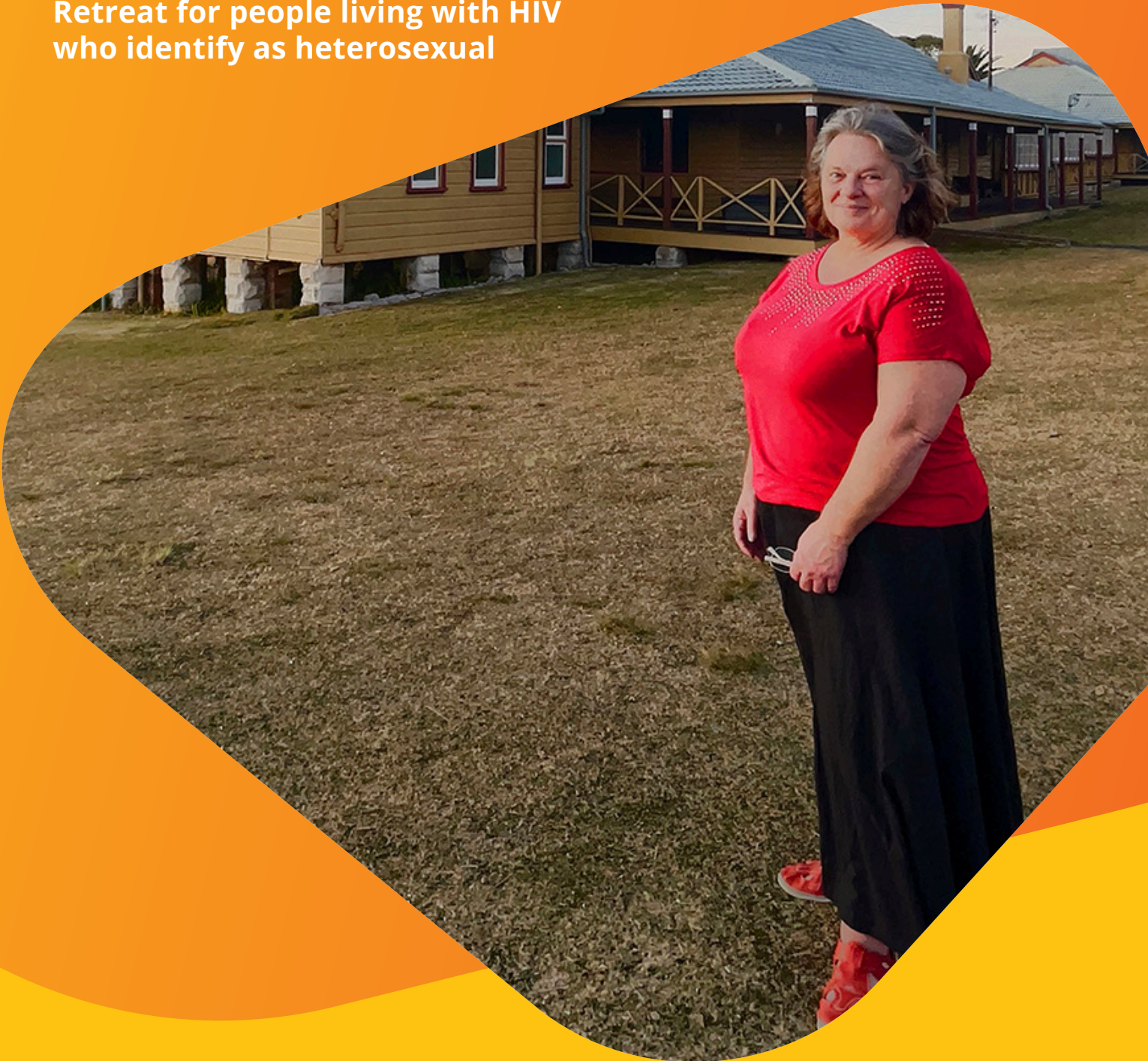


2023 'Life Beyond' Heterosexual Retreat

Retreat for people living with HIV
who identify as heterosexual



Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Between Friday 23 and Sunday 25 June 2023, 23 people from Positive Life NSW (Positive Life) attended the inaugural 'Life Beyond' 2023 Heterosexual Retreat. The retreat was an opportunity for all attendees, both community members and Positive Life facilitators to engage as peers, discuss and share life experiences and strategies around living with HIV.

