
27th June, 2018

Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association and SWOP NSW mourn the passing of academic, researcher, author and trans and sex worker rights activist Roberta Perkins. Roberta passed away yesterday afternoon 26th June, 2018.

Roberta Perkins lived and worked at the intersection of sex worker rights and transgender rights for more than three decades. Alongside her work as an author, researcher and academic, Roberta's impact on lives of sex workers and trans people cannot be overstated.

Roberta was a woman of action. Starting in the early 1980s, Roberta was part of the Australian Transsexual Association (ATA), a group which aimed to support trans people by advocating for legal and social changes. Building upon the insights gained during her honours thesis on trans people, Roberta approached Reverend Bill Crews of the Wayside Chapel Crisis Centre to provide a space for a support group for the trans women sex workers of Kings Cross. This provided a space for this group of street based sex workers, to meet and discuss their vulnerability to assault, robbery, rape and harassment while working in pre-decriminalised Kings Cross, and to share their strategies to manage and resist these threats.

Roberta's book "The Drag Queen Scene: Transsexuals in Kings Cross" (1983) prompted a meeting with Frank Walker, State Minister for Youth and Community Services to discuss and highlight trans issues. Moved by her words, Walker said: "Roberta, we have got to find them a place where they can lay their heads at night." Roberta turned this into a submission for funding to open a refuge strictly for trans people. In October 1983 this was made a reality at 75 Morgan Street, Petersham, and dubbed Tiresias House. Tiresias House was the precursor organisation for The Gender Centre, which still operates today.

Wayside Chapel was also where The Australian Prostitutes Collective NSW (APC) was founded. Roberta was also one of the founding members of this group, who advocated for the decriminalisation of sex work and heroin as necessary preconditions to improving the lives of the then 2000 NSW sex industry workers. Made up of current and former sex workers, youth and refuge workers, and social workers, this group produced 23 submissions for the Select Committee on Prostitution, which became the committee's primary data source on the working lives of sex workers in NSW and ultimately leading to the decriminalisation of sex work in NSW. The organisation received Government funding in 1984, and Roberta continued to be a part of it until it dissolved in 1987. The Government funding to continue the work of the APC flowed to SWOP, originally auspiced as a project of ACON, but now an independent peer sex worker health organisation in their own right.

Roberta's significant contribution on research into sex workers cannot be understated. Her decades of experience in sex work activism were evident in her ethical and community orientated approach to sex worker research. Acutely aware of the generally held misconceptions about the sex industry, and conscious of important identity and peer questions, her research always encompassed and involved the sex worker community and organisations including SWOP NSW and Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association as influential contributors. Her groundbreaking research

provided the important evidence base to fight against bad laws and to break harmful myths and stereotypes about sex workers. Her substantial body of work spanning close to four decades remains profoundly influential today and is often cited in contemporary research on sex work.

It would be hard to quantify the number of trans people and sex workers that have benefited from Roberta's work and legacy. Much of the work conducted by sex worker organisations today still takes its cues from Roberta's early work, addressing the complex and intersecting needs of sex workers, while simultaneously working on reducing the structural and systemic barriers sex workers face. Roberta was a trail blazer and her impact on the health safety and rights of sex workers and trans people has been vast and enduring. She will be greatly missed. Vale, Roberta Perkins

Roberta was recently reunited with her children Deborah and Bradley and their mother Barbara. We would like to offer our heartfelt condolences to her family, friends and all who knew and loved Roberta.

Roberta's friends and family would like to invite anyone who wants to join in celebrating her life this coming Friday the 29th of June at 12pm. The service will be held at The Anne Wilson Funeral Chapel in Mona Vale, located on the corner of Barrenjoey Rd and Darley St. in Mona Vale.