



# WiRE

## **BIOGRAPHIES OF FOUNDERS**

**LAST UPDATED IN 2023**

# BACKGROUND

Since the mid-1800s, Australian feminism has been fighting for basic women's human rights, such as voting rights, federal election stands, and abortion rights.

In 1983, a group of women came together with the ambition of creating a fairer and more inclusive society where all individuals could thrive. They explicitly supported women, and more recently non-binary, and gender-diverse individuals in making ethical decisions in their personal, professional, and political lives, and campaigned for structural change to achieve gender equity and social justice.

Their vision was to create a service for women run by them back in 1983. The group included Ann Jackson, Christine Haag, Dianne Fruin, Eleanor Summer, Fleur Spitzer, Gracia Baylor, Janet Horn, Kay Setches, Kerry Lovering, Philomena Horsley, Rosemary Varty, and Val Byth OAM.

Combining the efforts of the founding mothers and other organizations, Women's Information and Referral Exchange Inc (WIRE) officially opened in July 1984.

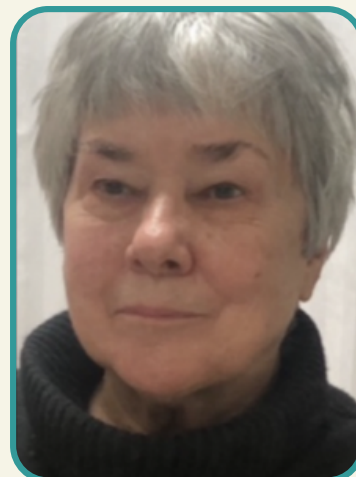
This document provides information on the lives and other activities of these important women, to give us insight into how they came to be involved with WIRE and its establishment.

# WORDS FROM A FOUNDING MEMBER: TRICIA HARPER

For context, in the 1970s, I was involved in the women's movement in Victoria, following my role in helping found the Victorian Council for the Single Mother (VCSMC) in 1969 and the National CSMC in 1973. Back then, single women raising children on their own were often referred to in pejorative terms, such as "unmarried mothers" and their children as "illegitimate" or "bastards", for whom there was little social or financial support and much social and legal discrimination! This was also the era of "shot-gun marriages", and for single mothers and single (never married) pregnant women of "forced adoptions" and for their children being part of the "stolen generations".

A highlight of the early WIRE days is a clear demonstration of the strong commitment of women from a widely divergent range of backgrounds and opinion to work collaboratively to achieve consensus, albeit not always easy to achieve! In early 1982, 5 women's organisations (WEL, NCW, Women's Refuges, Women's Liberation Movement, YWCA) commenced discussions. In late 1982, I chaired three meetings involving 70-80 individuals and organisations, finally reaching consensus and recommending to John Cain to set up a Victorian women's information service: WIRE!

Since then, the most significant progress for women has been their demonstrated capacity to work together, and reach consensus, on issues that are frequently complex and challenging, and involving a wide range of disparate views - ranging from income support, support for women encountering violence (including domestic and family violence), need for emergency and long-term accommodation, substantial legal reform, and a wide range of specialist women's and community services.



# CHRISTINE HAAAG

Christine Haag is an experienced and highly qualified Barrister, Mediator and Solicitor based in Melbourne. After initially pursuing a career in education, teaching politics and literature at a secondary school level, Christine returned to university to study in the 1990s. She then went on to work in private practice, focusing on commercial, property and family law. Christine specialises in family dispute mediation, helping clients to come to an acceptable resolution (Rainbow Flag Australia. (n.d.).

She has worked as a Family Court Registrar and a Federal Tribunal Member, giving her a wealth of experience in the area. In 1996, Christine was elected as second mayor in the city of Port Phillip and held the role until 1999 (City of Port Phillip, 1996). In 2019, Christine furthered her education by studying and becoming a Spiritual Director in the Ignatian tradition and a Spiritual Care Practitioner in St Vincent's Private Hospital Melbourne (Christine Haag, n.d.).

She has held numerous leadership positions throughout her career, including being a founding member of the WIRE and Victorian Women's Legal Service, a key supporter of the Pride Centre, and was a key player in the establishment of the Victorian Women's Trust (WIRE, n.d.). She also has a passion for the preservation of historical buildings and was heavily involved in the preservation of the Queen Victoria building.

Going through the archives, you can find evidence of Christine's involvement with WIRE dating back, for example, WIRE Christmas party 1987, second annual general meeting. Moreover, Christine Haag, along with Mary Bartlett, attended the Equal Opportunity Board for the case involving Women Who Want to be Women regarding the issue of political beliefs (Smith, 1986).

