

Resolution of Council

29 June 2026

Item 15.4

Vale Aunty Elsie Heiss

Moved by Councillor Weldon, seconded by Councillor Gannon –

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) the recent passing of Elsie Heiss, known by many as Aunty Elsie;
- (ii) Aunty Elsie, a proud Wiradjuri Elder, was born at Erambie Aboriginal Station in Cowra on 11 November 1937 to parents James and Amy. She was one of 8 children, growing up as the youngest of 6 following the loss of 2 siblings;
- (iii) life at Erambie, also known as 32 Acres, was not easy – they lived under the harsh authority of the Welfare Board, the mission manager and his wife;
- (iv) in 1946, Aunty Elsie's family decided to leave the mission, moving to the Riverina – spending summers fruit picking in Griffith, and winters in Darlington Point. She attended several country primary schools, and Griffith High School until she left at 15 to work as a ward maid at the Griffith Public Hospital;
- (v) Aunty Elsie moved to Sydney at 17, living with her Aunty Mary and Uncle Harry in Redfern. At 20, she met her life partner, Joe Heiss, who was originally from Austria. They were married at St Vincent's Church, Redfern in 1960;
- (vi) Aunty Elsie and Joe moved to Matraville in 1966, where they raised their 5 children Monika, Gisella, Josef, Mark and Anita;
- (vii) over the next 16 years, Aunty Elsie worked nights at the Matraville Skyline Drive-in. During the day, she was busy running the school tuckshop – for over 25 years – and raising their family;
- (viii) at age 42, Aunty Elsie's children had all finished primary school and she finally got to finish her schooling. She studied at Randwick TAFE, receiving a college medal and a certificate that enabled her to work as a health worker in the Aboriginal community;

- (ix) Aunty Elsie worked in the health care sector for 14 years with Hazel England and Beverly Simons, together running a diabetes program at La Perouse;
 - (x) in the early 1990s, Aunty Elsie met Father Frank Fletcher, a land rights and human rights advocate who had a great love and respect for Aboriginal people. This led her to become involved in the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry (ACM), representing the concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. She worked tirelessly seeking a stronger commitment from the Catholic Church in its recognition, respect and action to support Aboriginal people;
 - (xi) as a long serving-member of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, Aunty Elsie honoured both her Aboriginal spirituality and history with her Catholic faith. In 1995, she participated in the official smoking ceremony for Pope John Paul II, and in 1998 she was the only Aboriginal representative at the Synod of Oceania in Rome;
 - (xii) additionally in 1998, a church at La Perouse was established and handed over to the Aboriginal community under Aunty Elsie's leadership. Becoming known as the Reconciliation Church, it was a place where Aboriginal culture and practice could be celebrated alongside the Catholic faith. Aunty Elsie was part of countless masses, baptisms, first Holy Communions, and confirmations at the ACM;
 - (xiii) in 2009, Aunty Elsie was awarded NAIDOC Female Elder of the year for her work in health and church for the community;
 - (xiv) in 2010, Aunty Elsie was awarded an honorary Doctor of Arts from the University of Notre Dame, Sydney for her contribution to the Catholic community;
 - (xv) Aunty Elsie retired from the ACM in 2012, but those who know her know that she never really retired – her commitment to the church went beyond a formal title;
 - (xvi) in 2018, Aunty Elsie was made a Dame Commander of the Order of St Gregory the Great, forever after known as Dame Doctor Aunty Elsie; and
 - (xvii) Aunty Elsie will be remembered for her unwavering dedication to her community, her leadership, and her enduring commitment to faith and culture. She will be greatly missed;
- (B) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to the family of Aunty Elsie Heiss expressing Council's condolences; and
- (C) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Aunty Elsie Heiss and her commitment and contribution to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, as well as the broader community.

Carried unanimously.

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Note – All Councillors, staff and members of the public present stood in silence for one minute as a mark of respect to Aunty Elsie Heiss.