

## **2004 Jean Ferguson O.A.M. Memorial Lecture**

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### **RURAL CHILDREN – DIFFERENT NEEDS ?**

Thank you for the invitation to present the Jean Ferguson Memorial Lecture. It is an honour both as a past student of Miss Ferguson's and of the Brisbane Kindergarten Teachers College to perform this task.

While contemplating where to start tonight's presentation I reflected on how Miss Ferguson had informed my thinking as a young student.

I believe her legacy to me was an acute awareness of the need to develop an understanding of all aspects of the early years of a child's life and then use this knowledge to create caring and supportive learning communities for children and their families.

I remember also the emphasis given to the role that parents and the wider community play in supporting this development and my responsibility as an early childhood educator to engage with both.

Tonight, I would like to give you a brief insight into a unique community of parents with whom I have been engaged for the past 14 years, the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA Aust), whose commitment to advocating for the educational needs of their children, would surely have captured Jean Ferguson's imagination, just as they have mine.

ICPA Australia began quite literally 'out the back of Bourke' in 1971. Parents living in the vast area extending from the Queensland border to the Tilpa/White Cliffs area of New South Wales, were concerned that their children were not able to receive an education comparable to that enjoyed by those in closer settled areas.

Recurring drought conditions over a prolonged period associated with a steep down turn in financial returns for meat and wool were primary reasons that created diminishing job opportunities in inland rural Australia.

This necessitated the movement of families to larger urban areas seeking job placement. These same conditions made it hard and in many cases, impossible for parents to meet the rising costs associated with children attending boarding schools and hostels.

At the same time the rising standards in education coupled with changes in curriculum over a decade, was placing a heavy load on the mother teaching correspondence, who

was also being asked more and more to take her place in the diminishing workforce on the property.

The realisation that it was essential for their children to attain an advanced education standard, to take their place in a changing world and the threatened closure of the Bourke Student Hostel, led to the calling of a public meeting by the Bourke Branch of the Graziers' Association to discuss the educational problems facing the community and surrounding district.

Shortly after this meeting, on the 16th April 1971 (in Bourke) the inaugural branch of the of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association was formed.

The initial objective was to obtain 'equal justice for every school child isolated by distance to give the same educational advantage as was already available to non-isolated children of the Commonwealth.'

Surveys were undertaken in other areas of Western NSW and research was made into other States' education systems and forms of assistance.

The information gathered led the Bourke branch to formulate a policy seeking assistance for the renewal and continuance of Hostel facilities and financial assistance for parents to assist with boarding expenses for children living away from home to gain access to schooling facilities.

Following deputations to Federal and State Education Ministers of the day wide publicity was given to the information that ICPA had gathered. Interest in this fledgling organisation mushroomed, leading to the formation of branches in Western NSW and South West QLD.

Elated by this interest, the Chairman of the Bourke Branch, Mr. Wally Mitchell recognised that it was essential to form a national body with identical objectives and so a meeting was called, again in Bourke, of all ICPA branches.

Sixty-nine people including representatives from 17 branches, 10 in NSW, 5 in QLD and 2 in South Australia gathered and agreed to form a Federal Council of ICPA. A Constitution was adopted, the focus of which had two General Aims:

First: The continuance of the Correspondence School Systems with increasing enrichment of programs for the students and wider guidance and assistance for the supervisor, be it the mother or governess.

Second: A "Living Away From Home Allowance' for children who must, for any multitude of reasons, leave home and live away from the family in another home, or group facility,' in order to access education.

While parents acknowledged that the Department of Education had a very good

Correspondence School, many found that they could not cope with this type of education, or the volume of work involved in educating a child at home.

The men in the families were being forced to work away from home due to the economic conditions and the women were required more and more to supervise the properties, leaving insufficient time for teaching a child. The cost of employing a governess was impossible without financial assistance.

Parents of secondary students found the task of supervising correspondence lessons overwhelming. The same applied to governesses, many of whom had no formal teacher training.

Documented evidence to back up the 'needs' was required by government. There had been no studies done on 'isolated education' in Australia so there were no statistics on which to base the claims.

Much of the representation was concerned with the withdrawal of children from boarding schools and hostels. A survey of ICPA branches in existence at the end of 1971 showed that 120 children would be withdrawn from boarding schools and hostels if government assistance was not forthcoming for the following year. Sixty-five were from Western NSW.

In a letter to his then local Federal Member of Parliament Wally Mitchell (ICPA) wrote:

'Since first discussing the problems of educating children, living beyond reach of normal schooling, when you met us in Bourke, this urgent need for assistance has been the cause of an explosive spread in our organisation.

Parents of children in remote areas have met the full costs (of education) over the history of their settlements. Many of the people in these areas have been handicapped by their lack of schooling in the past but never has a generation had such an urgent need as these children have now. This comes at a time when remote area parents are in a desperate financial position."

