

An unbending campaigner

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Press

Betty Roberts, who was active for many years in women's and community affairs and served for a term on the Heathcote County Council, died earlier this month at the age of 89. She was well-known for involvement in the restoration of the Old Stone House in Cashmere and she co-wrote its history.

Roberts grew up in Sydney and the Blue Mountains. Her family was active in politics and the Anglican Church. Her father was the Foundation Professor of Public Administration at Sydney University and became a Liberal member of the federal Parliament of Australia.

She gained a first-class honours degree in history and second class in English at Sydney University, where she was secretary and then president of the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM). There she met her husband, Norman Roberts, who was president of the post-graduate branch of the movement.

They married in 1941 and moved into their home in Ryde. After a brief stint working at Ryde City Council, they had a daughter. Betty Roberts hid her pregnancy until the last possible moment to keep her job.

As there was no local kindergarten, the couple established one at their home. By the end of the year a paid kindergarten teacher and a different mother on duty each day were caring for 30 children, three days a week. This operated for six years and created a community of mothers interested in the education of their children. During this time, she had three more children.

Betty Roberts campaigned in the early post-war fight against banning communism in Australia.

As her elder children progressed beyond kindergarten, she arranged for a Girl Guides and Brownie organisation in the district. This allowed her daughters to be initiated into camping and bushwalking and to form a life-long love of the wild.

Respect for nature, and its importance to people, led the Robertses to organise for establishment of a bird reserve in a large gully, near their house, that



Betty Roberts

was to be subdivided for homes.

Betty Roberts tried to liberalise the teaching of scripture. She did theology and scripture courses and taught religious education to infant classes in Ryde.

After World War 2, her husband, who had been involved in electronic research and manufacture, moved into wool research. Sixteen years later, they shifted to New Zealand, where he was appointed founding Director of the Wool Research Organisation of New Zealand in Christchurch.

Betty Roberts taught English, history and religious studies at Rangi Ruru Girls' School. She enjoyed teaching social living classes, being a careers adviser and organising sixth-form forums in connection with the schools branch of the SCM, and the United Nations Association, in which topical political and social issues were discussed.

Finding she was not alone in wanting to be active beyond the domestic sphere, in the mid-'60s she worked to help women. After retiring from teaching, she began researching child-care for low-paid women for the Society of Research on Women. She became chairwoman of the National Organisation for Women (NOW) and oversaw a trebling of membership. She was active in establishing the Night Shelter for Women Alone, in Maternity

Action Alliance, in improving conditions for mothers in childbirth, and in other women's organisations.

The Robertses were instrumental in restoring Cashmere's Old Stone House. After years of failing to obtain funding from local bodies, she stood successfully for election to the Heathcote County Council. On the council she pursued the restoration with vigour. Her zealotry, criticisms of the near-dysfunctional council and push for reforms riled fiery County Chairman John McKenzie and rubbed some councillors up the wrong way.

McKenzie said at one meeting that Cr Roberts spoke "a lot of emotional tripe" and he disliked her "bellyaching attitude".

Roberts did not seek a second term but retained a strong interest in local government. Former councillor Oscar Alpers says he had many discussions with her on a range of issues. Former councillor Murette Taylor says Roberts campaigned tenaciously, especially in heritage and planning issues.

The Old Stone House became the home of the Cracroft Community Centre. In 1990, Roberts and her husband wrote its history.

After her husband retired from the Wool Research Organisation, the Robertses travelled to China and North Korea with the New Zealand-Democratic People's Republic of Korea Society.

Roberts received awards from Heathcote and Christchurch City councils for her services to the community. She and her husband each received a Queen's Service Medal in 2002.

□ Betty Kerford Roberts, born Sydney, June 21, 1919; died Christchurch, September 10, 2008; survived by husband Norman, daughters Robin, Kerry, Cynthia and Lin, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

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