

Interview with Miss P. M. VARCOE by Judith Duncan in regards to the NZFKTA

March 2010, held in Miss Varcoe's home, Dunedin.

JUDITH: Now I have got a long list of questions, and I'll leave a copy with you as well in case you think of anything later, but as you know we're looking at the history of the Kindergarten Teachers' Association. It's the only early childhood union that hasn't actually had its history written, so Sarah and I are quite excited about putting this together. Because of course the Early Childhood Worker's Union has, CECUA has, so KTA is the only one that actually hasn't had its history written, which I think's, you know, a – a huge gap. So thank you so much for making the time, you know, to talk with me today Phyllis, I was delighted when you agreed. So I guess what we've kicked off with everyone else is to say how did you first become involved with KTA?

MISS VARCOE: Well I became involved with KTA in 1952 because Dunedin initiated the formation of NZFKTA. The [kindergarten] principals had a meeting and they were encouraged by Vera Hayward to look at arranging, we're a service organization. So Elizabeth Hamilton, who was the Dunedin Principal, and Jean Stewart, who was the Assistant Principal, and Elizabeth became the President in the meantime and Jean became the Secretary with Vera as the Advisor. And we were very lucky to have Vera because she was on the Kindergarten Union Executive and she had also been National President of the NZEI and she really had skills to help us to see what we needed and why we needed it. And of course the movement was expanding so rapidly once the Department or the Government really began to pay the salaries and set the hours of employment. This was rather different from when each kindergarten association seemed to, in a way, have its own rules. So and the teachers needed to be united so that we could advance the cause of early childhood education and we needed to maintain and uphold just claims of members and student members and also to improve our working conditions. Because it wasn't always easy to encourage committees, and the Association in some cases, to realize how difficult it was working in some of the halls and places that people had to work and also some were inclined to set certain – a longer hour for people to work. Our status needed to be looked at carefully and that this would give us status if we were

united, the qualifications and provision for our continuing education and to negotiate for improved salaries. But we couldn't do that until we were an incorporated organization under the Incorporated Societies Act of 1957. Now recognition as a service organization of course meant that we could go forward with a case for increased salaries. And Vera put us onto Mr George – George – George Ashbridge, NZEI Secretary, and he gave us a lot of help because really we were greenhorns when it came to doing something like that. And of course doing it for the whole country was rather different than seeing it perhaps from down here in Dunedin so we had to be sure that we encouraged these other associations to – and teachers' groups – to put in their feelings about it. And we did several of those cases. There was much disappointment because we didn't get a salary equal to primary teachers and this became more evident once the primary teachers did three years they weren't going to give people who did a two-year training the same salary. And so we really did have to look forward to getting a three-year training course and of course we know today what has happened through doing that. Uhm and some – we all – some of us used to feel that we hoped eventually we would go into the NZEI but we found that others were saying: “oh no, we'll lose our identity, people won't know who we are, they won't know what we're doing”. But I think those feelings have gone, particularly once we went into the Teachers' College and became part of a bigger educational institution which was closer to the University. And of course the entry qualifications went up so there were more students coming in who would qualify to do, perhaps, University. The conditions of employment we have set out. We started off with a little book, which we did with the NZ – with the Kindergarten Union and I found among my treasures one which I'll show you later...

JUDITH: Oh great.

MISS VARCOE: ...because we needed to have something that we had shared together and decided that those were the conditions of employment. For example, appointing teachers, some associations perhaps took the person from their own area who went away and did two-year training and the best person missed out. And without creating a feeling of unhappy competition it was something that had to be faced sooner or later. And getting some research done in early childhood education and also the buildings and

equipment and working with children with special needs in the Kindergarten. Because sometimes you really needed extra help but you also needed some particular piece of equipment perhaps that that child could benefit from. And the relationships with other early childhood education groups, we were quite fortunate here in Dunedin because while some people had some feeling about the Playcentre and the Playcentre had perhaps some feeling about the Kindergarten they did invite us to – they always invited the principal to take part if they were having a work – study day. And when we went to the Teachers' College we had an early childhood education committee and we started off with the Kindergarten and uh childcare and then eventually the Playcentre people said that they would like to come too. And there were committees for each of the areas in the College uh and...

JUDITH: Were they like advisory committees?

MISS VARCOE: Well and they discussed plans for things. They were really like advisory committees. And I chaired that group because usual for a principal lecturer to chair it but Cess [Cess Irwin] decided that I should chair it but Neil Bourne would be the college rep on it.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And that included the early childhood supervisor and all the other people of interest. So we went quite a long way really in building up relationships and as well as that, of course, our course had time when students had a choice to go and work in a Playcentre one morning and work in a childcare centre and uh work with the people who were working in different areas of early childhood education. And that helped I think to – for them to come out and see what else was going on and vice versa. And of course the other people we need to include in our recognition of assistance is Elizabeth Hamilton because she was very keen too and supportive about it and also Moira Gallagher of course. Because it is important that the preschool advisors know what we're doing and can be supportive otherwise you can be crying a losing battle in Wellington. And so many cases were very interesting with Miss Ingram and Mr Pinder.

