Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE4783

University House Ladies Drawing Room, Australian National University

(1956 - 2002)

Born	19560101
Died	20021231
Occupation	Social organisation, Voluntary organisation

Summary

The Ladies Drawing Room was formed in 1956 to organise social functions for women members and the wives of members of University House. The group took its name from the Room so dedicated in University House, ANU, Canberra. The Ladies Drawing Room enabled creation of a community of likeminded women which resulted in lifelong friendships, and provided intellectual stimulation in a city which was initially small and lacking in social or cultural facilities.

The Ladies Drawing Room continued to hold regular lunches and other social activities for nearly 50 years until the age of remaining members, and lack of new membership, caused the group to wind up its affairs in 2003. Its story is a microcosm of the social history of the women associated with the University who played a significant but typically discreet part in creating the community and culture of the ANU.

Details

When University House was opened at the Australia's National University (ANU) in 1954 Canberra was a small city of 28,000 people with few social facilities. Rented houses were often too small for entertaining, and opportunities were rare for women to meet up with other women away from their home duties and childcare responsibilities. In 1954 the Governing Body of University House decided to help offset those limitations by dedicating a room – named the Ladies Drawing Room – for the use of women members of the House and, mostly, the wives of academic members.

Mrs (later Lady) Mary Melville, wife of the Vice Chancellor, convened a meeting of interested women in July 1956 which created an Ladies Drawing Room organising committee. Its membership reflected the ANU's structure with representation from each Research School and the Administration and, after 1960 (when the ANU amalgamated with the Canberra University College) the School of General Studies. The Committee's membership over the next 47 years reads as a Who's Who of the wives of the University's creators and leaders.

The first gathering (a morning tea) attracted nearly 80 women. By the early 1960s a pattern was established of monthly formal lunches, usually with a speaker. The events were both social and intellectual. Early speakers were members of the Drawing Room – e.g. Rosalie Gascoigne, Honor Maude and Nancy Parker. Later on they were drawn from elsewhere in the University and beyond, and covered an eclectic range of topics.

The Ladies Drawing Room enjoyed its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s as the ANU expanded. University House was central to the University community overall and the Ladies Drawing Room was considered the most club-like aspect of the House. The Ladies Drawing Room came to play a significant part in its members' lives – lifelong friendships were formed which continued long after retirement. The longevity and loyalty of the membership indicates the significant role the Ladies Drawing Room played in their lives. Many served as Convenors or Committee members for five or more years; a few for many more – e.g. Pat Back (14), Lena Karmel (15), Belle Low (10), Jean Moran (20), and Joy Wilson (16).

By the 1980s many of the University's early academic staff were retiring and the membership of the Ladies Drawing Room became both older and smaller. Canberra's social amenities and cultural hubs had grown apace; younger women tended to work and had little free time. In the 1990s members of the ANU Club for Women (founded in 1961 with a considerable overlap in membership with the Ladies Drawing Room) joined in some luncheons but by the end of the decade it was clear that the Ladies Drawing Room had served its purpose and the ladies wound up the organisation in March 2003. However, in recognition of the importance of the group in the life of University House and ANU more broadly, the House itself instituted a program of three reunions a year which continues to attract some 30 women.

Published resources

Resource
ANU Club for Women Inc,
http://clubforwomen.anu.edu.au/

Book
University House as They Experienced It: A History 1954-2004, Waterhouse, Jill, 2004

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

Archival resources

Australian National University Archives
Research Material for the 50th anniversary history of University House

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Digital resources



Title: Planting a Japanese maple, gift of Ladies Drawing Room to Univers
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