# ELEANOR MAY SUMNER

Eleanor Sumner was born in Epping in 1934 and demonstrated exceptional performance while attending Preston Girls High School. At the age of 14, she began working at a wool broking firm before transitioning to a custom forwarding agent. At 18, Eleanor enlisted in the Australian Navy and was discharged due to matrimony in late 1954. After marriage, Eleanor resided in Watsonia and various other locations based on her husband's postings, including Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Dominican Republic. She was awarded the "Freedom of the City" of San Domingo, Dominican Republic, in recognition of her significant efforts to support disadvantaged women in the area (Consumers Federation of Australia, 2011).

Throughout her life, Eleanor made significant contributions to women's issues across various organizations. Eleanor was a committed advocate for women's issues, and actively participated in several advocacy groups. Her dedication was recognized by the National Council of Women of Australia, where she held the honorary title of Life Vice President.

Apart from her work in advocacy, Eleanor was also involved in the area of health. She served as a board member at the Health Issues Centre and was part of the planning committees for both the Royal Melbourne and Epworth Hospitals' Hospital in Home Program. From 2006 to 2018, she was a member of the Northern Health Patient Experience Community Advisory committee, where her emphasis on patient and carer needs helped the Partnering with Consumers committee achieve many successes (Consumers Federation of Australia, 2011).

It is with great sorrow that we received news about Eleanor's passing on March 19th, 2023, in Bundoora, Melbourne. We appreciate Eleanor's work to better countless women's living experiences and her spirit will keep inspiring us to advocate to ensure women, non-binary and gender-diverse people are able to thrive. May Eleanor rest in peace.

# FLEUR SPITZER

Fleur Spitzer, born in 1931, grew up during the troubles of Europe and the Second World War. Although she had a safe and secure life in Australia, her awareness of racial discrimination as a Jewish heightened by her immigrant relatives' experiences. This later inspired her to become a feminist philanthropist (Ingvarson, 2008). Thanks to the hard work of her parents, Fleur was able to receive both secondary and tertiary education, which her mother had been denied when she was younger. After graduating, Fleur worked at the ABC, but was forced to resign after she got married due to the marriage bar, a government legislation restricting the employment of married women. This unfair experience further motivated Fleur to fight for women and girls' rights and inspired by the second-wave feminist movement in the USA, she decided she would not conform to stereotypes and unfair treatment anymore (Feldman , 2016).

Fleur then became one of the early members of Women's Electoral Lobby and in 1977 she became the leader of the newly established minor political party, the Australian Democrats. Later, she founded WIRE with her friend Val Blyth and others.

In 1990, Fleur established the Alma Unit, which made a significant contribution by conducting multidisciplinary research and teaching on older women's health and wellbeing. She became president of the Network's committee of management and served until 1993 (Victoria Government, 2004). In 1996, she was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in recognition of her contribution to women's services, and in 2004, she was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. In addition to her feminist identity, Fleur Spitzer was also a philanthropist (Victoria Government, 2004). She had been an established donor in Melbourne since late 1996 and began financially supporting the Victoria Women's Trust in 1998, including projects for female asylum seekers, older women in rural Victoria, and the Fleur Spitzer Sub-Fund. She also worked for years as vice president of the Australian Association of Philanthropy (now Philanthropy Australia).

# GRACIA BAYLOR

Gracia Baylor was born in 1931 and moved to Victoria from Brisbane due to her father's occupation mobility. In 1950, she completed a degree in Fine Arts and began her career as a teacher. After her marriage, Gracia worked as a manager in her husband's law business (The Australian Women's Register, 2020).

Gracia's interest in politics began when she became aware of the lack of kindergartens in the Healesville area where she lived. In 1966, she was elected to the Healesville Shine Council and later served as the first female President of the Victorian local government from 1973 to 1976 (The Australian Women's Register, 2020). During this period, she advocated for women's needs and encouraged women to work in local government. In 1979, she was elected to the Victorian Legislative Council as the second woman in the field, and she held this position until 1985 (Victoria Government, 2003). During her time in the council, she initiated the baby capsule program, which required parents to use a baby capsule during the early years (The Australian Women's Register, 2020).

