

Item 3.1

Vale Irene Doutney

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

On Monday 11 June 2018, former Deputy Lord Mayor Irene Doutney passed away after a long illness.

A Redfern resident for 22 years, Irene was an active community member and a passionate advocate for her fellow social housing residents, social justice and human rights.

What was most admirable about Irene was her success in overcoming adversity. Irene spent her early years in Kings Cross. Her father, the artist Charles Doutney, died from leukemia when she was nine years old. Together with her older brother, she spent her early teenage years caring for her mother, who died from cancer when Irene was 16.

After leaving school, she completed a degree in fine arts at the University of Sydney and worked in administrative roles at several Sydney theatres during the 1970s and 1980s.

Irene, however, battled depression from the age of 12, which included being a psychiatric unit patient. In 1973, a male nurse introduced her to narcotics, which led to a long, but ultimately successful, struggle against drug addiction. Yet, Irene continued to lead a productive life. She returned to university in the 1990s as a mature aged student studying modern history and literature, and subsequently worked as a curator and researcher at the Powerhouse Museum, the Mint and at the Belvoir Theatre. She was also the curator of the History of the World Exhibition at the Coca-Cola Museum at Circular Quay.

After moving to Redfern, Irene became part of a nursing team that cared for a friend who was dying of AIDS. She contributed three days per week, coordinating with three other carers. This experience was also influential in Irene taking charge of her own life.

She joined The Factory Community Centre in Waterloo, becoming a member of its Management Committee in 2005, and continued until she retired in 2016 due to ill health. She also worked as volunteer project coordinator at the centre, coordinating the Open House Project from 2006 to 2008, which made it possible for pensioners to attend Sydney Opera House performances for only \$5. Irene was a member of the Factory Community Centre Management Committee from 2005 until 2016. Irene also worked as a homework support officer at the Redfern PCYC.

Irene's initial active political involvement began as a volunteer in my office and helping out on polling booths in 1999, when Redfern became part of the Bligh electorate.

In the early 2000s, Irene became increasingly involved in community activism. She was elected as a tenant representative of her building, liaising with Housing New South Wales over various issues. She supported her fellow tenants in successfully challenging Housing NSW on maintenance issues in the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal.

Her activism had in fact begun three decades before, taking part in the first Moratorium against the Vietnam War and the first Sydney Gay Mardi Gras in 1978.

In 2006, Irene joined the coordinating group for Redwatch and remained an active member until 2016, when she resigned due to ill health. During 2011 and 2012, she was a member of the coordinating group for Lift Redfern, a community group that campaigned for the installation of elevators in Redfern train station to improve accessibility.

Also, in 2006, Irene joined The Greens and became an active member of several policy working groups related to housing, economics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and women's and other issues. In 2007, Irene began volunteering with Sylvia Hale MLC and later for David Shoebridge MLC, when he replaced Sylvia in the NSW Upper House.

In 2008, Irene was declared elected as the City's second Greens Councillor on the Town Hall steps, near where she joined a sit-down anti-war protest over three decades before.

In her first speech to Council, Irene said:

"I believe there are many great initiatives started by this council in its previous term that we will be able to extend and promote further into the disadvantaged communities.

"I'm thinking of services for youth and seniors, alternative forms of housing, support for indigenous development on the block, fresh food markets for housing residents and green solutions for our city's development.

"I am looking forward to all the work that lies ahead and the opportunities that will arise to further these aims."

Over the next eight years Irene proved to be an energetic and passionate Councillor, with a strong commitment to representing the most disadvantaged in our city, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, the LGBTIQ community, supporting strong action on climate change, and opposing the disastrous impacts of WestConnex.

Irene's website reveals the wide range of issues Irene pursued as a Councillor. They include affordable housing, sustainable procurement policies, the treatment of refugees, protecting our biodiversity, skate parks for young people, support for live music and nightlife, street art and ensuring complex development information is provided in plain English.

Irene was also a speaker at many rallies and protests for a range of issues, including housing, marriage equality, anti-war, WikiLeaks, homophobia, Aboriginal rights, police violence and Millers Point.

In 2012, the Greens endorsed Irene as their Lord Mayoral candidate. In mid-May she became aware that a political opponent was going to reveal her troubled past. Irene bravely pre-empted this by taking the personally challenging step of giving a frank and open interview to The Sydney Morning Herald. Irene was overwhelmed by the warm and positive response she subsequently received. By being willing to share her personal story, she also demonstrated that it was possible to overcome adversity and live a worthwhile life.

Irene was re-elected in 2012 as a Councillor. On 29 February 2016, Irene was elected Deputy Lord Mayor, following the sad passing of Robyn Kemmis. Despite having been diagnosed with inoperable cancer following a period of illness in 2014, Irene was determined to complete her term as Councillor and fulfilled her new role with grace.

In her final speech to Council, on 15 August 2016, Irene looked back on her eight years as a Councillor with a sense of pride and of regret. Pride at what the City had achieved and what it stands for and regret that important social environmental and economic change can only move so fast. She spoke of the significant change she has seen over her lifetime. She continued:

“I’ve also seen the enduring resilience of disadvantaged communities across Sydney and the important community work that has allowed them to thrive. My fellow public housing tenants are an important part of the city’s fabric. These people deserve a place in the city’s future. Yet more and more, they are being shut out.

“The strength of communities across Sydney is their understanding that our wellbeing and our destinies are inexorably linked. As the political leaders of this city it is our responsibly to ensure that we all move forward together. When we move disadvantaged people out to the suburbs, out of sight, we are all poorer.

“My great hope for Sydney is that it continues to embrace and celebrate its diversity. This is an act that requires more than just platitudes and parades. It is an act that requires strong leadership and deliberate planning. We must work to strengthen our community organisations and foster understanding across our great city. Our future leaders must understand that the market does not deliver opportunities to those who, for a myriad of reasons, are struggling for inclusion.

“Equally, it is important our elected representatives reflect this diversity. While we haven’t always agreed on everything I have really enjoyed the opportunity to work with my fellow Councillors, and appreciate those of you who have reached out a hand of support and friendship when most needed.

“What makes the City of Sydney successful is its engagement with our communities. I want to place on the record my thanks to all those in the community that took time to contact me and keep me up to date on their neighbourhood. The job of a Councillor is a difficult one and we would not be able to do the job effectively without the generous work of many community members.

“In 2008 I was as surprised as anyone to find myself elected to the City of Sydney. I never saw myself as a politician. I am humbled to have been selected to represent my community and to play a small role in Sydney’s long and rich history. As a community activist, it has meant so much to me to have this platform to advocate for others.”

Irene was an exemplary Councillor, a dear friend and a wonderful deputy. We will miss her greatly.

Recommendation

It is resolved that all persons present in the Chamber stand for one minute's silence to mark the life of former Deputy Lord Mayor Irene Doughty and her significant contribution as a Councillor, community activist and advocate.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor