

OBITUARIES

MIA TAY

- Kate Dewes

Mia was a member of, and regular donor to, the Anti-Bases Campaign from 1992 until her death in 2014. Ed.

Mia Tay died from cancer on June 25, 2014, in Christchurch, aged 73. For over 40 years she was very active in the peace and anti-nuclear movement. She described herself as one who did the “elbow grease work at the grassroots”, who “got things going”, but was not one “in the prophet line in the movement”. However, she played in key role in holding the Christchurch peace movement together during its resurgence in the late 1970s. Many of the activities she helped to organise broke fresh ground, and some continue to this day. What shaped her lifetime commitment to peace, and what special skills did she bring to her work?

Born in The Netherlands in 1941 during World War II, Mia was the daughter of Quakers Jos and Angela Brusse. Her early years were spent on a Quaker farm school for Jewish children where her father managed the farm, and her mother taught. They provided a sanctuary plus a solid training in Dutch agricultural skills, while helping the children flee to a safer country. At the age of three Mia contracted diphtheria. Confinement from other children, lack of good food and forced removal of seven Jewish children to their deaths in concentration camps helped form her social conscience. Her parents' strong moral views had a huge influence on her and gave her the strength to be different and say “hey, hang on! I don't have to follow” (interview with Susan Bourke, May 1988).

Peace Activist Since Childhood

Having arrived in New Zealand with the family as State-assisted immigrants from The Netherlands after the war, she attended the Whanganui Quaker School. In 1955 the family moved to Christchurch, where she went to Linwood High and Avonside Girls High Schools. At that age of 15, after learning about apartheid, nuclear weapons, war, discrimination and inequality, Mia acknowledged her awareness that “there but for the grace of God, go I” by making a “personal commitment to the realisation that war is wrong” and becoming a Quaker. In 1960 she followed up her ambition to qualify as a social worker by studying sociology at Canterbury University, where she met and married Economics lecturer Frank Tay. She sat her final exams in 1968 while pregnant with her third child Kim. Around this time she began protesting against the Vietnam War with her young children in pushchairs.

Mia and I first met in 1976 at the International Convention for Peace Action in Wellington, when she was coordinating the Christchurch branch of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and I was teaching peace issues in Auckland. Inspired by the conference, she teamed up with Michael Malloch from the Catholic Overseas Aid Committee to pool resources and to explore how local groups such as the National Council of Churches (NCC), Quakers, CORSO, etc could work together. Mia was appointed part-time organiser for the Peace Office, working with Michael for \$1 an hour for about four hours a day, including expenses. She was given a tiny office free of charge by the NCC and free secretarial services from the Irish Peace Movement. They worked on coordinating the NZ Northern Irish Peace Body; opposing the US Trident nuclear submarine programme; helping market the *New Internationalist*, and promoting visiting overseas speakers. The office published and distributed booklets reprinting articles by inspiring peace activists including Robert Aldridge, a former US physicist who had helped design the Trident submarine's Poseidon missile with its cluster of individually targeted re-entry vehicles, each carrying a nuclear warhead. These publications were then promoted and sold at public meetings.

Lantern Ceremony

In the mid 1970s, prominent peace researcher Owen Wilkes* returned to Christchurch after attending annual commemorations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He had observed the Hiroshima ceremony when the souls of the dead are remembered by floating lanterns down the city's river. Determined to do something similar here, he called together representatives of the Christian Pacifist Society, CND and Quakers to organise lantern-making with what “any self-respecting Kiwi would have in their shed”

- a couple of pieces of wood, some wire, nails and paper. In 1976 Mia organised the first annual lantern ceremony on the Avon River on or around August 6th. There was a procession from the Cathedral to Victoria Square where people put their lanterns on the water. Mia saw it as a public ceremony where ordinary people could be involved in something positive and peaceful. In 2000, during the 25th successive year, the ceremony was filmed live by NHK Hiroshima and shown to millions throughout Japan. Speakers included Mayor Garry Moore, Maori leader Rev Maurice Gray and MPs. In 37 years, Mia never missed the ceremony; after the 2010-11 earthquakes, the closure of Victoria Square forced it to be moved to the World Peace Bell in the Botanic Gardens. *Peace Researcher 31, October 2005, <http://www.converge.org.nz/abc/prcont31.html>, is a Special Issue for Owen Wilkes. Ed.