The program was structured to provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their HIV journey to date and examine their thinking styles in relation to their health diagnosis through art and psychotherapeutic tools. These included meditation techniques, art therapy, group therapy strategies and reflection on cognitive distortion thinking styles and personal wellbeing.

Gender and Cultural Diversity – 19 attendees (participants and staff) were people living with HIV who identified as heterosexual. 10 attendees living with HIV had a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, 12 attendees living with HIV had an Anglo-Australian background, 14 attendees were women living with HIV, while seven were men living with HIV.

HIV Status and Identify Consolidation – a number of the heterosexual participants had lived with HIV for over 10 years and still experienced a daily sense of trauma around their HIV status. During the retreat sessions, it was clear a number of these participants experienced significant shifts in their cognitive thinking styles including acceptance and consolidation of their HIV status. These personal shifts were evidenced in peer-based one to one conversations with facilitators, and also in final commentaries in the individual evaluations of the weekend indicating that participants felt that the retreat had provided them with strategies to improve their health and wellbeing outcomes.

Introduction

Between Friday 23 and Sunday 25 June 2023, 23 people from Positive Life, attended the inaugural 'Life Beyond' 2023 Heterosexual Retreat. This included 16 participants living with HIV who identified as heterosexual and seven staff facilitators, most of whom were living with HIV themselves.

Shortly after midday on Friday 23 June, 16 participants met at Positive Life's office on Level 4, 414 Elizabeth Street, where they began socialising and bonding with each other and Positive Life staff over a light lunch. Participants were provided with a welcome pack containing information about the venue, the retreat program, emergency numbers for the staff facilitators, venue safety messages, photographs and details about the accommodation, meeting rooms, meal times and locations, and check-out times.

Following this orientation, the group congregated outside the front of the building at 414 Elizabeth Street to board the bus and load their luggage and Positive Life equipment for the 50-minute journey to the historic Q-Station on North Head Scenic Drive, Manly, NSW.

After arriving at Q-station, all attendees disembarked and engaged with room assignments, a brief site orientation and overview, and review of the participant information pack. Facilitators remained available to participants as support personnel to ensure that all felt comfortable, safe and secure before the first session began at 5.30pm.



Attendees

Participants

Of the 16 community members living with HIV who identify as heterosexual, 11 were woman and four were men. Eight participants had an African background, seven had an Anglo-Australian background, one participant had a Nepalese cultural background, and one had a Spanish cultural background.

Facilitators

Of the seven staff facilitators, six were peers living with HIV. The seventh staff facilitator was a counsellor and psychotherapist accredited with the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) with her own private practice, and extensive professional and personal experience working with people living with HIV. All staff personnel were people of Anglo-Australian cultural background except for one with an African

cultural heritage. Three of the staff facilitators were heterosexual women living with HIV. .

- Overall program peer coordinator – heterosexual woman living with HIV
- Program peer co-facilitator – heterosexual woman living with HIV
- Program peer co-facilitator – man living with HIV
- Psychotherapist and counsellor – heterosexual woman affected by HIV
- Art workshop peer facilitator – man living with HIV
- Peer support worker – heterosexual woman living with HIV
- Peer communications worker – man living with HIV



2023 Retreat Staff Facilitators

Program

First Session

This initial one-hour session set the scene and expectations for the remainder of the weekend. The program peer co-facilitator detailed housekeeping and basic property safety procedures at the beginning.

This session was devoted to creating a group agreement and managing expectations of participants. This was followed by a drumming meditation and contemplation exercise where participants focused on connecting with themselves and their peers through a concentration technique.

The session concluded with participants writing on small post-it notes one thing they would like to get out of the retreat, and one thing they would like to 'let go of' or relinquish. After dinner, participants collectively and ceremonially burnt the pieces of paper containing the things they would like to relinquish.

Second Session

On the Saturday morning after breakfast, participants met together in the meeting room.

Led by the retreat psychotherapist and counsellor and the program peer co-facilitator, participants were provided with a 23-page single-sided stapled resource that introduced notions of journeying, change, and cognitive distortion. The resource contained a range of thinking styles along with examples of each. The psychotherapist presented a number of printed cards with words written on them, such as *compassion* and *changemaker*. Participants were supported to choose cards that expressed 'where you are now' and reflect on how they view their life now.

