



KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

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RETIREMENT

With the recent retirement of Miss Margaret Just the kindergarten movement has lost an outstanding teacher, tutor, friend, and colleague.

Following other appointments Miss Just held the position of Head Teacher at the Helen Deem Centre for Pre-School Education in Dunedin from its opening in November 1953 until the end of 1977.

Her work load in that position comprised a great deal of administration and also lecturing to the many groups who visited the Centre either on a regular or irregular basis.

These groups comprised Karitane and Plunket nurses, Kindergarten teacher trainees, medical students, Home science students and Secondary school pupils still trying to decide on their future career. Many of those pupils who decided on Kindergarten teaching did so after sympathetic and knowledgeable discussions with Miss Just.

Parents were welcomed with a smile and warm greeting and Miss Just always made time for a reassuring word with an anxious parent.

Every function held by either the Parents' Club or Kindergarten Committee was supported by way of donation of time, money and goods.

During the years 1968-72 Miss Just was President of the New Zealand Kindergarten Teachers' Association. At this time a great deal of careful thought and negotiation went into the preparation and presentation of a successful salary claim. A great deal of credit for the success must go to the President of the day.

At a farewell dinner in Dunedin in November tributes were paid to Miss Just by the President of the Union and By Dr Neil Begg who as Medical Director to the Plunket Society had worked with Miss Just over many years.

The Union thanks Miss Just for a lifetime of dedicated service to the kindergarten movement and wishes her a long and happy retirement.

LUNCHEON TO MARK THE RETIREMENT OF MRS HELEN DOWNER

After 27 years of dedicated service to the kindergarten movement, a luncheon was held at the end of July 1977, to mark the occasion of the retirement of Mrs Helen Downer.

Mrs Downer had been President of the Rotorua and Bay of Plenty Associations since their inception in 1950 and from 1957 to 1966 she was also President of the N. Z. Free Kindergarten Union. She was awarded the M.B.E. in 1961 for active and devoted service to the kindergarten movement and in 1954 a kindergarten in Rotorua was named after her.

These achievements were acknowledged and praised by Mr Toms, President of the Bay of Plenty Association who commended Mrs Downer for the efficient way in which she had run the Association and for her close contact and involvement with staff. Mrs Lockhart, President of the N. Z. Free Kindergarten Union said her first impression of Mrs Downer at the Dunedin 75th Jubilee Conference in 1964 was of a President with a fantastic control of proceedings. She also mentioned she was well aware of the tremendous work Mrs Downer had done for her association. Miss Christison, Officer for Pre-School Education spoke about the "three faces of Helen Downer".

Her public face which 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. On behalf of the newly formed Tauranga Regional Free Kindergarten Association, Mrs Blow, President, thanked Mrs Downer for the tremendous assistance she had given her and wished her well in her retirement.

Accepting the gift of a colour television set, Mrs Downer thanked everyone for the gift and said she would treasure everything that had been said. She also thanked everybody for their loyal support and friendship. The years given to the movement were rewarding and stimulating and she had no regrets. In closing, Mrs Downer wished the kindergarten movement great success in the future.

Mr Toms stressed that this was not an occasion to farewell Mrs Downer as the Bay of Plenty Association would be calling upon her for advice and guidance in the future, but as an appreciation for the years of dedicated service.

Another Entry in the Jubilee Competition

Mrs Helen Downer BA MBE

Janet M. Elliott, 1977

To provide a service for the growing numbers of pre-school children in the town and the opportunity for employment in their home district for girls whom she had taught at the Rotorua High School and whom she had encouraged to train for kindergarten teaching, in November 1950 Mrs Downer convened a public meeting to establish a free kindergarten in Rotorua. At that meeting she was elected president of the newly-formed Rotorua Free Kindergarten Association. Within three months the first kindergarten in the Bay of Plenty was established, and three years later it was operating in a permanent building which now has her name.

Mrs Downer attended her first Union Conference in 1951, when she was elected to a sub-committee set up to redraft the Union Constitution. This gave her an early insight into the scope of the movement and the opportunity to express the views of non-training associations. The following year she was elected as a non-training member of the Executive, on which she gave continuous and distinguished service until she did not seek re-election in 1956.

In 1956, she worked with Mrs K. B. McCreanor in the preparation of the Kindergarten Handbook, and took over the editing and supervision of the printing of the booklet and its subsequent reprints in 1951 and 1954. In the days when the shortage of teachers hampered the growth of kindergartens, Miss I. M. Jamieson and Mrs Downer were appointed by the executive as a publicity committee, in an effort to recruit students.

