



### **SOS – Save Our Sirius**

Inside Myra Demetriou’s apartment on the tenth floor of Sirius, every night since the beginning of November 2014, a set of lights has flashed a message across Sydney Harbour and The Rocks: SOS, Save Our Sirius.

SOS is the international distress message and in late 2014 the residents of Sirius were in distress. A few months earlier the NSW Government had told them they would be moving to ‘new homes’ along with all other public housing tenants in The Rocks, Millers Point and Dawes Point. Some had lived in the area all their lives. Others had family ties going back generations.

Sirius was perhaps the only truly successful high-rise public housing development in the state. Its residents loved it, and loved their community. Most were devastated they were to be ‘relocated’ far from everyone and everything they knew. The announcement had been so sudden and so complete. Everyone to be gone within two years.

According to the government, the city was no place for social housing. The old houses of Millers Point and Dawes Point were unsuitable and too expensive to maintain. There had been no analysis of Sirius and its suitability, but it was thrown into the sale program nonetheless.

What follows are the human stories of Millers Point residents, and especially those who brought Sirius alive over the past forty years.

*left: SOS Lights in Myra’s apartment from Atherden Street, The Rocks. Margaret Bishop and John Dunn installed the lights in November 2014. photo: Ben Guthrie. above: Myra in her apartment with SOS lights. photo: John Dunn.*

### Impact of the displacement on Sirius residents – Alan Morris

The announcement by Minister Pru Goward on 19 March 2014 that all residents of Millers Point and Sirius would have to move out of their homes, is etched on residents' memories. It was a profoundly traumatic day. There had been no inkling that Sirius was to be part of any sell-off. There had been some concern among Millers Point tenants that the government was perhaps planning a partial sell-off; 29 vacant homes had been sold between 2008 and 2013 and a Social Impact Assessment (SIA) had been commissioned by Family and Community Services to measure 'the potential social impacts on the existing Millers Point community and the broader social housing system that may result from the sale of any further social housing in Millers Point' (Reilly, 2013). The Sirius building was not part of this SIA.

Cherie Johnson was one of the first people to move into Sirius. She was totally devastated by the announcement:

The day that we received notice ... I was listening to the radio and I heard it on the news and I nearly collapsed. I was devastated from then on ... So that's how it has been – the first thing you think of when you wake in the morning and the last thing at night. It's just horrid.

Maureen Hansen, 81 years-old at the time, described her response to reading the letter saying she had to move out of Sirius:

I was physically ill, I can remember. I don't know if you've ever suffered from it, but when you get a shock and you can't think. You know that feeling?

For many tenants, the period after the announcement was intensely stressful. The pressure on tenants to vacate was relentless. The key pressure was the threat of termination of their public housing status. Residents were allowed two 'formal' offers of alternative public housing. If they rejected both offers Housing NSW would terminate their tenancy and issue an eviction notice. Cherie was convinced the situation had contributed to a serious decline in her physical and mental health:

Well with the depression business, I'd never experienced anything like that. It was never part of our family. We didn't know what it was all about ... And little did we know that Cherie would end up with it. It's dreadful. And so there's that you see, and that impacts on other illnesses that you might have and when you're on your own you have too much time to think about these things especially when all these outside influences are happening.

Cherie found the endless lack of certainty and bureaucratic pressures debilitating:

Well I'm suffering with depression. I've never had anything like that in my life. I didn't know what it was all about. I don't function correctly. It's so debilitating because it [the displacement] is on your mind all the time ... I have days where, and there's no forewarning ... I just cannot get out of bed. Like aching all over. I want to get up and I want to have a drink of water and do all these [things] ... and I cannot do it and I've never been like this. It's something dreadful ... And I was always on the go.

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*This article is part of a larger study based on in-depth interviews which examines the displacement of public housing tenants from the Sirius building and Millers Point.*



**above:** Cherie at home in Sirius. **left:** Myra was called before the Housing Appeals Committee. It recommended FACS withdraw its inappropriate offer to Myra. FACS rejected this recommendation. **below:** Maureen outside Sirius, the neighbourhood her family lived in for five generations. photos: John Dunn



Cherie received a job offer just prior to the announcement. She had turned it down. She felt that she would not be able to cope:

Where I worked, they sold out ... and the new owners asked if I would begin work there and I was, this was just before this happened, and I was on cloud nine. And then this [the displacement announcement] happened and I thought, 'Well how can I begin there when I've got to be here sort of. They might say you're moving tomorrow. We've got a place for you, blah.' And I wouldn't want to be taking time off and so I've had all that to contend with ... To think that it's your home. It's not just a place to live. It is your home and you've made so many contacts with everyone and the whole beautiful community ... I want to return to work when I'm well enough, but this is so unsettling.

