

## The true definition of an ally: a reflection of Levinia Crooks

The climate for those living with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s was clouded with uncertainty, misconceptions, fear and death. The HIV community had few friends on the outside but one woman, Levinia Crooks, became a trailblazer of what it looks like to be a real ally of the HIV community.

Being an ally is more than being sympathetic towards those experiencing discrimination. A true ally takes on the identity and puts oneself in the position of a group being discriminated against or treated unjustly and is willing to act.

Levinia saw the injustices towards people living with HIV (PLHIV) and became angry with us. She cried and mourned with us as we buried partners, friends, brothers and sisters. Our hurt and our struggles became her own.

Levinia's choice to stand with the HIV community during the early days of the response cost her relationships, privileges and even her reputation. But her passion for PLHIV and her vision to see beyond the fear and shame that plagued the community is the fruit of what the HIV community lives in today.

Her vision fuelled her to join the HIV response in almost every way imaginable. She was instrumental in the first grassroots community organisation, National People Living with AIDS Coalition (NPLWAC) and continued to work on behalf of the HIV community until her recent departure from the Australasian Society for HIV Medicine (ASHM). You'd be hard pressed to find an area that didn't have Levinia's fingerprints on it. Her influence stretched across government, medicine, research and into the community response. She developed strategies, sat on numerous committees and marched alongside PLHIV in the name of dignity, respect, and equality.

She encouraged us to speak up in the face of fear. Our voices slowly became creditable and our experience valued in the HIV response. She called out the strength, uniqueness and value of each PLHIV she came in contact with. It was the encouragement the HIV community needed as we battled to see every PLHIV live without discrimination and fear.

Our community stands behind the statement "nothing about us without us" and Levinia was always at the side of PLHIV. She was a friend, a teacher, a mentor and a fighter.

Levinia's devotion to the HIV community is one that is unrivalled. It proves what is possible when we all work together. Her death is one the community mourns and celebrates as we look back, together with other allies, at the path she paved for us all.