

**Kyam Maher MLC**  
Deputy Premier  
Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

Wednesday, 4 February 2026

## Six Aboriginal leaders to be honoured

Six leading Aboriginal South Australians will be honoured with statues to be built on Kurna Land within the CBD.

Today, the Government confirmed statues will be erected in honour of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG, Gladys Elphick MBE, Dr Alice Alitya Rigney AO PSM, David Unaipon, Yami Lester OAM and Garnett Ian Wilson OAM.

The statues will be built on the southern side of Karrawirra Parri/River Torrens at Tarntanya Wama/Elder Park walkway, with the first statue to commemorate Dr O'Donoghue.

This announcement marks the next stage of fulfilling the Government's 2022 election commitment to establish six statues to memorialise prominent Aboriginal South Australians acknowledging their extraordinary contributions to our communities and our State.

State-wide engagement was conducted with Aboriginal community members, leaders and organisations to identify the Aboriginal leaders to be commemorated for this initiative. The State First Nations Voice to Parliament were also provided the opportunity for input ahead of the decision on the leaders chosen.

The statue of Dr O'Donoghue is expected to be completed towards the end of the financial year, and is being designed by acclaimed sculptor Robert Hannaford AM.

The State Government acknowledges critical partners in this project, including the City of Adelaide, Guildhouse Professional Services and Robert Hannaford.

### Quotes attributable to Kyam Maher

*Throughout much of Adelaide we see numerous monuments celebrating non-Aboriginal history and achievement, but seldom do we see the same recognition afforded to Aboriginal leaders and trailblazers.*

*This commitment acknowledges that the significant contributions of Aboriginal people deserve to be visible in our public spaces in a prominent and meaningful way.*

*Each of these six leaders shaped our state for the better and I am proud that each are recognised through monuments that ensure the respect and recognition their leadership deserves.*

*Publicly honouring Aboriginal people ensures Aboriginal children see their leaders and their culture represented as a source of collective pride, not just something that is known and celebrated amongst Aboriginal communities.*

*It's fitting to make this announcement on the anniversary of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue's passing in 2024, recognising the important contribution she has made for South Australians and, indeed, all Australians.*

*She was the first Aboriginal woman to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, she was the inaugural Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and she also co-founded the Council of Aboriginal Women in South Australia.*

*I am pleased that we will be able to take this small step to honour her legacy for generations to come.*

#### **Quotes attributable to Deb Edwards, niece and Head of Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation**

*The O'Donoghue family warmly welcomes the announcement honouring the late Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue with a statue to be erected on Kurna Land this year. We deeply appreciate this recognition, particularly as we gather today in remembrance on the second anniversary of her passing.*

*Dr O'Donoghue would be profoundly moved to know she is to be memorialised alongside five Aboriginal South Australians for whom she held immense respect, admiration, and love. To stand among such leaders reflects both the depth of her relationships and her enduring commitment to Aboriginal people and communities.*

*The river precinct, featuring these six statues, will become a powerful place of reflection, learning and truth-telling — offering our communities and visitors to South Australia a lasting opportunity to honour, understand and be inspired by the extraordinary achievements and legacies of these remarkable Aboriginal leaders.*

#### **Quotes attributable to Adelaide Lord Mayor Dr Jane Lomax-Smith AM**

*The City of Adelaide is honoured to support the State Government's initiative to commission statues to celebrate the achievements of six remarkable South Australian Aboriginal leaders.*

*Our involvement in the project reflects the City's commitment to reconciliation and truth-telling, ensuring Aboriginal leadership and lived experience are visible in public space.*

*Our staff have been involved in helping to identify potential sites for the statues along Karrawirra Parri and we are funding the installation of the statue of Lowitja Donoghue.*

*Honouring Dr O'Donoghue recognises a nationally significant Aboriginal leader whose legacy continues to shape health, justice and human rights in Australia.*

## **ABOUT THE HONOUREES**

### **Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG (1932 – 2024)**

- Yankunytjatjara / Pitjantjatjara woman, born near De Rose Hill, South Australia (SA). At age two years she and two sisters were removed from their mother and taken to Colebrook Children's Home at Quorn, Flinders Ranges SA, where they were reunited with their eldest sister and only brother.
- First Aboriginal person to train as a nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, achieving triple certificate qualifications in nursing, midwifery, and mental health. As a nurse she practiced in remote and regional areas of SA, and in India for the Australian Baptist Missionary Society.
- First Aboriginal woman to become a Member of the Order of Australia and the first Aboriginal person to address the United Nations General Assembly.
- In 1991, appointed the inaugural Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).
- Co-founder and Secretary of the Council of Aboriginal Women of South Australia, and an active campaigner for the 1967 Referendum.
- In 1983, invested as Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for service to the Aboriginal community.
- 1984 Australian of the Year. 1998, declared an Australian National Living Treasure.
- Received numerous awards and honours throughout her service, patron to numerous institutions, also serving on numerous Boards and Committees.
- 1999 invested as Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) for public service through leadership to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the areas of human rights and social justice.
- In 2006, invested as Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great (DSG), a Papal Honour by Pope John Paul II.
- In 2009, honoured with the NAIDOC Lifetime Achievement Award.
- In 2010, the Lowitja Institute is established as Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research institute.
- In 2022, commemorating her 90th birthday, the establishment of the Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation is announced to acknowledge, recognise, and preserve the extraordinary legacy of Dr O'Donoghue's dedicated lifetime of work through the creation of opportunities for advancement and change for First Nations people.

