

Mrs Edie P Martin: putting children first

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I make no excuse for putting children first in my service to the kindergarten movement. Nothing is of greater importance than the education of the pre-school child. These are the formative years and what happens today helps mould the children of the future. Their future is in our hands. Edie Martin (1985)

Post-World War 11 spurred a rapid expansion of free kindergarten provision that saw increased government involvement and, from 1958, the requirement that new kindergartens be established only in specially designed buildings. Unlike schools, kindergartens were owned and operated by their respective committees, involving a large amount of parent participation. The building of purpose-built kindergartens required extensive community planning, lengthy fundraising, regular working bees and persistence by local committees made up of interested parents. Family and community based fundraising provided the impetus for approved initial equipment and furniture, assisted by varied local government support and by subsidy grants from central Government. A key figure in Manawatu was Mrs Edie Martin; mother to three daughters and a supportive husband. Her time in kindergarten management spanned thirty years including time

as a mother help, a committee member, an association president and seven years as National President of the New Zealand Federation of Kindergarten Association (NZKFA) – as well as attendee at over twenty-two consecutive kindergarten conferences.

Established in 1949, the Palmerston North Free Kindergarten Association opened their first purpose built kindergarten, City Kindergarten in 1955. In nearby Hokowhitu, Edie Martin, mother of three daughters and a supportive husband, joined the committee of a recently opened kindergarten in Ascot Street Baptist Hall who were fundraising to build a new kindergarten building. Three years later, Hokowhitu Kindergarten was officially opened on May 24th, 1958, to much celebration from young families in the area.



Figure 1: City Kindergarten, Palmerston North's first purpose built kindergarten. c.1955.

By 1969, the Association – now renamed Manawatu Free Kindergarten Association (MKA) - had twenty-two kindergartens, of which nine operated in newly built kindergarten buildings, and a tenth kindergarten building awaiting permission to start. Costs were high, but community support was immense with one unnamed member commenting, “We never fail to applaud the energy and enthusiasm with which our committees tackle this immense financial obligation and annually undertake to meet ever-spiralling operational costs.”

For Edie Martin, as a young mother the sixties had brought many new experiences. Speaking later in 1985 at the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union annual conference, Martin described an unforgettable event that had occurred at her first conference in 1963.

Presenting my first remit in the name of Manawatu with knees knocking, hands shaking and tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I rose to my feet to present what I thought was a revolutionary remit designed to help those less fortunate than ourselves. The remit – a pooling of surplus money to enable Associations struggling to find money to build a kindergarten in their area. Having presented the remit I thankfully sat down and awaited the passing of the remit. Rising to his feet the delegate from Auckland, whose name I thought I would never forget, but somehow I have, proceeded to tear our precious remit to shreds and it was lost. I did not have the courage to speak for the rest of the conference.



Figure 2: Edie Martin outside the office of the Manawatu Kindergarten Association. Date unknown.

Edie Martin soon gained the skills and experiences needed in her role; including with the changing governments over her many years in kindergarten. As she explained later

Kindergarten was a place to send children to play with others or to get them used to a school environment, and the Government, if they thought about us at all, would occasionally throw us a bone. But we were there, and we were determined, so gradually through the years we have won the right to participate in negotiations, attend national courses, and be consulted on matters that are our concern. We have seen improvements in the areas of building, maintenance, teacher training, support for teachers, appointments and appeals. We have meetings with officers of the Department of Education and the Minister of Education. Our views are listened to although not always agreed with. We also have the right to disagree and do so at times.

Around the late 1960s, Edie Martin became involved in a photographic project documenting the movement's development of kindergarten buildings throughout New Zealand as a historical record, the establishment of kindergarten buildings throughout the country. The images were mounted in geographical order in two photograph albums and later stored for in a back cupboard. There they remained until found in a clean out in the early to mid 1970s. RKA staff member, Gaylyn Campbell recognised their value contacted me to see if I would be interested in caring for them. I replied with a firm yes. Once officially handed over they

were stored in a secure location whilst I worked on other projects. Finally their time arrived and Mrs Edie Martin's project began.



Figure 3: Edie Martin's project to photograph the NZFKU's kindergarten buildings.
Photographer: Bernadette Peters.



Figure 4: Edie Martin hands over her chain of honour to the NZFKU's new president Brian Elliott.
Manawatu Standard

In her final address as NZFKU President in 1985, Edie Martin recalled memorable experiences from the twenty-two conferences she had attended. Her speech made reference to the illuminating speeches of Miss Christison, the Government preschool advisor; the impassioned pleas for change and the equally impassioned pleas for no change; the lawyers and insurance people all wanting insurance or rules; fundraising schemes such as the great Christmas Cake bake-off with hundreds of people baking Christmas cakes in the kindergarten. The latter idea failed to get sufficient takers.

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In 1985 Edie Martin became an honorary life member of the NZFKU.

Thirty-two years on, a newspaper item from the Manawatu Standard for December 18, 2017 shows Edie Martin as resident in a retirement home, sitting alongside a table laden with multiple small Christmas cakes and a tiered larger cake baked onsite.



Figure 5. Olive Tree Village Christmas Cake. Edie Martin seated in chair.
Manawatu Standard, December 18, 2017

Edie Martin died in 2020 aged 92 years. The following two tributes testify to the respect shown towards her as a person and to her work in kindergarten.

“I remember Edie as a great worker with the Kindergarten Association at the time Riverdale Kindy was established. We appreciated her knowledge and support. My sympathy to Edie's whanau and friends. Arohanui.” Annette Nixon

“My sympathies to Edie's family. I remember Edie from her days as President of the Manawatu Kindergarten Association. She was a mentor to me and I remember her elegance and grace.” Judy Watkins