

Levinia Crooks understood the power of community

Director of the Doherty Institute Professor Sharon Lewin reflected on the life of HIV activist and researcher Levinia Crooks, describing her work as “an incredible legacy”.

“She had very unique and special relationships with so many people, always very professional but also infused with great fondness and warmth,” Lewin said.

Her recollections come after the news that Crooks passed away earlier in October, which has brought Australia’s HIV communities together to celebrate on the life and work of one of the country’s most celebrated and influential HIV advocates.

“Levinia’s contribution to the HIV sector has been incredible,” continued Lewin.

“In fact, I think she mentored and counselled and inspired a whole generation of HIV professionals.

Crooks first became involved in the response to HIV and AIDS in 1986 when she began managing the Wollongong AIDS Research Project. Over her next few years on the project she interviewed people affected by HIV and AIDS, many of whom became seriously ill or died during this time.

The project was an important early academic response to the epidemic, and set a course for Crooks that would continue for over three decades.

She went on to work or volunteer with almost every major Australian HIV organisation.

From the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) to the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation to ACON, Crooks has left a legacy of policy and program development that has profoundly shaped the landscape of Australia’s HIV response.

Her most recent position as the long-standing CEO of ASHM—what began as the Australasian Society for HIV Medicine—has not only had an impact here in Australia, but around the region and internationally as well.

But throughout her career, Crooks’ outlook was shaped by the early work that exposed her to the human side of the epidemic.

“Her career began at a time when there was little hope for people living with HIV,” said Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) President Chad Hughes.

“At every level, her contribution furthered debate in substantive and important ways. Her leadership legacy is one of partnership, collaboration, vision and courage and in many ways she will be impossible to replace.”

Many in the sector have reflected on their personal relationships with Crooks, who was a formidable advocate as much as she was a warm, caring person completely dedicated to the communities she served. Over her decades working in these communities she was more than a professional giant, she was a friend to many and even a caregiver in the darkest days of the epidemic.

CEO of Positive Life Craig Cooper recalled the ways Crooks had become embedded in the communities of gay men she worked within and alongside.

“Levinia also had a unique tribal association, commitment and connection with gay men—we remember dancing and partying with Levinia prior to and after HIV arrived in Sydney,” Cooper said.

“We join with the Australasian HIV sector, her friends, colleagues, and gay, lesbian and trans brothers and sisters in mourning her loss and acknowledging her extraordinary contribution and commitment to PLHIV and their clinical management, welfare and human rights.”

Brent Allan, a long-time HIV activist and senior advisor for ASHM and ICASO, echoed Cooper’s comments—Allan saw her relationship to and understanding of community as the heart of Crooks’ ability to change hearts and minds when it came to HIV.

“She knew the real passion of community didn’t just reside in bricks and mortar of an organisation, but was felt just as viscerally in the bars and on the streets,” he said.

The words of so many advocates from Australia’s response to HIV point to the breadth and profundity of Crooks impact on the lives of everyone she worked with, an impact acknowledged by the Commonwealth of Australia.

Crooks’ appointment as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2008 was the just recognition for a career spent improving the lives of people living with and affected by HIV.

While her legacy is felt across every organisation she has been involved in, none of Australia’s HIV institutions has been more profoundly affected than ASHM, where Scott McGill has stepped in as Action CEO after the end of Crooks’ 18-year tenure in the role.

During her time as CEO Crooks elevated not only her organisation but Australia’s role in the international HIV response, representing the country in global forums and supporting the development of new HIV programs around the Asia-Pacific.

“She will be remembered as a warm and generous friend to so many—always ready to roll her sleeves up, get on with the work at hand and without exception bringing her formidable leadership, intelligence, wit and problem solving abilities to the table,” McGill said.

“While the ASHM staff team and board are enormously saddened by her passing, Levinia leaves us all a major and extensive legacy to carry forward and build upon.”