Wally went on to refer to the survey that ICPA had initiated, "We realise that our survey that is being conducted (by our branches) with the enclosed questionnaire, must be completed very accurately before we can answer the Ministers' questions of "How many children are concerned?" and "How much would this required assistance cost?"

This survey in itself is a tremendous achievement by a young organisation, considering the distances and communications involved, and will doubtless be a great help to Government Departments requesting it.

The urgent thing right now is the case of those unfortunate children in these areas who this week are forced to prematurely terminate their education because of their parents inability to meet the cost of keeping them at school” end quote

With all the relevant information in hand, members of the newly formed ICPA demanded, as a matter of urgency, that the Government of the day review the situation of the education of isolated children and take immediate steps to provide financial support. Their efforts were not in vain.

The problem of educational provision for isolated children became a significant political issue in the 1972 Federal election and led to the introduction of the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) by the Commonwealth Government in 1973.

Its purpose was to provide financial assistance for schooling children who, because of the geographic isolation of their homes, must live away from home in order to attend school or have to be taught at home. This was indeed a significant outcome for many bush families at the time and remains so today.

The story of ICPA is the story of a group of people passionately committed to the cause of gaining access to quality education for their children and their children's children.

The issues of today are much the same as the issues of 33 years ago ... the difference is that the cause has been taken up by the next generation.

ICPA has been many things to many people and it has undoubtedly had a major impact on government policies in rural areas over the last 33 years. It has broadened its range of tasks immensely since that first meeting in Bourke.

'ICPA is the only organisation that represents parents views across all areas of education, from pre-school to tertiary, and all systems, State, Religious and Independent.

We are a voluntary national parent body. The Association has over 3,300 member families, residing in the more remote parts of Australia. In places like Cobar, Tibooburra/Milparinka, Esperance, the Pilbara, the Kimberley, Kalannie, Goodooga, Thargomindah, Winton, Katherine, Port Augusta, Leigh Creek.

For a lobby group to survive and improve over a period of 33 years is recognition of the efforts of its leaders, however ICPA's strength has always been its branches and its members.

The 'community' based branch structure that is ICPA, sustains a network of well over 100 branches that allows almost 'instant' access to feedback on a wide range of issues that impact on the lives of families who live in rural and remote Australia.

ICPA's role at State and Federal Council levels is primarily one of lobbying to achieve the targets set by our branches and members. The branches however have a much broader role because as well as initiating action through Conference motions and representations at their local level, they fulfil the important task of providing social contact and support for geographically isolated families trying to educate their children.'

Schooling is always an issue, a big decision for anyone, but an even bigger one if there is no school near by. The decision on whether Mum will teach, a governess employed or the children will be sent to boarding school, and at what age is not easy.

One of the greatest challenges facing many remote mothers is that of teaching their own children. They take the ultimate responsibility for educating their child with support from a teacher based at a School of Distance Education.

Distance Education is different – it has to be able to meet the needs of children who have no school

As I mentioned earlier, when ICPA was first formed, many of our children received their education via correspondence and the Schools of Distance Education. The ensuing years have seen many changes in the distance education schoolroom led by technological innovation.

However, one aspect has remained constant, the vital role that the home- tutor or teaching mother plays in the delivery of the curriculum.

While there is much to celebrate, change has brought with it anxiety and uncertainty as many home tutor mothers struggle with the demands of teaching their children at home.

The need for a range of strategies to support these families is a constant issue. There are no cleaning ladies, gardeners or handymen – it is all do it yourself or it simply isn't done. This is when stress does become evident.

A recent report, aptly named 'Too Far', highlighting the needs of families who live in the remote areas of Western Australia is again a timely reminder.

A joint initiative of the Isolated Children's Parents Association in WA and The Uniting Church Frontier Services, the report highlights that: " the difficulties families are facing are huge. The average distance between medium sized towns, and properties where we surveyed families, was over 100 kms each way. Mothers are accountants, cooks, teachers and assistant property managers at the same time as caring for young children, and there is often no respite for them.

All the usual avenues for "time out" – family, friends and out-of-home child care services, even play groups and social activities – are just not available to them. Families persevere

in these situations –they have to but the strain can be enormous.” (Frontier News, February 2004, Vol. 106 No1 pp 18-21)

This report found that after health and education concerns, families living on remote properties were most in need of child-care services that could be tailored to meet their needs.

Yes there are still areas of need, however gains are being made. As a direct result of the advocacy of groups such as ICPA and Frontier Services I am delighted to say that there has been significant progress in the range of early childhood services being developed in many rural and remote areas. The focus on flexible service delivery has greatly assisted families living in these areas to cope with the vast distances and social isolation that is their reality.

