

Betty Feith – A Minute of Record

Betty Feith (née Evans) was born in 1931, the eldest of four children born to George and Ina Evans. The Evans family was closely involved in the Methodist Church and Betty attended Methodist Ladies' College, Kew from 1944 to 1947.

Betty was, in the 1940s and 1950s, active in the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM), in which she took a leadership role. She was also significantly involved with Christian World Service (now Act for Peace), the Division of Social Justice (Victoria) of the Uniting Church of Australia, the Victorian Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in Australia.

In 1947 she met Herb Feith whose Jewish Austrian parents had fled Europe for Australia in 1939. Together Betty and Herb were heavily engaged in war relief activities – including door-to-door collections – on behalf of Germans and other Europeans who suffered severe privation in the immediate post-war period. In Renate Howe's history of the ASCM, Betty is quoted as feeling that “their marriage was a creative interaction of the Jewish socialist and Methodist social traditions.”

Herb and Betty were to make a major and enduring contribution to Australian-Indonesian relations and support for the new republic of Indonesia in a number of ways. Perhaps chief among these was their key role in the formation and early development of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme for Indonesia (later becoming Australian Volunteers International). This involved Australian graduates providing technical expertise – particularly in support of a new national Indonesian public service – in a sense of social solidarity by living and working alongside their Indonesian colleagues. A distinctive feature of this scheme was that the Australian graduates worked on the same pay scales and conditions as similarly qualified Indonesians. Both Herb and Betty worked in Indonesia for a number of years in the early to mid-1950s under these arrangements and returned for another four years in the late 1990s. They maintained a strong and ongoing relationship with Indonesia throughout their lives.

From 1968 Betty taught English and Asian studies at various secondary schools in Melbourne and from the 1970s lectured at Burwood and Toorak Teachers' Colleges, both of which were to become part of Deakin University.

Both Betty and Herb were very active in a range of peace and human rights activities including in support of a peaceful evolution of the new state of Bangladesh (following the secession of East Pakistan) and in assisting ethnic minorities in Burma (Myanmar) following the military coup of 1988. This deep concern for, and involvement with, peace and justice within the world led to an engagement with Quakers. Members of the Feith family – Herb, Betty and two of their children, Annie and Rob, and granddaughter Esther were frequent attenders at the Orrong Road meeting house. Later Betty attended other Quaker meetings, including Eastern Suburbs. As well, Herb and Betty's home in Glen Iris was a place of welcome, stimulation and nurture for a host of people including many Quakers.

Betty passed away on 18 May 2022 after a long illness. Betty was a warm and dignified person, a very effective organiser but one who avoided the limelight. Her lifelong commitment, as a teacher and as a quiet activist, for peace, equality and social justice, underpinned by her abiding Christian faith, made a significant impact. To quote a phrase of her late husband, Herb, she was truly a ‘radical of the long haul’.