As Secretary of the Peace Office, in July 1977, Mia wrote to local church ministers drawing their attention to the Hiroshima Commemoration asking them to use August 7th as a special day with "Peace is Possible" as the theme in all pulpits. She even offered them a "prepared sermon". She wrote: "It is the belief of this Office that Man has the skills to resolve conflicts without going to war, but the means of settling disputes without resort to armed violence needs to be constantly worked at". This was the beginning of the marking of Peace Sunday and a Peace Week devoted to highlighting opposition to all wars. Also in 1977 Mia started representing various Christchurch groups on the National Consultative Committee for Disarmament, established by the Government in that year to facilitate consultations between non-Government organisations (NGOs) in Wellington and to offer suggestions for Government action at the first UN Special Session on Disarmament in 1978.

In early 1979 she helped organise non-violent action training workshops throughout New Zealand led by well known British/Australian Quaker Peter Jones and Kiwi Rachel Bloomfield. My first husband John Boanas and I attended the Christchurch workshop over Easter – just after we had moved to Christchurch and only six weeks before the birth of my first daughter. It was a special time to reconnect with Mia following the 1976 conference. We were taught listening skills and practical activities to deal with possible violent confrontation during the upcoming protests against the 1981 Springbok rugby tour. On reflection, Mia was convinced that this training helped the national protests to be predominantly non-violent – "... it was the peace movement's gift to the anti-racist movement".

Peace Groups

In the following weeks Mia attended the inaugural meetings of the fledgling Christchurch Peace Collective in our home, which we hosted until early 1982 when my second daughter was born. Mia and I worked closely to reactivate the dormant CND membership and establish Women for Peace, and later a branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The Peace Collective organised the first Peace Movement NZ meeting at Living Springs in 1981; the visit of the "Pacific Peacemaker" to Lyttelton; peace education in schools; public meetings including by the famous Dr Helen Caldicott; street protests in the Square and against visiting nuclear warships; and we wrote many letters to politicians about nuclear issues. Mia and Peter Jones assembled a "macro analysis kit" called "New Zealand and Nuclear Warships" which she promoted throughout the country via the Peace Forum.

During this time, the Peace Collective, which included Larry Ross* and Harold Evans**, had grown rapidly; and there were enough neighbourhood and church groups to form the Christchurch Peace Forum in 1982 to coordinate our activities. The Forum met on the first Saturday of every second month in the Quaker Meeting House with each group taking turns as convenor. That year, an ad hoc group of Peace Forum members called Peace Action coordinated the making and distributing of white flowers and singing peace songs around Mothers Day to highlight the role of mothers in peacemaking. They also organised a Peace Walk on International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament (<http://www.un.org/disarmament/HomePage/gender/docs/note2.pdf>) on May 24 which drew about 500 people, with speeches by local MPs including Ruth Richardson (National), and Labour's Ann Hercus and Mary Batchelor (*Peace Movement New Zealand Newsletter* June 1982, p3). *See PR 44, November 2012, <http://www.converge.org.nz/abc/pr44/pr44-008.htm> for Murray Horton's obituary of Larry Ross. **See PR 33, November 2006, <http://www.converge.org.nz/abc/pr33-132a.html> for Kate Dewes' obituary of Harold Evans. Ed.

The first Christchurch Peace Festival, organised primarily by the Nuclear Free Zone Committee and the Peace Forum in March 1983, was sponsored by the City Council to mark the first anniversary of the city's nuclear weapon free zone status. A Parade for Peace stretched for six city blocks and was

opened by the Mayor, city councillors and both the Catholic and Anglican Bishops. The public picnicked in the sun, entertained by over six hours of speeches, music, dance, and mime artists. 1,000 doves were released with peace messages attached; local doctors organised a mock nuclear blast, and spoke about the effects of a real nuclear war. Finally the crowd was addressed by Owen Wilkes about "Missile Madness" (*PMNZ Newsletter*, March 1983 p7 and *Peacelink* 8, April 1983).

In August 1982 the Peace Forum Management Committee had appointed Mia as their first Peace Worker. From 1983 she coordinated the Peace Office in the Environment Centre at the Arts Centre which became known as the Environment Peace Information (EPI) Centre. Her work included fundraising, collecting levies from the 25 local peace groups, selling memorabilia, booklets, showing anti-nuclear films, getting newsletters printed via a dirty duplicating machine, and activating phone trees for actions. She helped compile a list of peace books for the Public Library and a peace resource kit which was sent to all Christchurch schools. When *Peacelink* moved to Christchurch she helped collate and promote it. She also supervised workers from the Government-funded Voluntary Organisation Training Persons scheme. Many of those people are still active in the movement. Coordination of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki Day commemoration took a great deal of her energy as it often attracted up to 1,500 people with many groups involved. While helping run the EPI Centre until 1985, she used her creative skills to help make beautiful rainbow banners celebrating Christchurch as the first Nuclear Free City in 1982, and some huge ones marking NZ's nuclear free status in 1987. These were then taken all over the world by various peace campaigners to promote our policy.