JUDITH: So I'm just trying to think back, so back at the beginning, in terms of the 1950s, so when you were negotiat – when you did your first salary negotiations as the KTA who were you actually negotiating with?

MISS VARCOE: The representative of the Department of the Kindergarten Union.

JUDITH: So the Kindergarten Union was representing...

MISS VARCOE: Oh yes.

JUDITH: ...all of the associations at that time?

MISS VARCOE: Yes.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: Miss Ingram was the President when we were doing it.

JUDITH: Okay.

MISS VARCOE: And a Mr Pinder was the Department and I think Miss Christensen sat in once or twice but not for the purpose of – just as an observer really and then we were just left, the two or three of us. With those two.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And it – it was – it was interesting but of course it was – it was difficult in – by the time you had spent probably a couple of hours in the morning and had some lunch and then went back again after we'd had a chat over lunch about what was happening and then not quite knowing but sensing that we weren't – we were going to get something but we weren't going to get what we asked for. And some of us were prepared to say: "well, look we've done as well as we can, taking into account the differences between the services just in training time". But that didn't satisfy some people, particularly the people up North. You know they – they seemed to think that we should just be able to be given this and that's not the way it works. So, but we battled away and of course we were very thrilled when they – we finally got quite – once we were – went

into the College of course we did better and – ‘cause I think they saw then that we were really going to do something about having a longer training and Cess Irwin kept saying: “Phyll it’s no use trying to get more salary till you get a three-year course”. And so he encouraged a committee to be set up that we would look at a three-year course and a BEd. So we were really fortunate to have people down here who saw the value of moving on and coping with the problems until we got to that point. Which – and then of course we did some other things that – and we star – we had two or three summer schools at Lincoln College and that again caused us to be in the same place as other teachers for our morning tea and our lunch and our afternoon tea and...

JUDITH: So who was running the summer schools?

MISS VARCOE: The Kindergarten Teachers’ Association.

JUDITH: Ah.

MISS VARCOE: And we organized it – we organized it really from here because we – we mentioned it at one meeting we had and I said: the teachers are having this and what about us organizing one for early childhood? So we had one in for music...

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: ...and Miss Martin was here at the time and she took that – part of that for us and that was wonderful. But Lincoln was a good place because there were lots of courses and we were away from any particular association, which had its values.

JUDITH: Right. So it was all teachers together irrespective of which association they were employed by.

MISS VARCOE: Employed by.

JUDITH: Ah.

MISS VARCOE: And I think we had two – two of those or three of them and then the numbers began to drop and we said: “well, it’s served its purpose, we’ll just give it

away”. And also it wasn’t easy for some associations to feel they should give their staff time to go to a course through the year. And again it’s this mixing business really. It’s having companionship and talking to other people who’ve done a different kind of training. Because the colleges were not all the same at one stage and different areas looked at things differently and it’s good to exchange what’s happening in your association with what you’re doing in your work. And then of course the principals were meeting and working on a national curriculum and they met with some of the staff from teachers’ colleges in Auckland and then we communicated of course with the College here and planned how we would do it.

JUDITH: Right, so was that through the KTA or that was separately?

MISS VARCOE: It was separately but the KTA were – were – well they were involved because some of us who...

JUDITH: Yeah, same people.

MISS VARCOE: ...well yes, I mean well here I was on that committee, so it depends really what the association in the main centres wanted to do.

JUDITH: So you’ve had a really long association with KTA really haven’t you?

MISS VARCOE: Oh yes. And it was very interesting and we had lots of – we had lots of fun too...really.

JUDITH: So what’s been the different roles that you’ve played over the time in KTA? So I mean you were right there right at the beginning...

MISS VARCOE: I was there at the beginning and I was the second President, I followed Nikki Bourke, and I was President for six years and then I went overseas and came back. And the next time they were looking for it to come to Dunedin I said: “well, no I’ve had my turn and it’s time for somebody else”. And so they said to Margaret Houst: “would you do it Margaret?, Oh well I suppose I could, she said, if Phyll would be the Secretary I’ll be the President”.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And when we got home here she said: “You can help me write the letters and I’ll help you look after the cash”. ‘Cause Margaret was very good at keeping the accounts, she had been secretary with me – and treasurer with me, well secretary and treasurer - and of course we were very fortunate because Tom White was the Association’s Treasurer and Secretary and you only had to ring Tom and say: “what’ll I do about this or” – and he also audited our accounts, so we had somebody who knew and who understood Kindergarten, which was important. Uh and then of course we had our own local group and I was President of that at one stage. But well we – I think because we had already started to have a link, with the other early childhood groups’ help too, and setting up this early childhood education, which the inspectors were very keen about and I mean one of the inspectors was on the committee, meant that we met these other people and we were given an opportunity to enter into discussions or courses or studies or whatever they were doing. And you see the Institute for Educational Research was here and Cess – it was through Cess I got onto that committee. I think he was anxious that the early childhood people should be seen in these other organizations.