### **Gladys Elphick MBE (1904 – 1988)**

- Kaurna and Ngadjuri descent, grew up at Point Pearce, Yorke Peninsula, SA.
- In 1940s, joined the Aborigines Advancement League of South Australia and became active in committee work with the League in the 1960s.
- Best known as the founding president of the Council of Aboriginal Women of South Australia, which became the Aboriginal Council of South Australia in 1973. Through

the Council many Aboriginal community controlled organisations originated, and are still providing services for the community. The Council was active in campaigning for the 1967 Referendum.

- In 1971, appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in recognition of service to the Aboriginal community.
- The inaugural Gladys Elphick Memorial Oration was held in 2022 with eminent Aboriginal leaders being selected to deliver the oration annually.
- The Gladys Elphick Awards, established in 2003, celebrates the life achievements of Aunty Gladys and her fellow members of the Council of Aboriginal Women of South Australia. The awards acknowledge the contemporary achievements of Aboriginal women who work tirelessly to advance the status of Aboriginal people through a wide range of mediums.

### **Dr Alice Alitya Rigney AO PSM (1942 – 2017)**

- Kurna and Narungga woman, who grew up at Point Pearce, Yorke Peninsula, SA during the 1940s.
- The first female Aboriginal school principal in Australia. Starting out as a teachers' aide in 1967, she retired as principal of Kurna Plains School for Aboriginal students in Adelaide's north in 1997 and has been recognised for making a significant contribution to the preservation of the Kurna language.
- Served on numerous Boards and Committees.
- Received an honorary doctorate from the University of South Australia and a string of awards and achievements to her name.
- In 1991, awarded a Public Service Medal.
- In 1998, awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of South Australia in recognition of her pioneering contribution to Aboriginal education.
- In 2000, appointed a panel member of the S.A. Guardianship Board.
- In 2017, awarded the Gladys Elphick Perpetual Award, a lifetime award in the Gladys Elphick Awards.
- In 2018, posthumously made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in the Queen's Birthday Honours.
- The annual Dr Alice Alitya Rigney Prize commemorates renowned educationalist and Australia's first female Aboriginal school principal, Dr Alice Alitya Rigney AO PSM, by recognising a young Aboriginal person in South Australia who is dedicated to their education, in year 10, year 11 or year 12.

### **David Unaipon (1872 – 1967)**

- Ngarrindjeri man born at Raukkan (Point McLeay Mission), South Australia.
- Australian preacher, inventor, author, and political activist who was the first Australian Aboriginal person to publish his writing in English.
- Among his many achievements, he is especially known for his inventions focusing on perpetual motion, and by 1909 he created and a device for shearing sheep's wool by hand.
- Other inventions included a centrifugal motor and a mechanical propulsion device. His passion for scientific ideas, earned him the nickname "the Australian Leonardo da Vinci" for his mechanical ideas, which included pre-World War I drawings for a helicopter design based on the principle of the boomerang and his research into the polarisation of light; he also spent much of his life attempting to achieve perpetual motion.
- Took out provisional patents for 19 inventions but was unable to get any of his inventions fully patented, according to some sources.

- First Aboriginal author to be published (in the early 1920s). He wrote on topics covering everything from perpetual motion and helicopter flight to Aboriginal legends and campaigns for Aboriginal rights.
- In 1953, at the age of 81, awarded a Coronation Medal celebrating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.
- A literary award has been created in his honour - the David Unaipon Award for an outstanding unpublished manuscript by an emerging Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander writer.
- To emphasise the importance of his contribution to Australia, his image is featured on the Australian \$50 banknote.

### **Yami Lester OAM (1941 - 2017)**

- Yankunytjatjara man, born at Walyatjata in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands of South Australia in 1941.
- He survived, although was blinded as a young boy by, the nuclear testing, Totem One and Totem Two (1953) in outback Australia, and is best known as an anti-nuclear and Indigenous rights advocate.
- His most significant contribution to the rights of Aboriginal people was helping gain recognition for the atomic tests at Emu Field and an acknowledgement for the 1800 Anangu affected.
- His story and advocacy were pivotal in the 1985 Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia (McClelland Royal Commission), during the 1950's - 1960's which resulted in compensation for his people and cleanup operations at both Emu Field and Maralinga areas.
- As a young man, he joined the Aboriginal Advancement League in Adelaide, and the United Mission, in Alice Springs, as a welfare worker and interpreter for the courts, and was founder of the Institute of Aboriginal Development along with Rev Jim Downing, which was concerned with Aboriginal education and languages.
- After a position administering Everard Park Pastoral business affairs in Mimili community, he worked with the Pitjantjatjara Land Council on Aboriginal lands rights issues with the South Australian Government.
- Yami worked as an organiser and interpreter assisting the handover of freehold title to the Anangu people in 1981, which came about because of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act, (SA).
- In 1981, he was awarded the Order of Australia medal for service in the field of Aboriginal Welfare.
- As an Elder, he retired to his traditional home at Walatina Station West from Marla in the far north of South Australia.

### **Garnett Ian Wilson OAM (1928 – 2010)**

- Ngarrindjeri man born at Raukkan (Point McLeay Mission), South Australia.
- At the age of twelve he suffered a serious injury which developed into a painful and permanent disability. Tough family love turned him away from bitterness and self-pity towards a lifetime of achievement and service.
- First Aboriginal wool classer in South Australia.
- Inaugural member and long-standing chair of the Aboriginal Lands Trust, the first Aboriginal land-holding body in Australia.
- Served as an executive member and acting chair of the National Aboriginal Conference. He also chaired the South Australian Aboriginal Heritage Committee.
- In 1984, awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for service to Aboriginal Welfare.