The facilitators led a discussion of common thinking styles (positive and negative) and encouraged participants to reflect on their own responses and thinking styles, working

with them to 'check in' with themselves around what they felt others may know or think about them.

Third Session

After morning tea, the art workshop peer facilitator introduced art materials and supplies to the participants. He briefly discussed different techniques within abstract expressionism along with the use of prints of well-known paintings, and supported participants to artistically express 'where you are now'.

Participants were encouraged not to interpret each other's work or styles, instead to wait for individuals to share whatever they wished in regard to their work. This activity continued until the lunch break.

Fourth Session

After lunch, participants returned to the second part of the art workshop where they were supported to artistically express 'where you would like to be'. Both the peer art facilitator and the retreat psychotherapist reflected verbally with participants to model analysis of the process and a variety of personal reflections.

Participants broke temporarily for afternoon tea and returned for a 'closing circle'. This was outside where the psychotherapist introduced musical 'sound therapy' through the use of crystal singing bowls and guided meditation.

Participants returned to the meeting room where they debriefed together with the psychotherapist and program peer co-facilitator. At this time, some participants chose to share their artwork and thoughts with the group.

After this session closed, the attendees attended dinner together after which some participants returned to the meeting room for board games and socialising.



Program

Fifth Session

On Sunday morning, the program peer co-facilitator led a session which culminated in a letter writing activity, where participants were supported to write a letter to themselves to be opened at a later date of their own choice.

After providing a framework for the letter with tips and suggestions, and a brief group discussion, individuals decided what they wanted to put in their letter. The group went outside and individually wrote a letter to themselves for 45 minutes. On completion, the group broke for morning tea.

Sixth Session

After returning to the meeting room from morning tea, the program peer co-facilitator and psychotherapist reflected with participants about the weekend and concepts presented. Both facilitators workshopped with participants various items from the workbook such as confirmation bias thinking to support participants' wellbeing and challenge thoughts around their HIV diagnosis and status empowering them to explore a different reality.

Towards the end of this session, facilitators handed out printed copies of an evaluation form (Appendix B) to all participants and invited them to complete the evaluation. On conclusion, the group broke for lunch.

Seventh Session

After lunch, participants returned to the meeting room. By request of the group, the retreat psychotherapist returned to the use of music therapy through drums, singing bowls, and kalimba (hand-held thumb piano instrument), to support participants in their health, functioning and wellbeing goals.

The psychotherapist and program peer co-facilitator invited participants to reflect and share what they will be taking forward with

them from the retreat. The psychotherapist highlighted activities in the handout resource for individuals to complete at their own pace and time.

On conclusion of this session, the psychotherapist led the group in a small closing ceremony using the quilt that was on the floor of the meeting room throughout the retreat. All attendees gathered around the edge of the quilt, and ceremoniously folded it together for return to the psychotherapist.

Attendees then collected their belongings and bags to await transit to the reception area and the bus departure at 3pm.

Evaluation Analysis

All 16 participants completed and returned the evaluation sheets handed out in the sixth session prior to concluding the retreat.

All questions were responded to fully with a range of thoughtful responses. Overall, the majority of the participants' satisfaction with the retreat was rated highly.

Question 1

14 out of the 16 participants were 'very satisfied' with the retreat overall, with one participant selecting 'satisfied' and one participant selecting 'dissatisfied'.

How satisfied are you with the 'Life Beyond' Retreat overall?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0

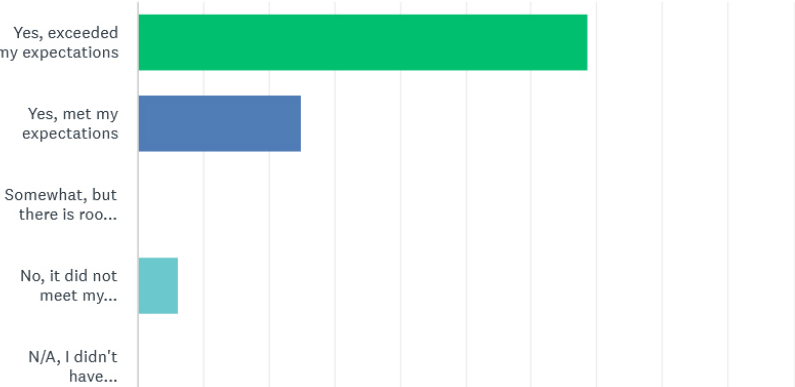


Question 2

11 out of the 16 participants stated the retreat 'exceeded expectations', four participants said the retreat 'met expectations' and one participant stated the retreat 'did not meet expectations'.