JUDITH: Well, increased visibility gives more viability doesn’t it?

MISS VARCOE: ‘Cause I don’t know who was speaking once when they had a course here once he said: “oh, Phyllis you’ll do the vote of thanks”. And I thought: “oh”. But I know now when I look at it why, yeah, because he wanted somebody to do that.

JUDITH: Some of the other questions are sort of around specific things that happened when you were involved with KTA. And I’m thinking you’ve had so many hats and you’ve been involved in so many times I’m wondering if we maybe kind of divide it up by time a bit might make it easier for you to think about or for me to get my head around. So thinking right at the very beginning when KTA was starting what was kind of the political climate around that time that either helped it get off the ground or made it harder?

MISS VARCOE: I think in some areas it made it easy to get it off the ground if there was some person who was keen to be supportive about it and as better – well I hate to better qualified – but as the better qualified teachers came out they began to see the value of, for example, the little booklet that I've talked about. And some who went and worked in some associations were amazed at what was happening in the way of extra, an extra hour or the attitudes...

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: ...that you know and also some of the STJCs [Senior teachers of junior classes] were beginning to see the value of Kindergarten and I think that helped some people to think: "oh, it'd be a good idea for us to have our own service organization". And of course you see there was no way of anybody, if they had a complaint, being listened to really unless they had a sympathetic committee.

JUDITH: Right. So did the membership grow quite quickly or was it quite a slow...?

MISS VARCOE: It grew reasonably quickly...

JUDITH: Once the word got out.

MISS VARCOE: ...because the Dunedin one of course we didn't – I don't think we paid a sub at all because we met in the kindergartens and or at the College up at York Place. And once it started and I think people began to realize that it was going to be beneficial then they wanted to belong. So it grew as the time went on. And of course in any national organization it's not easy to get every area in on the situation because they had been so long doing their own thing in a way.

JUDITH: Well, that's kind of how it had developed really hadn't it...

MISS VARCOE: Yes.

JUDITH: ...area after area became involved in kindergarten.

MISS VARCOE: And of course once some places invited some of us to go and talk about it that helped too because the Association then didn't see us as a threat they saw us a protector of staff and as anxious to have early childhood education of quality and that they had a role too to play.

JUDITH: So – so in those days it wasn't sort of like that feeling now of the Union and the Employer, it didn't have that feel to it?

MISS VARCOE: We – we broke some of that down. And – and that wasn't easy because Mrs Downer was a very different personality to Miss Ingram and that – she came to our first summer school, Mrs Downer, and was the speaker and opened it. So you see by asking her and her coming here again she met teachers out of Rotor – away from Rotorua and of course Miss Ingram was a primary teacher in Motueka and of course she was the sister-in-law of the then prime minister.

JUDITH: Oh really?

MISS VARCOE: Keith Holyoake.

JUDITH: Oh now there's a useful link.

MISS VARCOE: And she didn't forget to tell you either.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: But she was just a different person. But whatever you do you have to learn to work with those people and you really don't get anywhere by being aggressive about it. And there were some people in the Kindergarten Union who had a great deal of experience in education and some of them were trained. And of course it was natural in a way for the committees who raised all the money and set up the kindergarten to feel a possession of it because they didn't get such a grant from the Department as they do now and when those who worked in boards you know – when we were working at the Wakari it was really a nightmare but eventually they got their own kindergarten.

JUDITH: I've been looking through some of the minutes of the NZFKU and reading some of the annual reports, you know, starting right back in the early – early 1900s and just reading the stories about the numbers that were in you know...

MISS VARCOE: Yes.

JUDITH: ...community halls and having to pack everything up every day and...

MISS VARCOE: Oh it was a nightmare at Wakari and then the church would use it at night and then you'd have to clean up in the morning before you could...

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: It was an absolute nightmare and there were no fences round any part of the area, if the children went out you just had to make sure somebody was out there. Especially when you had some characters of children. I had three sets of twins at Wakari.

JUDITH: Oh no, three sets.

MISS VARCOE: And one was a – a - they had been living down in North Dunedin and they were shifted to a state house in Wakari and – but the little girl was very quiet but oh I'll never forget that boy, he was much bigger physically than she was and he was really quite a disturber of the peace.

