

# Passionate advocate for women and peace

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**D**ame Laurie Salas was a peace campaigner who believed you had to try to change the world for the better. You had to make a difference. And so she did.

She dedicated her life, beyond her family, to a legion of organisations for women whose objectives embraced the concepts of peace, justice and humanitarian assistance.

She always pushed for the total abolition of war. "There must be an alternative to resolving conflict other than by killing each other," she told the *Evening Post* on receiving her damehood in 1988.

The National Council of Women and the United Nations were her main platforms for change. She represented these and other non-governmental organisations at many international conferences over her career, travelling to Paris, Oslo, Tashkent, New York, and Beijing.

Women and children were the main beneficiaries in her fight for change. As a staunch anti-nuclear campaigner she once pointed out that the cost of one nuclear submarine was equivalent to the education costs of 160 million children in 23 Third World countries.

Addressing 400 women gathered for the Save the Children Woman of the Year Awards in 1988, she told them they must bring pressure on politicians to stop the "unacceptable and outmoded concept of war". The world must replace fear with understanding, tanks with tractors, she said.

Laurie Salas was born in Wellington in 1922. One of four children, the family moved to Christchurch, where she attended Fendalton School and later Rangitapu.

When she was 13 her family were in a serious car accident which left her unconscious for a week. She spent four months in hospital and had a year off school. The accident left her with gaps in her memory of her life up till that point.

At the age of 19, while doing her BA in philosophy and history at Canterbury University, she met and married Ian Webster. But after just 21 months of marriage Webster died of blood poisoning. His death inspired her to study medicine but half way through medical school she married John Salas, another medical student, and started a family.

She never finished her degree. In the early 1950s, after the birth of three of her six children, the family moved to Edinburgh, where her husband was studying. They returned a few years later, to Timaru, where the couple had another daughter and, following a move to Wellington, two sons.

Daughter Rosie remembers her mother always being involved in some community organisation or other, in particular the Playcentre Association and later the Mothers Helpers Committee.

"She was a devoted mother but she was also always connected outward. She believed that even if you were really busy, as she was raising six children, you should still go out and do things for other people."

In the late 1960s, with the children all at school, she became more deeply involved in her cause for women, international relations



Dame Laurie Salas embraced the concepts of peace, justice and humanitarian assistance.

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Salas "was a devoted mother but she was also always connected outward", her daughter Rosie says.

and peace. It was through her work in the mid-1960s with the Mothers Helpers Committee and the Federation of University of Women that she came to the attention of the National Council of Women (NCW).

She would go on to work at the highest levels of that organisation, starting out as the national secretary from 1976-1980 and moving to the position of vice-president from 1982-86.

Salas was involved in the NCW watch committee on work with proposed legislation that would make significant changes to the lives of women, including the Matrimonial Property Act, the Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act, and on matters of equal pay to women.

By the early 1980s it had become clear to her that although women may have had equal pay in theory, they did not have it in practice. Organising a two-day seminar at the Centre for Continuing Education in Wellington, Salas took practical steps to make education for women a political priority.

Jean Fuller, who worked alongside Salas on various women's organisations for almost 50 years, says her friend was a respected leader and a gracious and generous person.

"She gave immeasurable amounts of time to the organisations that she believed in. She was always nice, friendly and helpful – but that doesn't mean she was a puffed-up! She could be steely when needed and earned great respect from the politicians."

Salas and her siblings all undertook a lot of public work. Their parents had instilled in them the importance of serving the community and of stewardship.

Several family members were formally recognised for their work. Her father, Sir James Hay, a councillor and deputy mayor of Christchurch and the founder of the department store chain Hays, was knighted for services to the community. Both her younger twin brothers were knighted: Sir David Hay, founder of the National Heart Foundation, who died last year, and Sir Hamish Hay, former mayor of Christchurch who died in 2008. A sister, Helen Louison, also served her community volunteering for the Red Cross and the Save the Children Fund.

Salas herself received the Queen's Service Order in 1982 and in 1988 she was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in recognition of her voluntary service for women's causes as well as for her work in international relations and peace.

Her work in peace and disarmament and with the United Nations was partly as a result of her aunt who had a liberal and international outlook on life, she told Deborah Coddington in a 1991 interview with *North & South*.

Her own family had suffered terrible loss at war with two uncles dying in the Gallipoli campaign.

"After World War II it seemed such a terrible waste of life and I thought there must be some other way of solving disputes rather than going to war and killing each other ..."

"The more people think of resolving conflict in ways other than in bouts of legitimised killing, the more likely is the prospect of

lasting peace," she said.

As the former national president of the United Nations Association of New Zealand and vice-president of the World Federation of United Nations Association, Salas was a leader in improving the status, safety and security of women.

In 1982, she was the only non-government representative from New Zealand at the United Nations session on disarmament, as well as at the New York conference of Women of the World Working for Peace. She was involved in many organisations working towards social progress, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the National Society for Alcoholism and Drug Addiction.

In a 1988 article in the *Evening Post* Salas defended the UN from criticism that it was no more than a "costly talk-shop", saying if it had not been established there would probably have been a lot more conflict in the world.

"Now that we seem to be moving towards a more peaceful world ... I hope that people realise that we can perhaps do without war altogether. The more people who have faith in the UN and really support their respective governments, the more likely we will have the enduring peace the charter sets out to achieve," she said.

She was a frequent contributor to the newspaper Letters pages. In her 80s she wrote about the effect of smacking and hitting children: "The end result will, I hope, be a society where children have the same protection from assault as adults and animals do, and New Zealand will be seen to comply with all the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child," she wrote.

Campaigning till the end for the protection of others.

By Bess Manson

Sources: Salas family, National Council of Women, United Nations Association of New Zealand, North & South (Deborah Coddington).