Did the retreat meet your expectations in terms of connecting with other people?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0



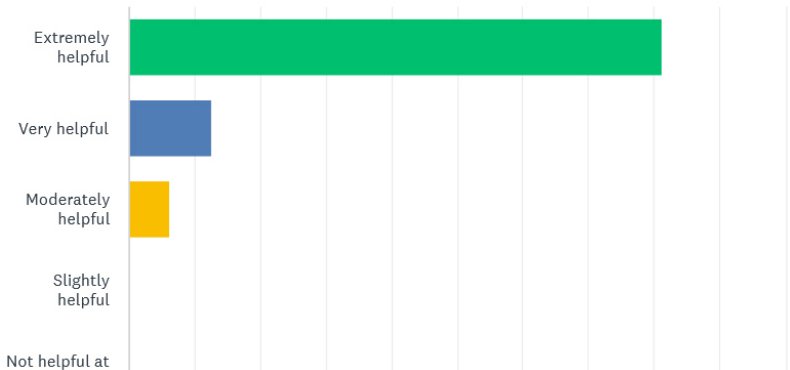
Evaluation Analysis

Question 3

13 out of the 16 participants stated staff were 'extremely helpful' assisting with questions or support at the retreat, two out of 16 stated this assistance was 'very helpful' and one participant indicated staff were 'moderately helpful'.

How helpful were the Positive Life Staff in assisting you with your questions or support at the retreat?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0

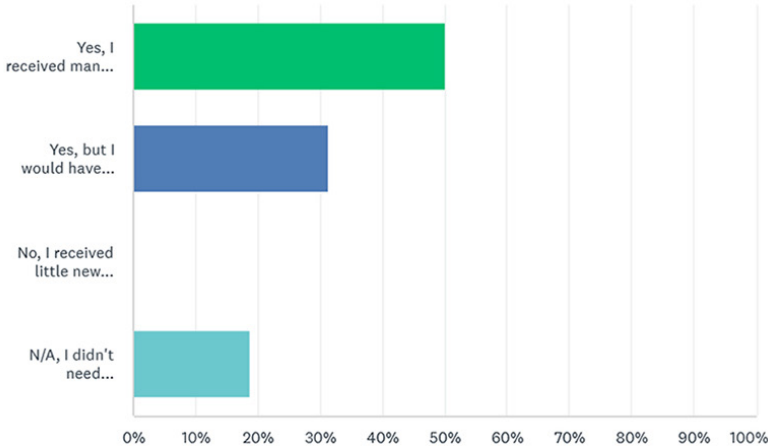


Question 4

Eight out of the 16 participants indicated they 'received many new thoughts and ideas about living with HIV' whilst at the retreat. Five out of the 16 participants indicated while they received new thoughts and ideas about thinking about living with HIV, they 'would have liked more thoughts and ideas about living with HIV'. One participant indicated they 'didn't need information on living with HIV'.

Did the retreat provide you with some new thoughts and ideas about thinking about living with HIV?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0



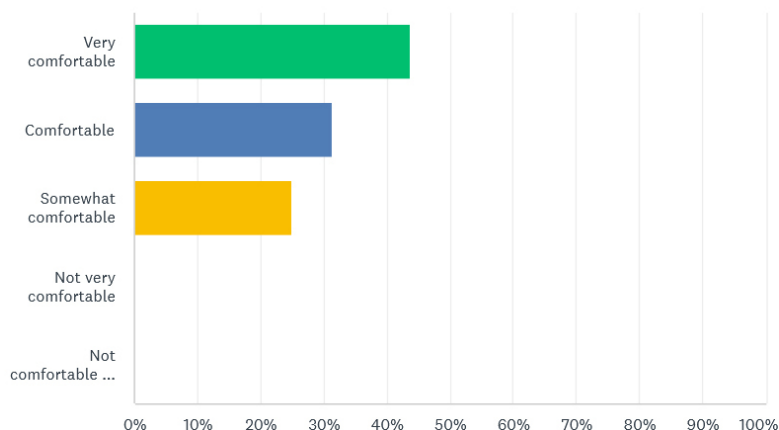
Evaluation Analysis

Question 5

Seven out of 16 participants indicated they felt 'very comfortable' using ideas and strategies from the retreat. Five out of 16 indicated they felt 'comfortable', while one participant indicated they felt 'somewhat comfortable' using ideas and strategies from the retreat.

