



Elsie: we will not be beaten

A documentary about the first
women's refuge

We see every woman who comes here as responsible for her own decisions. What we aim to do is to give people back to themselves.
Elsie Collective, 1974

LOGLINE

Fifty years ago, a small group of women created a women's refuge, heralding the birth of the movement against domestic violence in Australia.

SYNOPSIS

In 1974 a small group of women, armed with nothing but brooms, mops and washing up gloves, broke into two abandoned houses in Glebe called Elsie and Minnie, cleaned them up, changed the locks, and declared themselves a safe place for women.

Firebombed, shot at, beaten up, *Elsie: We Will not be Beaten*, tells the remarkable story of these feminist pioneers as they created the first refuge for women fleeing domestic violence ever created in Australia. Prior to Elsie women who fled violent husbands risked separation from their children, stigma at the hands of police, homelessness or destitution.

Elsie made history by giving them a way out.

BACKGROUND

The women who founded Elsie had no money, no training in counselling nor domestic violence prevention (concepts which did not yet exist) no means to defend themselves against violent husbands (who turned up with guns and fire-bombs), and no organisational or institutional support. Despite these difficult circumstances they created a 24hr volunteer roster system and managed to feed, house, and protect hundreds of women and their children. Elsie was run entirely on donated food and volunteer labour for over a year before the government finally offered support. Once government funding was



secured more refuges opened throughout Australia and today there are over 800 refuges and domestic violence prevention is a core aspect of government policy.

Elsie was more than a refuge it was a life changing experience, a place where women lived with each other, formed friendships and relationships, argued over the representation of First Nations and migrant communities, shared domestic tasks and childcare, created all girl punk bands and theatre groups, hosted parties and dances, organised self-defence squads, fell in love and became powerful advocates for the rights of women.

Elsie transformed the political landscape making domestic violence an issue in Australia for the very first time. Today domestic violence is the leading preventable cause of death and illness for women aged 18 to 44 (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety) and anger at the rising numbers of women murdered by their intimate partners has sparked a series of nationwide rallies. This documentary will uncover a little-known story of bravery and activism from the past and connect this with a rising movement for change today.

STORY ARCS

This documentary will follow three key narrative arcs:

1. The Occupation, the birth of Elsie and how collective action created an unprecedented sanctuary for women.
2. The Reckoning, the conversations within Elsie, as First Nations, working-class and queer women birthed deeper dialogues around intersectionality.
3. The Legacy, the institutionalisation of the refuge model and how activists were forced to invent new ways to response to domestic violence.

This documentary will follow several personal narrative arcs including:

1. Anne's story. After reading in *Spare Rib* about the first women's refuge in the world, Chiswick Women's Aid in London, Anne became determined to establish a refuge in Australia. Outspoken, strikingly beautiful and fearless Anne forged a gang of co-conspirators to squat an abandoned house and bring the dream to life. Forced to sell marijuana to raise money to keep those seeking shelter alive, Anne is now one of Australia's leading feminist thinkers.



2. Bobbi's story. In a doctor's waiting room one day Bobbi read an article about Elsie in *Cleo Magazine*, a few weeks later she jumped on a train to Sydney with her kids, a garbage bag of belongings and \$5 to her name. Bobbi went from being an Elsie resident to becoming a leader in the fight against domestic violence.

3. Christine's story. One of seven children Christine remembers the police being called when her father beat her mother, but they would always say there was nothing they could do. One night Christine's mother escaped to Elsie with five of her children but eventually returned to her husband. Later Christine became an Elsie worker and is now CEO of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's community legal centre.

Elsie: We Will Not be Beaten will include archival footage, documentation of women's punk performances and bands, contemporary reenactments and interviews with participants, survivors and experts.

It will be energetic and raw, drawing its aesthetic from

feminist 16mm film footage, hand drawn posters and 70s and 80s underground counter-culture.

WHY NOW?

Elsie: We will not be Beaten has undeniable urgency, anger at the rising death toll of women killed by their intimate partners is palpable and rising.

The full story of Elsie, and its impact, has never been told, making this a unique opportunity to uncover a fascinating piece of Australian history.

Most of the founders of Elsie are still alive – making this a crucial time to capture and share their story.

The story of their activism brings hope and agency to a heartbreaking topic.

It's an eventful story as the collective navigated new territory for feminism; with the lives of women and children at stake, middleclass activists had to quickly learn to work with their working class, Aboriginal, and queer sisters, while simultaneously convincing



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governments that domestic violence was a real issue.

The refuge model birthed by Elsie has become highly contested, new generations of activists are confronting the past with their own insights making a lively and engaging story.

This documentary demands big answers to big questions.

Themes discussed include:

- What will it take for men to stop killing the people they claim to love?
- What does radical, intersectional solidarity look like in practice?
- What happens when grassroots movements become government programs?
- What would a world without violence against women look like?

CHARACTERS & CONTRIBUTORS

Original Elsie Collective Members:

Anne Summers AO, author of *Damned Whores and Gods Police*, celebrated feminist academic, award-winning journalist and former drug dealer to raise funds for Elsie.

Bronwyn Penrith, Wiradjuri elder, founder of Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Women's Cooperation, former member of National Advisory Group on Domestic Violence, former Elsie resident.

Christine Robinson, Bundjalung woman, CEO of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's community legal center Wurringa Baiya, came to Elsie as a child, former Elsie worker.

Christina Giberson, Elsie volunteer and first paid worker at Elsie.

Ludo McFerran AO, former national director of the Safe at Home, Safe at Work project, member of the punk band Stray Dags, Elsie volunteer.

Bobbi Townsend, former Elsie resident, advocate for working-class feminism, women's refuge worker.

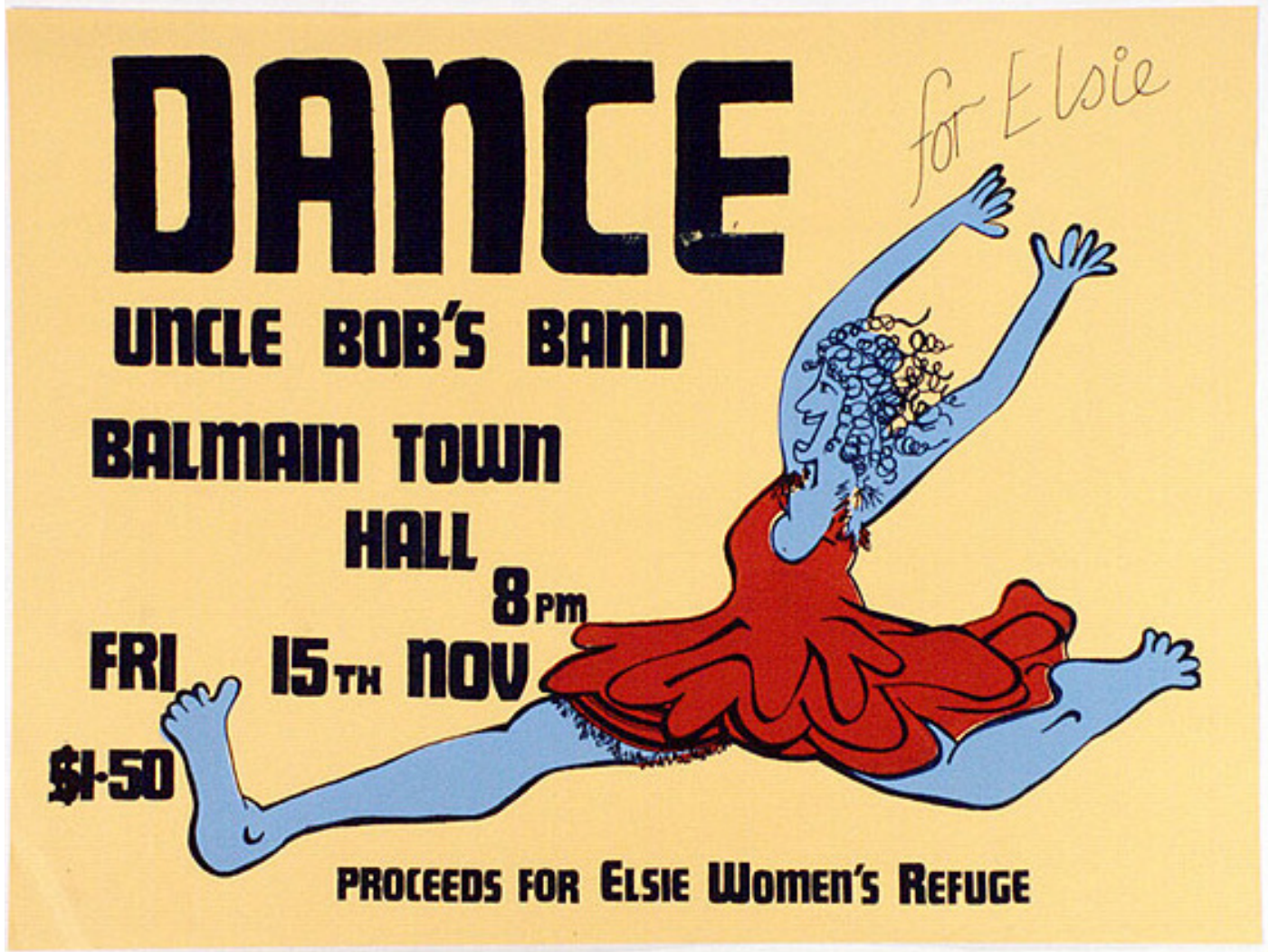
Lina Clayton, Abortion Rights Activist, Businesswomen, Elsie Volunteer.



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Susanne Hollis, Elsie volunteer, theatre performer and feminist activist.

Contemporary Activists

Young women leading campaigns against domestic violence and domestic violence experts.

STRUCTURE

ACT I: OCCUPATION

- The documentary will explore the limited options for women to escape domestic violence in the early 1970s and why Elsie was so important
- It will introduce key characters and activists and who helped create Elsie
- It will explore the world inside Elsie, the struggles to defend women, to secure funding, and what made Elsie so unique

Over Act I we will discover the tough physical world of Elsie, a semi-derelict pair of terrace houses in Glebe, dubbed by the local newspaper a “Lesbian Rathole.” There will be moments of joy as women work together and dream of a world without patriarchal violence. Funny stories, such as the whole Elsie collective changing their surnames to “Egg” to avoid patrilineal naming traditions will be shared alongside more serious stories of resilience and survival.

Archival 16mm film footage, photographs, band posters, feminist magazines, flyers, and news footage will be combined with interviews to bring the world of Elsie to life.

ACT II: RECKONING

- The documentary will explore the tensions that erupted within Elsie as queer, working class and Aboriginal women challenged the more middle-class founders, provoking new ways of thinking about feminism.



- It will introduce key characters who came to Elsie as residents and their paths to liberation.

Over Act II we will hear from women who came to Elsie and developed new ways of relating outside the confines of the nuclear family. Even children demanded their own personhood; when Elsie first opened children were considered “plus one” to their mother, but as Elsie evolved it was realised, they also needed counselling, care and support.

The conversations within Elsie changed ideas about humanity, class, sexuality, and race. These debates culminated in a show-down between residents and the founders of Elsie with residents and their supporters eventually taking over as Elsie became survivor led.

Archival 16mm film footage and family photographs will be combined with interviews to bring the world of Elsie to life.

ACT III: LEGACY

- The documentary will explore how Elsie inspired a national movement with refugees springing up across Australia and domestic violence becoming a recognised part of the welfare sector.
- New voices will join the conversation to assess what Elsie achieved and what needs to happen next.

Over Act III we will hear from contemporary leaders in the fight against domestic violence. The legacy and impact of Elsie will be explored alongside an assessment of what next to stop violence against women.

Archival 16mm film footage and documentation of contemporary rallies will be combined with interviews to bring to life the ongoing fight for safety for women.

IMPACT

Elsie: We Will Not be Beaten seeks to do more than tell a story—it aims to:

- Bring to life an inspiring, and so far, unknown, story of activism
- Recognise and pay tribute to women who changed the world thus inspiring other women to live fulfilling lives
- Create a bridge between generations of feminists.
- Amplify the voices of those still fighting for to stop violence against women

- Spark conversations about how to stop domestic violence

PRODUCTION STATUS

- Archive Footage: Secured and rights cleared for 16mm film shot inside Elsie, accessed secured and rights cleared for personal photographs and other documents from Elsie
- Key Participants: Identified and some have been interviewed, access secured
- Support & Interest: Support secured from some feminist networks and activist groups, with more to come as the project progresses.

A huge trove of materials available from band posters, photographs, performance documentation, flyers, magazines, news footage is available for the documentary. Key participants have given extensive interviews and granted access for more as needed.

WHAT IS NEEDED?

To fully realise this powerful documentary further research and development is needed to finalise the treatment and pitch materials. We need to:

- Complete interviews with contemporary activists
- Follow up interviews with Elsie founders
- Interviews with former residents of Chiswick Women's Aid in London, to provide an international context to the story of Elsie
- Additional shooting of recreations
- Additional archival research and clearances

This final leg of research and development will also be used to confirm the rest of the team, the finance plan, production schedule and materials that will enable us to pitch the project to sales agents, distributors and broadcasters.

Given the overwhelming success of the preliminary work done through an video installation at UTS Gallery based on this project we are confident of the audience appetite for the documentary.

