

11 September 2018

RECOGNITION FOR ABORIGINAL AND REGIONAL WOMEN

Her Place Women's Museum Australia Exhibition

Morwell Library 1–20 October

[#onedayourplinthwillcome](#), the campaign launched in August by Kathy Lette and Annabel Crabb for more statues to commemorate history's 'badass women', should look to Aboriginal women, says **Mary Stuart**, who chairs Her Place Women's Museum Australia.

"Historically, Aboriginal women have been rendered invisible by the double whammy of racism and sexism. However, as this year's NAIDOC campaign, 'Because of Her, We Can', reminded us so powerfully, Aboriginal women have achieved so much, not just within their own communities but within the broader Australian society," she said.

"Her Place is fortunate to feature two amazing Aboriginal women – **Aunty Bess Yarram** and **Alma Thorpe** – in its exhibition at Morwell Library, 1–20 October. Both say they were 'non-persons' until the 1967 referendum but that didn't stop them leaving enduring legacies in Morwell and Gippsland, more generally. Both are in their eighties and still forces to be reckoned with."

Harriet Shing, Member for Eastern Victoria Region, will open the exhibition on Thursday 4 October, 4pm.

Eight women are featured along with Aunty Bess and Alma Thorpe: **Sallie Jones**, co-founder of milk brand Gippsland Jersey; **Pat Bigham AFSM**, pioneering CFA volunteer and poultry farmer from Gruyere in the Yarra Valley; the late **Joan Kirner AC**, Victoria's first female premier; **Susan Alberti AC**, businesswoman and football trailblazer; **Peta Searle**, Head Coach of the Southern Saints, St Kilda's first women's football team; **Halima Mohamed**, Somali community leader; **Alice Pung**, author; and **Deborah Lawrie** FRAeS MAP, Australia's first female commercial pilot.

Seven of the women featured in the exhibition have been inducted onto the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. <http://www.vic.gov.au/women/women-s-leadership/victorian-honour-roll-of-women.html>

The Morwell exhibition will be followed with similar exhibitions in Pakenham and Ballarat.

For each of the profiled women, there is a short biography, video portrait and artefacts.

Aunty Bess, who turned 80 this year, says she is fortunate she wasn't one of the stolen generation and was able to finish high school and train as a nurse. However, that didn't mean she was spared racism and discrimination growing up as a young Noongar woman on a mission in Western Australia.

"My mother was denied entry to hospitals and businesses and that left its mark," Aunty Bess said. "Before the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal people weren't even counted as part of the census – we were lumped in with the flora and fauna".

In 1957 Aunty Bess married Noel Yarram, also from the Noongar nation. Noel joined the army and was posted that year to Malaysia, where Bess had the first of her six children. Noel's last posting was to Sale, where they both became heavily involved in the local community. Bess volunteered for the St Vincent de Paul Society and she and Noel also provided a loving home to vulnerable young people in the region, welcoming many into their ever-growing family.

In 1988 Aunty Bess joined one of the first Aboriginal Community Justice Panels in the state and thereafter was on call 24 hours a day to assist Aboriginal people taken into police custody. When Noel died the following year, she supported the family by working for the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative. She also decided to realise her husband's vision of an Aboriginal corporation. After years of hard work, the Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation grew from a makeshift office in a bedroom to become an incorporated organisation in 1992.

Aunty Bess was influential in securing funding for Ramahyuck and has held several positions on the board. Today the corporation provides health and community services across Gippsland and employs over 280 staff across five communities, including Morwell. It has 9000 clients, including many from a non-Aboriginal background.

“It’s made a big difference in getting Koori kids trained, employed and looking after their health,” Aunty Bess said. “Over the past 19 years, I’ve spent a lot of time working as a volunteer at the prison, in the Koori Court, the Children’s Court and the Magistrates Court, helping people get the support they need so they can turn their lives around and be better parents. One of the kids was nicknamed ‘Trouble’ and he promised me he’d stay out of trouble and he has.”

Being Aboriginal is hard, Aunty Bess says, but being an Aboriginal woman is harder. “It’s been men who have had the voice. It made me even more determined that our children, especially the girls, got a good education. That resolve has paid off with my seven grandchildren as well.”

Aunty Bess’s work has been recognised by a Centenary Medal in 2001 and induction into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2008 and the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll in 2014.

Alma Thorpe declares she was a ‘non-person’ until the 1967 referendum and it helped make her an early political activist. A Gunditjmara woman, Alma was born in working-class Fitzroy in 1935. She left school at age 12 and went to work in a shoe factory.

“Life was tough but my mother kept us together even though we had nothing. Back then, Aboriginal people weren’t allowed to congregate on the street. If we did, the police would pick us up in the paddy wagon and throw us in jail. Australia was a real racist country, no doubt about it, and it’s time we had some truth telling,” she said.

“My Dad, who was non-Aboriginal, was a communist and worked on the railways. We had a lot to do with Father Tucker and the church, the Builders Labourers Federation, and communists who held a lot of concerts, I seem to remember. My mother danced the corroboree at these events.”

Alma was married at 18 and moved to Yallourn where she had seven children and fostered two more. There began her long association with Morwell and the surrounding area.

After separating from her husband, Alma went back to Melbourne with her children in the late 1960s. While working as a barmaid, she became involved in the Aboriginal rights movement — born around Fitzroy's kitchen tables and in its laneways — that was then gaining real momentum. She marched alongside community leaders like Geraldine Briggs and Margaret Tucker. She was further inspired by her mother, who raised money to give proper burials to those who would otherwise end up in unmarked ‘pauper’ graves.

In 1973, Alma was a key figure in the establishment of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) in an old building in Fitzroy's Gertrude Street. She then went on to help establish similar centres in Morwell, Sale, Bairnsdale, Perth and Broome. A childcare service and a youth club and gym grew out of the initiative. The history of the service describes her as the “glue that held the VAHS together. She was the silent worker, not only on a local scene but nationally”.

Alma has been an Elder in Residence at the Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University.

One of the proudest moments in a long life of achievement came last year when Alma watched her eldest granddaughter, Lidia Thorpe, being sworn in as the first Aboriginal member of the Victorian Parliament. Coincidentally, Lidia was born the same year as the VAHS.

***Her Place* exhibition, Morwell Library, 63–65 Elgin Street, Morwell**

1–20 October. Monday-Friday, 10-6; Saturday: 9-12

Forthcoming exhibitions (with different line-ups):

***Her Place* exhibition, Pakenham Library, cnr John & Henry Streets, Pakenham**

24 October – 8 November. Monday-Wednesday, 9-8; Thursday 9-9; Friday 9-8; Saturday 10-4; Sunday 1-4.

***Her Place* exhibition, Eureka Centre, 102 Stawell Street, Ballarat Central**

14 November- 10 December. Monday-Sunday 10-5

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