

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE23090699

Dawson, Elizabeth OAM

(1936 - 2014)

Born	26 May, 1936
Died	14 November, 2014, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	social activist, Teacher

Summary

Liz Dawson trained and worked as a speech therapist and teacher and her early social activism related to school education. Later in life, she lobbied through the organisation Common Ground to provide permanent, safe and supported homes for the homeless and for low-income families in Canberra. She was nominated as Canberran of the Year and ACT Local Hero in 2012 and was awarded an Order of Australia Medal ‘for her tireless work providing for homeless individuals and their families’ in the Queen’s Birthday honours in 2013.

Liz Dawson was inscribed on the ACT Women’s Honour Roll in 2014.

Details

Elizabeth (Liz) Dawson was born on 28 May 1936, the daughter of Olga Mary (nee Barton) secretary and later newsagent, and David Francis Lewis, a judge in the New South Wales District and Quarter Sessions courts. Educated at a private boarding school in Tamworth NSW and later at Ascham school, Sydney, she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at Sydney University and a Licentiate of the Australian College of Speech Therapy in 1958. She worked as a children's speech therapist in Brisbane. Following her marriage to Peter Dawson on 8 June 1963 at St John's Anglican Church, Balmain, she moved to Canberra where she worked in the Commonwealth Public Service. She accompanied her husband to Indonesia when he was appointed Trade Commissioner and to his next posting in Kenya. The couple returned to Canberra in 1969 with their two daughters, Julie and Kate, where their third daughter, Sophie, was born.

Liz's life reflected her passion for social justice, education and gender equity. After graduating with a Diploma of Education from the University of Canberra in the mid 1970s, she became a primary school teacher and in 1997 was awarded a Master of Education from that university. She and Peter became involved as parents in the Association for Modern Education School. Operating in Canberra from 1972 to 1996, the independent, progressive school encouraged students to develop their individual talents rather than following a set curriculum. In 1989 she received an ACT Government Achievement Award for her innovative work as a teacher at Duffy Primary School and for promoting gender equity in education. Active in the ACT Teacher's Federation and the Labor Party, of which she was a life member, Liz initiated a political campaign to have class sizes in the ACT reduced to 20 at the kindergarten level, a policy later adopted by the Labor Party and extended to all ACT primary schools. In 1990 Elizabeth joined the Public Service Commission as its Women's Advisor. She subsequently worked in the Department of Education until her retirement in 2005.

In the early 2000s she completed a Graduate Diploma in Community Counselling at the University of Canberra, while working part time at Marymead, a support agency for families, and at a women's refuge. This experience made her determined to support homeless people. As an employee of the Salvation Army, she initiated and developed a dental support program for pensioners and arranged for Canberra hairdresser, Angelo Cataldo, to provide free haircuts to clients to boost self-esteem. Despite undergoing bouts of chemotherapy for bowel cancer from December 2010, and blindness suddenly brought on by temporal arteritis in March 2011, Elizabeth remained undaunted in her social activism. She was nominated as Canberran of the Year and ACT Local Hero in 2012 and was awarded an Order of Australia Medal 'for her tireless work providing for homeless individuals and their families' in the Queen's Birthday honours in 2013. Her name was inscribed on the ACT Honour Walk in 2014.

Elizabeth tirelessly lobbied the ACT Government to establish permanent, safe and supported homes for the homeless and low paid workers in the ACT, such as those first established by Common Ground in New York in 1980. Similar centres were already operating in Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide. She gained support from the Snow Foundation and from Tanya Plibersek, Federal Minister for Housing in the first Rudd government. A persistent lobbyist, Liz observed: 'The great thing about having terminal cancer is no one ever says no to you'. Common Ground ultimately received a \$4 million grant from the Commonwealth and a further \$7.5 million from the ACT government, enabling it to build 40 secure, self-contained, one-bedroom apartments in Gungahlin. Twenty apartments were for people who had experienced chronic homelessness, the remainder reserved for people on low incomes. The complex opened on 3 July 2015. Elizabeth worked with the Gungahlin Community Council to enhance community support for the project and promote better understanding of homelessness. She obtained funding from the Thyne Reid Foundation to make three films featuring local homeless people, each launched by Andrew Leigh, ACT Labor Member of the House of Representatives.

Elizabeth used her experience of blindness to help fellow Canberrans with visual impairment. She formed a drumming group, The Groves, served on the Board of the Blind Society and in 2014, with the aid of her daughter Kate, published a book, *Where is my left eyebrow?: Losing my eyesight overnight* that described her battle with cancer and gave practical tips to people with impaired vision. Elizabeth died on 16 November 2014, survived by her husband, daughters and six grandchildren. In his tribute, read in the House of Representatives on 27 November 2014, Andrew Leigh remarked: 'Liz was just a firecracker for change ... She saw that parliamentarians were not to be feared but were to be used'. The Chief Minister of the ACT, Katy Gallagher, described her as a friend and the Member for Canberra in the House of Representatives, Gai Brodtmann, said in her speech to Parliament: 'Liz inspires us to be the best we can be. To act on disadvantage. To better contribute to our community'.

Published resources

ACT Honour Walk, ACT Australia's Local Hero Nominee 2012,
<https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/women/awards/act-womens-honour-roll/2014/elizabeth-dawson>

Queens Birthday honours 2013, 2013,
<https://the-riotact.com/queens-birthday-honours-2013/106843>

In Memory of Elizabeth Dawson, 2014,
<https://andrewleigh.com>

Elizabeth Dawson with Kate Dawson, *Where is my left eyebrow? Losing my eyesight overnight*, 2014

Hansard, Statements by Members, Statement by the Hon Gai Brodtmann MP re Dawson, Ms Liz OAM, 2014

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Created 25 April 2023

Last modified