JUDITH: And you've never forgotten him have you?

MISS VARCOE: No. You don't, you know, it's strange how you don't forget some children. But...

JUDITH: So thinking about maybe the time that you were KTA President can you remember any of the sort of key issues or – or events that happened over that time?

MISS VARCOE: Well, of course we were working on the salary and uh we were worked on the booklet...

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: ...and we did quite a lot of work on equipment...

JUDITH: In terms of?

MISS VARCOE: Trying to set up what was really essential...

JUDITH: Ah right.

MISS VARCOE: ...and ensuring that uh associations would be advised, or committees, to get them from the right quarters, that they would be safe, because sometimes, if they had a parent who was good with a hammer and nails, these things were made but they often weren't the best. And so it was really ensuring, as far as we could, the conditions of the situations in which teachers were working. Then of course we had the three summer schools and then oh once or twice Margaret – Margaret and I went to Christchurch I think twice and spoke to them and I was down in Invercargill and there was somewhere where – I think it was in Christchurch - there was a staff member who was concerned and the Association was concerned so they called on the KTA President to hear the stories. So you found yourself doing some tasks that you perhaps thought you might never be doing. And it – Miss Bird made a good start, there was a feeling, even at that stage, of being together, of being united.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: We were still working on trying to unite the country and I remember coming back from one meeting and saying to Vera Hayward: “those people in the North, really, they don't seem to just see what we're trying to do or listen to us. Phyll, she said, you don't need to worry it's just the same with the hospital board when we went up there”. So that cheered me up.

JUDITH: Yeah.

MISS VARCOE: But it – I realize now that the North Island in some places is very different to Dunedin. Very different. But – and I was lucky that Margaret agreed to be my secretary because I started off with Geraldine Partington and she got married and left and then Janet McKinley came for a short time and she left and then Margaret appeared.

So, you know, it was a case of initiating them into the program and so on when they came. So I really was lucky.

JUDITH: So one of the roles that teacher unions have now is heavily involved with the Ministry of Education and with the Minister of Education, what was kind of KTA's role at that stage with those bodies?

MISS VARCOE: They would come – we usually tried to make a place for them in our agenda when we had our annual meeting and they would come. And then of course uh Mr Pinder wasn't the Minister of Education but he was the Departmental person we negotiated salaries with and he really was a very astute fellow.

JUDITH: So what was his name?

MISS VARCOE: Pinder. Brian Pinder.

JUDITH: Pinder, right.

MISS VARCOE: And he had done his training in Dunedin.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And I think xxx he came from Cromwell. But he was the sort of fellow that you – I remember hearing him saying at tea one day: "oh well of course when I was a student I biked from St Kilda to the University but oh you know students don't do that now". I thought: ha-ha. But that was the uh existence that they coped with and they found it, I think, hard sometimes to see that society was changing.

JUDITH: So did you even, you know, did the Minister for Education at that time ever get involved with the KTA or?

MISS VARCOE: Only by coming to our annual meetings.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: And – oh one time Brian Talboys was coming down here and Cess rang one day and he said: “Phyllis would you be – do you think you could have him at the College and he’ll be going over to Boys’ High School”. And we were having a – what we had an open week always once a year so that students from the schools could come and have a look. So we had this all set up and it was the time when the secondary teachers were battling for salary and of course they were determined at Boys’ High apparently that they were really going to give him the works. So the time was arranged and Sess said: please don’t let him away till such-and-such a time. So we looked after him very well I can tell you – Mr Talboys.

JUDITH: Mr Talboys, yeah.

MISS VARCOE: But he spoke at the opening of the Winton Kindergarten and he was very good. And that’s another thing, when there was a new kindergarten being opened, and you know they had to have a speaker at one and so many meetings, uh I often landed that.

JUDITH: Oh did you?

MISS VARCOE: And I didn’t mind because again it was letting them see a teacher talking about what was required and so on. And then of course I often got an – well I got an invite to the opening of Winton Kindergarten which was very nice. But I always remember saying something with Mr Talboy – Brian Talboys was speaking, he said: “oh, ‘cause I wrote his report”.

JUDITH: New Zealand’s a small place isn’t it?

MISS VARCOE: But I thought on the other hand somebody can write something for you to say but it doesn’t come always across because you’ve got to read something like that until you can own it. But I had to smile to myself.

JUDITH: So what were some of the other key people that you remember over your time involved with KTA? What were some of the personalities that – that you can – sort of stick in your mind?

MISS VARCOE: Well there was Vera [Hayward] of course and, as I say, George Ashbridge was very good, you know. We needed that kind of guidance...

JUDITH: That's right.

