Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2097

Brown, Olive

(1945 - 1993)

Born	19450510, Grafton New South Wales Australia
Died	19930131, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Health worker

Summary

A founder of the Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service, Olive Brown was central in the fight to improve Aboriginal health services generally in the Canberra region.

Details

An inspirational figure and tireless promoter of community services, Olive Brown was a central combatant in the fight to improve Aboriginal health services in the Canberra region.

While most widely recognised in Canberra as the founder of the Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service, Olive Brown had a varied, rich life before arriving in the capital in 1987. After training as a teacher's aid at Sydney University, Brown worked for the Rural Bank. Utilising her natural beauty and iconic Australian looks, Brown also modelled for the Australian Wool Board and David Jones in the 1960s. She starred as part of a 'bunch of Australian beauties – blondes and brunettes, out-doorsy or sophisticated, of European or indigenous stock' in a 1969 feature called 'Beautiful Australians' in *Vogue* magazine.

Winnunga Nimmityjah, which means strong health in the Wiradjuri language, was established in 1988 by a group of local Ngunnawal people, the Traditional Owners of the lands that form the ACT. Inspired by the influx of people from across the nation around the time of the opening of the new Parliament House in May 1988 and the Queen's visit, Olive Brown recognised the need to set up a temporary medical service at the Tent Embassy site and enlisted the support of Dr Sally Creasey, Carolyn Patterson (registered nurse/midwife), Margaret McCleod and other volunteers to assist. Thus Winnunga was created.

From this transient beginning, formed by the movement of people, Winnunga became a permanent entity, taking up residence in the back rooms of Shortcuts, a youth support centre in the city. From 1989 to 1990, Winnunga ran a clinic twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday mornings) and on Saturday mornings. The current Winnunga Medical Director, Peter Sharp, began work at Winnunga in 1989. Other staff worked as volunteers. The then ACT Minister for Health, Wayne Berry, was shocked by its accommodation in a visit to the service in 1989. In 1990 he was able to provide a small amount of funding.

By January 1990 the service began full-time operations. In 1991 the clinic was operating out of the Griffin Centre, from 1998-2004 in Ainslie and is today located in Boolimba Crescent, Narrabundah. While the centre has struggled to gain adequate funding and resources, and to keep up with an increasing demand for its services, it has persevered despite the challenges.

Olive Brown's vision of a community empowered to know and own information about itself, therefore enabling self-determined planning and decision making is central to Winnunga's fabric and drive. In Chief Investigator Michele Moloney's dedication to "'Bumpa Shooters' A study of the smoking habits among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of the ACT region", she noted Brown's conviction that health care needed to be reintroduced as a process in Aboriginal people's lifestyles: 'That not only do we need to have access to Aboriginal services, but we also need to be at the forefront of identifying the issues and developing the processes which will ensure wellness and holistic health.' It was this fundamental component which she saw as Aboriginal people's right to self-reliance and self determination at community, family and individual levels.

Olive Brown's frenetic activity as adviser, helper and friend drove her to help set up the Aboriginal Children's Service, the *Murralingabung* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Drug and Alcohol Organisation, and be active as a member of the executive of the Diocesan Pastoral Council of the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn for two years, and a member of the Council for four.

Her active commitment to the ACT Aboriginal community and beyond continued until the end of her life. As her sister Kaye Mundine noted in her obituary, it said a lot about the pace and nature at which Olive Brown lived her life that it ended while meeting with friends early on a Sunday morning, 31 January 1993.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Resource
Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service,
http://www.winnunga.org.au

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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