

The gift of the Gabe

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It was in the middle of a July winter when I received one of those unexpected phone calls. Gabe McCarthy had suffered a major asthma attack that triggered a [heart attack](#) [1]A life-threatening emergency in which the blood supply to the heart is suddenly cut off, causing the heart muscle (myocardium) to die from lack of oxygen. and within minutes she had died.

Gabe was a trailblazer, a dynamo and an incredibly gutsy woman. She was outspoken, astute and never missed the opportunity to champion the cause for all positive people.

Elected to the board in 2002, Gabe held numerous positions during her time with NAPWA. In February 2004 she stepped up as acting president until she was officially elected as president at the next AGM. Over the next two years she worked closely with the legal, indigenous and international portfolios and convenors. She played a hands-on role in regional work in Timor Leste and worked closely with [Igat Hope](#) [2]Organisation representing people living with HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea. ('Igat Hope' means 'There is hope' in Tok Pisin, the national language of PNG). in Port Moresby; and formed many friendships along the way.

Together with Amelia, the first convenor of the positive women's portfolio, the three of us formed a national women's network. I was fortunate to have such a skilled peer alongside me on the NAPWA Board and together we co-chaired the new network. There were many highlights over this time, but probably the finest was prior to the 2005 NAPWA conference in Adelaide, when more than 50 positive women gathered around a quilt to celebrate their lives.

Gabe's motivation was to increase awareness of the issues surrounding HIV and to educate people about its stigma.

She appeared in national TV ads, featured in a Women's Weekly article, did two segments on 60 Minutes, wrote prolifically for a variety of sector magazines and spoke openly at schools as an HIV positive person.

Her presidency coincided with Tony Abbott's spell as Health Minister and whenever they met she never missed the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and push boundaries – usually leaving the minister at a loss for words.

She enjoyed telling a story – particularly one about the time she met Nelson Mandela at an international conference in South Africa. She truly had the gift of the gab.

Gabe was also among one of the first four women in Australia to join the Surf Life Saving Club in the early eighties. Competing against 80 men and 25 women in a two kilometre ocean race, Gabe not only won the trophy for the fastest woman, she also came second overall.

I was privileged to represent NAPWA at Gabe's funeral in Queensland; to see how many people's lives she had touched and to meet her family and amazing parents.

To close, I will borrow the words of a close friend's tribute to her parents:

'Thank you for encouraging your daughter to challenge all the structures in society that rendered her and so many others as second class citizens.

'Thank you for giving her a heart for the world and not just herself.'

- [HIV sector](#)
- [NAPWA news](#)
- [news](#)
- [Positive Women's Network](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/103>

[2] <http://www.napwa.org.au/glossary/term/392>