



## **Muswellbrook Pre School Kindergarten Inc.**

### **40 years ~ A Community Pre School**

**1965 – 2005**

#### Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the generosity of Shirley Feeney in helping to compile this story. Many of her words have been used (numbered 1 -6) as she was able to paint such a vivid picture. We also thank Jeannine Garrard for giving insights into the later life of the Pre School. So much was achieved over those years and we used her words to do it justice (numbered 7-10). Also Dianne Knight's words have been used to explain Pre School No. 2 evolution (numbered 11-14) and Lou Sealby (numbered 15). Verna Esdaile's words have also been used to reflect currently on Pre School No.1 (numbered 16 -17).

A big thank you must go to Shirley, Jeannine Garrard and Dianne Knight. These three dedicated women have inspired others and have left a legacy for our community, one that will be much appreciated for future children and their families.

A special thank you must also go to Diane Knight and Lou Sealby for collating and writing the Pre School's story.

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## **40 years of Community Service.**

On the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the opening of Muswellbrook Pre School we pay tribute to the thousands of children who have walked through those doors on the first anxious days and walked away at the end of their time there with enriched lives, confident in who they are; taking with them the memories of friendships, loads of fun and new skills. To the parents who made the choice to engage in early childhood education we thank you for entrusting us with care of your precious children and thank you for supporting your love and encouragement. To the amazing community that has never hesitated when asked for assistance, from buying a raffle ticket to large financial donations, we thank you for your generosity. Finally thank you to an amazing group of women who took the dream of one determined lady and made it their own – the staff have loved, nurtured and cared for all who came through the door leaving a piece of themselves in each little heart.

There have been those specifically mentioned in these pages but there are countless others who deserve our wholehearted thanks – you know who you are.

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## **Beginnings.**

In 1964 a group of interested parents held a public meeting with the aim of establishing a caring environment for children – a Pre School. Shirley Feeney, a local primary school teacher was interested in a Pre School education for her son, John. She tells of her experiences in those early days.

"The first meeting was held at Willowbrook School – a school set up by the community for school aged children with disabilities. The chairman was Brian Adams – I asked him to chair the meeting. I was prepared to back it as a trained teacher. It had been tried twice before but had not been able to get off the ground. The main reason I wanted to do this was my son's birthday was 30<sup>th</sup> June and he was too young to start

school. I had taught for seven years at infant's school and saw problems if you started children at school too early.

I rang other people who had been involved in Willowbrook. Dr Jessie Mayer attended the first meeting. I felt there was at least enough interest investigate the possibility.

I then set off and visited kindergartens in Cessnock, Maitland and Newcastle as I knew teachers who worked there. We also had support from Singleton and Scone as there were already centres there. Scone had their sessions in the youth centre for a few days a week.

I approached the Child Welfare Department. The office was a very small room in an office block in Sydney. There was one man and a secretary and the room was so small that the secretary had to move her chair into the hallway to allow for an extra person in the office. They gave me an interview but assured me there was no money – then gave me a copy of the regulations. It was on one sheet of foolscap paper – front and back – and consisted mainly of rules for the height of the toilets and washbasins that would be required.

Most of the kindergartens that were running in Sydney at the time were through organisations such as Kindergarten Union and were in areas where there were considered to be “disadvantaged children”. There were centres run by Lady Gowrie to provide physical care and health and hygiene for disadvantaged children. They were given funding but it wasn't available to me.

I did all of the research in the later part of 1964 and decided to start after Christmas. I approached the Mayor, Ted Humphries, and he held a public meeting in the Rotary rooms on site of the present Art Gallery. From that we formed a committee and within that first group there were enough interested parents to send their children and pay a fee for attendance”.

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## **The Very Early days.**

Before 1965 there were no facilities for caring for Pre School aged children in Muswellbrook. The Liddell Power Station was also in the construction phase at the time providing a greater push to provide child care facilities. New families to town provided a different clientele – those without family support in the town.

There was no funds or subsidies to get the Pre School established, so all monies needed to run the facility had to be raised or paid by parents who used the school.

Muswellbrook Pre School Kindergarten opened in the then Methodist Hall in Bridge Street, Muswellbrook in February, 1965 with one teacher, Mrs. Shirley Feeney and one teacher's aide, Mrs. Aileen Southcombe. The Methodist Church was convinced that the project had merit and offered the church hall for nominal rent. When the school opened, it had a meager bank balance of just 20 pounds raised by some fundraising, with the two staff working almost voluntarily. The total enrolment was 20 children.

