

Mrs Helen Downer M.B.E., 1906-1989

Helen Downer was originally a secondary school teacher who would encourage the girls of Rotorua High School to consider kindergarten teaching as a career. Her own career in kindergarten began after her retirement from teaching. In 1950 Downer convened a public meeting that established the Rotorua Free Kindergarten Association of which she became president. It took four years to get the first kindergarten that was named in her honour, the Helen Downer Kindergarten. Downer later expressed regret that she retired from teaching, as she would have liked to apply the knowledge she gained from her work in kindergarten to school teaching. 'I would have been far more effective'.ⁱ

When Helen Downer was elected President of the NZFKU in 1957, the *Hawkes Bay Herald* reported that this was the first time the position would be held by a member of the 'non training' associations, referring to the fact that Downer came from the regions rather than one of the four older established city associations which operated training colleges.ⁱⁱ Her election was a nod of acknowledgement that there were growing tensions associated with the myriad of new but small associations in the regions and the larger, and also growing, city associations. The unexpected decision at the conference of the incumbent president, Mrs H. McCreanor (1955-57) not to stand on the grounds that the next step towards a 'tidy organisation' would be a 'long process' led to Downer's election 'to lead the organisation on that road'. In 1960 the Rotorua Association became part of the Bay of Plenty Free Kindergarten Association, as part of the necessary 'tidy up' envisaged earlier. Downer became the new President, a position she held throughout her years of kindergarten involvement. Downer's presidential term 1957-1966 covered the years where unprecedented demand for kindergartens and qualified teachers outstripped the resources of both the Union and the Department of Education. Growth had to be contained and managed, firstly through a policy of 'consolidation' and later by 'controlled expansion'. In her retiring presidential address, Downer recalled the 'challenge' issued by C. E. Beeby, the Director of Education who 'urged' the delegates to the 1957 conference 'to solve the problems of success' that had arisen from rapid growth and compounded by the 'fragmentation of control' within the Union.ⁱⁱⁱ Nine years later, Downer felt that 'some success had been achieved'. The number of associations had reduced from 78 to 67 (although this was to later rise to 75). Downer cited success and satisfaction in her own region, and also claimed that there were 'no regrets' about amalgamation in New Plymouth, South Taranaki, Franklin and Southland. That Downer 'earnestly urged' other associations to consider such a move, viewed by some with 'suspicion and even hostility', was indicative of an ongoing problem because the pace of growth, while managed, did not slow.^{iv} In summarising some of the achievements of her term Downer cited the move towards a national kindergarten training scheme, never fully completed, and the gazetting of kindergarten regulations in 1959. Alongside the first Kindergarten Handbook in 1956, which Downer had worked on in her role as Vice President, these initiatives were essential aspects of the infrastructure for managing the operations of a national kindergarten movement.

Upon her retirement as president Downer was given a magnificent gift by the Union, a black and white TV. Eleven years later in 1977 upon her final retirement from official kindergarten work this was upgraded to a colour television! Speaking on this occasion, Miss Isobel Christison, Officer for Pre-school Education in the Department of Education recalled the 'three faces of Helen Downer. Her public face was her ability to chair a meeting in a controlled way, her fairness and directness. Her personal face when people can discuss things with her and receive comradeship. Then there is her third face, one of sympathy and understanding in times of bereavement, loneliness and ill health'.^v Downer's detailed presidential addresses at biennial conferences provide a useful insight into the times. The concluding words in her final address are interesting to consider in the light of 21st century early childhood policy:

'I am often asked if and when kindergarten will become part of government and when they will be provided by Government...I sincerely hope this will never happen. I firmly believe that the strength of our movement lies in the desire to establish kindergartens and the willingness to work for them. When we lose this motivating force we lose the vitality that has been a feature of our history. There are already signs of loss in well established kindergartens ... We must do all we can to resist this development and to realise our good fortune.'^{vi}

ⁱ Helen Downer, President's Opening Address, NZFKU AGM 1966, Napier-Taradale

ⁱⁱ Undated clipping , 1955 HNKA 4.1d Box HA60

ⁱⁱⁱ Downer, 1966

^{iv} Janet Elliott (March 1978) 'Mrs Helen Downer BA, M.B.E. Another entry in the jubilee competition', *Kindergarten Education*, 1978, pp. 5-6.

^v 'Luncheon to mark the retirement of Mrs Helen Downer', *Kindergarten Education*, 1978, pp. 3.

^{vi} Downer, 1966