of the Mardi Gras festival, Politicians Say Something. All three of the state parliament panelists support equality, but their parties do not. Somebody in the audience asks the panelists, "Please raise your hand if your party does not support equality." The Nationals MP on the panel responds with, "I am not going to play these games." I can't control myself and say, "It is not a game. He asks a question, now give an answer." They refuse to, then say that everyone there should write to their federal MP and tell them they support equality. At the end of the session I stand up and ask the politicians if they have done what they instructed us to do and of course none have. I lose my cool and call the panelists cowards for the way they have answered the questions.

Debating Peter Madden On Kerri-Anne

Ding ding... Debate time with Peter Madden, the candidate for the Christian Democrats in the upcoming NSW state election, on the Kerri-Anne show. I meet him in the green room, where we start a banter, then we are separated until the debate. My impression of the man is that he is so consumed with ideological fundamentalism that reasoning with him will be impossible. Right before we start filming he asks, "Are you one of those Green lobbyists?" to which I reply, "No, I am just someone who wants to marry the person I love in the country I love." He doesn't respond. Once the debate starts I try my best to stay rational and reasoned, but with his annoying smirk and the absolute rubbish coming out of his mouth I have trouble holding back my emotional response.

I lose my cool. The feedback is either, "Loved you on Kerri-Anne, great job," or, "Alex, you are usually much calmer. What happened?" I learn from the experience that it is not my job to get mad at opponents, but use every chance I get (including debates with fundamentalists) to appeal to reason-minded Australians and politicians and to do that it is essential I come off as reasonable. As soon as I come out of the debate I know I haven't done as well as I could have, but I learn an important lesson: don't let your opponents rattle you.

MARDI GRAS MADNESS

The day of the Mardi Gras parade is one of the most stressful, emotional and rewarding of my life. After waking at 6am I issue a press release that the parade "will send a clear message to Julia Gillard that our community, friends and family support equality". Within an hour every major TV station and media outlet has called me to organise interviews. This is in addition to News Limited being part of our float and the ABC already scheduled to film our dress rehearsal. Thank goodness I had the support of the key float organisers, Elaine

Czulkowski and Nathan Thomas. Without them this day would not have been possible.

After a series of interviews, I pick up our float VIPs, Sarah Hanson-Young, Professor Kerryn Phelps, Geoff Field and his husband Jason Kerr. We are all welcomed with a huge cheer from the crowd. The magnitude of the day and the message we are sending is dawning on me, but I am still focused on making sure all the last-minute details are taken care of.

We are part of a procession of 15 floats and around 1,000 marchers, all calling for marriage equality and being cheered on by 300,000 spectators. When we hit Taylor Square we have a massive “protest push”. With the crowd cheering, the wedding bells playing and the message being delivered, I become very teary-eyed and realise that, more than ever, we have the support of not only the gay community but our friends, families and neighbours.

After the parade Sarah and I bump into gay activist Peter Tatchell, who has also had an amazing night. I try not to stay on at the party too long but am on such a high from the parade that I don't leave until 5am, which gives me an hour of sleep before I go on *Today Show*.

This is not going to be a quiet year, but when I get to walk down the aisle with Victor it will all be worth it. ★

If you're keen to contribute to the fight for marriage equality, email your local member through the webform at australianmarriageequality.com



All dressed up but nowhere to go and get married – yet.



One unit in the army of marriage equality ninjas.