MISS VARCOE: ...despite the fact that it was always in the background: "oh, you'll lose our identity and they don't understand kindergarten. But it wasn't that, we wanted to know how you went about this salary business and the questions there were likely to be asked because, as I say, we were really greenhorns. And it wasn't much fun getting up to catch that first plane from Dunedin in the morning and work all day and then come back at night and go to work the next day. And there were people like Ian Stewart who was at the University and Bruce McMillan although he was a great Playcentre supporter he would – he took the education for our students and he really was very good. He – I think he realized that each service had its values. And Richard Barham and of course Cess Irwin and Neil were very good at College. Cess really was sympa – understanding. And it does make a difference. And of course you see Neil Bond and Ernie Munro they chaired the Education Committee of the Dunedin Association so that other – that again brought people in education to an important place. And I think it was a good thing when the associations got some men on their committees and some men into the – into the College. I think we needed to look – beginning to look at having male kindergarten teachers because so many children today don't have a male in their families.

JUDITH: Can you – can you remember when the first males started training at Dunedin? Would that have been in the seventies or?

MISS VARCOE: Somewhere roundabout there I think. We didn't have any up the hill, it was when we went down there [to the College], and we had two who came in who had only two units of their degree to finish.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: And one time Marie Bell came down and there was a College meeting and she said: "oh you people didn't accept any men". And Cess said: "no", he said, "your Department sets the rules". And he said: "if they don't measure up to what we're

looking for why take them in?”. And I had tried to say to Marie Bell: “look Marie we didn’t accept them because”, I said, “we have to be like the nurses, when males came into nursing they took the best”. And I said: “if they can’t foot it with the women well why select them? “.

JUDITH: Well...

MISS VARCOE: And then one time she came and she said: “oh you’ve got no Maori”. I said: “we interviewed one girl and we suggested she went back to school”. “Oh”, she said, “why didn’t you take her in?” I said: “look that’s not doing anything if I – if we had taken her in and she had failed...what would that do to her?”. Whereas she came back the next year, she came in and she finished the course. You know, it’s all very well to sit up there in Wellington with all these bright ideas but...

JUDITH: That’s exactly right. So what role do you think that KTA played in the professional lives of teachers over that time? So if we’re thinking about I guess well, you know, the early fifties through to the seventies I guess, that would have been – that’s when you were President about that time?

MISS VARCOE: I think eventually they began to realize the importance of having an organization that was really working for them and that we were planning in-service courses at national level and setting about with the little booklets and – and they realized that we were working with the Union and the associations for their employment conditions to be better. And – and I think some of them realized that if they were in trouble they knew where to come. Even – because sometimes even being able to discuss it with somebody takes the heat out of it.

JUDITH: That’s right.

MISS VARCOE: And I’m quite sure that the early people did a very good job but as we gained people who had higher qualifications on entry and who were looking at this as a profession and some of the idea of kindergarten teachers minding children had disappeared. Because I don’t think any of the staff before ever felt like that but that was very strong feeling within the community and the very strong feeling was in some of the

primary teachers at the lower end of the primary school. I know people were very surprised I stayed but it just so happened I didn't ever intend to stay actually I intended to go back to primary teaching but to work in the infant department...

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: ...but oh there were other things in the mill and I thought: "oh perhaps I'll consolidate my training". And of course once the Department took over the allowances and other – the conditions of your employment I think people saw it as being more of an educational - uh part of the total education system than it had been before.

JUDITH: So you think that was a really sort of pivotal time?

MISS VARCOE: I think it was a pivotal time. And I think it's become more – more like that now because some of them are going and going a long way from their training as you've done in the College. And I think because of the gender issue – and I'm not a gender issue lady – but I think with people working longer and working after they're married I think they have seen it as a profession which they can leave and have their children and then come back. And sometimes while they're at home caring for their children they can increase their qualifications. So it's a changed society. And I think with more women working uh it's extended its hours to provide for some of that for those parents and, you know, that's important that the children, if possible, are cared for in one place and not uh here, there and everywhere in one day with people.

JUDITH: It must be exhausting when that happens for children.

MISS VARCOE: I don't know whether that answers your question.

JUDITH: Yes, no, it's absolutely fine. I'm just making sure I'm covering everything. So how do you think that KTA has contributed widely to early childhood education in New Zealand? What do you think its contribution has been?

MISS VARCOE: I think its contribution has been working for a professional status and for encouraging stu – their teachers to increase their qualifications. 'Cause I'm quite surprised sometimes when I go to a meeting and find: "oh I've finished my degree". And

I can remember one student, I felt she couldn't get out of the place quick enough and yet she finished her BEd. So that gives you a feeling of thinking that that's something we really have accomplished. And I think the feeling that they've got an organization that isn't anti their Association or anti the Department but who knows that they have been – have got guide rules for working with those people and vice versa because you only need to get a very strong person – need only to get a very strong person on your committee in a kindergarten and you really could have an unpleasant time. So there has been – and I think we've – the KTA has really helped it to become a profession and more in equality with primary teachers.

