

## **Celebrating a Palawa trailblazer in Lutruwita in NAIDOC Week - Heather Sculthorpe**

We at Women's Legal Service Tasmania want to celebrate the contributions of women from all walks of life who have contributed to the social fabric of Lutruwita.



We want to use our voice as a women's organisation to recognise and lift the efforts of others into public view. We want to celebrate and reflect on their achievements, to improve the lives of others, particularly through furthering the objectives of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

This week - NAIDOC Week - we shine the spotlight on Heather Sculthorpe, for her dedication to civic leadership and to raising the voices of her people over decades.

Heather has dedicated her working life to challenging and working within a broken system imposed on her people. She has been an extraordinary community leader who has grown the service offerings of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre beyond its initial scope and footprint. She has consistently challenged and fought the system for the benefit of her people.

We want to acknowledge her contribution to shaping Tasmania, and the conversation about Aboriginal rights and the work that still needs to be done towards treaty to redress the dispossession of her people, acknowledging the role we as non-Aboriginal peoples of this land have in that.

Heather demands accountability and redress that sounds in contemporary action. I invite us all, in honouring Heather's accomplishments and work, to pay it forward and reflect on what each of us, as non-Indigenous people, are doing as allies to support the Aboriginal community in Lutruwita.

Through all of her people's struggles for justice, Heather chartered her own path when there were few other women at law school to follow and no other Aborigines in the law in Lutruwita. In doing so, she has created a pathway for other women to follow. She has pushed boundaries and challenged the system every day. In having her voice heard, she has led by example and shown all women what we can do if we set our mind to something.

Not all of her actions have been politically popular, but she still pushed ahead with steely determination. She carved a path for others to follow. She shattered gender and racial stereotypes well before her time. This will be her legacy.

## **About Heather**

Heather Sculthorpe has dedicated her life to advocating for the rights and wellbeing of Tasmania's Aboriginal community and her name is synonymous with strength, resilience, and unwavering commitment to justice. Heather has been a formidable advocate for the recognition and respect of Aboriginal rights, tirelessly working to ensure that the voices of her people are heard and valued.

Throughout her career, Heather has played a pivotal role in various initiatives aimed at addressing the injustices faced by Aboriginal communities. Her work spans across education, health, and social justice, impacting countless lives and inspiring many to join the cause.

In 1982 Heather became the first Tasmanian Aboriginal to obtain a Law Degree from the University of Tasmania. She also has an Honours Degree in Law, an Arts Degree, a Graduate Diploma of Environmental Management and is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

In addition to her formal qualifications and accomplishments, Heather established a career in the administration of Tasmanian Aboriginal organisations and in 2016 was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, a position she still holds. In 2016, in recognition of her outstanding achievements, Heather was listed on The Australian Women's Register.

## **Acknowledgement**

Remembering Palawa men, women and children who lived their lives on these lands before the English invasion. Remembering the Mumirimina who spent time at Kangaroo Bay, down river in this same landscape, on the outskirts of the emerging town after they were pushed off their land, imprisoned on the Furneaux Islands and then had their identity questioned and denied by colonists. It is a questioning that continues today, in breach of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and undermining the rights of community to determine their own peoples.

## **Early work of the AIS and the TAC - in Heather's words**

Heather has been involved in the TAC since its inception. The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre is an Aboriginal community organisation developed in the early 1970s and has been funded by the federal government since 1973. It was incorporated as the Aboriginal Information Service (AIS) in November 1973 and changed its name to Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) in August 1977.

Health and housing were the big needs of the Aboriginal community in the early days of our organisation's existence. Infectious diseases, especially among children, were a significant focus of our work. We weren't funded for that of course. The Social Welfare Department knew best and they decided a 'homemaker service' was most needed for the families removed from Cape Barren Island and relocated into substandard housing in Launceston, Burnie and Hobart. Much of our early work was voluntary and it wasn't until 1973 that we obtained Commonwealth funding for a legal service.

The TAC has become a major provider of services to the Aboriginal community as well as being at the forefront of the political movement for Aboriginal rights. The Centre is now a registered charitable organisation, a registered Training Organisation (the only Aboriginal RTO in the State), a major employer of Aboriginal people with over 200 staff, about three quarters of whom are Aboriginal, and the leader in Aboriginal language and repatriation efforts. The TAC has premises in six locations around the State with workers outposted to the Furneaux islands. For more information: <https://tacinc.com.au/>

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