

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2101

House, Matilda

(1945 -)

Nationality Australian

Born 1 January, 1945, Cowra New South Wales Australia

Occupation Administrator, Artist

Summary

A Ngambri-Ngunnawal elder, Matilda House has a long-established connection to Canberra and its surrounding regions as one of the traditional custodians of the land.

Details

Born near Cowra on Erambie Aboriginal Reserve, House grew up in her grandfather's house on Hollywood Aboriginal Reserve in Yass. She was one of ten children. The Ngambri-Ngannawal family group has been formally recognised by the ACT Government as having historical connections to the Canberra region and surrounds, particularly the region around Namadgi National Park. Black Harry Williams, also known as Ngoobra, House's great-grandfather, and Harry Williams her grandfather, both identified as Ngambri. [1]

While living with her grandfather as a child, she visited the region frequently and listened to his many stories about their ancestral history and country. Where others see Canberra as the nation's capital, descendants such as House see Ngannawal country, with Parliament House built in their 'mother's womb'. [2] House returned to her ancestral country permanently in 1963 and has been actively involved in Indigenous Affairs in the Canberra region since 1967.

Matilda House is the Chair of the Ngannawal Local Aboriginal Land Council in Queanbeyan and the Joint Chair of the Interim Namadgi National Park Committee. As chair of many other Canberra and Queanbeyan Indigenous committees and organisations, and in her role as a Ngannawal representative performing numerous welcoming ceremonies, House is vitally active within the community.

House's long association with Aboriginal justice concerns began when she helped to establish the Aboriginal Legal Service in the 1980s, and has continued more recently through her membership of the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee. [3] Serving on the first ACT Heritage Council, delivering the welcome at 1997's 'Sea of Hands', contributing to the 'Bringing Them Home' report into the Stolen Generations, acting as an ACT honorary ambassador or as one of the original protestors who established the Tent Embassy in 1972, Matilda House is tirelessly involved.

While running for regional council in 2002, House told the Canberra Times that her main interests were Aboriginal history and traditions, and her long term goal was to improve the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community: 'I believe it is possible to work together to respect this land of ours and to achieve justice, equity and unity for all Australians, and that's a journey I'd like to tell my great-grandchildren about in the years to come.' [4]

It seems House's goal has proved both abundantly fruitful and successful. Commenting at a ceremony naming Matilda House the 2006 Canberra Citizen of the Year, Chief Minister Jon Stanhope noted 'It is hard to think of any organisation involving Indigenous interests with which she has not been involved at some time'.

Being awarded the highest recognition that can be bestowed by the Territory upon one of its own is an active testament to House's tremendous impact on Canberra's social, heritage, justice and environment landscape. After receiving a standing ovation from a 400 strong crowd, House, dressed in traditional possum skins, thanked her family, community and ancestors, adding Canberra was the best city in the world. [5]

In 2008 she performed the first 'Welcome to Country' at the opening of the Federal Parliament in Canberra and has continued to perform this role at other official functions.

In 2012 she addressed the protestors at the fortieth anniversary of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, and looked forward to the time when the embassy could perform a more educational role.

Story-telling is a tradition close to House's heart: she believes that, as an elder, she has a responsibility to tell the stories of her people and thereby pass on community identity and heritage to her descendants. Five picture books under the banner 'Tales of Ngambri History' address this desire. Written and illustrated by five local Indigenous families (House, her son Paul and grandchildren Leah, Ruby and Reuben included), the books were distributed throughout the ACT's public primary schools. House firmly believes 'you must have stories of your country. If you don't, you don't belong, no matter where you come from.' [6]

Matilda House has four children and many grandchildren and she enjoys telling them about their ancestors and country through such stories, and also through painting. Just another dimension of House's passion and output, her paintings are exhibited, and one hangs in the ACT Legislative Assembly.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Catalogue

Strong Lines New Directions: an exhibition of prints by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists living and working in Canberra, House, Matilda Williams, 1996

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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>

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