JUDITH: Right. So it's played quite a role in...

MISS VARCOE: It's played quite a role in the education and I think because some of us had probably been – had been in NZEI and could sit down and look and realize what the KTA needed. Because uh no service is perfect and no – no committees or organizations are perfect but uh to encourage each side of to understand the other and how they could cooperate and work together for the best interests of the kindergarten and the teacher is important.

JUDITH: So do you think it was the fact that when you talked about the group that established it that they had links with other education? Do you think that's how the KTA really came about? 'Cause you already understood the need to have some collective...

MISS VARCOE: And I think – I think because we – I think because Vera was on the Kindergarten Union and Vera was not frightened of saying what she thought.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: Which didn't always please some people but it was very often to the – for the best thing. And she was Vice President of the Union and also she had been National President of the NZEI and she could see what we needed to do and we needed to be – to be grouped – we needed to work together which was the important thing. Even the teachers needed to work together.

JUDITH: So was the starting idea had really come from the Union...

MISS VARCOE: No.

JUDITH: ...to teachers or...? I'm trying to get my head around how it kind of came about.

MISS VARCOE: I think – I think the teachers – I think probably there were some – there had been some comments between uh one or two people...

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: ...when things with the – some of the associations had gone awry and teachers were beginning to be concerned about this. And I think it was from there that we decided – they decided we should have some organization. And obviously the principals were the ones to attend to it.

JUDITH: Right. So the principals...

MISS VARCOE: Though I wouldn't say all of them at that time but certainly I think probably uh – Elizabeth had been overseas and I think if you've been away and met up with other people too you are more inclined to know what is needed. And I mean we didn't ever see it as – as being an anti sort of Union or anti associations, we saw it as grouping together for the benefit of the children. But there were one or two people who wondered what you wanted this for. But then you see some of them hadn't moved very far – had worked in one association and their family was here and everything was very comfortable for them but then there were others who were in a different situation all together.

JUDITH: Did any of the associations try and stop their members becoming...?

MISS VARCOE: No, not as far as I know.

JUDITH: They didn't put blocks in?

MISS VARCOE: No, not as far as I know.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: I didn't – didn't ever hear of anything. In fact, any of the associations, when I visited, when I was President, I didn't feel any anti feeling.

JUDITH: So how did you manage your president role with your teaching and all of the things you were doing at the same time?

MISS VARCOE: Oh well, we met – well we've always met in August, the August holidays, and then when Margaret was sick, Margaret and I were working both times, that was our Friday night.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And we would have – very often - her parents were alive then – and we often had a meal in town and then we would come to one house or the other with all our bits. So that meant that we kept what had to be done uh being done carefully, as careful as we could, and if there was anything urgent through the week, if she got anything or I got anything, well we would just be on the phone. But that was our Friday nights.

JUDITH: So what were the sorts of things that – that you were having to do on the Friday nights?

MISS VARCOE: Oh well we often had letters, people wanting information or wanting to know what they did about certain situations and uh wondering when the next meeting was. And then of course when it got near the meeting it was a case of doing the annual report and – and the balance sheet and we always shared those. I always shared whatever I was going to say at least with Margaret and whatever we were going to write for an annual report. And then of course if there were new members and so on – and then of course we produced a newsletter.

JUDITH: Oh really?

MISS VARCOE: We did. The time we spent running off that newsletter on the Gestetna at Teachers' College, Dunedin Kindergarten Teachers' College. And you know what happens with black ink.

JUDITH: Ah I can imagine.

MISS VARCOE: And we would put it all together and staple it.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: And then of course they all had to be addressed and sent off. So yes, we decided we should have a newsletter because we needed to have some way of communicating with our members as to what was going on and anything new that we had to uh show.

JUDITH: So how early on in the days did you start having remits and all of those sorts of things?

MISS VARCOE: Oh from – from – right from the beginning we had remits on equipment and remits on times. And we were very careful, we had to sometimes contact a local group and say: "look, it would be better if you wrote it like this". Uh and you would chat to them till they came round to your way of thinking.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: Because some people when they want something or are cross about something whatever they do or say is rather blunt, whereas if you're careful you get further with it looking more positive.

JUDITH: So if you had to kind of sum up one memory or one significant event would there be one particular one that you remember?

MISS VARCOE: I think the last salary increase we got when we were in office because even although it may have seemed very little it was a start.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: And also getting an allowance for head teachers who had students.

JUDITH: Ah.

