
In Memory of Dorothy Olsen, 1931 – 2022

~ Recollections shared by Ruth Ker, Flora Suel-Jacklein, and Dorothy's children

On August 11, 2022 one of the inspiring and well-loved initiators of Waldorf education crossed the threshold. The schools and teacher training institutes in our movement have been fortunate to have her continued interest throughout the years. She was present at the founding of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association in 1983 and a long-time WECAN board member thereafter.

Born April 26, 1931 in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, she was the eldest of three girls. Dorothy grew up in a household where responsibility, strength and perseverance were highlighted. Her parents, particularly her father, a South African farm manager, held his children and everyone else to a high standard of being responsible and capable. As their home was often on the large commercial farm where he was employed, Dorothy and her sisters had to attend boarding school, which she did not much like. This is likely where she began learning to be independent and responsible for her needs. She was strong, and life's challenges, while sometimes inconvenient or unwanted, never put her off.

She met her husband, Ray, in South Africa and their five children were born there as well.

They moved to Canada in 1967, and Ray and she were instrumental in forming several initiatives on this continent, notably the Vancouver and Halton Waldorf schools. She was the proud grandmother for seven grandchildren whom she adored. After 50 years of marriage, her husband Ray passed away in 2004 and Dorothy continued to be a pioneer of Waldorf early childhood initiatives and students in training.

Dorothy's role in founding the Waldorf School in Halton, Ontario, unfolded in this way. After her time in Vancouver when most of her children were out of high school, she and husband Ray moved to Whitehorse, Yukon, where she was lead teacher in a public nursery/ kindergarten. This experience of bringing Waldorf ideas to a government guided set-up was quite important for her. It showed, she said, that you can do a lot with Waldorf in many different settings. When invited to guide establishing the Halton school, she

and Ray arrived in late August 1984, all their earthly belongings on a homemade trailer, having driven two weeks from the Yukon. Through the challenges, tensions, and joys of guiding the school in its growth, she fulfilled many different roles. No matter what the situation, she always was kind and gracious, navigating opposite viewpoints and finding the common thread: the children. She did this not so much in words, but through her example of being humble, seeing the potential and rising above any fray.

She was an extremely avid and quick reader starting at a young age, and this lasted her whole life. Her children, husband and friends were amazed at how quickly she finished book after book—novels of varied styles and authors and, later, long lists of anthroposophical references for teacher training courses. Dorothy had several jobs as a librarian, and this skillset informed her well-organized and detailed approach to record-keeping. She used these skills as well as her warm, loving, and well-developed, socially-adept nature in her pioneering endeavors. Dorothy was truly interested in others and those around her felt bathed in her warmth and acceptance. One of her children said, "I never saw her give up on anything or even express such a sentiment. It was always an attitude of 'What's the next step?' and then to engage with the process of working through it."

Dorothy also loved to travel and had many adventures in Europe and on the North American continent. There is a story about Dorothy and Ray and their five children arriving late one night in Paris in their Volkswagen camping van with a tent that everyone thought was a circus tent (it had to be big enough to house them and their five children). They pitched their tent after parking by the Eiffel Tower, only to be greeted by the *gendarmes* the next morning. In later years she was an avid hiker and loved especially to walk in gardens, by the seashore or on forest trails. In the last week of her life, she made her last trip to the beach with friends.

As mentioned, Dorothy was involved in many Waldorf initiatives. Her persevering nature and

attention to details, as well as her personal warmth enabled her to be instrumental in the success of many endeavors. As well as helping to start schools in South Africa and Canada, she also was an initiator of Waldorf teacher training and began courses for Rudolf Steiner Centre, Toronto (1991–2002) and later mentored Jan Patterson to begin their part-time training in 2010. After a move to Duncan, BC in 1994, she began the founding of West Coast Institute for Studies in Anthroposophy in 1995 and later mentored Ruth Ker, the current WCI Director, in 1998. Dorothy was Co-Director for WCI from 1996 to 2011.

In the early 90s Dorothy also began mentoring Waldorf early childhood teachers all over North America. Waldorf practitioners worldwide have much to be grateful for because of the great number of children and adults who have benefited from Dorothy's wisdom and compassionate approach to life.

Here are some words from one of her children, "In all this activity you would hardly expect to find such a sweet, kind, sensitive, and vulnerable person—you

might expect someone with a harder shell and a dominant approach, but that was not her way at all. She was gentle and could wield the power of gentleness in a way I have never seen and I'm sure I'm not the only one. A rare and wonderful quality. Very passionate. Very gentle. Very strong. She was genuinely interested in everything and everyone and loved conversation, parties, and good jokes for a wonderful laugh. She believed in joy and sought after it and spread it wherever possible."

Many people have benefitted from working alongside Dorothy Olsen. She was not only a pioneer of initiatives. She was also an example that many of those she mentored learned to esteem and model. Her hardworking, enthusiastic, joyful, inclusive approach to life is something she leaves as a legacy to all of us. As one of her children expressed it, "She was a flower always looking to open. A courageous, generous tree under whose shade many came to rest, or begin something new. A shelter."

Thank you, Dorothy, for all you have given to us. ♦



Illustration by Jo Valens from Tell Me a Story (WECAN, 2013)