

Resolution of Council

15 November 2021

Item 3.1

Vale Myra Demetriou

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I inform Council of the death of Myra Demetriou on 23 October 2021. Myra was mother to Ruth and Jim and will be remembered as an integral member of the Millers Point community and the face of the 'Save Our Sirius' campaign.

Myra Demetriou lived in the Millers Point area for over six decades. In 1959 when Sydney was a port town with a working harbour, with shipyards, docks, and factories, Myra rented a terrace with her husband Nick in Erskine Street, Millers Point, from the Maritime Services Board. While Nick ran a business, Myra had secretarial skills and began working at the advertising firm, J. Walter Thompson just weeks after her son Jim was born. She later said leaving her children Ruth and Jim was the hardest thing about the job.

Nick's business thrived because the Balmain ferry docked close to his shop. A sudden decision to change where the ferries docked saw their business collapse. When Myra and Nick found it difficult paying rent to Maritime Services, the government moved them to a rundown Victorian terrace in Trinity Avenue, a kilometre away.

Tragically in 1991 Nick passed away, and soon after Myra's eyesight began to diminish. She had discovered that she had macular degeneration, and there was no cure.

That did not slow Myra. She became the deaconess at the Garrison Church, and she volunteered as curator of its military and historical museum. She also became the senior vice-president of the Darling Harbour branch of the Australian Labor Party, where she would often speak about the need for more social housing in the city.

In time, Myra had grandchildren, then great-grandchildren and despite the fact she could barely see, she knew the Millers Point area well, and could get around.

In 2008 Myra moved into Sirius. The Sirius building was built in the 1970s to provide social housing for low-income residents displaced by the redevelopment of The Rocks. Designed by commission architect Tao Gofers, it is a prominent example of Brutalist architecture.

Over her decade at Sirius, Myra's neighbours became good friends. They described her as tenacious and generous and as "the glue that held her community together". Myra once purchased 88 pounds of dried fruits and nuts and spent weeks baking Christmas cakes for her fellow residents despite her poor eyesight. When asked for her most cherished memory from her life at Sirius, she would say "It's the people around me. All of them."

In 2014, the then State Government made the shocking announcement that it was going to sell the Sirius building along with the rest of the social housing in Millers Point, claiming it would use the proceeds to build more housing elsewhere. The State Government's decision was a betrayal of Myra and the many families who called Millers Point, one of Australia's most historic communities, home. Many residents had connections to the area going back generations.

There was public outcry, marches, and protests against the decision. I saw the sale of Sirius as a symbol of the State Government's shocking inaction on providing social and affordable housing in the inner-city. That is why the City supported the Millers Point public housing community's 'fighting fund' for its ongoing eviction battle with the State Government, and gave over \$400,000 to the Redfern Legal Centre to provide tenants support, advocacy and advice for the Millers Point public housing community.

When heritage experts, government officials, and community groups cried out against the government's decision, Myra stood with them.

She would say, "There has to be room in the city for everyone. Nobody wants a city just for rich people. Public housing gives people with less money a chance to live close to jobs and people they have known."

As her neighbours were relocated one by one, Myra refused to move. She called for the Government to recognise the building's architectural and social significance and joined forces with local advocacy group 'Save Our Sirius', spoke at State Parliament, gave media interviews, and opened her home to 2,000 Sirius supporters who toured the building and were eager to show their solidarity.

Myra said: "They have come from all over and they tell me how much they love Sirius. There are so many young people I have met, and they give me hope for the future."

Every night Myra would also turn on a set of lights which flashed a message across Sydney Harbour and The Rocks: 'SOS, Save Our Sirius'. Myra became a symbol of hope and determination and the public face of the fight to save the Sirius complex. In 2018 Myra was named "Sydney electorate woman of the year".

When the State Government had first told the building's 400 residents in 2014 that they would need to leave, the decision prompted a fight that has lasted four years. But at the end of 2017 the building slowly emptied. When Myra finally agreed to move to a unit in Pymont, she was the last tenant to leave.

Myra would say, "it was never about me – I want to live here, I like it here. It was this place; this community should have working class people in it".

For the past few years Myra was a resident in Aged Care at the Terraces Retirement Village at Paddington. Her friends say that when she was there, she was as positive and cheerful as she had always been.

Which is why Myra's legacy is not just about her activism and commitment to fight for her community, it is her values which inspire us. As Alex Greenwich MP has said: "It is women like Myra that make the city so great and so strong".

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Scott –

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council observe a minute's silence to mark the passing of Myra Demetriou noting her significant contribution to her community and her commitment to upholding justice for social housing residents in Millers Point; and
- (B) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to Myra's children expressing Council's condolences.

Carried unanimously.

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