MISS VARCOE: And I think the Lincoln College summer schools because that was a chance to meet people and meet other kindergarten teachers not at a meeting. Yes, I think those are the things that – and of course - I wasn't President when it happened - but to get a BEd and three-year training was just wonderful.

JUDITH: Well and a lot of your work was behind that.

MISS VARCOE: That was really a – you know. Because uh many of us knew that we wouldn't get very far until we had that, the three-year training, whether we wanted it or didn't want it.

JUDITH: 'Cause I'm just sort of going through my memory, so by 1952 there was – was there a standardized training program by then or were associations still doing...?

MISS VARCOE: Associations did their – really did their own.

JUDITH: So when did it come all standardized, can you remember?

MISS VARCOE: Oh it was once – once we became incorpor – well once we became incorporated it started but it started just after I became Principal, which was in 1967.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: We were looking at it, we'd had a – we had a meeting eventually and then it was – and of course the Committee of Enquiry in early childhood education and that was the suggestion – one of the suggestions - and when we had our senior lecturers' meeting - and it was all talked about, the Union had been talking about it of course - it was suggested when we went home we approached our Teachers' College because uh they had been – they knew that this was going on when they had their review. And uh so I just made an appointment to go down and see Cess and uh – who was lecturing down there? – I should really remember his name – he did all their timetables. So of course he

helped me to do the timetable 'cause the timetable had to be very different with a block in and a block out and that was something some of the students: "well, you know I should be going out or I should be coming in". And some of the associations and once we began to send them out into the country uh and some of the kindergartens would say: "oh, you know we haven't got students for three weeks". But we just explained that this was what was necessary and I'd said cheerfully: well the first time I was at Teachers' College we were in all the time except for teaching a lesson in front of a little group of our own students.

JUDITH: Right.

MISS VARCOE: And I said - we were beginning to mutter: "I thought I came here to xxx the kids know how to teach". But then the next two terms we were six weeks in and six weeks out. But it's very hard to break a system because after all, let's be fair, some teachers demanded quite a lot for their students and uh you know it was always sort of the extra pair of hands in a way or the extra person about. And then of course we started having associate teachers', head teachers', meetings and I think that helped them. And we did our best to keep the doors of communication open so that we - we listened and did what we could to either put into operation perhaps some suggestions they had but also helping them to see what we were doing that was of value. So it really comes back to personal relationships in some ways. And that's why some of the situations previously had broken down really because - and there was no organization for them to turn to, for either side to turn to.

JUDITH: It must have actually - I'm just thinking as a teacher - it must have felt quite powerless when the employers had the Union but as teachers you just had yourself.

MISS VARCOE: You really didn't have anything.

JUDITH: Yeah, it must have felt quite disempowering.

MISS VARCOE: And of course it was different in a way that a number of people on the associations, and this would be true of Dunedin, it was a good - it was doing a good thing and, you know, I raised - they raised the money to have the building built and so on.

And I remember at one stage when things were quite difficult for salaries before the Government took over one of the committee people out at St Kilda saying to me: well of course we're raising the money to pay your salary. She was on the Kindergarten Association. But she was the only president that was inclined to call the tune and I found such a difference when I went to Kelsey. Because we had to get the room ready for their – at St Kilda we had to get the room ready for the parent meeting and, you know, we were - all these sorts of things and we just did them. When I went down there the first time there was a parent meeting I said to the president: "oh how do you like the chairs set out?" "No", she said, "Miss Varcoe you're not – you're staff – you and your staff are not putting out the chairs we'll see to that". And those sorts of things made all the difference but you can see how even little things like that can cause friction.

JUDITH: I've worked in enough kindergartens over the years to understand that one, yes.

MISS VARCOE: So I think that there's been a lot of value in feeling we can support each other at national level as well as local level. But whatever you're writing I would like to feel that Elizabeth Hamilton and Vera Hayward and George Ashbridge and Moira Gallagher's contribution is acknowledged. Because it was very important that we had Vera's advice, she was really our mentor, and Elizabeth was keen for this organization and probably encouraged her fellow principals to be keen even if they weren't very keen. Uh and, as I say, we needed Mr Ashbridge's help to know what to do because you can't go into the Education Department making a fool of the organization is what really the case. And Moira of course was very supportive, she was the first preschool advisor in Wellington and she was marvelous. But you see people turned up their nose when she was appointed.

JUDITH: Really?

MISS VARCOE: Oh yes. I was in hospital at the time and I remember Miss Duffy our principal, coming up to see me and she said: oh, she said, Miss Gallagher has been appointed, she said, rather a pity not to have appointed somebody with a preschool qualification.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And you know we couldn't have had anybody better because she was a very – obviously a very good entrant uh STJC and she was then involved with the NZEI and she was keen to see the values of what we were doing with NZEI and in other ways and it was marvelous really.

