

LOWITJA – A LIFE OF LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY

Inaugural exhibition portraying the life and influence of
Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG
to be held on Kurna Country in Adelaide – June and July 2025



On February 4, 2025, the first anniversary of the passing of **Dr Lowitja O Donoghue AC CBE DSG**, her life and legacy will be commemorated with the announcement of an inaugural exhibition in her honour.

Dr O Donoghue, a Yankunytjatjara woman and one of Australia's most respected and prominent Aboriginal leaders, passed away peacefully at the age of 91 on Kurna Country, Adelaide, in her home state of South Australia.

Described by her associates and colleagues as, *'the greatest Aboriginal leader of the modern era'*, *'a powerful and unrelenting advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'*, and *'an outstanding leader and visionary'*, Dr Lowitja Donoghue left behind a nation that are still mourning the loss of *'a leader's leader'* and *'a national living treasure.'* The outpouring of love, admiration and respect came from people of diverse backgrounds from Australia and beyond, due to Dr O'Donoghue's lifetime of transformational work for the rights, education, health, and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples of the world over.

At her State memorial service on 8 March 2024 at St Peter's Cathedral on Kurna Country, **Prime Minister Anthony Albanese** paid tribute to her legacy, describing her as *'one of the great rocks around which the river of our history has gently bent.'* First Nations communities far and wide mourned their matriarch and significant elder, who had worked tirelessly for them, *'because I loved my people.'*

One year on, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue's remarkable life and lasting impact will be remembered and honoured in an inaugural exhibition portraying her most iconic, triumphant, and heartbreaking moments from childhood, a career in health, Indigenous activism, high-profile leadership, and stellar career in Australian Aboriginal Affairs.

The exhibition titled '**LOWITJA - A Life of Leadership and Legacy**' will be held at the Kerry Packer Civic Gallery managed by The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, University of South Australia in Adelaide, from 4 June to 25 July 2025. The exhibition is proudly presented by The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre, in partnership with the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation and Lowitja Institute, with the support of principal sponsor, the Government of South Australia.

An existing connection to the Hawke Centre, creates a special union for the presentation of this inaugural exhibition. Dr O'Donoghue was a longtime friend and Patron of the Hawke Centre and had a close professional and personal relationship with **the late Hon Bob Hawke AC**, the former Prime Minister of Australia.

Bob Hawke presented Dr O'Donoghue with her 1984 Australian of the Year Award and throughout the years, their respect and admiration for each other never waned. The former Prime Minister, born in South Australia, greatly valued the esteemed Dr O'Donoghue, who was born at De Rose Hill on the APY Lands (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara), before she was removed from her mother at the age of two and taken to Colebrook Children's Home in South Australia's Flinders Ranges.

Throughout decades working in health and Aboriginal Affairs, determinedly devoting her life to the betterment of her people, Dr O'Donoghue collected and retained landmark reports, images, video and audio footage, unique memorabilia, papers and certificates, which now form part of her large personal collection of historical archives housed within Special Collections at the National Library of Australia on Ngunnawal Country in Canberra, ACT.

Head of the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation, Dr O'Donoghue's niece **Deb Edwards**, shares a vision for ensuring that the rare, deep and raw history contained within Dr O'Donoghue's collection is drawn upon to educate present and future generations with bold truth-telling through the life story of a strong-minded young girl whose experiences shaped her into a leader who walked tall, unwaveringly and compassionately.

"Dr O'Donoghue was a trailblazing Aboriginal woman who was told she would never amount to anything. Throughout an exceedingly difficult early life, she evolved into a person with incredible internal strength, whose main aim was to always fight for justice and a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," Ms Edwards said.

“Her meticulous diligence and desire to ‘do things properly’ resulted in the existence of this collection, which holds such a wealth of information about the history of Aboriginal Affairs in Australia. Through the Lowitja O’Donoghue Foundation, my Aunt entrusted me to carry forward her legacy and this exhibition is the perfect occasion to remember and honour her a year after her passing, whilst also providing an educational opportunity for school groups, Aboriginal community and professional groups, corporate and community organisations and the broader general public to learn more about an extraordinary South Australian Aboriginal woman whose notable achievements were recognised globally.”

Dr O’Donoghue’s pioneering achievements included being:

- * the first Aboriginal person permitted to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, who then obtained triple certificate qualifications in nursing, midwifery, and mental health
- * the first Aboriginal woman invested as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM)
- * appointed the inaugural Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)
- * the first Aboriginal person to address the United Nations General Assembly
- * 1984 Australian of the Year, invested into the Companion of the Order of Australia (AC), named an Australian National Living Treasure
- * Awarded Commander of the British Empire (CBE), Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great (DSG – a Papal Honour by Pope John Paul II)

She also played a key role in negotiating and drafting Native Title legislation in Australia that arose from the High Court’s historic Mabo decision.

The exhibition content will feature vision of a selection of Dr O’Donoghue’s landmark speeches and media interviews, historic items of personal clothing and awards, items of cultural and political significance, newspaper clippings and quotes, and never seen before photographs, letters, and reports.

Themes within the exhibition will include Stolen Generations, Nursing and Health, Aboriginal Affairs, ATSIC, Significant Achievements, Family, and Indigenous Peoples.

Jacinta Thompson, Executive Director of The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre said, “This exhibition celebrates the remarkable life of the late Dr Lowitja O Donoghue, a true pioneer and tireless advocate for justice, health, and equality. It is an honour for The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre to host this exhibition, given Dr O Donoghue’s deep and enduring connection between the late Bob Hawke and University of South Australia. As a member of the Advisory Committee of the Aboriginal Task Force, she played a key role in

ensuring that one of the University's core functions would be to provide education programs that meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

"Through her extraordinary legacy, Dr O'Donoghue has inspired generations, not only within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but across the wider Australian community - fostering greater understanding, respect, and reconciliation."

The exhibition coincides with the end of 2025 National Reconciliation Week (27 May–3 June) and aligns with the Lowitja Institute 4th International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference at the Adelaide Convention Centre (16-19 June), and 2025 National NAIDOC Week (6-13 July).

Hosted Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation Talk sessions will be available for ticketed group bookings, details will be announced soon.

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LOWITJA – A Life of Leadership and Legacy

The life and influence of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG

Wednesday 4 June 2025 to Friday 25 July 2025

Kerry Packer Civic Gallery

The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre,
Hawke Building Level 3, UniSA City West Campus
55 North Terrace, Karna Country, Adelaide SA
(Corner North Terrace and Fenn Place)

Opening Hours – Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm
Closed on weekends and public holidays

FREE ENTRY

For more information, visit: [The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre](#)



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NOTES FOR EDITORS

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**For more information about the late Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG
and the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation:**

[Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation](#)

For more information about Lowitja Institute:

[Lowitja Institute](#)

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