Mrs. Jessie Smith (Dr Jessie Mayer) was elected inaugural President of the Pre School committee. John Jobling was Vice President, Secretary was Noel Drinkwater and Treasurer was Ray Stacey.

The Methodist Church was very supportive of the venture into Pre School education and the kindergarten remained on the premises until the 3<sup>rd</sup> term of 1967.

“It really is a tremendous effort on the part of the initial committee and the first twenty parents who had to fund all the costs of running the Pre School,” said Mrs. Feeney. Mrs Feeney, prior to becoming involved with the Pre School, was previously a teacher at Muswellbrook Public School.”

At first Mrs. Feeney and staff worked almost voluntarily since the Pre School could not afford high wages for staff.

"It wasn't until two years after we started that anything like a reasonable wage was paid." Mrs. Feeney said. Although she considered going back to infants teaching, Mrs. Feeney did not – she completed a bridging course, a diploma that made her fully qualified to teach at a Pre School level. The Pre School was in a vulnerable position, since it was still unable to pay enough money for qualified teachers. If I left it may not have survived, because to pay professional rates for a teacher would have been limited only to those who could afford it".

In the first year I really got the benefit since my own children were catered for, so it really was just a straight out donation. Then because I see the Pre School benefit my children, it would have been greedy of me not to help the school get on its feet, since at that time there was no recurrent funding.

The church really did offer a bargain. The few shillings rent that they charged us barely covered the electricity. Of course we were obligated to return the hall as we found it each day – that meant putting everything away each day. We were able to use their tables and chairs. Mothers always came in and helped which meant many of them doing the repetitive cleaning chores like the toilets and floors. We also had steps made so the children could access the adult size toilets.

Before we started the day we had to set the whole place up. The teacher was paid 2 pounds and 10 shillings per week. At the time the casual teaching rate was 8 pounds per day. Marie Quinn was the teacher's aide at that time. We would acquire supplies from friends in high places. By the time we were ready to go to larger premises, we were running a group who attended five mornings per week and two lots of two afternoons with at least 40 children per week. We were desperate for space". 2

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## **A Permanent Home.**

In 1967 the committee purchased the Tohama Tennis Club site and clubhouse from the Serhan family. They built a toilet block to convert the clubhouse into a suitable building for a Pre School. Funds were borrowed to purchase the building and the grounds. Renovations left the Pre School committee heavily in debt.

"The tennis courts had ceased to function and came to an agreement with the Serhan family who owned the land that we could use the clubhouse. It had started its life as the RSL Club and was on wooden piers. It then became a clubhouse for the Tohama Tennis courts. The building was the regulation size but of course we had to put in the regulation sized toilets.

We started to fundraise. We had to raise a loan from the Commonwealth Bank and it had to have a guarantor so Pat and I went guarantor until the loan was paid off.

The mines had started around town so they were a help. Staff from the electricity station came and did major work such as the lawn because the old tennis court needed to be torn up first. We went to the schools and borrowed old furniture. Parents made items such as large wooden hollow blocks and easels. We purchased beds for the children's day sleep.

We started with one room. Sessions were flexible depending on the need at the time. Forty years ago there were few mothers who worked. We had many children coming in from the surroundings country areas. There were no facilities at Denman. We tried to accommodate all children. We had handicapped children in the centre from day one. Willowbrook did not have the facilities for the needs of young children.

Grants were constantly sought from every source. We always had help from Quota, Lions, Apex and Rotary. All of the clubs helped. They would give time and labour – for painting, building and mending. It was a true community based Pre School and would not have survived without the aid of the community.

We had the committee right from the start. Dr. Jessie Mayer was the first president. The second was June Davies who was there to help us move up to the new Pre School. We had great assistance from people like Monica Torpey.

The first lot of funding that came from the government was attached to the trained teacher. I had retained in my own time making me Early Childhood qualified. It was all done by correspondence. To keep the Pre School functioning we had to raise one major fundraiser every term. We had dinner dances and fetes. By the time we got to the end of my times funding was much easier to come by. Federally funded money was funneled through the states. There was even money for major works. As regulations came through grants had become available".

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## **Families and Support.**

"Initially the Pre School was not approved by grandparents in the town – after all children should be at home with their mothers. They began to see, however, that it was more extension of the family. Families were heavily involved and regularly attending to help and fundraise. There was a committee but there was also a mother's club. They organized a raffle every week – usually a cake. They would have swap table for used clothes or toys and mothers would organise that. That fundraising was essential because the fees barely covered the wages. It was a struggle to pay rates and insurance and to purchase equipment.

