

Biography and Achievements
DR LOWITJA O'DONOGHUE AC CBE DSG
1932 - 2024

1932

Born 1 August 1932 - De Rose Hill, on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, in north-west South Australia.

(Lowitja's birth was not registered, her approximate birth date and birthplace were given by missionaries Ruby Hyde and Delia Rutter)

Mother - Lily Woodforde (Yankunytjatjara/Pitjantjatjara), died 1979.

Father - Thomas O'Donoghue (Irish), died 1960.

1934

September - aged two, removed from her mother Lily along with her older sisters Violet and Amy, and taken to a United Aborigines Mission home, 'Colebrook Children's Home' at Quorn in the Flinders Ranges, South Australia. Lowitja's two elder siblings Eileen and Geoffrey had already been placed at Colebrook Home in 1926, eight years earlier. The missionaries gave her the name 'Lois.'

1938 - 1943

Attended Quorn Primary School, South Australia.

1944 - 1945

Moved from Quorn to United Aborigines Mission's new Colebrook Training Home at Eden Hills, Adelaide. Attended primary school at Eden Hills, completing Grade 7 in 1944 and received her Certificate in 1945.

1946 - 1948

Attended Unley Girls Technical High School, South Australia, received her Intermediate Leaving Certificate in 1948.

1948 - 1949

Left Colebrook Home on her seventeenth birthday and moved to Waitpinga, South Australia to work as a domestic servant for the Swincer family, caring for their children. The children fondly referred to Lowitja as 'Lo Lo.'

1950 - 1953

At the age of eighteen, commenced as a trainee nurse at the South Coast District Hospital in Victor Harbor, South Australia. Lowitja completed her training in June 1952 and became a staff member whilst seeking training placement to become a fully qualified nurse.

1953

Denied entry to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital due to discrimination and racism, joined the South Australian Aborigines Advancement League and lobbied then South Australian Premier, Sir Thomas Playford, for his support.

1954

January - twenty-two-year-old Lowitja entered the Royal Adelaide Hospital in Adelaide, South Australia as the first Aboriginal trainee nurse.

1958 - 1961

1958 - completed training and received her nurse's certificate. Lowitja received triple certificate qualifications in nursing, midwifery, and mental health. In 1959, she was promoted to Charge Sister before resigning from the hospital in December 1961.

1962

February - travelled to Assam, India to work for the Australian Baptist Missionary Society as a missionary relief nurse. Lowitja was believed to be the first Aboriginal person to travel abroad in such a role. In December 1962, she returned to Adelaide having been quickly evacuated due to Communist China's advance into India.

Commenced work at the Repatriation Hospital in Belair, South Australia, where she met her future husband Gordon Plumer Smart for the first time.

1964

Joined the Aboriginal Progress Association in South Australia.

1965

The late Mrs Gladys Elphick MBE formed the [Council of Aboriginal Women of South Australia](#) with co-founders Lowitja O'Donoghue (Secretary) and the late Maude Tongerie AM.

1967

At the age of thirty-five and after thirty-three years of separation, Lowitja finally reunited with her mother Lily at Oodnadatta, South Australia. It was a bittersweet meeting as Lily did not speak English and Lowitja did not speak Yankunytjatjara. They spent five days together along with oldest sister Eileen who accompanied Lowitja. In the years that followed, Lily travelled south on the train to Adelaide and met her other three children, and her grandchildren.

1967 - 1972

Commenced work as a Nurse/Welfare Officer for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, South Australia working at Coober Pedy, Oodnadatta, the APY Lands and Point McLeay.

Actively campaigned for the 1967 Referendum which was successful in changing the Constitution for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be counted as part of the population, and for the Commonwealth to make laws for them.

1970 - 1972

Became a member of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement (ALRM) in South Australia.

1973 - 1976

Promoted from the South Australian branch of the Department for Aboriginal Affairs to a Federal role as Senior Liaison Officer, Canberra, and Adelaide.

Joined the newly formed National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC).

1975

Promoted to Regional Director for the South Australian branch of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (the first Aboriginal person to be promoted to this level).

1976

Invested as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for service to the Aboriginal community - the first Aboriginal woman inducted into the new Australian honours system.

Appointed as Board Director, Aboriginal Hostels Limited.

Resigned from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs over continued frustrations with the bureaucracy in Canberra.

1978

Appointed founding Chairperson of the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC).

1979

Married Gordon Plumer Smart on 5 January at Pichi Richi Pass in Quorn, South Australia.

Lowitja's mother Lily Woodforde died on 17 October at Port Augusta Hospital, South Australia and was buried in the sandhills of Oodnadatta.

1980

Appointed as Board Director, Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC).

1981

Appointed Chairperson, Aboriginal Hostels Limited Board (resigned as Chair when appointed to ATSIC, however remained as a Board Director until 1996).

1983

Invested as Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for service to the Aboriginal community.

1984

Named Australian of The Year by Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

Governor-General Sir Ninian Stephen opened Lois O'Donoghue Hostel at Port Augusta, South Australia.

1989 - 1990

Appointed as the final Chairperson, Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC).

1990 - 1996

Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Gerry Hand announced Lowitja as the inaugural Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). ATSIC was the Commonwealth statutory authority, set up under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* to include Indigenous people in the processes of government affecting their lives.

1991

Husband Gordon Smart died on 27 June of a heart attack at Quorn, South Australia.

1992

Became the first Aboriginal person to address the United Nations General Assembly in New York, speaking at the launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People.

1993

The Keating Government passed the historic Native Title Act which saw Lowitja widely commended for her leadership in spearheading the lengthy and difficult negotiations with the Commonwealth. Keating later called Lowitja "a remarkable Australian leader."

Received her first two honorary doctorates, Lowitja was honoured with nine honorary doctorates from Australian universities during her lifetime.

1996

Resigned as Chairperson of ATSIC in December and replaced by Gatjil Djerrkura.

Left Canberra to return home to South Australia.

Delivered a final address to the National Press Club in Canberra in January of the following year.

Named as a possible contender as Australia's next Governor-General to replace Bill Hayden.

Appointed inaugural Chairperson of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health.

1997

1 June - At the last Colebrook Home in Eden Hills, Adelaide, Lowitja unveiled a bronze statue, *The Fountain of Tears*, recognising the 'tjitji tjuta' - the Colebrook children. This significant moment followed the release of the '*Bringing Them Home*' report, which documented the history and effects of forced removal policies on Indigenous children, families, and communities. The report was tabled in Federal Parliament on 26 May 1997.

1998

Declared an Australian National Living Treasure.

Reclaimed and permanently adopted her traditional name, Lowitja.

Appointed Chairperson, National Indigenous Advisory Committee of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG).

Became Patron of the National Sorry Day Committee.

1999

Invested as Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) for public service through leadership to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the areas of human rights and social justice, particularly as Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

1999 cont.

13 October - Travelled to the United Kingdom as a delegation of five pro-republic Aboriginal leaders who met with Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.

2000

June - the Sydney Olympics torch relay commenced from Uluru in the centre of Australia. Lowitja was torch bearer 'Number 11' and proudly carried the Olympic flame on Anangu country.

Invested as a Member of the Olympic Order for service to the National Indigenous Advisory Committee of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG).

Appointed Professional Fellow of Flinders University, South Australia.

2002

Martin Luther King III, son of legendary civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jnr visited Australia on a charity fundraising tour during National Reconciliation Week. Lowitja collaborated closely with him throughout the tour which aimed to aid funding of community education and development of Indigenous leadership.

2003

Co-wrote the book 'LOWITJA' with Karen Jennings and Joan Cunningham, as a primary school education resource.

2004

Appointed Advisor to the Premier of South Australia Mike Rann, on matters relating to the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands.

2006

Invested as Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great (DSG), a Papal Honour by Pope John Paul II.

Renowned South Australian artist Robert Hannaford AM painted Lowitja's portrait, commissioned by the [National Portrait Gallery](#), Canberra.

2007

The inaugural Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration, presented by the Don Dunstan Foundation, took place at University of Adelaide's Bonython Hall, with Lowitja as the Orator. Titled "[Black and White Together, We Shall Overcome Some Day.](#)", her address celebrated the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum.

2008

13 February – Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal [National Apology to the Stolen Generations](#), on behalf of the nation at Parliament House in Canberra. Prime Minister Rudd sought Lowitja's counsel in preparation for the Apology and she was amongst a group of Aboriginal people invited to sit in the House to witness the historic moment.

May - announced her retirement from public life at St Peter's Anglican Cathedral in Adelaide.

2009

Honoured with the NAIDOC Lifetime Achievement Award.

2010

January - Lowitja Institute established as Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research institute. As its Patron, Lowitja agreed to have the Lowitja Institute named after her, and entrusted her spirit and energy, her values, and priorities to the organisation.

2016

Making a welcome return to public speaking, Lowitja delivered the [opening address of the Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference](#) in Melbourne, Victoria.

