



## Lowitja O'Donoghue, celebrated campaigner for Aboriginal Australians, dies aged 91

A member of the stolen generations, the Yankunytjatjara leader was only reunited with her mother through a chance meeting 30 years later

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Lowitja O'Donoghue, a Yankunytjatjara leader and activist, has died at the age of 91.

The Lowitja Institute announced her death on Sunday. A pioneering leader in Aboriginal advancement and recognition campaigns, O'Donoghue was a "formidable leader who was never afraid to listen, speak and act", her family said.

"Yankunytjatjara woman, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG, aged 91, died peacefully on Sunday 4 February 2024 on Kurna Country in Adelaide, South Australia, with her immediate family by her side," Deb Edwards, O'Donoghue's niece, said in the statement.

"Our Auntie and Nana was the matriarch of our family, whom we have loved and looked up to our entire lives. We adored and admired her when we were young and have grown up full of never-ending pride as she became one of the most respected and influential Aboriginal leaders this country has ever known."

The prime minister, Anthony Albanese, paid tribute to O'Donoghue as "one of the most remarkable leaders this country has ever known".

"As we mourn her passing, we give thanks for the better Australia she helped make possible," he said in a statement.

"Dr O'Donoghue had an abiding faith in the possibility of a more united and reconciled Australia. It was a faith she embodied with her own unceasing efforts to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to bring about meaningful and lasting reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia."

Like other members of the stolen generations, O'Donoghue was taken from her family and home at a young age and raised in an institution. From the age of two she was brought up by missionaries at the Colebrook home for half-caste children. She was born on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands at Granite Downs station in SA but did not know her birthdate. Missionaries assigned her the birthday of 1 August 1932.

By the age of 16 O'Donoghue was employed as a domestic servant in Victor Harbour in SA before campaigning to be allowed to pursue nursing training.

She became the first Aboriginal person to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide hospital, the first Aboriginal person to be named a Companion of the Order of Australia, and the first to address the UN general assembly.

She campaigned for the recognition of Aboriginal peoples in the 1967 referendum and went on to work with the Prime Minister Paul Keating as a lead negotiator on the Native Title Act after the 1992 Mabo decision.

A chance meeting with an aunt and uncle who recognised O'Donoghue in the SA town of Coober Pedy in the late 1960s led to her being reunited with her birth mother, Lily, more than 30 years after they were torn apart. She told the Australian Biography project that the moment had brought "new meaning and a whole new dimension" to her life and a resolve to devote herself to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In 1984 she was named Australian of the Year and in 2005 was honoured with a papal award, becoming Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great.

She was the founding chair of the National Aboriginal Conference in 1977 and, in 1990, the first chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

“Aunty Lowitja dedicated her entire lifetime of work to the rights, health, and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,” Edwards said.

“We thank and honour her for all that she has done – for all the pathways she created, for all the doors she opened, for all the issues she tackled head-on, for all the tables she sat at and for all the arguments she fought and won.”

O’Donoghue was the first Aboriginal woman named in the Order of Australia in 1976, and later a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1999 – both for her commitment to public service and leadership in Indigenous affairs.

Naidoc described her as “one of the great and sustaining forces for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”.

The Lowitja Institute, dedicated to advancing Indigenous health outcomes, was named in her honour in 2010.

Her family on Sunday gave permission for O’Donoghue’s name and image to be used.

The Indigenous Australians minister, Linda Burney, paid tribute to O’Donoghue as a “fearless and passionate advocate”.

“Australia mourns the passing of Dr Lowitja O’Donoghue and it is with great sadness and love that I pay tribute to her remarkable legacy,” she said.

“Throughout her career in public life, Dr O’Donoghue displayed enormous courage, dignity and grace. She dedicated her life to improving the lives of Indigenous Australians and deserves our deepest respect and gratitude ...

“She was a truly extraordinary leader. Lowitja was not just a giant for those of us who knew her, but a giant for our country.”

Pat Dodson, the former Labour senator known as the father of reconciliation, said: “This is a sad day for first peoples of this nation. We have lost an extraordinary person of great courage and strength.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/feb/05/i-asked-lowitja-odonoghue-why-shed-lived-the-life-she-had-she-replied-because-i-loved-my-people>

Dodson said O’Donoghue’s leadership in the battle for justice was legendary.

“Hers was a strong voice, and her intelligent navigation for our rightful place in a resistant society resulted in many of the privileges we enjoy today. She will be forever remembered in our hearts.”

Noel Pearson said O’Donoghue “was our greatest leader of the modern era”.

“She was full of grace and fortitude. She was the definition of courage and never lapsed in her principles. Her love and loyalty to our people across the country was boundless,” he said.

“We owed her an unrepayable debt for the sacrifices she made while she lived. Her memory will never be forgotten and her legacy will endure.”

**SOURCE: The Guardian 4/2/24**