

Resolution of Council

19 February 2024

Item 3.1

Vale Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I wish to inform Council about the passing of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG on 4 February 2024, who was best known for her lifelong advocacy for the health, wellbeing and rights of Indigenous Australians.

Lowitja O'Donoghue, also known as Lois O'Donoghue and Lois Smart, was born on 1 August 1932. She was the fifth of six children born to an Irish pastoralist (rancher) father and a Yunkunytjatjara mother in Indulkana, a remote Aboriginal community in northwestern South Australia.

At age two, Lowitja and two of her sisters were removed from their family and placed in the Colebrook Children's Home in Quorn along with thousands of other members of the Stolen Generations. There her name became 'Lois' and she did not see her mother again for more than 30 years.

She went to Quorn Primary School and later moved to Eden Hills in South Australia where she attended Unley Girls Technical High School in Adelaide. At 16, she was sent to work as a domestic servant for a large family at Victor Harbor and later became a nursing aide and did some basic training.

After a long struggle to win admission to train at the Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH), in 1954, she became the first trainee Aboriginal nurse in South Australia. She remained at RAH for ten years; after graduating in 1958 she was promoted first to staff sister and then to charge nurse.

In the early 1960s, Lowitja travelled to Assam in northern India to hone her nursing skills with the Baptist Overseas Mission.

Lowitja returned to Australia in 1962 and joined the South Australian public service as an Aboriginal liaison and welfare officer. In 1967, she joined the newly established Department of Aboriginal Affairs and three years later was appointed the Department's regional director in Adelaide, the first woman to hold such a position in a federal government department.

From 1970 to 1972, Lowitja was a member of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement.

In 1976, she became the first Aboriginal woman to be made a Member of the prestigious Order of Australia for her work to improve the lives of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

In 1977, she was elected chairperson of the National Aboriginal Conference, a forum for the expression of Aboriginal views that had been established by the Australian Government.

In 1979, she married Gordon Smart, a medical orderly from the Adelaide Repatriation Hospital whom she first met in 1964. He had six children from a previous marriage, but they had no children together.

In 1990, Lowitja became the founding chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, playing a key role in negotiating Australia's historic Native Title legislation, which granted land rights to First Nations people, and in the successful 1967 referendum, which saw them included in the national census.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Lowitja continued her tireless work and became a patron of many health, welfare, and social justice organisations, earning a long list of accolades and awards, including Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1983, Australian of the Year in 1984, Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in 1999 and Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great (DSG), a Papal Honour by Pope John Paul II.

She was also the recipient of honorary doctorates from five Australian universities and named an honorary fellow of both the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and the Royal College of Nursing.

In 2010, the Lowitja Institute was founded in her honour - a research body dedicated to advancing Indigenous health outcomes. In 2022, the Institute announced the establishment of the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation which seeks funding for scholarships to assist Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

Reflecting on their time together on the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney MP said:

'Lowitja's leadership and tenacity has been an inspiration for generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, including myself. She was a truly extraordinary leader. Lowitja was not just a giant for those of us who knew her, but a giant for our country.'

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor

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

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to mark the extraordinary life of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue and her outstanding contribution to the advancement of Australia's First Peoples, Aboriginal rights and reconciliation; and
- (B) Council express its sincere condolences to Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue's family.

Carried unanimously.

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Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG.