

Council backs statue to honour race relations pioneer

Plans to mark the legacy of Saroj Lal are set to be unveiled after councillors unanimously backed the creation of a “permanent memorial”.

Edinburgh Council has backed building a statue to honour the legacy of Saroj Lal, an influential equal opportunities campaigner and one of the first Asian women to teach in Scottish schools in the 1970s.

Lord Provost Robert Aldridge described her as a “pioneer and an inspiration” as he tabled a motion supporting a statue in her honour at a full council meeting on Thursday, March 21.

“We have very few statues of women in the city,” the Provost said. “We have no statues of named women of colour in the city. I think it is more than overdue that we have such a statue and I think no one is more deserving of that than Saroj Lal.”

The only existing statue in Edinburgh depicting a person of colour is the 1986 ‘Woman and Child’ sculpture at Festival Square built to represent the city’s opposition to South Africa’s Apartheid system – although this was not of a specific individual.

The new memorial, which is likely to be in the Southside area where the Lal family have lived for decades, will celebrate Saroj’s “enormous legacy of work and positive change across the city of Edinburgh and far beyond, improving race relations and race equality across several fields, particularly education, policing, health, social work, prisons and many more,” the Provost’s motion stated.

He said: "She was a teacher, one of the very few woman of colour to be a teacher in the 1970s, one of the earliest woman to teach in an Edinburgh primary school of colour.

"She introduced multiculturalism into the classroom, she had a long career in race relations, retiring as director of Lothian Racial Equality Council in 1996. Her influence was all embracing; in schools, in hospitals, in hospices, and prisons she improved conditions for minority communities."

He added fundraisers were "in a position to fully fund the creation and erection of a statue".

A report will be brought forward to the culture and communities committee later this year "considering options for the site of a statue".

A previous attempt to recognise Lal's contribution to the capital by naming a new Morningside primary school after her failed after parents instead voted to call it 'Canaan Lane'.

Her son Vineet, who led the campaign, said in 2021 the decision was a missed opportunity "to mark her life and her legacy".

Deputy Lord Provost Lezley Marion-Cameron said: "From collaborating with the former Lothian and Borders Police for serving as the first Asian woman in Scotland to be appointed as a justice of the peace, [Saroj Lal] just has such an enduring and wide spectrum of legacy we can pay tribute to."

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



Saroj Lal, photo taken by her son Vineet Lal, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saroj_Lal.jpg