How comfortable do you feel using the ideas and strategies from the retreat?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0

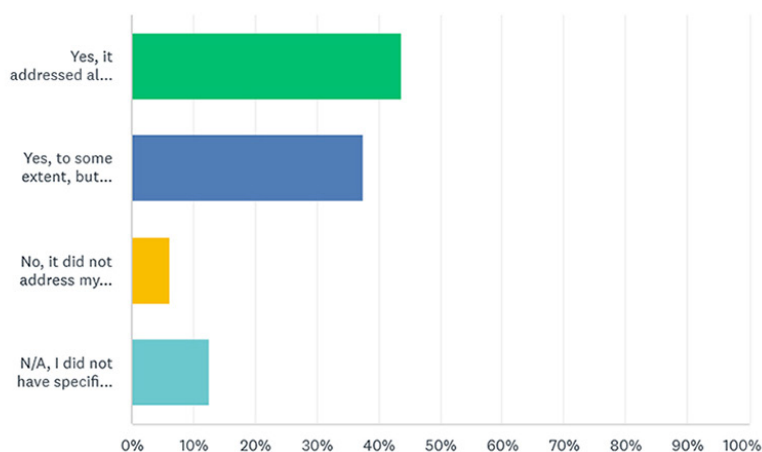


Question 6

Seven out of 16 participants indicated the retreat 'addressed all my needs and challenges' related to living with HIV. Six out of 16 participants agreed the retreat effectively addressed their specific needs and challenges related to living with HIV 'to some extent, but more could have been done'. One participant indicated the retreat 'did not address my needs and challenges related to living with HIV' while two participants out of the 16 indicated 'NA, I did not have specific needs or challenges'. One of these two participants explained their reasons in question eight for selecting NA to this question as feeling that the retreat addressed their needs relating to living with HIV but also to life more generally.

Did the retreat effectively address your specific needs and challenges related to living with HIV?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0



Evaluation Analysis

Question 7

15 out of the 16 participants indicated they would 'definitely' recommend the retreat to other community members. One participant indicated they would recommend the retreat to other community members 'with some reservations'.

Would you recommend this retreat to other community members?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0



Question 8

All participants responded to this question providing some brief commentary on their experience of the retreat.

In your own words, please describe your experience attending the retreat.

Answered: 16 Skipped: 0

A compilation of some of the descriptions of participants' experiences in attending the retreat are included below:

"It reopen my heart for growth and to live on with better ambition to strive. The food and location is perfect."

"I have received more support from the group. Very loving. Coming to this meeting changed my thinking and everything."

"It has to be my first time to attend this retreat. I learnt a lot of good experiences including making more connections. My life is so different. I have realised that I still have a million reasons to smile again and let the past go. I can't be carrying my barriers everywhere."

I have to live like and smile like everyone else. I love the person in me. I had a lot of leadership and learn more knowledge. Thank you for choosing me to be part of this. Love the venue as well xxx."

"My experience attending the retreat was great because I learnt so much about myself and had the opportunity to meet other people in the same circumstance which made one feel better about themselves. Retreats are so important because it's one of the only places to connect and feel valued."

"I had no expectations of the retreat as my first one. So I was pleasantly surprised and established some new friendships and communal understanding."

Evaluation Analysis

"I have marked N/A to the questions about living with HIV because I felt (for myself) that the retreat addressed my needs and gave me thoughts and ideas about living full stop. For me this was a huge positive that I did not have to revisit stories (mine and others) regarding diagnosis and treatment during the sessions. This information was freely shared during the social interactions. I feel that the hands on activities were of great value and allowed participation by all. We are all at different parts of our journey with HIV and I feel that this retreat gave space for all and their needs. The location is 100/10."