While Mrs Downer would not wish to take full credit for the Union's achievements during her term as president, her wise leadership and dedication to her office undoubtedly stimulated progress and development in pre-school education. She was the first non-training president, and like all previous holders of the position, the service she gave called for considerable financial sacrifice, for, although travelling expenses were met, it was not until 1960 that the Union was in the position to approve a hospitality allowance of 20 pounds per annum.

On her election as president at the 1957 Conference in Hastings, Mr C. E. Beeby, then Director of Education, the guest speaker, threw out a

challenge to associations to amalgamate into district associations to avoid fragmentation of control and to overcome problems created by rapid growth. The idea was enthusiastically received by some, while others viewed the proposal with suspicion and even hostility. Mrs Downer accepted the challenge, and during 1957/58 travelled to make contact with 60 associations to explain the implications of amalgamation. Through her efforts, membership of the Union fell from 78 to 67, thereby bringing greater stability and strength to the movement.

Few people today will remember when the pooling scheme was completed during the Conference, by a committee set up to receive and pay out money during sessions. Upon her election to president, Mrs Downer recommended that, in view of the time taken to administer the scheme, it should be handled by the Union office and be subject to audit. Her recommendation was endorsed by the honorary auditor who said that all payments to and from the pool should be made by cheque.

Union files from 1957 to 1966 reveal that Mrs Downer became deeply involved with the building programme. 1958 saw the gradual development, from the period of consolidation begun in 1956, to the policy of controlled expansion of new kindergartens. Although some associations were apt to be irked by what appeared to be frustrating delay, the record of those nine years is more than impressive, a total of 74 new kindergartens, in spite of a further halt in 1962/63, caused by a shortage of trained teachers. This was not the fully story. During the same period, 39 new buildings were erected to replace temporary premises and four buildings were purchased by the Department of Education and remodelled for use for kindergarten teachers in training.

1958, too, saw the first real steps towards a national system of training and a more equal sharing of the costs of administration, but it was not until the next year that any actual contribution to these costs was made by associations outside the training areas. It was first merely a token payment of 10 pounds per recognised kindergarten. The first equal sharing did not take place until 1962, when discussions which Mrs

Downer had with the Department of Education led to approval of a pilot scheme whereby associations might transfer control of the kindergarten teachers' colleges to Regional Boards of Management and Education Committees might be replaced by Boards of Studies. Later regulations were gazetted to effect the change.

Training Centre members of the executive were, at that time, nominated by their associations, but because of the new pattern of meeting the cost of training, Mrs Downer recommended an elected executive, as there is at the present time.

From 1965/68, Mrs Downer was a member of the Board of Studies of the Auckland Kindergarten Association, and has had continuous attendance at Ward meetings. She has also been a member of the District Pre-School Committee for the South Auckland Area since its inception until 1976.

In December 1959, the Kindergarten Regulations were gazetted, and in the same year, believing that the higher the qualifications for entry to any profession, the greater the number of applicants, at the request of the executive Mrs Downer had discussions with the Department of Education on the advisability of making School Certificate the minimum qualification for entry to kindergarten teacher training. Although some fears were expressed concerning the effect raising the qualification would have on recruitment, they have not been realised.

As early as 1965 Mrs Downer raised the question with the Department of a three-year training course for kindergarten teachers. Her concern for stability in staffing and longer service from teachers led her to give strong support to the introduction of a bond to bring kindergarten teaching into line with other services.

Accompanied by Mrs Herbert Batten, in July 1959, Mrs Downer made submissions in Auckland, on behalf of the Union, to the Consultative Committee on Infant Pre-School Health Services. In July 1961, in conjunction with the Christchurch Association, she made submissions to the Commission on Education, on behalf of the Union, urging that the national system of education be extended to embody the free kindergarten system and that this be given recognition in the Education Act; that kindergarten teacher training be extended to cover the age range of 3 to 7+, that the Minister of Education assume full responsibility for kindergarten teacher training and that a

regional educational authority organise and administer all kindergarten activities. Already some progress has been made towards these goals, and it may well be that, in the present re-organisation of education, other matters raised at that time will receive attention.

In 1960, discussions were held with the Federation of Play Centres on the possibility of moving towards a New Zealand Pre-School Association and the holding of a Pre-School Convention. No doubt the seeds were sown at that precise moment for the holding of the very successful New Zealand Early Childhood Care and Development Convention held in Christchurch in 1975.