JUDITH: So she was really good support.

MISS VARCOE: Oh she was a good support. And you know she would just quietly – we – we never went to Wellington, even if we just went for a salary case, but what she wouldn't make a point of perhaps having a bit of – bite of lunch with us or saying: how are you getting on girls?

JUDITH: That's great.

MISS VARCOE: Oh no. Because I think it was in a way more of that sort of in-house thing we needed than it would be today because we're better known.

JUDITH: So is there anyone else that you think we should know about or be trying to find out about or?

MISS VARCOE: No, I can't think of anybody, well those are the ones in my...

JUDITH: List.

MISS VARCOE: ...list.

JUDITH: So just remind me, who was the first President of KTA?

MISS VARCOE: Well Elizabeth Hamilton was the temporary...

JUDITH: Yeah.

MISS VARCOE: ...from the principals but then Miss Burt, Janet Burt, from Auckland. And I can't remember the name of the secretary.

JUDITH: It's okay. There'll be minutes somewhere...

MISS VARCOE: There are minutes somewhere there. But Auckland of course is a very different place too.

JUDITH: So I'm just thinking it's interesting that Auckland ended up with the President actually when the group started from here.

MISS VARCOE: Yes.

JUDITH: How did that come about?

MISS VARCOE: I don't – well we – we – we had this meeting and we had an election and so Janet was the President and I was the Vice President – I wish I could remember that secretary's name 'cause we corresponded for years. But I think it was a good thing that it happened like that because of the size of Auckland, I don't know where Miss Corkwall stood in regard to it, but rather than it all coming from down here [Dunedin] – because there is a certain degree of professional jealousy, even with the University and, as Vera said, with the hospital board: “don't worry Phyll”, she said. But I – I felt it was – it was good and it also gave me time to get to know more about a service organization 'cause I had belonged to the NZEI but just to know what was going on and where we perhaps hoped we might go and where I hoped we might go, you know. And you see we had quite a strong group here in Dunedin and that was good.

JUDITH: Can you remember what the first President's kind of key issues were that she was dealing with? I mean when you're a brand new association and a brand new president that must have been quite tough.

MISS VARCOE: Oh yes well it would be tough because – but she was – she was near Mrs – Mrs Downer was in Rotorua and in my experience Mrs Downer was a – well she was a very different person from Miss Ingram, for example. And Mrs Downer I think saw the value of it for us and then of course Netty would have more people to uh to call on and I don't – I think I was the starter of having the president's address.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: I just can't – I think she always welcomed us and had some comments to make uh but I think that I – I think I'd been to an NZEI meeting once or twice before I went into kindergarten and that seemed to be – that seemed to be the pattern and also you would see when the teachers NZEI met, you know, the president made some comments, for better or for worse. And I think perhaps it's the part of the person who's in the president-ship not to be forcing her ideas but to have something positive to talk about.

JUDITH: Showing that leadership and...

MISS VARCOE: Yes. And that was all my little scraps of paper.

JUDITH: So is there anything else you'd like to add or you think that we should be enquiring about or people we should be talking to or...?

MISS VARCOE: I don't – I suppose there's not very many left is there? I thought last night when I was looking through things I wish Margaret had been here. She just died in August.

JUDITH: Oh right.

MISS VARCOE: And her sister rang and said: "Phyll would you prepared to talk at the funeral about Margaret's professional life?" And I said: "oh yes".

JUDITH: Oh that's a hard job to do too.

MISS VARCOE: Oh but I – and then I had written out something and she rang on the Sunday night and she said: "we want it to be short". I said: "oh that's okay then". So I had to sit down then and shorten it. And I knew Gordon Parry was talking for the – for the cathedral and of course whatever he writes or talks so but however we survived. And it was nice because Dean Mills who had been the Dean there - and Margaret did a lot of work at the cathedral after she retired – he was in Oamaru and he came down to take the service. So he came over and shook hands and said: "oh Phyllis how nice to see you again". 'Cause I'd got to know him when I was moderator at presbytery when I went to things at the cathedral, so that was a help.

JUDITH: Oh they're difficult times.

MISS VARCOE: But it's not easy.

JUDITH: No. Well I'm very happy to finish this and I'm sure there's probably...

MISS VARCOE: I'm sure you know...

JUDITH: ...other things that'll come to your mind.

MISS VARCOE: ...going down to Teachers' College had its advantages in lots of ways. The place, the equipment, the qualified – teachers qualified in specific subjects and the sports and that sort of thing.

JUDITH: It was a community of teachers.

MISS VARCOE: It really was. Oh yes. So if you want to take any of this stuff over here away with you you'd be very welcome.

JUDITH: Thank you.

End of interview