"I found it really rewarding in connecting with the other participants. It was wonderfully run and very enjoyable. I am very grateful to Positive Life for the wonderful experience."

"I am extremely happy with my experience at the retreat. Meeting new amazing people was the highlight of this retreat, I really felt welcome and receive lots of love, so thankful for all of it."

"Community, a sense of belonging. Great venue. Great food. Good thought provoking activities. Good speakers. Great staff. Great views. Good amount of people."

"I thoroughly enjoyed myself, I appreciated the amount of work, effort and sacrifice that went into preparing for this retreat, time scheduling, thoughts everything. Emotionally I have been connected, I feel somewhat comforted and safe. Venue was wonderful and therapeutic. Transport was organised, all meals were delicious."

"I feel very much loved, everyone is so amazing. The staff and everything is good for me. When I look at the group, I feel that they are all my family. Tell the staff thank for having me, so full of love and I have more love for the people around me, confidence, building trust with the group. I say a big thank you to everyone."

"We all bonded like a family. Great to see old friends and make new friends. The camaraderie was great. Food – delicious. Room – Great. View – fantastic. Weather – perfect. Help from others I appreciated."

"Overall 5/10 retreat. Great place. Great atmosphere surroundings. Well done on venue selection."

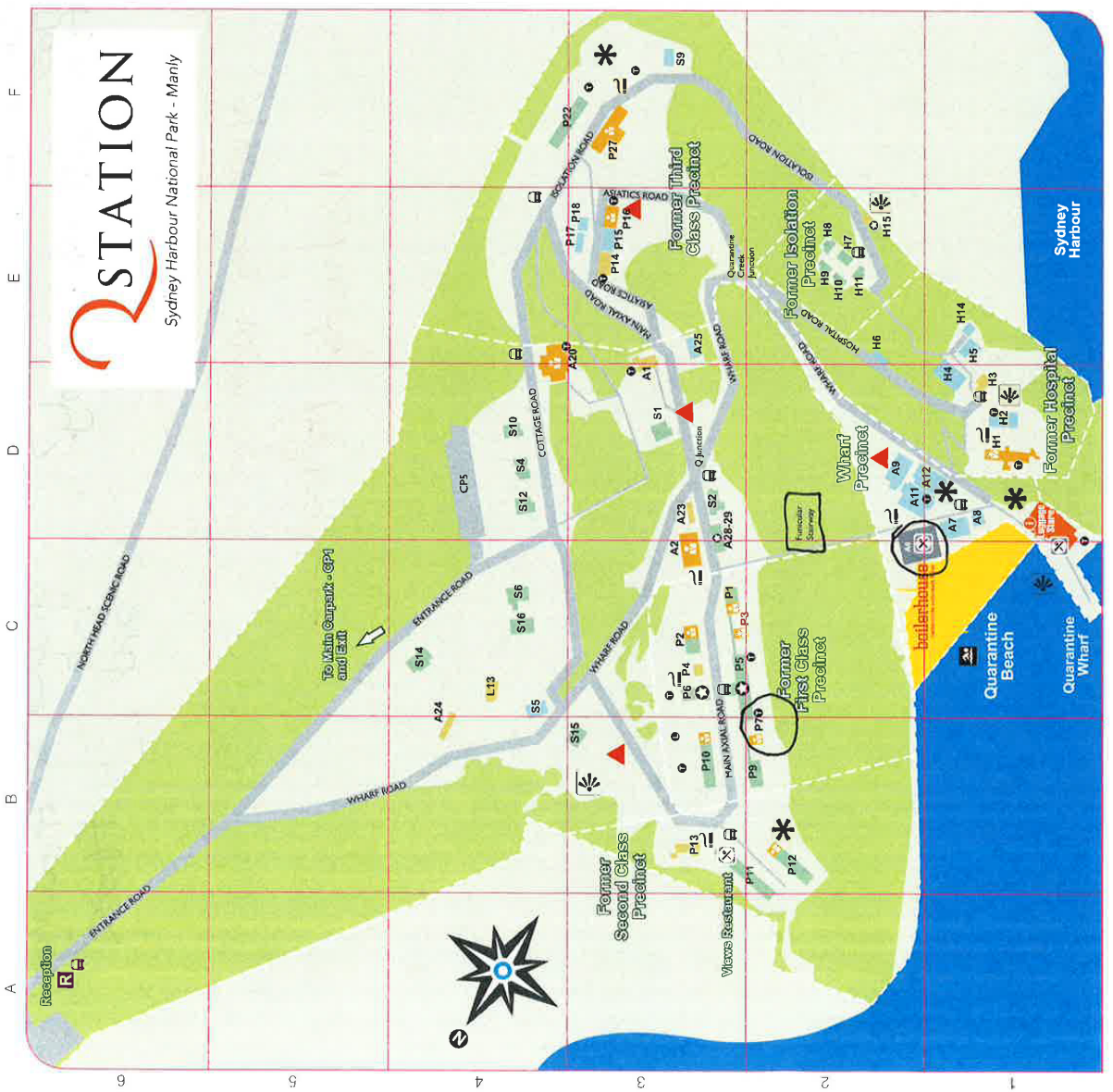
"This was very informative with new and practical activities that were extremely entertaining. Thoroughly enjoyed the location and quality of the venue. The weekend was arranged with thought and insight catering for everyone attending. Thanking all the efforts to organise and put together a great, entertaining and creative event of information and thought provoking activities. thank you."

