



Who was Elsa Dixon?

A community leader and an inspiration

Elsa Dixon was born in 1925 and lived in Campbell Street Darlinghurst for 32 years. Elsa was an extraordinary person and the first Aboriginal woman to obtain a Pilot's License in the 1940s. She was one of the original founders of a number of critical Aboriginal services over the 70s and 80s. Elsa cared for single mothers and would often buy food out of her own money for their children.

Aboriginal activist

Elsa was an Aboriginal activist who played a key role in improving social outcomes for Aboriginal people in NSW.

In 1970 she was part of an activist group which included Shirley Smith and her husband Chicka Dixon, who were the guiding force behind a group of young Aboriginal men and women involved in the campaign for land rights by the Gurindji people. This same group, with Fred Hollows and others, helped to establish Aboriginal Medical Service in July 1971. They also helped establish the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, the Aboriginal Legal Service in 1971, the Aboriginal Black Theatre, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, the Aboriginal Children's Service, the Aboriginal Housing Company and the Detoxification Centre. Elsa remained an active member of the Medical Service until her passing in 1993.

Focus on Employment for Aboriginal people

In 1975, after many years of social activism, Elsa won a position as an Aboriginal Vocational Officer with the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training. This position was one of seven in NSW and it was the first time in Australia that Aboriginal Vocational Officer positions had been created.

For seventeen years, Elsa was a central figure in the Broadway CES Casual Section. Working tirelessly both during and outside work hours for all CES clients, she was affectionately named 'Mrs Casual'.

Elsa kept a drawer full of 50 cent pieces and another filled with cigarettes to comfort people. The Casual Section of the Broadway CES attracted many desperate people from the country or those who were just out of jail seeking employment, or sometimes those just wanting a sandwich from Elsa.

Elsa knew the importance of employment for people and her commitment would not be hindered by rules about the time the Casual Section should open for clients.

For nine years Elsa opened the Casual Section at 6.00am to ensure that clients would be able to start work at 7.30am. A new manager joined the Casual Section of the Broadway CES and agreed with Elsa that employment is linked to good business practice. If clients were to start work by 7.30am the office needed to open at 6.00am. The manager changed the scheduled opening time to 6.00am and ensured that Elsa received back pay for those nine years of overtime.

The Aboriginal people at the heart of her life and work

Elsa strove personally and professionally to assist those who needed her help, for she knew that to overcome social inequality, people needed education, training and employment – the foundations of an informed and just society.