Peace & The Arts

In one of her reports to *Peacelink*, she wrote about the importance of "Peace and the Arts": "The peace movement needs many talents. I have personally been involved with the protest and political part, as well as the spiritual. I've found that people keen on politics tend to form the active, planning, time-keeping, stirring-up role. They are often so busy with their business – after thoroughly enjoying themselves – that they forget the artistic. Then, in everyday protest work, comes a need for creativity. What is really exciting for me is the feeling that every time a grassroots movement looks like taking off - it passes from being a lunatic fringe - offbeat, political stirring group to a broad-based new vision movement for society – then we find that art in all its various forms comes to help. Suddenly the self-motivated political activist finds that there is music, visual art, help for posters, shows, drama, etc in ways never dreamt of. As the movement and the people in it mature, there is a real flowing of energy and enthusiasm. The creative imagination has more sources to draw from, and the ideas and resulting action have a main guiding line which sparks off new and interesting directions. So what I feel is that artists are not good political activists, and political activists are lousy artists, but when they work together in harmony great things happen!" (*Peacelink*, May 1985, p3). When Quaker Peace and Service and the Quaker Peace Committee were combined and moved to Christchurch in the late 1980s, Mia took a leading role and maintained that work until her death. She also served on the Peace Movement Aotearoa Working Group from 1984 for a few years, and later on the NZ Peace Foundation Council.

Runs In The Family

Despite being taken on peace marches in the pushchair, Mia's daughter Kim was not alienated by her mother's indefatigable peace commitment. In fact her early career emulated her mother's. She worked in the Peace Movement Aotearoa office in Wellington, and studied Peace Studies at Canterbury University. Subsequently she secured a job with the prestigious Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC) in London in 1992, where she co-published articles on the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, detection of satellites, and entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. She also served as the President of the NZ Foundation for Peace Studies at the beginning of the 2000s.

I have a delightful picture of Kim in the *Press* in January 1989, with a pile of teddies and dolls on the Quaker Peace Stall at the International Peace and People's Day in Hagley Park. More than 50 environmental, cultural, community and political groups were represented with stalls and displays. The annual event, one of the most popular of the Summer Times programme, was organised by the City Council. Mia and I built upon this early commitment to peace by the Council when, in 2002, we drafted the Christchurch Peace City proposal. Adopted later that year, it marked the 20th anniversary of Christchurch as the first nuclear free city, and declared Christchurch as New Zealand's first Peace City. In 2005, Mia received a well-deserved Peace City Award in recognition of her lifetime

commitment to peace. Since then, several other cities, including Auckland, have emulated Christchurch's lead.

Ensuring Peace A Central Part Of Christchurch's Identity

In conclusion, Mia played a key role ensuring that peace remains a central part of Christchurch's identity. Her humble, strong yet gentle caring presence and persistent hard work continue to inspire others. I miss her chuckle and wry sense of humour. I'm grateful to her for all the yummy wholesome dishes she shared at the many peace pot luck dinners, and for ensuring the hot drinks were organised. As with Kim and my daughters, she inspired other younger women to continue her legacy. Anna Parker and Jen Margaret, who were awarded the Quaker Loxley Fellowships for their peace work, paid tribute to her: "Mia, you were always on the other end of the phone with words of encouragement, support and passion. You believed in the projects we were working on, you championed us and our work. You also understood us as mothers, as women in context - you cared about us and our families. Your unwavering support saw us through the challenges of our projects, and we trust that the work we have produced is a useful contribution to peace/peaceful relationships that you worked for in your life".

Sadly, during her last few months our midnight email exchanges were often to share various remedies for cancer. She admitted that the stress of the ongoing earthquakes and repairs had taken a huge toll on her. In 2012 she wrote: "My dream is that by the end of the year I have this house sorted to run itself, all my papers in place, and that I have energy to help others who need help". When I bade her farewell my final promise was that we would ensure that the lantern ceremony would continue. The 2014 ceremony was addressed by Mayor Lianne Dalziel, who acknowledged Mia's special role. Four local MPs attended, plus a Japanese women's choir and over 100 supporters, including members of Mia's family and many children. The WILPF group who organised it provided refreshments at the YMCA where they paid tribute to Mia's vision, and committed themselves to sustaining this rewarding event as a lasting memorial to her work for peace and reconciliation.



Mia Tay receiving Christchurch Peace City Award 2002