Gracia was involved in supporting women's services in various ways. She helped to establish the Queen Victoria Women's Centre (QVWC) by campaigning against the sale of the buildings on the Queen Victoria Hospital site, which later became the QVWC (The Australian Women's Register, 2020). From 1990 to 1993, Gracia was the President of the National Council of Women (NCW) of Victoria and later became the President of NCW Australia (Victoria Government, 2003). During this period, she supported NCW in preparing and submitting many women's issues to the government regarding health, migration, education, and the environment. She also led a range of activities to reform NCW into the 21st century. This included setting up the board and monthly meeting agenda. She also contributed to the challenging task of combining three different councils of NCW (National Council of Women of Australia, 2013). In recognition of her work in women's affairs and government, she was listed on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2003 (Victoria Government, 2003).

# JANET HORN

Janet Horn relocated from New Zealand to Melbourne in her 40s in 1961. She pursued an arts degree in education and philosophy and a bachelor's degree in education after receiving her first degree in Home Science. She worked as a part-time tutor at Monash University for eleven years after graduation (Victoria Government, 2001).

In 1982, Janet's early 60s, she engaged in setting up WIRE. Janet continued to be a WIRE member ever since and volunteered in the office for over 17 years. She mostly worked behind the scenes on unglamorous but important jobs, such as filing and record keeping (Victoria Government, 2001). In 2001, the Victorian Honour Roll of Women inducted Janet in recognition of her major commitment to advancing women's rights through the foundation of WIRE.

Apart from WIRE, Janet was a long-time volunteer for many women's services. To ensure women's access to housing, she volunteered for Statewide Women's Community Housing Service until 2000 and Women's Housing Ltd. for 10 years (Women's Housing Ltd, 2019). Additionally, she was also one of the founding members of the Monash Women's Society. As Monash Women's Society member Janet was a delegate of the National Council of Women and later became the education representative (Victoria Government, 2001).

Janet was also dedicated to assisting underprivileged migrants and children's development in addition to women's services. As recorded, Janet volunteered at her children's school, the neighborhood Scouts, and Princes Hill High School for a number of years, instructing children from non-English speaking families. Janet also volunteered at the Ecumenical Migration Centre for 20 years, helping to support underprivileged immigrants and refugees by promoting their rights, recognizing their contributions to Australia, and advocating for their wellbeing (Langfield, n.d.).

Unfortunately, Janet died in 2022, and WIRE mourned the loss.



# KAY SETCHES

Kay Setches is a renowned advocate for gender equality and women's rights. She began her career in the retail industry from 1976 to 1982, before becoming a Member of the Victorian Parliament for Ringwood in 1982. During this time, she was also the Chair of the Victorian Government Women's Caucus and held various ministerial roles, such as Minister of Conservation, Forests and Lands (1988-90) and the Minister of Community Services and Minister responsible for Child Care (1990-92; Victoria Government, 2001).

Throughout Kay's career, she convinced the Victorian Government to support and fund the 'Why Women's Health?' Consultation in 1987, which led to the establishment of eight Women's Health Centres, eight Sexual Assault Services, and one Women's Health Information Service (Women's Health Victoria; Victoria Government, 2001). In her exposition to WIRE, Kay cited several motivating factors that led to her founding of the organization (Ingvarson, 2008). Kay's own experience of being denied the same education opportunities as boys due to her father's beliefs that education for women after the age they can work was a waste, further fuelled her to be a feminist and work towards equality for all.

A synthesis of these driving factors inspired Kay to establish WIRE, with the primary aim of alleviating the numerous obstacles and pressures confronting women.

Once WIRE set up, she kept working for WIRE. Her role was to work within the government to make sure the promise was carried out in terms of setting up the services (Ingvarson, 2008). In 2001, Kay Setches was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women, in recognition of her dedication to fighting for women's rights. In an interview with WIRE in 2008, she expressed her hope to see women achieve absolute equality with men in all areas, including workplace gender equality and payment equality (Ingvarson, 2008). She also praised WIRE for their work in assisting women in need and for their volunteer base as "they keep work in new areas and finding new ways to assist women with information...they have so many good volunteers" (Ingvarson, 2008).

# JANET HORN

Janet Horn relocated from New Zealand to Melbourne in her 40s in 1961. She pursued an arts degree in education and philosophy and a bachelor's degree in education after receiving her first degree in Home Science. She worked as a part-time tutor at Monash University for eleven years after graduation (Victoria Government, 2001).

In 1982, Janet's early 60s, she engaged in setting up WIRE. Janet continued to be a WIRE member ever since and volunteered in the office for over 17 years. She mostly worked behind the scenes on unglamorous but important jobs, such as filing and record keeping (Victoria Government, 2001). In 2001, the Victorian Honour Roll of Women inducted Janet in recognition of her major commitment to advancing women's rights through the foundation of WIRE.

