



NPY Women's Council: Who we are and how we started¹



"So I said to the women, 'Eh, we should become separate.' I suggested this because we had been told to be quiet and leave. We all had something to say, about caring for our children and families, about our aspirations to have good lives... We wanted to talk about issues to the government. We wanted to talk together to give a strong message. That's why we formed the Women's Council." Nganyinytja OAM (dec.)

History

The common interests and family and cultural connections of women from the 'three sides' of the central desert region, and a united cross-border approach to issues and services are the underlying strengths of NPY Women's Council. These 'three sides' are the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia, the Ngaanyatjarra Lands leasehold and native title holdings in Western Australia (formerly the Central Reserves and other land tracts) and the four southern Northern Territory communities of Imanpa, Mutitjulu, Docker River and Aputula (Finke.)

When NPYWC was formed in 1980, the Pitjantjatjara Council Inc. represented Anangu and Yarnangu² from these three sectors of the central region. The twenty-five communities and their numerous homelands spread over a vast 350,000 square kilometres continue to constitute the organisation's membership and service delivery area (see NPY map.) The members share language, historical, cultural and familial connections and concerns for themselves and their families that take precedence over state and territory borders.

In 1978 the South Australian Labor Government introduced a Bill recognising the traditional rights to land of the Pitjantjatjara in SA. The Liberals came to power in 1979 before the Bill was passed. In 1980 the Pitjantjatjara Council and supporters resolved to march in Adelaide to protest against proposed changes to the Bill, including the lack of a right to veto mining.

Senior law women, led by Nganyinytja (OAM, dec. 2007) and assisted by her friend Diana James, met at Amata. They determined to, and did, join the march despite discouragement from their countrymen. The re-negotiated Bill came into effect as the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981*³.

An Anangu women's delegation to Adelaide for the Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Aboriginal Women's Conference in Adelaide, May 1980, led by Nganyinytja, was the forerunner of the formation of NPYWC. Nganyinytja gave a key speech and spoke up so strongly that her words and vision inspired its establishment.

Nganyinytja declined the urging of other women to take the lead in the emerging organisation due to her time-consuming work with petrol sniffers, and the task fell to the clever and formidable Mantatjara Wilson (dec. 2009.) With Diana's help she made a cassette tape invitation and sent it around to women in communities, calling on them to attend the first meeting.

In December 1980 around forty women attended the inaugural meeting at Kanpi in the north-west of SA, welcomed to the site by Mr. Andy Tjilari, who years later would be employed by NPY Women's Council as a ngangkari (traditional healer.) Tjunmutja Myra Watson (dec. 2009) was chosen to be the Chairwoman, with Diana as the secretary. In 1981 the old Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs provided NPYWC's first funding - \$29,000 for five part-time workers: Kunbry Peipei, Melva Davies, Mantatjara Wilson, Tjunmutja Myra Watson and Diana James.

In early 1988 Maggie Kavanagh was employed as Co-ordinator, following Di Lane (1982) and Cynthia Shannon (1984.) This appointment would last until late 2003, providing consistency and support as well as a strong relationship with the members as the role of the organisation greatly expanded.

NPYWC initially worked out of an office in the Pitjantjatjara Council premises in Bath Street, Alice Springs. Along with the Pitjantjatjara Council, it moved in October 1987 to a new resource centre at Wilkinson Street for organisations providing services to Anangu and Yarnangu.

NPY Women's Council Chairwomen

1. Tjunmutja (Myra) Watson (dec.): Indulkana SA 1980 - 1985
2. Anmanari Tjalara Nyangu (dec.): Ernabella SA 1985 - 1986
3. Waniwa (Lucy) Lester: Ernabella SA 1986 -1988
4. Joylene Orsalla (dec): Docker River NT 1988 - 1990
5. R. Forbes (Reid) (dec.): Blackstone WA 1990 – 1991
6. Sylvia Benson De Rose: Indulkana SA 1991 –1993
7. Josephine Mick: Pipalyatjara SA 1993 - 1996
8. Makinti Minutjukur: Ernabella SA 1996 – 1997
9. Winnie Woods: Blackstone WA 1997 – 2001
10. Sandra Lewis: Ernabella SA 2001 – 2002
11. Lala West: Warburton WA July 2002 (briefly)
12. Yanyi Bandicha (Baker): Ernabella SA and Finke/Aputula NT 2002 – 2006
13. Muyuru Burton (dec.): Amata SA 2006 – 2007
14. Yanyi Bandicha: (Baker) Ernabella SA and Finke/Aputula NT 2007 – 2008
15. Margaret Smith: Imanpa NT 2008 - current

References

- ¹ Sources: www.foundingdocs.gov.au;
Minyma Tjuta Tjunguringkula Kunpuringanyi: Women Growing Strong Together. Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council 1980 – 1990. NPY Women's Council, 1990;
NPY Women's Council newsletters; internal documents.
- ² The names by which Aboriginal people from the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara (Anangu) and Ngaanyatjarra (Yarnangu) language groups describe themselves.
- ³ Now the *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act 1981 (SA)*