Flexible models now include multi-purpose mobile services, small multi-purpose centres, and multi-sited services with mobile support units.

A number of innovative and highly valued programs have been established nationally, including:

In South Australia, the Remote and Isolated Children’s Exercise (RICE) and its child care component Outback Child Care

In NSW Contact Inc plays a vital role in supporting communities as they seek to establish early childhood services. Contact Inc also conducts activity days for children and families as well as coordinating a wide range of support programs for staff working in mobile outreach teams.

In Queensland, we have the Uniting Church, Frontier Services ‘Remote Area Families Service’ (RAFS) and its child care program ‘Remote Family Care Service’ (RFCS).

The aim of the Remote Family Care Service is to meet the care needs of parents who have no access to existing children’s’ services or programs. Frontier Services identified an important need:

“ While some families are aware of child care services in town, what they really appreciate is an extra pair of hands on the property itself. There are all sorts of situations that arise from time to time that can make the care of children problematic. Some of those are seasonal, like mustering times, when women as well as their partners are needed on the land away from the home. Others are less predictable – sudden illness or an emergency trip to town. These are the times that are really stressful for families. There is no one to call on for help.” (Jen Roe, Frontier News, February 2004, Vol. 106 No1 pp 20-21)

This service offers three weeks per year of in-home care to families on properties.

Carers travel all over outback Queensland and parts of the Northern Territory, providing that much needed 'extra pair of hands'. It is reassuring to parents that the carers are experienced and well understand the needs of their children and families. (Frontier News, February 2004, Vol. 106 No1 pp 20-21)

The difficulty of educating children in the bush continues to facilitate the exodus of families to more closely settled areas. However, those families who remain in the 'heartland' do so as a matter of choice, understanding full well the joys as well as challenges involved.

A number of years ago the Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise identified the need for a creative way to meet the needs of their women clients, in outback South Australia, wishing to develop new creative and life skills.

With federal, state and regional arts funding they conducted a creative writing and visual arts/photography project, the outcome of which is a wonderful book called 'Dirt Roads and Desert Roses'.

This book celebrates women in the outback and the environment in which they live. The women's writing captures poignantly the unique challenges that the families who live 'further out' encounter in their daily lives.

In closing I would like to share with you the personal journey of one of those writers, Polly Smart

'Polly was born and raised in the Adelaide Hills (SA) and still remembers the crisp, cold winters and orchards on the River Murray belonging to her mothers family.

At 18 she went governessing in the Northern Territory and realised she would never live in the city again.

After several teaching positions, including Port Augusta's School of the Air, she married and went to live on Plumbago Station. She has lived with her husband and children at Wilkatana Station for the past 16 years.' ('Dirt Roads and Desert Roses' p 110)

Her poem 'Rural Woman' gives us a glimpse of the strength and resilience of the people who choose to live and work in outback Australia. They are the reason for ICPA's being. The needs of these women, their children and families should never be ignored.

## **A RURAL WOMAN**

*Polly Smart.*

*Plumbago Station*

*'Dirt Roads and Desert Roses' 2002 RICE*

Things are different now that the season's dry,  
And the market's down, and the staff have gone.  
The poor sheep don't know though.  
Heads down, creamy oblongs stringing into water,  
Worth less than the feral goats in the hills.

The colours of the land become more vivid  
With each dry day,  
And even the shade becomes hotter,  
The icing on the Christmas cake  
Will melt again this year.  
Dusty legs, bare feet, my son rushes in  
For water and a hug.  
Some hard playing with the old sheep dog.  
Watch for snakes, won't you mate!  
Starting school over the radio next year.

I glance at my belly, eight months rounded,  
And hope again  
I don't have it here in the kitchen,  
Next to the Flying Doctor radio.  
I smile at the thought of my husband helping.

He's one of the things that's different now.  
He used to be cheerful and bluff and tired.  
Now he's short-tempered and restless and weary.  
He deserves more than just  
Work-socks for Christmas. He's only thirty.

I stare at the place where my garden should have been.  
The salty bore-water has won, as it has with my skin,  
And my hair and my clothes.  
But at least the bark chips, carefully laid  
Will keep the dust down.

And sometimes I long for a coffee and a chat  
With a girlfriend, and to giggle.  
A holiday, a perm and a spending spree.  
A swim, a meal at a restaurant.  
God forgive me, a babysitter.  
I am tired of the news in the papers and journals,  
And feeling like a doll  
In the back of a politician's wagon.  
Thank goodness we only get mail once a week,  
So I miss most of what they say.

And I feel like lying down,  
Cheek against this red earth,  
Taking comfort, trusting it.  
It's easier to accept what it gives.

At least it never makes any promises.

References:

'Dirt Roads and Desert Roses', Writing from women in South Australia's Outback.  
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