

Lil Gwyther Honour Statement



Lil Gwyther's passion for, and delight in young children was evident to all.

Right from her very early years growing up on a dairy farm on the Comboyne Plateau in NSW, Lil wanted to be a teacher. After graduating from Armidale Teachers College in 1934, she spent five years teaching in country NSW, and then taught during the war years at Canonbury Hospital School in Sydney.

After a whirlwind wartime romance Lil married Evan, an air force radio operator and fellow teacher, and in 1946 they moved to live in Brisbane. She returned to teaching at Ashgrove West Kindergarten, and subsequently became Director, spending a total of 20 years there.

During these years Lil supported and encouraged involvement of parents in kindy affairs as well as developing a passionate commitment to the continued wellbeing of her young charges. She saw and heard first hand of the damage to some youngsters when they moved to primary school where they had to perform tasks for which they were not ready. She firmly believed that this was the cause of many behavioural and learning problems in later school years.

This passion and concern led her to take up work in the Qld Education Department with Margaret Outridge, firstly developing a new screening survey for children entering school, and then visiting a wide range of primary schools as an early childhood advisory teacher. Under the regulations current at that time she had to retire in 1980 (very much against her will!).

Lil's years of practical experience, followed by a concentrated study of early childhood educational theories and approaches during her work in the Education Department left her very committed to changing early childhood practices in Queensland schools.

Along with some other concerned teachers and parents, she helped to establish the Early Education Reform Group in 1980. EERG publicly campaigned for at least the first few years of primary school to be ungraded, so that individual readiness would be the determining factor for selection of learning material and teacher expectations. They advocated child centred and developmentally appropriate education. They regularly assisted teachers who

were implementing these approaches in their classrooms. Lil often used to say “**Don’t ask if your child is ready for school – ask if the school is ready for your child**”. The group was active until the late 1990s and was highly successful in achieving media interest in the campaign, as well as support from a wide circle of parents, educators and politicians.

As Public Relations Officer for EERG for over 15 years, Lil talked at literally hundreds of local parents and teachers meetings in pre-schools, play groups, schools etc. During the mid-1980s she was on a weekly ABC radio talkback program with host Janine Walker, discussing young children’s development and issues for parents.

In 1983 she joined with a group of educators and parents to establish the Pine Community School which has continued to operate for more than 25 years, and continues to attract families with its commitment to child-centred schooling. Her work with teachers and principals helped to build the enthusiasm that led to the Multi-Age Association of Qld.

During these years Lil was also active in a range of public campaigns, for example the Citizens Against Corruption, the Public Education Coalition, People for Nuclear Disarmament and Just Peace.

In 2001 Lil was awarded life membership of the Early Childhood Teachers Association, for her ‘treasured wisdom and lifelong advocacy’ for good practices in early education. http://www.ecta.org.au/01_cms/details.asp?ID=206. She also spent 10 years serving on the Children’s Services Council of C&K.

Lil’s firm conviction of the importance of play-based early childhood education led her to advocate through the Early Education Reform Group for return to a play-based prep-year in Queensland schools in addition to the pre-school year, so that children would be 12 months older when they started Year 1. The EERG campaign centred around a prep-year classroom designed for play-based learning, small classes and full time early childhood trained aides.

Lil and her colleagues in the Early Education Reform Group have left an inspiring legacy for all those of us who now work to ensure that children’s early education is firmly centred on the needs of these children, and is appropriate to their development during the early years of schooling, and most importantly in their Prep classes.

