

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Place

Entry ID: AWE4880

Women's House (Canberra Women's Centre)

(1975 - 1994)

Born 1 January, 1975, 3 Lobelia Street, O'Connor Australian Capital Territory

Died 31 December, 1994

Occupation Feminist support service

Summary

For almost 20 years the Women's House in O'Connor was an important feminist space providing support for community based women's groups and organisations. Activities and events at the house reflected the changing shape of the women's movement, both locally and nationally, as well as local women's involvement in broader political campaigns. The House was the first centre for community based women's services in Canberra with Canberra Women's Liberation, Women's Electoral Lobby, the Abortion Counselling Service and the Rape Crisis Counselling Service as the first tenants. Over the years many of the women involved formed significant groups and connections at the House, contributing to the establishment of some of the key women's services in Canberra. Lesbian Line, a telephone support service for women, operated out of the House for a number of years in the late 1980s and early nineties. An even wider range of women's groups used the House for meetings. By the mid 1990s there were more women-specific services established in Canberra, both government and non-government. This meant that the House was being used less often after having provided a critically significant place for a diverse range of Canberra women to meet, work, organise and party.

Details

The history of the Women's House in O'Connor is intimately interconnected with the early years of Women's Liberation in Canberra. When the women of Canberra Women's Liberation secured the house in O'Connor as a rental property from the government in 1975, they had already been meeting at 12 Bremer St, Griffith for a couple of years as well as providing some ad hoc informal services for women. As Julia Ryan noted 'the house is beaut and Ginny Ryan is living there as a caretaker cum housewarmer'. Canberra Women's Liberation regularly met there in the early years.

Women were invited to join what was to be called the Canberra Women's Centre (for \$5) and become involved in the Collective which was responsible for managing the business of the House. In 1978 the Canberra Women's Centre Collective decided to go into print with a newsletter for Canberra women and in May 1978 the first issue of *Wimminews* appeared. For about 15 years *Wimminews* provided important information for Canberra women about upcoming events at the Women's House and around Canberra such as meetings, discussion of feminist issues, art, film, poetry, and it also ran some classifieds for accommodation and services for women.

The following groups met there on a regular basis: Rape Crisis Centre Collective, Abortion Counselling Service, Refuge Rap Group, Lesbian Group, Women's Electoral Lobby, Rape Law Reform Group, Women on Campus Collective, and Women's Radio Collective. A feminist bookshop was set up at the house and the Collective started a Women's Information and Health Counselling Service funded by a grant from the ACT Health Commission.

In 1978 *Wimminews* reported that 'the laundry of the Women's House has undergone a complete metamorphosis and is now the National WEL Communications Office'. There was also a complaint from a neighbour in Lobelia St about 'that noisy mob of women and all their bloody cars' which was resolved through neighbourly communication and compromises about car parking.

From 1979 to the early 1980s the International Women's Day Collective met at the House to organise events to celebrate International Women's Day in Canberra and a Feminist Lawyers Group was also meeting there. Funds to keep the house financially viable were always needed and women were asked to pledge regular donations. Fundraising events were held at the house and a stall at Belconnen Trash and Treasure markets raised money so that in March 1983 the library could be refurbished. In 1983 Women's Salon meetings were held every fortnight at the Women's House with dinner and discussion, and in July an open event was held to raise money for Lesbian Line.

In the mid 1980s the House was also being used by women involved in the actions against American bases and the anti-nuclear movement – the Cockburn Sound Women's Action Group, Women Against Nuclear Energy (WANE), Women for Survival, and the Feminist Anti Nuclear Group (FANG), as well as Women Against Rape in War.

From 1983 to 1985 the committee of Women's House, now referred to as the Women's Centre, were urging women to donate money to the House, to be involved in work to keep the house open and to promote it to women's organisations for meetings and events. In 1984 the House was refurbished and women continued to meet there, with new groups such as the Women and Addiction Group meeting there as well. In October 1984 a group of women (Medea) held an open meeting to discuss the need for 'a women's space run by women, for women to work through emotional and mental health problems'. This service would become what is now Inanna, a service for people who experience homelessness, are living with mental health issues, violence and the effects of trauma.

In 1989, as well as the Abortion Counselling Service and the Women's Electoral Lobby, the 2XX Feminist Broadcasting Collective were meeting there. In May, Chief Minister Rosemary Follett launched the Rape Crisis Centre's 24-hour service at the Centre. In June, there were Saturday night 'Soup Kitchens' for women and WEL held Writing Circles in the kitchen to support women to write letters to politicians. But it was a continuing struggle to get enough women to join up and stay on the committee for the House.

By January 1994, the Women's House had been going for nearly twenty years. A meeting was called by the Canberra Women's Centre Inc. to discuss future plans for the Centre with a plea for women to 'come along and put forward your ideas'. As one of the women involved in the House at the time recollected, the National and ACT WEL moved out, having found premises on the edge of Civic which they liked better than the previous laundry. It had become increasingly difficult to maintain the House financially and it closed not long afterwards.

Published resources

Journal

Wimminews, 1978

Wimminews, 1978

Wimminews, 1978

Wimminews, 1978

Wimminews, 1979

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>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Records of the Women's Electoral Lobby, 1952-2010 \[manuscript\]](#)

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