

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE1895

Mackenzie, Olwyn Bernice

(- 2005)

Nationality Australian

Died 6 May, 2005, Coffs Harbour New South Wales Australia

Occupation Political candidate

Summary

Olwyn Bernice Mackenzie was Alderman in the Ryde Municipal Council from 1968-71 and in the Bellingen Shire Council from 1985-91. In between these two stints in local politics she ran as an Independent in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly elections for Eastwood in 1971.

Details

Olwyn Bernice Mackenzie was born in Petersham, Sydney on 25 September 1920, the eldest of three daughters of Gwen and Thomas Arkinstall. Her father abandoned his wife and children at the start of the Depression and the girls were brought up by their mother to struggle and care for others. Olwyn was encouraged by her musical mother and developed a talent for singing and piano at the Conservatorium of Music, where she was a contemporary of June Bronhill and Lily and Olga Kolos. She studied under Isolde Hill, daughter of Alfred and Miri Hill, the well known Australian composers.

In 1937, she and her sister, Carol, joined the communist-led New Theatre League and subsequently the Communist Party. She remained a member until the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, but she had long disapproved of the Party's attitude to women's issues.

Having left school early, she studied for her Leaving Certificate as a private study candidate and achieved it in 1950. She went on to graduate from the University of Sydney, Bachelor of Arts with honours in linguistics and social anthropology.

Olwyn Mackenzie was the first woman to be elected to the Ryde Municipal Council and made a substantial contribution to the Council's efforts to clean up the Parramatta River. She was elected to the Bellinger Shire Council in 1985 – 91 and was Deputy President for one term. She was Vice President of the Country Public Libraries Association, President of the Northern Zone in 1991, Member of the Bellinger River Hospital Board, on the Management Committee of the Bellinger River Senior Citizens Centre and the Bellinger River Catchment Management Committee. She was Chairperson of the Gumbaingirr Aboriginal and Community Liaison Group in 1993 and was one of the driving forces behind the 1993 historic 40-kilometre "Back to Bellinger" walk over the Bowraville mountain, which helped to heal the scars left by the expulsion of the Aboriginal community in the 1920s.

In the 1990s she lived in the Potts Point area of Sydney and was Chairperson of the Kings Cross towards 2000 committee, a body which focused on making Kings Cross a healthier and safer place. She was also a Member of the National Council of Social Service; helped to establish the NSW Aged Care Alliance; was a member of the Central Sydney Area Health Service Board, the Council on the Ageing, the Kings Cross Community Drug Advisory Team, and helped to establish the Sydney Medically Supervised Injecting Centre. She was State Secretary of the Combined Pensioners' and Superannuants' Association from 1994 to 1996.

She was awarded the medal of the Order of Australia in 2005 for services to the community particularly in the central Sydney Area. When she moved back to the Bellinger area in the late 1990s to be close to family, she remained active, being an executive member of the Board of Warrina Women's and Children's Refuge, Vice President of the Coffs Harbour branch of the Country Women's Association and a member of the Coffs Harbour Committee of Reconciliation Australia.

Olwyn Mackenzie was survived by five of her six children. At her funeral, members of the Gumbaingirr nation performed a smoking ceremony to help her spirit on the way. It was the first time this had been done for a white person in the region's history.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

Putting Skirts on the Sacred Benches: Women Candidates for the New South Wales Parliament, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2006,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/pssb/home.html>

Author Details

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