

Tribute to Miss Frances Rutherford

On Monday 27 November 2006, the Mercy Parklands Chapel in Ellerslie, Auckland, was adorned with flowers, original paintings, photographs and a story-board about Miss Frances Rutherford. Family, friends and colleagues were gathering to say their last farewell to the 94 year old woman known as Aunty Top to some and Miss Rutherford to others. Swelling the small chapel to capacity, occupational therapists spanning four decades of graduates kept arriving. Their presence spoke volumes about the specialness of this diminutive woman who played such a major, visionary role in driving forward the advanced preparation of occupational therapy clinical leaders and educators in New Zealand. Her potential for bringing a leadership role was recognised by Hazel Skilton (nee Barton)¹, the second New Zealand School of Occupational Therapy principal, 1950 to 1960. She appointed Miss Rutherford as her deputy and after a four-year term, Miss Rutherford was appointed as the third New Zealand School of Occupational Therapy principal in 1960, a position she held for the next twelve years. Miss Rutherford is fondly remembered by students and occupational therapists as being a warm, caring person who would speak her mind.

In honour of Miss Frances Rutherford's contribution to occupational therapy education and practice, the New Zealand Association of Occupational Therapists Inc. named its lecture award series after her. Mary-Anne Boyd was the first recipient of the Frances Rutherford Lecture Award in 1984 and was with the other occupational therapists paying their respects at her funeral. It was also a fitting tribute to have Mrs Hazel Skilton, now 94 and her long-time friend and colleague, speak at the funeral.

Two compelling memories of Miss Frances Rutherford stand out in my thoughts. The first is of watching her and Hazel Skilton plant a pohutukawa tree at the official opening of the School of Occupational Therapy at the Auckland University of Technology in 1991. The tree stands to the East of AF block and is flourishing. It is an enduring symbol of the contribution both women have made to occupational therapy education in this country. The second memory is of my meeting with Miss Frances Rutherford and Mrs Hazel Skilton when I was preparing my presentation for the Frances Rutherford Lecture Award in 2000. Over a cup of tea and amidst their fondly remembered stories of New Zealand's occupational therapy history, we talked about caring, the topic of my presentation. Their ideas and comments were reflected in the essence of my talk and affirmed the importance of caring as a means of understanding and reaching out to our clients.

Valerie Wright-St Clair FRLA 2000

I have two enduring memories of Frances Rutherford. One was the long umbrella she invariably carried and used as a walking stick presumably because she did not want to be seen with a real one. It all worked perfectly until it rained!!

The other memory is of Art and Design, the introductory craft activity we studied. Frances told us that, if we looked carefully, on a bright day you could see pink spots on lemons where the sun hit them and that the bright green of the mown grass made the asphalt look purple. Forty-two years later I am still trying, unsuccessfully, to look carefully enough.

¹ Mrs Margaret Buchanan (nee Inman) was the first principal of the New Zealand School of Occupational Therapy, 1940-1950.

There was also the day she got a bit muddled and started talking about frequency of matriculation in her lecture on the bladder.

I also reflect when I see the wide range of New Zealand Occupational Therapy Graduates, how far we have come (thank goodness). Frances was not accepted for training in New Zealand because of her disability, and I remember her telling us that Peter Graham, who set up the Training Officers who worked at Psychopaedic Hospitals, was not accepted either as he was male and that would cause difficulties sorting out toilet facilities! Fortunately they both found a way of using their skills in OT, or a related field, but who else did we miss out on?

Cynthia Growden NZROT

A little lady with a dominating smile.

Anatomy lessons became very real when we had to compare normal and weak muscle strength by feeling and observing Miss Rutherford's calf muscles – one being severely wasted due to polio.

One of the lasting poignant phrases Miss R. used was "you only see what you know". Shopping in my home town after completing a course in leatherwork taken by Miss R I drawn to the construction and tooling on shoppers leather handbags – something I was not consciously aware of beforehand.

At my interview for the occupational therapy course Miss R asked me how I would foster improvement in mental and physical ability with patients I would be working with. I can't remember my reply but it obviously satisfied her as I began my training 6 months head of schedule.

Miss R was very particular about uniforms, including how they were ironed, wearing the cape and tippet correctly – even in class; (she was) a stickler for time keeping, expected everything to be organized and orderly; (she) instilled in us quality and pride in our work (and) she had a calming influence when students were under pressure

A special person and revered by her students

Rae Couch

To student occupational therapists at the Point Chevalier Training School, Auckland (as I was in the late 1960s); Frances Rutherford was a dominant force to be respected. She was very strict about us not flating in the first year – we were expected to board, or to stay with family. Miss Rutherford took her responsibilities towards us very seriously. Early in the training she used to give a welcoming talk, which included advice about being professional. I recall her stating strongly "You must never show emotion with patients!" Although today that may seem extreme, in those days it helped us in our lack of experience with disease and disability. She seemed to know us all and word was that she hated purple!

Alison Nelson NZROT/WFOT Delegate

Miss Rutherford had many disappointments and surprises related to her occupational therapy career, but always extended herself in order to elevate the educational standards of New Zealand occupational therapy. She followed developments throughout her life and was always pleased when her ex-students visited. My

association with her was mainly in regard to the establishment of the NZAOT Award named in her honour. I was president at the time and later, a recipient so shared special moments with her.

I remember especially her love of art and flowers and I treasure the landscape painted by her, which I bought at the Takapuna market. The "tussie-mussie" posies she made and gave to people were a joy to behold.

Beth Gordon

I have mixed memories of Frances: as a student I thought her a little gushy and superficial until I had some hassles with some fellow students. Over this she was attentive, affirming, supportive, and challenging; all appropriately and all in the same session. I learnt a lot from her about seeing different perspectives and recognising that there could be different and all valid experiences of exactly the same events. I remember her as committed to us succeeding in our education, both for ourselves and for the profession.

Later, through studies I did on the history of the profession, I came to see how much she carried. For example at the 1967 AGM, there was no formal documentation available. There was no slate for nominations and president and secretary had both tendered their resignation due to illness. Frances Rutherford took acting chair to sustain the AGM requirements. At that AGM she advocated for "regular study courses in all fields and the Association branch is the logical group to be responsible for that." (NZROTA AGM, 1967). She therefore seems to have been instrumental in the development of the Association's role in providing continuing education.

Linda Wilson NZROT

An interment service was held on Monday 4 December in Masterton old cemetery. Annette King (NZROT) attended with a painting – a water colour of the Rosemount Bridge at Bideford. A niece, Susan remembers when she was aged 5 looking on as Frances painting this. The painting thought to be 'lost'; was gifted by Annette back to the family. This painting was unearthed in a Carterton second hand shop about 20 years ago and had been lovingly cared for by Annette over the years.

We stand and say farewell to Miss Frances Rutherford, always remembered as a visionary leader of occupational therapy's development in New Zealand.