

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6101

Feith, Betty

(1931 -)

Born 1 January, 1931, Melbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Teacher, Volunteer

Summary

Betty Feith is a teacher and volunteer whose work inside and outside the classroom has reflected her ideals of a peaceful, just and inclusive society, and her abiding Christian faith. Betty was a co-founder of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme for Indonesia, a programme established in the early 1950s that pioneered the concept of international volunteering as it is understood today. Betty herself worked in Indonesia in a volunteer capacity during the mid-1950s and again in the 1990s, both times with her husband, political scientist Herb Feith. Betty has taught at schools and tertiary institutions in Melbourne and Indonesia, and the Asian Studies and Indonesian history courses she taught in Melbourne during the 1960s and 1970s were among the first of their kind in Victoria. Betty has had a lifetime involvement in church and other service, including for the Christian World Service (renamed Act for Peace), the Division of Social Justice (Victoria) in the Uniting Church of Australia, and other ecumenical organisations.

Details

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

Growing up, Betty's involvement in church and community circles included Youth Club activities, Sunday School teaching and participation in the United Nations Club. Later, she was active in the Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council, helping to provide assistance to European refugees newly arrived in Australia, and she helped to establish the Victorian Committee for Interchurch Aid and Service to Refugees. As a student at the University of Melbourne, Betty was a campaign organiser for World Student Relief. At that time, and also in later years, Betty was closely involved in the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM). In 1952 she was selected to represent the Methodist Youth Fellowship of Victoria at the World Council of Churches Youth Congress in Travancore, India.

In 1947, Betty met Herb Feith, whose Jewish Austrian parents had sought asylum from Nazism in Australia in 1939. Together, Betty and Herb undertook war relief activities, collecting door-to-door in Melbourne suburbs on behalf of Germans and other Europeans who were struggling with post-war shortages and hardships.

Betty graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1951 with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in history and english, and a Diploma of Education. As a newly qualified teacher, Betty taught at Swinburne Junior Girls' Technical College, and Box Hill Girls' Technical School.

In 1950 Betty and Herb, together with a group of other University of Melbourne students and ASCM members, including John Bayly, Alan Hunt and Vern Bailey, set in motion a pioneering initiative in international aid focused on Indonesia. The main idea behind the programme – that Australian graduates would not only make available their technical expertise in response to the shortage of skilled graduates in the new Republic, but also take part in Indonesian society as a whole, living and working alongside their Indonesian colleagues – had first arisen during discussions at a World University Service Assembly that year. Betty was secretary of the initial planning committee of what would become known as the Volunteer Graduate Scheme for Indonesia (VGS). The Volunteer Graduate Scheme was the first incarnation of AVI (Australian Volunteers International), which has programmes in communities across Asia, the Pacific and the world.

The founders of the VGS envisaged the initiative as an expression of unity and understanding across cultures, that would promote genuine understanding of and solidarity with Indonesia. Salary equality was a central aspect of the Scheme. Volunteer graduates worked on the same pay scales and conditions as similarly qualified Indonesians – a departure from the usual custom among expatriates working in Indonesia at that time. The VGS was officially recognised by both the Australian and Indonesian

governments in 1954.

In January 1953, while travelling home from India, Betty visited Herb in Jakarta, where he was then employed in the Ministry of Information. They became engaged, and were married on 29 December 1953 at the South Camberwell Methodist Church, Melbourne.

From July 1954 to August 1956, Betty and Herb lived and worked in Jakarta, under the auspices of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme. Betty was employed in the English Language Inspectorate in the Ministry of Education, Instruction and Culture.

In late 1957, Betty and Herb arrived at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where Herb completed his doctorate on the decline of Indonesian constitutional democracy. The first draft of Herb's thesis was typed by Betty – an example of the close supportive role she played in Herb's work. The Feiths formed part of a circle of friends and colleagues who were from Indonesia or working in the field of Indonesian Studies at Cornell at that time, among whom was Indonesian teacher and academic, Kurnianingrat Ali Sastroamijoyo, and Australian scholar and public servant, David Penny, and his wife Janet Penny

The Feiths returned to Australia at the end of 1960, living for a year in Canberra before re-settling in Melbourne with their son David and their daughter Annie. Another son, Robert, was born in 1963. After returning to Australia, Betty and Herb remained closely involved with Indonesia and with promoting understanding among Australians of their nearest northern neighbour. The family lived in Jakarta for a year in 1967, during which time Betty worked for the Indonesian Council of Churches.

From 1968, Betty taught English and Asian studies at various secondary schools in Melbourne, including Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School. From the 1970s she taught Indonesian history and Asian studies at tertiary level, chiefly at Burwood Teachers' College and Toorak Teachers' College (both of which later became part of Deakin University). From the late 1970s Betty co-led several study tours to Indonesia in her capacity as a lecturer at the Burwood and Toorak Teachers' Colleges.

In 1984, Betty completed a Master of Educational Studies at Monash University. For her Masters thesis, Betty wrote a history of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme, in which she documented the ethos of the Scheme as an 'episode in education for international understanding', underpinned by a belief in racial equality and a spirit of identification with the Indonesian Republic. This history was published in 2017 in a book entitled *Bridges of Friendship*.

In addition to her community involvement with refugees, Betty's church service has focused on issues to do with peace and human rights. In 1994, she and Herb co-led an international relations workshop with the Karen Burmese leaders in Manerplaw on the Thai-Burma border. Manerplaw was at that time the headquarters of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (now Myanmar), which formed in the wake of the military regime coming into power in 1988.

For four years from 1996, Betty and Herb lived and worked in Yogyakarta, this time through the Overseas Service Bureau's Australian Volunteers Abroad programme – the successor of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme. Betty, who had gained a qualification at Deakin University in teaching English as a second language, taught English at the University of Atma Jaya.

Betty has described women in the Uniting Church as 'householders (as it were) in the tents and caravans of faith and in life, as in mutuality we pilgrim together in life's journey' (*Women in Ministry*, 46). This expression of common purpose, and of ideals married to actions, reflect convictions central to Betty's life and work as a whole.

Events

1979 - 1979

Victorian Area Council of the Australian Student Christian Movement

1940 - 1950

Betty Feith was actively involved in the ACSM during the 1940s-1950s and in later years

1954 - 1956

Betty lived and worked in Indonesia under Volunteer Graduate Scheme

Volunteer Graduate Scheme

Actively involved in the Methodist Church throughout her life.

1996 - 1999

Betty lived and worked in Indonesia under Australian Volunteers Abroad program

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

Records of Betty Feith - Transfer pending - Addition to Papers of Herbert Feith, 1946-2001

Correspondence from Herbert and Betty Feith to Anton Lucas, 1971-2001 [manuscript]

Private Hands (These regards may not be readily available)

Papers of Ailsa Thomson Zainuddin

Author Details

Ann McCarthy & Betty Feith

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