

25 September 2018

GETTING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION RIGHT

Her Place Women's Museum Australia Exhibition

Pakenham Library 24 October – 11 November

The current turmoil over women's political representation highlights the need for exhibitions that explore – and celebrate – the role of women, says **Mary Stuart**, who chairs Her Place Women's Museum Australia.

"At Federation, Australian women were the first in the world to have the right both to vote and to stand for parliament. Our trailblazing democracy was the envy of the world. Now, the low levels of women's political representation drag down Australia's ranking on the United Nations' Human Development Index. More than 30 nations on the index have a higher share of female political representatives, including Argentina, Bolivia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda," Stuart said.

"If we understand the role women have played – and continue to play – in shaping Australia, female politicians might be more in number and get the respect and recognition they deserve. Statues, place names and electorate names that celebrate women's contribution are essential – so too are exhibitions like the *Her Place* exhibition at Pakenham Library from 24 October – 11 November. Another will follow at Ballarat.

"Women are underrepresented in all of our cultural institutions. It is not radical to think half our politicians should be women. It is radical to think the reverse and for unequal representation of women in all walks of public life to prevail. This must change"

The **Honourable Natalie Hutchins**, the Minister for Women and the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, will open the exhibition on Tuesday 23 October, 5- 7pm.

Ten women are featured: **Kay Setches**, former local MP, Minister in the Cain and Kirner Governments, and long-time campaigner on family violence and affirmative action in the ALP; Pakenham activist, **Shoheli Sunjida**, who is behind the Cardinia Food Movement and other initiatives to improve neighbourliness and raise awareness around family violence; **Aunty Bess Yarram**, Aboriginal activist; **Val Lang**, farmer and rural women's advocate; **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; and **Deborah Lawrie** (Wardley) FRAeS MAP, Australia's first female commercial pilot.

Eight 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>

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

Kay Setches, 73, who was one of the inaugural inductees onto the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2001, has devoted most of her life to campaigning for women's rights and an end to family violence. Growing up in working-class Collingwood, Setches was aware of inequity from a young age. At the Collingwood School of Domestic Arts, which did not believe girls required Matriculation, she did four classes a week of Laundry and one class of Science.

Leaving school at 14 to support her ill parents, Setches worked as a shop assistant at Georges, the exclusive Collins Street emporium. She experienced first-hand the low status of junior working-class girls and unequal pay. She sold scarves and stoles in neckwear but, had she worked in fabrics or manchester, she would have received a junior male award pay, a substantial increase.

Setches married at 18, moving with her husband Denis to Croydon, where they opened their home to women and children fleeing from violent men.

Raising her two children and a foster daughter and working as a sales assistant in furniture and carpets for many years, Setches was always involved with the community – first as the Secretary of the Croydon Central Kindergarten Committee and then as the Weekend Co-ordinator of the Maroondah Halfway House women's refuge for two years from 1977.

Seeing women and their children, with no money and with nowhere to go, propelled her into politics. “Family violence needed a broader approach – with political, economic, cultural and social solutions,” she said.

Setches, who had joined the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 1972, was elected to the seat of Ringwood in 1982, and re-elected in 1985 and 1988. She served as the Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, shifted to Minister for Community Services in 1990, and added the new portfolio of Minister Responsible for Child Care. The seat of Ringwood was abolished and she lost the new notionally Labor seat of Bayswater in the 1992 election landslide.

Setches then made affirmative action within the ALP her mission. In 1994, she was elated (and somewhat surprised) when the National ALP Conference adopted a policy of 35% female MPs in winnable seats by 2002. A 50% target has been set for 2025 but she thinks it could be reached sooner.

“Joan Kirner, my best friend, made it all happen. As of 2002, the policy carried a sanction -all pre-selections were null and void if the target was not achieved. It’s still in place. EMILY’S List is continuing to hold the line,” Setches said.

“Politics can’t just be the preserve of grey-haired white men in suits. The so-called ‘merit’ argument is without merit. It’s a matter of human rights. Women make up 51% of the population,” Setches said.

Now living at Phillip Island, Setches is far from retired. After the recent murder of a local mother, she is part of a huge campaign to put in place a comprehensive program to combat family violence.

“Following the Royal Commission, the Victorian Government is investing \$2.3B in such measures. No other government in the world is making such a commitment. On Phillip Island, the whole of the community from sporting clubs to businesses is getting involved in addressing the issues.”

Shoheli Sunjida, 40, who migrated from Bangladesh with her husband and the first of her two sons in 2002, thinks Australia is lagging when it comes to women and leadership.

“Conservative white males don’t want to see women coming forward, whether it is in politics, schools or companies. Unequal pay is shocking. Lots of migrant women don’t know their rights, which means that they’re often exploited. I am determined to change all this,” she said.

Sunjida was motivated to get involved politically when her family moved to a new area in Cardinia Shire in 2012 and discovered that the walking paths, bike paths and disabled ramps around the lake at the centre of the community had been removed because they weren’t fully railed. She and a community group she started worked hard over a number of years to have the facilities restored.

Sunjida stood for council in the 2016 elections, missing out by 37 votes. Meanwhile, she has thrown herself into community life. One of her key initiatives is the Cardinia Food Movement.

“Coming from a Bangladeshi background, I have personally witnessed what lack of food and nutrition can do to people, how it adversely impacts overall community wellbeing as well as the healthcare systems of a country. I also realise that although the issues in Australia are not as severe as in under-developed countries, there is still a lot of work to be done here. Around 65% of people in Cardinia are obese and there is a high rate of diabetes,” she said.

“Cardinia Food Movement is encouraging community members to grow and source fresh produce locally, to create healthy food habits and also to share a vast variety of food processing and cooking techniques that a diverse community brings in. Most Australians don’t know, for instance, that you can eat pumpkin leaves.”

In April the group initiated a program of Kitchen Table Conversations that reached over 1000 people in two months.

Cardinia grows onions, potatoes and asparagus, and the Cardinia Food Movement is keen to see farmers able to sell their produce at the farm gate.

“We want farmers and consumers to be able to deal direct with each other and, wherever possible, not have to go through a ‘middle-man’. We’re also taking up a petition to get a community house set up in the

fast-growing area of Officer. We'd like to see it have a dining area, a multicultural garden and a commercial kitchen where people could learn to cook healthy foods."

The group has teamed up with the council, Monash Health and the University of Melbourne.

Sunjida has also been working with local schools on a project to raise awareness about family violence. Posters by school children now adorn local buses and the walls of the Cardinia Cultural Centre and the Pakenham Library.

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

24 October – 11 November. Monday–Wednesday 9–8; Thursday 9–9; Friday 9–6; Saturday 10–4; Sunday 1–4

Forthcoming exhibition (with different line-up):

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

14 November – 9 December. Monday–Sunday 10–5

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