

SPEAKING OUT

by EUGENE YIGA

Are you tired of 'connecting' with guys through out-dated websites and sleazy apps? Then Conversations, a professional networking event in Cape Town and Johannesburg, is just for you. Andrew Howard, creator of Conversations, tells Eugene Yiga more.



WHAT IS CONVERSATIONS?

The aim of Conversations is to promote face-to-face conversations between gay professionals, be it for business or social networking purposes. With the increasing use of technology for communication, the art of human-to-human conversation is dying. In the context of the gay community, many men rely on faceless interaction via social media outlets. But social and business networks are formed, maintained, and strengthened through face-to-face conversation. And ideas are formed, developed, and shared through face-to-face conversation – the basis of effective networking.

HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA?

I used to attend a similar monthly event in London, but that was just for gay male professionals. In Cape Town, I asked a few of my new gay friends if there was a regular social and networking event for gay men and women in the city, and the answer was no. They said that they had three other options: going to the gay bars or clubs, hanging out in their small cliques, or going online to meet people. So there was a niche for an event such as Conversations.

WHY DO YOU THINK THE LGBTI COMMUNITY NEEDS THIS?

Many people either don't want to go clubbing or have just grown out of it, and the scene in Cape Town is not what it once was anyway. Cape Town is also cliquey, so people didn't have an outlet through which to meet people outside their closed friendship circle... unless, of course, they went online (Gaydar, Grindr, etc.). So Conversations gives the

community the chance to meet like-minded people in great venues without loud music blaring in the background.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Conversations is a monthly event for gay professionals, providing them with upmarket, friendly and informal environments in which to talk, network, socialise and make new friends.

IS IT MOSTLY ABOUT SOCIAL OR BUSINESS NETWORKING?

The events are whatever people want to make of them. Most people just come to socialise, but others want to do that and



also network for business. I did make it clear at the first event that Conversations is not a dating service. But if two guys meet at an event, fancy each other, and start dating, that's fantastic. I can't and wouldn't want to stop people from checking each other out at the events; that is human nature. But I think it's nice that when people do meet at one of my events, they have proper face-to-face conversations, not a quick snog on a noisy dance floor.

HOW'S IT BEEN GOING SO FAR?

Conversations has been running in Cape Town since August 2013. There has been one event each month since then. Most of the events to date in Cape Town have been held in hotels, with a few in restaurants.

HOW'S IT GOING NOW IN JOHANNESBURG?

In July 2014, I was approached by three people asking to help start Conversations in Johannesburg. They didn't know each other and only one had been to an event before in Cape Town. They all had different skills to bring to the table, so I created a team, set up a Conversations JHB Facebook page and Twitter account, and got them working on the launch event. As I run everything by myself here in Cape Town, I know exactly what works and what needs doing. It was therefore scary to let go of certain aspects of the management of the events in Johannesburg, but I guess that is all part of the risk of expanding to other cities.

WHAT'S THE RESPONSE BEEN?

Fantastic. I know that many new friendships have been formed through it; I've been at several dinners where a lot of people around the table knew each other through Conversations, which is amazing. I think many are just grateful to have a regular event at which they can meet new people face-to-face and have regular conversations that don't involve asking "Are you top or bottom?" Not everyone wants to do that.

WHO ATTENDS THE EVENTS?

The events are aimed at gay professionals. However, I haven't and won't define what "professional" means as many different people can be "professional" in many walks of life and types of work. So anyone is welcome at the events, as long as they are over eighteen (the main age demographic is thirty to fifty). Gay-friendly straight people are also welcome, but the aim is to keep the events largely gay. I would, however, still like many



more women to attend. Many do RSVP to the event invitations on Facebook, but don't show up. So that is something I'm working on.

WHAT'S THE BROADER MIX OF PEOPLE?

I am aware that while Conversations does attract people from the four main communities of South Africa (black, white, Indian and coloured), the main racial and sex demographic of the guests is white, male, and middle-class. I think it was always going to be like that initially, but it's something I want change over time. For example, I am keen to open up Conversations to LGBTI people living on the Cape Flats. I am about to start making a few contacts there with a view to seeing what can be done to promote Conversations and to discuss things like providing transportation to the events so people can come and get home safely afterwards. By doing this, I can take Conversations to the next level; building links between two LGBTI communities that don't mix for a range of reasons that are not insurmountable.

SO THE EVENT DOESN'T EXCLUDE PEOPLE?

I was adamant from the outset that Conversations was for men and women. Gay men and lesbians tend to steer clear of each other, but as far as I'm concerned, that's daft. Just because we are not going to sleep with each other doesn't mean we can't stand in one room together and talk about other stuff. So, with Conversations, I am actually trying to break down the "ghetto-isation" that gay men and lesbians impose on themselves by not mixing together socially.

HOW DO YOU PLAN TO CHANGE THIS?

Conversations is showing that the LGBTI community here in Cape Town is active, outward-looking, and cares about the community at large. I want to open up the opportunity to come to Conversations events to a diverse range of people, some of whom may at this stage think that Conversations would not be for them. I want to make it as inclusive as possible, as that would benefit all involved in many different ways.

WHAT'S YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL FOR CONVERSATIONS?

I would like to turn Conversations into a non-profit organisation (NPO). Initially, I want it to be a philanthropic organisation, funding various projects run by other NPOs. I'm developing the business side of Conversations, building more links with corporates and fostering greater engagement between these corporates and the NPO sector. I'd also like to see the events start up in other South African cities, especially Durban, and maybe even expand abroad. ©

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