

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2286

Williams, Loris Elaine

(1949 - 2005)

Born	19490916, Brisbane Queensland Australia
Died	20050828, Brisbane Queensland Australia
Occupation	Aboriginal rights activist, Archivist

Summary

Loris Williams was a passionate advocate for the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to use archives as a means of reconnecting with their family, country and Indigenous identity. She was the first Aboriginal person from Queensland to gain professional archival qualifications and only the second Aboriginal person to do so. She spent the last 11 years of her life helping Indigenous people to reconnect with their Indigenous identity and encouraging her professional colleagues, non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous, to recognize the significance of this work.

Details

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Loris Williams was strongly connected to her Aboriginal heritage through her mother Agnes (nee Bell) who was from the Birra Gubba people of North Queensland; through her father Cyril who was from the Mulinjali people from Beaudesert south of Brisbane, and; through her personal and professional commitment to the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as well.

She grew up in Brisbane in a strong family. She began work as a machinist and then joined Telstra as a telephone operator. At the age of 42, having been with Telstra for over 25 years, she was made redundant.

She returned to study at the University of Technology Sydney and graduated Bachelor of Education with a major in Aboriginal Studies. In 1999 she commenced part time study for a graduate diploma in archives and records at Edith Cowan University graduating in 2004.

In 1994 she began work assisting researchers at the Indigenous Resources Unit of the State Library of Queensland. In 1998 she moved to the Community and Personal Histories Section of the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (DATSIP). Part of her working week was spent at the Queensland State Archives helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients to trace their family and community through the records. Apart from a short secondment to the State Library of Queensland in 2002, she remained with the Community and Personal Histories Section until she passed away.

Loris was an early member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN) and organized the 1999 conference in Brisbane. She served as President of ATSILIRN in 2000.

In 1999 she told the story of her own family's journey through the archives at the Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) Brisbane Conference and spoke of the 'emotional rollercoaster' that involved. She urged archivists to be aware of both the great happiness and the angry despair which Aboriginal people could experience as they traced their identity and she called on archivists to allocate the resources for indexing Indigenous records so that people could readily access their precious stories.

Loris was a member of the Indigenous Advisory Committees of both the Queensland Museum and the State Library of Queensland.

In 2003 she was involved in the National Indigenous Access to Records Workshop held in Brisbane.

She also gave a paper which had been prepared by Kirsten Thorpe , Aboriginal Liaison Officer, State Records New South Wales at the Archives and Records Education Stakeholders (ARES) Forum. This led to the Forum recognizing that the education of Indigenous archivists was a critical issue for the profession. In 2004 and 2005 Loris was Convenor of the ASA Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group (IISIG). Under her leadership the group produced the brochure 'Pathways to your future and our past: careers for Indigenous peoples in archives and records' to encourage Indigenous people to train as archivists and records managers.

Loris played a significant role in the concurrent official celebrations of the 40th anniversary of suffrage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – both women and men – and the celebration of the centenary of women's suffrage. She researched and prepared fact sheets which were made available on the web and in hard copy and spoke about the history of Indigenous suffrage at conferences. The artist Judy Watson was inspired by Loris' work to create her artist's book 'a preponderance of aboriginal blood' on the theme of Aboriginal suffrage.

In 2005 she provided an Indigenous community perspective on access to archives at the ASA's 30th anniversary seminar 'Made, kept and used'.

In 2006 the ASA held the inaugural Loris Williams Memorial lecture to commemorate her life and work. The lecture which will have a theme relating to Indigenous records will be held annually at the Society's conference.

The State Library of Queensland has named a room in honour of Loris and ATSILIRN has announced that an annual grant to assist an Indigenous member to attend their conference will be set up in her memory.

Loris' dignity and strength is warmly remembered within the archival profession, by the community she served and no doubt by the many Indigenous clients she helped. She was an effective advocate for her people's right to have access to archives as part of a service which met their need for support on their journey into a difficult past and a mentor and friend to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

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