

## Helen Yensen

*Helen Yensen was a CAFCA member from 2011 until ill health and old age forced her to resign in 2014. In that brief period, at the end of her life, she was a generous donor to both CAFCA and the CAFCA/ABC Organiser Account, which provides my income. I knew nothing about her life and am indebted to Maire Leadbeater, who informed me of her death and who accepted my invitation to write Helen's obituary. MH.*

Helen (full name Helena) Yensen died on January 22, 2015, aged 84, at the Princess Alexandra Retirement Village in Napier. She had been suffering from heart and increasingly painful vascular problems that could not be remedied. A long-time advocate of assisted dying, she was denied this option but still managed to choose her own time by opting to stop eating and drinking. Poignantly friends report that she spent much of her last week bidding farewell to those close to her. Her obituary notice in the *New Zealand Herald* records: "Her wish to die has come to pass, and her body has been cremated without ceremony in accordance with her instructions. In 2013 Helen helped to organise Maryan Street's speaking tour in Hawke's Bay promoting her 'End of Life Choices' Private Member's Bill. Helen's friends respected her wish to die and for a speedy end to her suffering. She had been a life-long advocate for justice, and worked tirelessly to expose injustice and cruelty. She deserved to have end-of-life choices and to die a peaceful death. Arohanui. Dag, lieve Helena" (the Dutch phrase translates as "goodbye, dear Helena").

Helen's last four years were spent in Napier. She took to Hawke's Bay life with enthusiasm and was soon regaling her Auckland friends with accounts of the cultural, community and political attractions of her new home. She will be greatly missed in Napier for her contributions to many organisations including Don't Frack the Bay, the Green Party, Grey Power, the Maraenui community in Napier and its Maori bilingual school, and the Books in Schools programme. Helen was a dear friend and mentor to me over the past 30 years. We met when the Auckland peace movement was in a period of exponential growth in the early 1980s. Helen was at the heart of all the major campaigns and supported a number of groups, including the Auckland Peace Forum and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She chose to use her energies and time in line with her skills – facilitating meetings and supporting others to develop good group process, writing submissions and letters, record keeping as



well as the innumerable demonstrations, stalls, and petitions of the time.

### East Timor Campaigner

In 1981 Helen volunteered to help Greenpeace's then Coordinator, the late Elaine Shaw – how could she be most effective? Elaine handed her a file of material about East Timor and told her East Timor work had lapsed for want of an effective coordinator. Helen was soon hooked and for the next two decades she was a key driver of East Timor solidarity work – maintaining the links with other national and international groups, and with Timorese leaders in exile – Jose Ramos Horta was a guest in her home more than once. Helen kept up a stream of lobbying correspondence with Government and fronted up to the parliamentarians when petitions were heard. Often this was a thankless and somewhat disillusioning task – nuclear free leader David Lange was obdurate on East Timor and many MPs were little better. In the 1990s East Timor work went up a notch and there were more hands to the plough, but Helen's wise guidance, organising skills and extensive snail mail correspondence with supporters was vital to the group's effectiveness. In 1999, at the time of the cataclysmic post-referendum violence in East Timor, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Conference was held in Auckland. Jose Ramos Horta visited to plead with world leaders to take action and Helen worked hard to ensure he met with key figures, including US President Bill Clinton (*for the history of NZ's decades of shabby policy towards the long suffering Timorese people, see Maire Leadbeater's "Negligent Neighbour", reviewed by Jeremy Agar in Peace Researcher 34, July 2007, <http://www.converge.org.nz/abc/pr34-141b.html>. Ed.*).

## Pakeha Treaty Activist

I believe that Helen's own personal background, working with the Resistance in the occupied Netherlands, was a help to her understanding of the Timorese struggle – she knew at first hand the hard challenges of clandestine work. Helen was a passionate advocate for Maori rights and Treaty justice and remained involved with Pakeha Treaty Action until her death. She co-edited a book with Kevin Hague and Tim McCreanor, "Honouring The Treaty: An Introduction For Pakeha To The Treaty of Waitangi" (Penguin Books, Auckland, 1989).

Tim McCreanor, these days Associate Professor and Senior Researcher at Massey University's Shore and Whariki Research Centre, agreed to let me share his personal tribute: "I met Helen while studying psychology at Auckland in the mid-1980s. Her quiet, radical analyses of the shift to neo-liberalism of that decade helped me enormously to develop a critical understanding of the impact of colonisation on social relations in this country which has animated my own work ever since. With Helen's encouragement and leadership, Kevin Hague and I collaborated with her and other authors including Mitzi Nairn, to produce 'Honouring The Treaty - An Introduction For Pakeha', which I think was a very public expression of her understanding and commitment to Treaty-based futures for Aotearoa. I remember her keen intelligence and energy in working to make what were then 'hard to hear' ideas intelligible to a broad Pakeha readership and a certain good-natured impatience with my feckless scholarship and inability to write in an appropriately accessible style. With characteristic self-deprecation she would say: 'This passage is way too intellectual. You have to write it so even I can understand it!'