Maureen was 81 at the time of the announcement and had had substantial surgery just prior to the announcement:

It was dreadful cos I'm telling you I wasn't well ... I was not in a very good way at all and I thought what am I going to do? ... They were all saying we'll finish up at Blacktown, you know and the thought of that was shocking. I don't know anything else but the [inner] city. I'm just a city person and to put me out in the middle of nowhere ... And everything races through your head. What am I going to do? ... How am I going to manage this? I didn't have the strength of a two-year-old.

When residents were displaced from the Sirius building and Millers Point, they often found themselves severely isolated. Rene Asselin had lived in Sirius for 35 years and had been moved out when he was 90 years of age. It was evident that he was struggling to cope in his new abode. He had had some social ties in Sirius, but he knew no one in his new locality.

When you are old you can't make friends with young people. I understand it because I have seen it many times and the old people, well they have their own way ... When I left Sirius a few people of my age or a little bit younger were there but they're gone so I'm on my own and here there's no one. I have no common ties with no one here. I speak to a few people, but it's lucky if I meet them in the street and say good morning and good-bye. I haven't been to any of those flats [the apartments in his building in the new location]. I have never been invited and my guess is that these people are not going into flats of somebody else.

He felt that there was no chance of him building up connections in the new area:

No, I'm on my own here. I think there won't be any connection, any tie or you know someone who you can trust.

Rene's mobility was limited so it was hard for him to maintain contact with the people he knew in Sirius. He had gone back to Sirius a few weeks after moving, but there was nobody there:

Anyway, I don't know where they are gone. I went back a few weeks ago and I saw the light in one of them [the apartment of a friend in Sirius] and it was a little bit rude so I didn't want to bother them, but they're probably gone by now.

In July 2017 Myra Demetriou and Cherie were the only residents left in Sirius. The tactics adopted by Housing NSW, most notably the threat of termination, had ensured that all of the other





**left:** Cherie proudly talks about the ornaments, and family photos in her ninth-floor Sirius apartment. **above:** Maureen, Cherie and Myra with Sirius architect Tao Gofers inside Myra's apartment. **right:** Myra and Maureen outside Sirius. photos: John Dunn

residents had left. Myra, despite being 90 and legally blind, has refused to be intimidated: 'You don't push this little bunny around.' At the time of writing Cherie was in an extremely vulnerable position. She had been made two formal offers and had lost her final appeal. She was mortified at the thought of leaving her beloved Sirius and moving into what she had been offered. 'It's filthy and disgusting, I won't got there.' Three years on, Cherie remains devastated by the government's decision:

A real community and this is what kills me. To think that it has been torn to pieces. To destroy this beautiful community where everyone cares, loves and respects one another and we come together in times of need always and it's just I can't believe that it's happening in my life-time to live though a government like this ... They're heartless, soulless ...

*This article is part of a much larger study examining the displacement of public housing tenants from the Sirius building and Millers Point. For the latest news about this study and to read more articles by Alan Morris go to [saveoursirius.org/thebook](http://saveoursirius.org/thebook)*

### Maureen, Cherie and Myra living in Sirius and The Rocks

**Maureen Hansen's** family lived in the streets surrounding Sirius for five generations. Maureen felt she walked in the shadows of her fifth-generation ancestor, Mary Ann Curry, who was convicted at sixteen for stealing and transported to New South Wales where she later met and married former marine David Davis who had fought with Lord Nelson. Together they lived in Globe Street. Their children and grandchildren continued to live nearby. Maureen's grandfather and his family moved into the first flat in High Street when completed in 1908. Maureen was the last of her family to live in The Rocks and 'relocated' in 2015.

**Cherie** and her mother Betty were original inhabitants of Sirius, moving into Cherie's ninth-floor unit in 1980. In 2014 Cherie described what it has been like living in Sirius and The Rocks:

My mum and I moved here thirty-four years ago. I looked after mum until she passed away last year. From the day we moved here, it felt like we had moved into a country town. Straight away it felt like home.

I was at the Fortune of War for nineteen years before it changed hands in 2013. I have always felt safe here. Whether it's day or night, there are always people I know, and they know me. People know and respect one another around here, and we look out for each other. That's the sort of place it is, a place I want to keep calling home.

**Myra** lived behind Holy Trinity Church before moving to Sirius:

It was a busy but happy time when our family moved to Trinity Avenue. I was still working for J Walter Thompson, before I became secretary to the bishop in 1972. My two children attended Fort Street School, where I formed many friendships, including one with Nita McCrae. For almost thirty years as a volunteer I ran the Historical and Military Museum at the Holy Trinity Church.

I continued to live in Trinity Avenue and care for a neighbour until a friend told me that the narrow and steep stairs in my house were too dangerous and I had to move. I knew several people in Sirius and when an apartment became available I agreed to move.