

Making a difference - 1

Every society has its 'unsung heroes', people who by their selfless actions make a difference to the lives of others, without expecting the rewards of fame and glory. But sometimes, those deeds have a positive effect on the lives of so many people that they do not go unnoticed.

Shirley Smith



Shirley Smith, known by those she cared for as, 'Mum Shirl', was visiting her brother in prison when she noticed that many prisoners never had any visitors. She thought how sad it was that no-one on the 'outside' cared enough to come and see them.

Shirley began to visit the inmates at her brother's prison and later at other prisons around New South Wales. She did not judge them for the crimes they had committed. She simply became a person they could talk to and share their problems, hopes and fears with.

When Shirley realised that people responded positively to her help, she began to spread it wider. She worked hard, caring for Sydney's poor and homeless Aboriginal people, finding them shelter and providing food. Over the years, she looked after more than 60 children in her own home. Caring for others was Shirley's life, even though at times it meant that she had to go without.

With a number of other caring professionals, Shirley helped to form the Aboriginal Medical Service in 1971. The AMS is still going strong today. Its main goal is to improve the health of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in communities across the country.

Lowitja O'Donoghue

As a child, Lowitja O'Donoghue was taken from her family and placed in a children's home where she was lucky to receive a good education. Later, while working as a children's nanny, Lowitja was encouraged to train to become a nurse.

Lowitja's Aboriginal heritage became very important to her and she became actively involved in Aboriginal politics. She spent time working as an Aboriginal liaison officer with the Education Department of South Australia and later as a welfare officer in the state's Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Lowitja held many important positions in public service that allowed her to work for the benefit of indigenous Australians. In 1992, she was the first Aboriginal Australian to speak to the United Nations General Assembly during its launch of the International Year of Indigenous People.

