

## Dr Naomi Ruth Mayers OAM

The honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Naomi Mayers by the Pro-Chancellor, Mr Peter FitzSimons AM at a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences graduation at 11.30am on 3 May 2017.

### Citation

Pro-Chancellor, it is an unequalled pleasure and honour that I present to you Naomi Ruth Mayers OAM for the admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*).

Naomi Mayers is, short and simple, a legend, a giant, a constant and compassionate spirit and presence that has for almost five decades guided, advocated, argued for and supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the nation to build a healthier future. In doing so she has developed and led some of the most enduring and fundamentally profound reforms in Aboriginal and Torres Strait health both in terms of community controlled services and the broader Australian health system.

Naomi Ruth Mayers, a strong Yorta Yorta/Wiradjuri woman was born on Erambie Mission outside Cowra NSW. Her family and connections stretch far and wide across the nation and she has called many great Aboriginal leaders and advocates friend, uncle and aunt her entire life. So it is not a surprise that she too grew into a role of local, state and national leadership in Aboriginal affairs.

Pro-Chancellor, Naomi has always called out injustice, a lack of compassion or the failure of government or other powerful players to act to alleviate hardship, correct an injustice or end discrimination. But Naomi does not just call things out she puts her shoulder and her considerable experience behind her passionate advocacy. Naomi gets things done - she most certainly does not sit back and wait for others, she leads by example often fronting opposition alone with the remarkable steely determination for which it has become internationally known. Naomi has broken through barriers, shattered untruths and called governments and Prime Ministers to account. She has laid down the challenge to Aboriginal communities to take control of own future.

Even as a young woman Naomi broke with the common social norms of the day as a member of the Sapphires, a young all Aboriginal girl group whose story was recently made into a successful movie of the same name. The group performed defiantly at a time when Aboriginal people and issues were generally ignored or unspoken.

Pro-Chancellor, Naomi Mayers was present at the very start of the Aboriginal community controlled movement in 1970 /71. She has been Administrator or CEO of the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service for almost 45 years.

Naomi has been a continuous presence, a source of wisdom and stability. She has been our conscious that has reminded the movement that service at the local community level is perhaps the most noble and inspiring thing we can do. Naomi Mayers is a warrior whose experience, connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose depth of understanding of health systems and services, of community development and public policy is unparalleled.

Naomi has applied this experience and passion to many critical roles that have shaped the new Aboriginal consciousness that emerged following the 1967 referendum.

Naomi has been one of the principal figures behind a number of Redfern's community development projects, including those which established the Murawina pre-school program in 1973 and the Aboriginal Housing Company in 1976.

She is a founding member of the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW, the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO) (now the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation), was founding president of the Federation for Aboriginal Women and a member of the first ATSIC Regional Council (Metropolitan Sydney).

As an authority on Aboriginal health issues, she proved an influential witness during the inquiries of the 1977 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Health. In 1981 she was appointed as a consultant by the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists.

As Chair of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party in 1988-9, Naomi helped shepherd an often volatile group of State and Aboriginal community representatives to develop a comprehensive and

insightful national Aboriginal health strategy. Under her leadership, that pivotal report introduced innovative Aboriginal health sector reforms that have shaped the nature, range and delivery of health services even to this day.

She has remained a proud Aboriginal woman in the face of much ill will, many challenges and racism. She has never lost her focus and her commitment, and is one of the great champions in Australia. Naomi has lived a remarkable life unnoticed by the University even though she has been just there in Redfern all this time. It is only fitting that our University finally recognise her amazing, her proud and passionate life and contribution.

Pro-Chancellor, I present Ms Naomi Ruth Mayers OAM, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) and I invite you to confer the degree upon her.