

Shirley Smith



Shirley Smith, affectionately known as 'MumShirl', was a Wiradjuri woman, she was born in about 1924 on the Erambie Mission near Cowra, and grew up with her grandparents.

She began her lifelong welfare work after her brother's imprisonment, when she realised that many of his fellow inmates had no visitors, nor anybody with whom they could discuss their problems.

Initially at her brother's suggestion, she began to visit other prisoners in the gaol and, later, began to extend her visits to other gaols in New South Wales.

Eventually, the Department of Corrective Services allowed her access to all its prisoners. She earned the nickname 'MumShirl' through her visits to the inmates. It reflected both the affection and the regard in which they held her.

Mum Shirl for then began offering assistance to Aboriginal people around Sydney. She often found shelter, food and friendship for those recently arrived in the city, and worked tirelessly for the vulnerable, especially children, single mothers and the homeless.

MumShirl's life was her work. She lived and worked among the people she helped, and often suffered her own problems of poverty as a consequence.

MumShirl was also influential in land rights struggles, including the Aboriginal Embassy, the Aboriginal Legal Service and Aboriginal housing issues.

In particular, she is well remembered for her role in helping to found the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern, where she was later employed and continued her valuable community work.

MumShirl was awarded an MBE in 1977 for services to the Aboriginal community and an AM in 1985. She died in 1998, aged 73.