2017

Featured in the Australia Post "Australian Legends" limited edition stamp series, a set of \$1 stamps of Lowitja, Professor Tom Calma AO, and Dr Yunupingu.

2020

The authorised biography '*Lowitja*,' written by Stuart Rintoul published by Allen and Unwin.

2022

1 August - Lowitja Institute proudly announced the [establishment of the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation](#), in honour of the significant day, Lowitja's 90th birthday. [The Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation](#) acknowledges, recognises, and preserves the extraordinary legacy of Dr O'Donoghue's dedicated lifetime of work, by delivering leadership programs and educational opportunities to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to lead with and for their communities.

2023

29 May - Australia's 31st Prime Minister, the Hon Anthony Albanese delivered the [17th annual Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration, "A Moment To Unite"](#), on Kurna Country, presented by the Don Dunstan Foundation.

2024

4 February - Yankunytjatjara woman [Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG, died peacefully aged 91 years](#), on Kurna Country, South Australia.

8 March - the South Australian Government honoured Lowitja on International Women's Day with a [State Memorial Service](#) at St Peter's Cathedral on Kurna Country, South Australia.

26 November - posthumously awarded the UNESCO Adelaide – Lifetime Achievement Award, to recognise her lifetime contribution to the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, leading to significant outcomes in health, education, political representation, land rights, and reconciliation.

November - the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM) announced the establishment of the Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue Leadership Award.

November - SA Health announced the establishment of [the Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue Award for Excellence in Aboriginal Health](#).

2025

4 February - National Library of Australia announced the digitisation of the [speeches of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue](#) as accessible through Trove – Australia's free online research portal.

19 March - became the first Aboriginal person to receive a building naming honour. Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra opened the [Lowitja O'Donoghue Cultural Centre](#) within the Kambri cultural precinct of the university campus. Lowitja was the first Aboriginal person to receive an honorary doctorate (Law) from ANU in 1995.

4 June - the [inaugural exhibition "LOWITJA – A Life of Leadership and Legacy"](#), opened at The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre's Kerry Packer Civic Gallery, at the University of South Australia. The exhibition portrayed the life and influence of Lowitja, a powerful testament to the lasting impact of her lifetime's work.

June - Lowitja Institute presented the [inaugural Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue Lifetime Achievement Award](#) to Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka woman, Dr Aunty Mary Graham, and Yawuru elder Patrick Dodson.

2025 cont.

1 August - Lowitja Institute and Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation announced that 1 August will be formally recognised annually as '[Lowitja O'Donoghue Day](#)'. The annual celebration honours Lowitja's life and legacy, whilst also commemorating her birthday and the anniversary of the establishment of her Foundation.

2026

January - received an [entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography](#) for the Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography project. The entry was researched by Natalie Harkin and Denise Noack in consultation with Deb Edwards, Head of Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation.

2 June - a statue of Lowitja by her portrait artist Robert Hannaford AM, was unveiled on Kurna Country, South Australia. It is the [first of six statues of leading Aboriginal South Australians](#) to be built in the CBD.

Patronage – Current and Past

Current Co-Patron Lowitja Institute

Past Patron Don Dunstan Foundation, Congress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM), The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, Reconciliation South Australia, Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA)

Additional Awards

1982 - Advance Australia Award

1992 - SA Great Award

2003 - Centenary Medal

2005 - South Australian Nursing and Midwifery Recognition Award, South Australia Government

2024 - Gladys Elphick Perpetual Lifetime Achievement Award

2024 – UNESCO Adelaide Lifetime Achievement Award

Honorary Doctorates and Fellowships

1993 Honorary Doctorate: Murdoch University, Western Australia

1993 Honorary Doctorate: University of South Australia

1995 Honorary Doctorate: Australia National University, ACT

1995 Honorary Fellowship: Royal College of Nursing, Australia

1996 Honorary Doctorate: Queensland University of Technology, Queensland

1996 Honorary Doctorate: Flinders University, South Australia

1998 Honorary Fellowship: Royal Australasian College of Physicians

2000 Honorary Professional Fellow: Flinders University, South Australia

2001 Honorary Doctorate: Notre Dame University, Broome, Western Australia

2003 Honorary Doctorate: Melbourne University, Victoria

2014 Honorary Doctorate: University of Sydney, New South Wales

2021 Honorary Doctorate: University of Adelaide, South Australia

Committees, Boards and Professional Organisations (Past)

Member: Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

Member: Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

Member: Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation

Member: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander War Memorial Committee, South Australia

Board Member: National Australia Day Council

Board Member: Order of Australia Council

Board Member: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

www.lowitja.org.au/lowitja-foundation/