Apart from WIRE, Janet was a long-time volunteer for many women's services. To ensure women's access to housing, she volunteered for Statewide Women's Community Housing Service until 2000 and Women's Housing Ltd. for 10 years (Women's Housing Ltd, 2019). Additionally, she was also one of the founding members of the Monash Women's Society. As Monash Women's Society member Janet was a delegate of the National Council of Women and later became the education representative (Victoria Government, 2001).

Janet was also dedicated to assisting underprivileged migrants and children's development in addition to women's services. As recorded, Janet volunteered at her children's school, the neighborhood Scouts, and Princes Hill High School for a number of years, instructing children from non-English speaking families. Janet also volunteered at the Ecumenical Migration Centre for 20 years, helping to support underprivileged immigrants and refugees by promoting their rights, recognizing their contributions to Australia, and advocating for their wellbeing (Langfield, n.d.).

Unfortunately, Janet died in 2022, and WIRE mourned the loss.

# KERRY LOVERING

After graduating from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Science (Honours) degree, Kerry entered a male-dominated industry and worked as a geologist (Ingvanson, 2008). However, once she started work, she noticed that she was only paid 70% of her male colleagues' salary.

Fortunately, her upbringing was rooted in a family ethos that emphasized gender equality and the belief that her potential was not bounded by her gender. With the support of her family and her experience of unequal pay, she later became a lifelong activist for women's rights, including equal pay, abortion rights, and paid maternity leave (Cooke, 2008). In the late 1970s, she helped women's refugees in Melbourne. In her 75th year, she devoted herself to serve as a local councillor, with a particular interest in academia and equal opportunity.

Combining her early life experiences and interest in women's rights, she went on to support the founding of WIRE. She also served as a member of the Women's Electoral Lobby and the Local Government Women's Association. She actively participated in "the conversation" to increase public awareness of women's participation in Victoria's political, social, cultural, economic, and democratic legacy (Fernantz, n.d.).

# DR. PHILOMENA HORSLEY

After graduating with a Master of Medical anthropology, Dr Philomena Horsley completed her Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne. In the 1980s, Philomena co-founded WIRE while she was a student activist. Dr Philomena Horsley had experienced the period when women were not allowed to drive trams due to having their period, fly planes and they also could not do anything without their husband's permission in 1970s. Accordingly, she noticed the need to change the role model for women and give them more choices in their personal life, not only in terms of health and fertility control but also in terms of employment and political life (Ingvarson, 2008). Early life experience made her realise that rather than having men run the service, women's services should be run by and for women because only they knew what we want and need.

Accordingly, she was involved in setting up the first state-funded women's health service in Victoria in 1983 named Healthsharing Women. Up to that point, there was no support for women to access information about women's health. She and her colleagues received funds from the Victorian government and set up an information service that collected women's stories about particular health conditions they had, and informed women by giving them access to information about their bodies, operations and treatments (Ingvarson, 2008). After this, with her experience in the information service, she supported the establishment of WIRE.

Dr Horsley was actively committed to helping women in various ways. The Victorian Honour Roll of Women inducted her in 2001 because of her involvement in establishing WIRE. In addition, the Australian government recognised her contributions to disability and women with HIV/AIDS sectors in 2003 and presented her with a Centenary Medal (Find an Expert, n.d.). Since 2009, she has worked as a lecturer at the University of Melbourne's Center for Women's Health, Gender, and Society. In addition, she is a medical anthropologist and researcher (Find an Expert, n.d.). 'The health and well-being of women with impairments' is the topic of her most recent research project with the Women's Health, Gender, and Society Center. Moreover, Philomena is an award-winning crime fiction author (Winner of the Scarlett Stiletto Award in 2018; runner up, 2019).

# ROSEMARY VARTY

Rosemary Varty was born in 1939. She grew up on a farm and had a wonderful childhood. Growing up, Rosemary experienced gender differences, specifically, being denied access to play sports like football due to her gender (Ingvarson, 2008). Living in a neighbourhood with effective community service, she understood that if individuals want things to be changed or maintained, they should be involved in doing it, instead of asking others for help. Accordingly, those became reasons that motivated Rosemary to advocate for female rights.

