

Peace Action group in it for the long haul

By Sandra Simpson

TAURANGA'S Peace Action group celebrates its 20th birthday this year and is still very much concerned with current issues, according to founding member Viola Palmer.

Dr Palmer, about to leave Tauranga for an "extended holiday" to begin her retirement, says the decision to form Peace Action came after hearing a speech about the nuclear threat at a Federation of University Women meeting.

"I had my consciousness raised quite suddenly," she says. "The scales fell from my eyes — you have to remember that the information wasn't as well known then as it is now."

Four women founded the Tauranga group, one of the first outside the main centres.

"We worked closely with all the other groups, I would guess about 300 in the heyday, but a lot of them haven't lasted 20 years."

Dr Palmer, who has lived in Tauranga for 25 years and is national chairwoman of Group Against Liquor Advertising (Gala), was also a founder of Peace Movement Aotearoa, a coordinating body for New Zealand's peace groups.

Her desire to be involved in the peace movement also had a personal tone — as a child she had experienced the horrors of war.

Born in Germany, she came to New Zealand as a Second World War refugee with her mother and siblings, later joined by her father who had been an opponent of Hitler's regime.

"My life was hugely affected by the war," Dr Palmer says. "That's why I've been so interested in preventing another."

"But people have been able to understand the nuclear threat without any first-hand knowledge and I think that's why the anti-nuclear movement has been so strong."

As the name implies, Peace Action believes in more than just talking — Dr Palmer took part in protests against the US nuclear-powered submarine Truxtun visit in 1981, the visit of the US nuclear-armed ship Bronstein to Mount Maungani in 1984, and at Blenheim's Waihopai Defence Department monitoring station in 1989.

"There are many different facets of peace — education, world government, non-violent action, making submissions, and so on — and people can make their



VIOLA PALMER

own choices how and when they wish to participate."

Peace Action played a role in having New Zealand declared nuclear free, although Dr Palmer was disappointed that three approaches to the then Tauranga City Council failed in having this area become a nuclear-free zone.

It has also taken action, along with other protest groups, against French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

"We got the names and addresses of all the French MPs . . . and gave copies of the list to all the peace groups in New Zealand. We also wrote to newspapers and peace groups in France and England."

The movement also aims focuses on awareness.

"Most of our work is in lobbying and letter-writing, and it's hard yakka, but the letters to politicians let them know where we stand and what some New Zealanders want done on peace issues."

"The issues haven't gone away — we are still fighting things like the transportation of radioactive material through the Pacific and backing a New Zealand-initiated project to have the World Court declare nuclear weapons illegal."

A member of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, Dr Palmer encourages anyone to become involved with the peace movement at any level. "No one should underestimate the power of public opinion — it's changed apartheid and won women the vote."