

Marjorie Thatcher

Marjorie Thatcher stands with the first teachers to consolidate Waldorf early childhood in North America. A long-time early childhood teacher in Vancouver, British Columbia, Marjorie was a member of the first WECAN board and co-founder with Dorothy Olsen of the West Coast Institute for Studies in Anthroposophy (WCI).

Marjorie was first introduced to anthroposophy in her native New Zealand at age seven, after a brother with Down syndrome was born to her family. An aunt, who had studied extensively in Dornach, decided to found a curative home in New Zealand, and Marjorie's brother was one of the first children there. From visits to her brother Marjorie remembers the medical doctor at the home, Dr. Maria Glas, as one of the most interesting people there. Dr. Glas, who had known Rudolf Steiner, was a remarkable individual and lecturer in her own right.

At some point Marjorie took a course in eurythmy but did not develop a connection to anthroposophy at that time. She trained as a nurse. Further studies to learn midwifery led her to Canada where she met her husband, Philip Thatcher. The children born to Marjorie and Philip called her to anthroposophy. One Michaelmas Day, when the Vancouver Waldorf School was still housed in a church, she visited and set her mind to have her children placed in the school. Marjorie and Philip made the big move to Vancouver from northern British Columbia in 1972, and enrolled the children in Waldorf programs. Deep interest in anthroposophy awoke in Marjorie and Philip, and both went to England to train at Emerson College. Francis Edmunds was one of their teachers. Philip did the Foundation Year, during which he studied extensively with John Davy as preparation for his Waldorf teaching career. Marjorie felt a strong impulse to teach. She focused on gaining the necessary background at Emerson.

Marjorie was invited to teach at the Vancouver school in 1976 by Dorothy Olsen, but she had no teaching experience. At that time there was no English language early childhood teacher training, so

Marjorie did practicums at Michael Hall in England and with Margret Meyerkort. Marjorie was inspired by Margret's conscious intention with everything she did in her classroom. All of Margret's teaching rose from a deep grounding in anthroposophy.

Marjorie began teaching older kindergarten children upon her return to Vancouver. There were the usual struggles with trying to create suitable environments in church basements and other rented spaces. She remembers doing this in six or seven different settings. There was difficulty in connecting parents to the school in these early days as well. A permanent classroom was secured in 1981, but it was only in the last years of working with young children that Marjorie got to teach in an environment intentionally designed for children. Through a government grant and generous financial support from a dedicated sponsor, Marjorie brought forward the impulse to build a new early childhood facility. All teachers create the best space we can wherever we find ourselves, but having the right kind of space best supports what we are doing. For Marjorie's kindergarten to have light pouring in through windows to a consciously designed, child-nurturing environment was a divine change from dingy basement rooms.

At an early childhood conference in Toronto in 1984, Joan Almon announced a meeting to form a North American kindergarten association, which was eventually to become WECAN. Marjorie knew that she had to be there. This was the beginning of serving on the Association's board for about fifteen years. The Association formed as a body of individual teachers rather than institutions. The work of the board in these early days was to keep track of the small initiatives in one's geographic area. Sitting in

someone's living room, the group divided up North America. Marjorie was "gifted" the area north-south from Alaska to Portland and east to Saskatoon. She began to organize twice-yearly spring and fall conferences for early childhood educators. These well-attended meetings benefitted from presenters such as Joan Almon and Margret Myerkort, among others. Eventually conferences began at Rudolf Steiner College as well to support early childhood work on the West Coast.

Formally organized trainings for Waldorf early childhood teachers were eventually organized by Susan Howard on the East Coast at what has become Sunbridge Institute and by Janet Kellman at Rudolf Steiner College in California. But Canadian students could not afford to travel to the U.S. for training. Marjorie Thatcher and Dorothy Olsen, both WECAN board members, were urged to create something for Canada. So the impulse that became WCI was born in 1995. Susan and Janet supplied all their documents and a year was spent in formulating this new training. The training program currently meets summers in Duncan, British Columbia, and winter and spring in Vancouver at each area's respective Waldorf schools—"country mice" in summer and "city mice" the other two sessions. One of WCI's strengths is its committed faculty, many of whom have taught from Waldorf early childhood's beginnings in the region. WCI is now the second largest Waldorf teacher training program in North America.

Our current times show many changes from when Marjorie began her teaching in the 1970s. In her study and practicum time in England, she remembers running around and copying all the songs and verses she could find. She was so impressed by how generous other teachers were in sharing their materials. Marjorie had from her own childhood a rich experience of nursery rhymes and traditional games played in the school yard without teachers. A musical mother was also a blessing. Margret Meyerkort brought traditional English rhymes and folk tales as first resources. Most notable are the Wynstones

collections, some of the very first English-language resources for Waldorf early childhood educators. Dr. von Kügelgen also shepherded translation of resources from German into English.

Marjorie sees teacher training opportunities as a great advantage for our teachers now. When she and others began, early childhood teachers had to ask their own questions and work with the experienced teachers they could find, mostly those in Europe. Early childhood teachers had to acquire skills for themselves. Conferences began as a way to enrich and support the teachers' "self-training." Now expectations have changed across the continent. Teachers in Canada are required to hold state certification and early childhood degrees as well as Waldorf training certificates. It is wonderful that teachers now have the resource of thoughtfully designed training programs. Marjorie also sees it as a strong professional step that our Waldorf teachers are expected to complete teacher training programs as well as do individual research. But we also must not lose the impulse to carry forward what we have learned and make it authentically our own through our striving as students and teachers.

A special love of Marjorie's is the Ellersiek hand-gesture games. At one point she created a parent-child group when there was a lot of pressure to put three-year-olds in school. Marjorie thought the children were far too little. The Ellersiek games were a wonderful tool to share with parents in this group. The games also enliven work in the classrooms.

Marjorie is now retired from active teaching in the classroom and from WCI. She feels privileged that she has been able to bring together the things she has most loved—her study of nursing, work with children, studies in anthroposophy, and work with adults—into a rich and full professional life. Now on her Vancouver desk sit sources of traditional singing games. What treasure from this research will join the riches Marjorie has shared with children, teacher-training students, and colleagues over her decades of service to Waldorf early childhood education? ♦