Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1826

Ah Toy, Lily

(1917 - 2001)

Born	19171024, Darwin Northern Teritory Australia
Died	20011015, Darwin Northern Territory Australia
Occupation	Businesswoman, Community activist

Summary

Lily Ah Toy was well known and respected across the Northern Territory; so well respected that, as part of the bicentennial events in 1988, she was one of only eight Territory women to be recognised for their contributions and achievements. Her family were key figures in the Pine Creek and Darwin (Northern Territory) Chinese communities, although, they came to be well regarded across ethnic boundaries, for the extent of their generosity and involvement in the community, her efforts in 1974 to assist people made homeless and hungry by Cyclone Tracy being a case in point.

At various times in her life, Lily was involved in school mother's clubs, church councils, the Red Cross and various Chinese organisations. In 1982, Lily graduated from the Northern Territory University with a diploma in ceramics. At 65 years of age she was the oldest graduate.

Lily's family was very poor but, through hard work and commitment, they made their place in the Territory. It is important that Lily and other Chinese Australians are now recognised as an important part of our Northern Territory history.

Details

When Lily Ah Toy (born Wong Wu Len) came into the world in Darwin in October 1917, her father didn't even register her birth. 'Well the war's on, and another girl', he said. The prospect that she might be adopted out to a woman in Darwin desperate for a daughter, an idea momentarily entertained by her Chinese born father, received short shrift, however, from Lily's Australian born (of Chinese descent) mother. As Lily says, she was lucky. And even though he was initially disappointed that Lily wasn't a boy, her father was very good to her, as he was to all his children. Sadly, he died when she was nine. At age fourteen she left school to become a housemaid for a European family. She worked there for three years, leaving when she married.

Lily became engaged at eighteen and married Jimmy Ah Toy, a hawker with his own market garden, in 1936 at the age of nineteen. After marrying, the couple moved to Pine Creek to work in the store owned by Jimmy's parents. They were to have five children, Edward, Laurence, Joyce, Grace and Elaine. At various times, they took on the responsibility of looking after Jimmy's younger brothers and sisters.

After the bombing of Darwin in 1942 Lily was evacuated to Adelaide, where she cared for a large extended family. She returned to Pine Creek in 1945 to re-open the general store, with her husband. It was the first civilian store to open in the Top End after the war, providing vital services to prospectors, pastoralists, buffalo and crocodile hunters, and the local community. Lily managed this business by herself for four years while Jimmy helped to establish a general store in Darwin, before returning to Pine Creek. Lily eventually moved to Darwin permanently when her eldest son Edward took over the management of the Pine Creek business.

Lily was involved with many different organisations and assisted with the establishment of the Crafts Council NT (now Territory Craft). In 1982, at the age of 65, Lily graduated from the Darwin Community College (now Charles Darwin University) with an Associate Diploma of Arts (Ceramics); at the time she was their oldest graduate.

In 1988, as part of the Bicentennial Celebrations, Lily was one of eight Territorians honoured for their contribution to the Territory and in 1995, Film Australia produced her biography. 2001 saw Lily nominated to the Centenary of Federation Peoplescape project. She died in 2001. Her philosophy in life was 'work hard, always be honest and give a helping hand'.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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