"Thought that the event ran well. Discovered some new things that I would like to do more of but not in a retreat setting a game night every 3 months or 6 months. Would like to meet for just the venue was fantastic relaxed, walking, free time, taking part was fantastic interaction. Good. Felt like part of a team."



APPENDIX A: Q-Station Map

- ### Legend & map reference
- Map Ref A6**
Q Station Entrance; Reception & Car Park
 - Building P11**
Map Ref B3
Views Restaurant; Breakfast
 - Building A6**
Map Ref C2
Boilerhouse Restaurant & Engine Room Lounge; A la carte Menu & Casual Dining
 - Map Ref D1**
Luggage Store Visitor Centre & Café; Free History Exhibition 10-4pm
 - Inside Luggage Store Visitor Centre**
Map Ref D1
Tours Desk; Ghost & History Tours, Kayaking, Snorkelling & Beach Towels
 - Building P5**
Map Ref C3
Guest Lounges; Coffee Machine (P5) Books (P6) Games (A28)
 - Map ref B2, B3, C1, D1, E2, F3**
Point of Interest, Heritage Building or View
 - Map Ref A6, B3, C3, D1, D3, E2, E4**
Bus Stop (or dial Ext 9)
 - Map Ref B3, C3, D1, D2, F3**
Guest Smoking Area
 - Map Ref B3, D2, D3, E3**
Emergency Muster Points
 - Accommodation Buildings
 - Tour Buildings
 - Function Rooms



APPENDIX B: 'Life Beyond' Retreat Evaluation Form

1 How satisfied are you with the 'Life Beyond' Retreat overall?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

2 Did the retreat meet your expectations in terms of connecting with other people?

- Yes, exceeded my expectations
- Yes, met my expectations
- Somewhat, but there is room for improvement
- No, it did not meet my expectations
- N/A, I didn't have expectations

3 How helpful were the Positive Life Staff in assisting you with your questions or support at the retreat?

- Extremely helpful
- Very helpful
- Moderately helpful
- Slightly helpful
- Not helpful at all

4 Did the retreat provide you with some new thoughts and ideas about thinking about living with HIV?

- Yes, I received many new thoughts and ideas about living with HIV
- Yes, but I would have liked more thoughts and ideas about living with HIV
- No, I received little new thoughts and ideas about living with HIV
- N/A, I didn't need information on living with HIV

5 How comfortable do you feel using the ideas and strategies from the retreat?

- Very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Not very comfortable
- Not comfortable at all

6 Did the retreat effectively address your specific needs and challenges related to living with HIV?

- Yes, it addressed all my needs and challenges
- Yes, to some extent, but more could have been done
- No, it did not address my needs and challenges
- N/A, I did not have specific needs or challenges

7 Would you recommend this retreat to other community members?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, with some reservations
- Maybe, it depends on the person's needs
- No, I would not recommend it
- N/A, I am not sure

8 In your own words, please describe your experience attending the retreat.

If you have any other feedback, please feel free to discuss your feedback/comment to either Jane, Andy, Priscilla or Catherine.



For more information phone 02 8357 8386 or 1800 245 677 (freecall)
or visit www.positivelife.org.au