Dr Ella Stack, Mayor of Darwin 1975-1980, & council member of the Darwin Community College and Menzies School of Health research

01 Ella Stack on: Darwin the 1960s

In 1961 I came here with my husband. there were no options for tertiary education in the territory and this was something that concerned my husband, Tom, and me. We had both been lucky enough to get Tertiary educations - both at Sydney University way back. And we had three sons and we hoped that one day they would get tertiary education and we thought about it quite a lot because if you have to go away to get the tertiary education you often get a job away - you don't come back. You make new friends at the university - start a new life . That didn't help and wouldn't help the growth and maturity of Darwin.

02 Ella Stack on: Darwin Community College

There were many of us who just thought "wouldn't it be good if they could start something in tertiary education"? This was when I was invited to join the Community College board - was just setting up - I was delighted to be asked and joined with enthusiasm.

We had really good people like the present professor of history, Alan. After the cyclone, he decided, even though the place was such a mess that there were still people around who wanted to do courses and so he organised a course. I booked in for it! It was about Australian politics and government and I thought 'I need to learn more about these things'. That all went along famously until, I was an alderman on the city council and I was asked if I'd consider standing for mayor of the city. I said yes I would. of course it was a heap of rubble then. So I gave up the practice of medicine to become Mayor of a heap of rubble. So I was very interested in promoting what the Community College was trying to do. But I had a lot of trouble getting my essays in on time. Because as I was elected Mayor - they kept me really busy - as you can imagine what it was like then . I was on the Darwin Reconstruction Commission - trying to set up a new building code. Such a lot of things. But I still stuck in an long as I could. So all of that was my background.

03 Ella Stack on: Cyclone Tracy

The whole city was destroyed. There wasn't a place that wasn't badly hit. Our house fell to bits around us. It was dreadful hearing it - in the small room which we picked to shelter in. My three sons and my husband and me, we were sitting there and listening to bits of the house go. Tremendous noise of the wind - and hte breaking of glass - and you sort of felt that you were going to go to. everyone thought they wouldn't survive the night. It was a slow destruction of an entire city. But we had
no water, no reticulation of water, no sewerage - this went on for months. No school were open for twelve months. We had three school sons...you just existed. And then there was no way you could open up a college again and get it going. So all those dreams of a tertiary education had to be put on very strong halt until we could get some life back into the city. And rebuild.

04 Ella Stack on : Menzies School of Health Research

That's when we were able to get a group together and start thinking about the Menzies school of Health Research. I went up the Legislative Council and sat down with every member of it. And promised the earth just about. And all the things I might have done for them as Mayor - all the IOUs I collected on. And they all promised that if we could get something going they would support it. And they would strongly recommend that the Commonwealth Government support it. And we already had the support of the Menzies Foundation which was marvellous. So they were the three pins. And we did have a problem with Aboriginal Health, as you know, and still have. But that needed a lot of study. And it needed study by people on the spot who were used to dealing with it. Not just flying in and flying out again. And we needed to make the job of Director an attractive one - and so it was very important then for the Sydney University to offer us one of their professorships which we could offer to our Director.

And they asked me at one stage, when i was on the board, if I'd go down to Melbourne and do some interviews - which I did. And they were remarkably good people. But there was one that stood out, that I thought, and it was Professor Matthews, and thank heavens they all agreed. And he became director of hte school. And he did just so much to set it up. To help establish it. And of course when the thought of the emerging University again, there was Menzies already set up. And the Department had given them rooms out at the hospital, so it was already a very vital unit.