Following correspondence between the then World President and Mrs Downer, the Union became a constituent member of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. She ably represented New Zealand at the OMEP Conference held in Bonn in 1971 and the Union at two Australian Pre-School Association Conferences, one in Hobart in 1961 and the other in Brisbane in 1964.

In 1962, at Wanganui, Mrs Downer's opening remarks to conference, and later, in an annual meeting, her casting vote, ensured that the word "Free" remained in the title of the Union. I quote from her opening address:

"Are we sincere when we say that we aim to provide an extension and complement of the home; that the early formative years are the most important in a child's life and that attendance at a kindergarten will give an important social and educational experience to little children. Which children? All children? Or just those whose parents make a satisfactory cash contribution.

"If we delete this difficult word, what will we use in its place? Public kindergartens? Government kindergartens? Or just kindergartens? Then how will they be distinguished from private kindergartens registered under the Child Care Centre Regulations? It is not a matter for pride that it is specifically stated in those regulations that free kindergartens are outside their scope? If the general public does not understand what a free kindergarten is, ours is the task to explain."

Ten years later, in Auckland, it was her impassioned address to the Conference that led the meeting to reverse an earlier decision to replace the historic title "Union" with the meaningless name "Kindergartens Incorporated".

An important anniversary was celebrated in 1964, when Dunedin reached the 75th year of its

service to the movement. To commemorate the occasion, Mrs Downer compiled and edited the booklet "Seventy-five Years of Free Kindergartens in New Zealand" . . . no mean task, and often discouraging through the dilatory response of some associations to requests for their history. The book, which provides the only complete history of the movement, now has a place in all public libraries in New Zealand.

In 1970, on behalf of the Bay of Plenty Association, Mrs Downer prepared submissions to the Committee of Inquiry into Pre-School Education on the subject of Supervising Head Teachers, which were adopted by the Union. With other presidents of associations with 10 or more recognised kindergartens, she was invited by Miss Ingram to accompany her to the Minister, to press for the appointment of these teachers. Approaches have not yet met with the success they deserve, but they have at least led to an improved advisory service.

Mrs Downer has always shown a keen interest in the welfare of teachers, and was responsible for the preparation of a course of lectures on kindergarten administration for students. She was an early advocate of country sections, realising that the experience gained would prove invaluable to those appointed to small associations.

While president, she established cordial relations with the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Teachers' Association, and was quick to appreciate the value of, and to provide the opportunity for, Principals' Meetings, particularly when they were working upon a uniform syllabus.

Before finalising appointments to the Bay of Plenty Association, she makes a practice of interviewing students at the College, to provide information on the Association and the localities of its kindergartens. Her door is always open, and many teachers have cause to remember with gratitude her tolerant understanding and sympathetic advice on their professional and personal problems.

While being interviewed on radio, addressing many meetings, service clubs and women's

organisations, Mrs Downer has grasped the opportunity to publicise the kindergarten movement and to bring before the community the needs of pre-school children. As a result, there is a greater awareness of the value of pre-school education, and greater support to hasten the establishment of kindergartens.

In recognition of her service to pre-school education, Mrs Downer was awarded the MBE in 1961 and Honorary Life Membership of the Union was conferred upon her at the 1967 Conference held in Napier.

When paying tribute to Mrs Downer on the occasion of her retirement at the Westport Conference in 1966, Miss L. M. C. Ingram said:

"Mrs Downer is a natural leader, with all the attributes it requires to be successful. The most important of these, I would say, is an unruffled exterior. This has covered, at times, an inner anxiety as to how a point might turn or proceed, but at all times she has been master of the situation.

"I have served on the executive for the whole of the nine years that Mrs Downer has been our president and I have come to know her very well. She has never left anything to chance . . . by that I mean she has always come well prepared; to the Conference table; she has put the same thought into executive meetings; and what is most important of all for the growth and standing of kindergarten education, she has been an excellent negotiator on the movement's behalf with members of the Department and the Minister . . . this I know, for I have accompanied her, as have many other members of the executive, on numerous occasions. We have always had the utmost faith in her ability to represent us in a dignified and reasoned manner, and we have cause to be grateful for the long service she has been prepared to give."

Twenty-six years after the first public meeting was called to establish a kindergarten in Rotorua, Mrs Downer is still at the helm of a vigorous and expanding association . . . a tribute, indeed, to her dedication to the kindergarten movement.

CONGRATULATIONS

The N.Z.F.K.U. extends warmest congratulations to Mr N. G. Leckie the newly appointed Director of Early Childhood Education with the Department of Education.

An interview with Mr Leckie will appear in the July Journal.