After completing her education, Rosemary became a financial controller and administration manager from 1962-84 (Francis, 2009). In 1979, Rosemary joined the Liberal Party of Australia and was active on the Central Women's Committee. She was elected a councillor for the City of Box Hill from 1981-84 and a member of the Australian Local Government Women's Association from 1981 to 1993. In 1985, she was elected as a member for Nunawading Province in the Legislative Council of the Victorian Parliament and held this position until 1992. During this time, she also held the position of Parliamentary Secretary to Cabinet from 1992-99. After serving in Nunawading, she was elected to represent the Silvan electorate from 1992-99.

Throughout her illustrious career, Rosemary has consistently advocated for gender equality and women's rights, displaying remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. She played a pivotal role in the successful establishment of WIRE to assist women in need. Despite the limited funds available in the early years and the formidable task of training personnel, Rosemary's unwavering passion and dedication to the cause contributed to a tangible improvement in the lives of many women. Her commitment serves as a testament to her indomitable spirit and the transformative power of her advocacy.

Rosemary was not only a long-time champion of women's rights but also a respected figure both within and beyond the political arena, and her work was acknowledged when she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in the 2021 Queen's Birthday Honours for "service to the community, and to lawn bowls" (Francis, 2009).

# PAULINE ROCKMAN

Pauline Rockman, an alumnus of Deakin University and La Trobe University, Melbourne, holds a Bachelor's degree in Engineering, a Graduate Diploma in Women's Studies, and a Bachelor of Arts degree (Melbourne Holocaust Museum, n.d.). Her academic background fueled her profound interest in combatting racism and antisemitism, which later became her life's mission.

Currently serving as the Co-President at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Pauline has been deeply involved in various roles within the institution since 1992 (Melbourne Holocaust Museum, n.d.). Her enduring commitment is evident in her ongoing contributions to the museum, particularly towards fundraising for educational purposes (Together we can educate against hate, n.d.). Pauline's influence extends beyond national borders. She represented Australia at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, underscoring her dedication to the cause.

Additionally, she demonstrated her leadership abilities as the Regional Coordinator for Australia and a Regional Consultant for 17 years. Between 2003 and 2014, Pauline was actively involved in the Australian March of the Living, further amplifying her commitment to remembering and teaching the lessons of the Holocaust.

In recognition of her significant contributions to the community, particularly through the Jewish Holocaust Centre, Pauline was bestowed with the prestigious Medal of the Order of Australia in 2010 (She Speaks, n.d.). Her tireless efforts in promoting tolerance and understanding remain as significant and impactful as ever.

# DIANNE FRUIN

Dianne Fruin is recognized as one of the esteemed founders of WIRE, playing an active role during the organization's formative years. Specifically, she was instrumental in addressing Mrs. Oldham's claims of unfair exclusion by WIRE, following the latter's publication of a letter in *The Age* in 1985, wherein she argued against affirmative action legislation (Connolly, 1985). Regrettably, due to limited resources, additional information about Fruin's contributions and career beyond this point remains unknown.

# VAL BYTH

Val Byth was a friend of another founder Fleur Spitzer, a pioneering feminist activist who played a pivotal role in the founding of WIRE from 1982 to 83 (Haag & Harper, 2021). Additionally, she established the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) Young Feminists' Group.

She also served as a long-time convenor and representative of the WEL at various forums, schools, institutions, and community groups across metropolitan and rural Victoria.

As a mentor for young activist women, she provided guidance and support for 16 ongoing years, starting in 1972 (Victoria Government, 2001). Val Byth was also a member of the Older Women's Network and actively engaged with the Rural Women's Network of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (Victoria Government, 2001).

In recognition of her remarkable contributions to women's rights, lobbying, and activism, Val Byth received the Order of Australia in 1994, was inducted into the Victorian Centenary Women's Honour Roll in 2001, and awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1994 (Victoria Government, 2001).

Tragically, Val Byth passed away peacefully in April 2021 after a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease. Her life's work as a devoted feminist has left a lasting impact (Women's Electoral Lobby Victoria, 2021).



# MARY BARTLETT

Mary Bartlett, along with Christine Haag attended the Equal Opportunity Board for the case involving Women Who Want to be Women regarding the issue of political beliefs (Smith, 1986). Regrettably, due to limited resources, additional information about Mary's contributions and career beyond this point remains unknown.

**REGRETTABLY,  
DUE TO A  
NUMBER OF  
CONSTRAINTS,  
INFORMATION  
PERTAINING TO  
SOME FOUNDERS  
COULD NOT BE  
ASCERTAINED.**

Special thanks to Zhiyue Zhang (Sherry) who was completing her internship at WIRE in 2023 and helped with compiling this information.