"Certainly the ideas converged with many other strands of thought in the Treaty movement of that time and were a key resource for the bicultural training courses for clinical psychology students that Helen led and contributed to at Auckland, Waikato and Massey Universities, over a number of years. A key feature of these efforts was the goal of building mutual support among students which she characterised as a need to find allies in this work because it was necessarily risky and lonely in those Rogernomics/Richardson years. Her empathetic and self-effacing style won over many and affected all the students one way or another but when they expressed admiration or even amazement that she had, as an adult migrant, such a clear understanding of the issues she would laugh and say: 'Yes but it is so much easier for me! Compared to you I had so much less that I had to *unlearn!*'

"We kept in touch intermittently and I was among many who benefitted from her long and rich life experience, sometimes in semi-formal 'supervision' where I could air specific issues, but also in laid-back 'catch up' sessions where she would share her latest experiences in her work with Maori schools, community groups and others and listen to the challenges and difficulties that I was encountering in the research field. When she decided to downsize her home she was insistent that I take many of the psychology and race relations books that she owned and these have been added to the Whariki Research Group Library where they are still in daily use... Helen, you changed my life greatly for the better, gave me inspiration and courage at moments when I felt struggles for social justice were in vain. Your warm, spiky, energetic, determination will not be forgotten".

Tim's contribution was read to a group of us who gathered in Auckland at Joan Macdonald's house to remember Helen over morning tea. Helen did not want a memorial service – "no right of reply" she is reported to have said! Kuia Pauline Tangiora (Mahia/Rongomaiwahine), Helen's old friend, joined us – she had been with Helen in her last days. There were plenty of tales of her activist involvement spanning the 1981 anti-tour movement – including an arrest - Child Poverty Action; a successful campaign to resist the construction of a school at Alexandra Park, Palestine and Western Sahara, and Women's Refuge.

Many referred to Helen's support and mentoring of others – this ranged over all kinds of personal and practical help from helping children with their maths through to helping with doctoral theses as well as looking after new immigrants. She also volunteered as a Lifeline counsellor. Life was not all about politics. Helen was a great supporter of the visual arts and an art collector as visitors to her Epsom home will recall. Artist Eric Lee-Johnson and his wife Elizabeth were good friends. Helen used to make regular visits back to The Netherlands to catch up with old friends and family. Her brother Henk, to whom she was close, was also a well-regarded artist. However, by the end of her life, her remaining relative was Henk's wife Co.

## Earlier Life

I am indebted to old friend Ian Summers, his son Graeme and Graeme's wife Cathy Summers, for helping me with this little background. Helen's childhood was spent in The Netherlands, and the Second World War had a major impact. All the family were involved with underground Resistance work.

---

Helen, though only a child, played a part, passing messages as a "runner". After the war Helen gained a Fulbright Scholarship and studied in the United States where she lived with a Quaker family. Still only in her late teens, Helen was accepted as an immigrant in Perth, Australia, where she worked for a time at the Dutch Consulate. She met her husband Roy, an academic and behavioural psychologist. They moved to Sydney and subsequently lived in the UK while Roy studied for his PhD.

Returning to Sydney the couple sought a change and decided to try life in the Manawatu where Roy taught at Massey University and Helen taught high school maths in Feilding. Here they met up with the Summers family who became life-long friends. Graeme and Ian remember this as a happy time – Ian and his wife shared an interest in geology with Roy and there were lots of adventures seeking out fossils and shared campervan trips. The Yensens took out New Zealand citizenship and the Summers signed the necessary papers for them. Then there was a sabbatical year in Sweden, during which the Summers cared for the Yensen's large Feilding property. Sadly, on returning to New Zealand, Roy suffered a serious accident which exacerbated old war injuries. Roy and Helen moved to Whangarei and Helen took a senior position at Tikipunga High School. She was an excellent teacher, able to get alongside "difficult" kids and with a special facility for understanding the different ways each person learns. After Roy's death, Helen moved to Auckland where she was happy to link up again with Graeme, his wife Cathy and their two boys, Andrew and Michael. I think she regarded the boys as grandsons and they went on many outings together. Cathy said she sometimes referred to her as a "daughter-in-law" but Graeme says the best word to describe the relationship with Helen was "mentor" - as Helen was to so many of her friends. I last met with Helen in December 2014 in her retirement village apartment. I was using her as a sounding board about my latest research project and benefiting from Helen's vast cultural and historical knowledge. I feel her loss and I pay tribute to Pauline Doyle, Pauline Tangiora and those who supported Helen on her final journey.