Any scrap paper that came around was used for craft. The hospital gave us orange and black paper. We always made up our own paint. I would buy special strong dye from an art shop in Sydney. You would only need a few drops and we would mix it with cornflour. Any time Pat and I went to Sydney would go to Reserve Garbage and fill up the boot.

Parents went on roster for gardening. We didn't have a cleaner for at least the first ten years. The staff went back in before the beginning of each term to clean and set up. No one was employed to cover anyone who was sick in the early days as parents were there to assist or people volunteered.

For major jobs everyone's family members would come in and clean the windows and gutters. Together with regular working bees things got done. Parents were more than willing to do little jobs when asked and there was always a tradesman Dad to call on.

The town was small enough for us to know most families, however by about the fifth year there were many new people in town. They often initially had no attachments and no extended family therefore no support and we became the support. They became attached to the Pre School. We gave them jobs to do and that as a way of them getting to know others and feeling like they were included.

Of course there were always those children that wouldn't settle and it was often Elva Cameron's job to take them on board and treat them as her own personal helper. When they became upset they would often retreat to the sandpit complete with tools and water to have a therapy session there".

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## **Innovative Programs.**

"For many years we did a lot of work with the Kindergarten Union for itinerant children in the caravan park. Muswellbrook Pre School supported the teachers who were working in the caravan parks and would loan them equipment. They would bring these children for visits to our Pre School.

On one occasion we got a grant from TAFE because they were setting up a program for children in caravan parks. I took equipment and ran simple play sessions in caravan parks and hospital. We had funding for six months. It was interesting and encouraged the people running the parks to provide play spaces for children to play.

St Heliers on McCullys Gap Road was originally a boy's home for boys from twelve years on. It then changed to care for family groups. Pre School placed children for St Heliers at the recommendation of Child Welfare and we were given funding for those children. We became a recognised place where children's needs could be catered for.

From the beginning parents with handicapped children were encouraged to use the Pre School. At one point there were three children in the service and I heard that Newcastle University was doing some work with handicapped children. They came and loaned us a psychologist and they would do programs with the children. We received a lot of support and help from them over the years. We eventually managed to get some funding for children with additional needs and Jeannine Garrard was the first teacher funded. We went to seminars in Sydney and armed with training were able to apply for federal funding.

The funding was for the whole of the Upper Hunter. We set up a small committee between the functioning pre schools in the Upper Hunter. We put together some basic testing with the assistance from the university. It was the beginning for integration of children with additional needs into the Pre School.

With the support of the Pre School several children's services were established within the town and the valley. Some of the first playgroups initially had meetings there. Upper Hunter Family Day Care and the Muswellbrook Multi Care had the firm support of the Pre School.

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## **Fun and Activities in the Early Years.**

"Dress up Day began as a major fundraiser. It was associated with a mini fete. There were stalls manned by community members and parents. Children came dressed in their favourite costume. The children paraded in classes and danced for the families. Everyone came. It was a big day. We had two sets of stairs made by the TAFE students so the children could climb on to the tables safely. Pam Jones would play the piano while the children walked up the stairs and across the tables. It was a little like a mannequin parade. Pam played songs like "I'm the leader can't you see" and all the children would sing loudly. They practiced this and all had a lovely day.

The first sandpit was at the Methodist Hall. Obviously we couldn't dig a sandpit so the fathers went up to the local tip and found two corrugated iron water tanks. The bottom was cut off them both and they were buried in the back yard. One was for wet sand and one was for dry sand.

After moving to Hill Street, with much assistance from parents and friends, the playground came together. The old fort was built by Barry Daniel's brother-in-law. He was a bricklayer and his children attended Pre School. The fort was made out of better blocks and included monkey bars. Most of the equipment was adapted from scrap materials. Lola Harris' father made tunnels out of old drums with legs attached. There was a large cut off water tank on small legs filled with water for water play. The electricity commission donated large wooden spools for sitting and climbing on and huge tractor tyres were modified with seat and steering wheel and could accommodate several children at once. A large cement pipe was a tunnel and cubby house.

With money that parents raised from regular cake stalls in the main street. A frames and wooden planks and ladders were purchased which was standard Pre School equipment in those days. Some of the equipment was rather high with sand as soft fall but we only had one broken arm in all of those years and that was after hours when the child was in the care of their parents".

"The bus started when we started to get building on the south side of town. People were having difficulty getting their children to Pre School. Usually there was only one car and Dad would have that to go to work. Before South Muswellbrook went ahead most people could walk to Pre School. Thompson's had bus runs and also had children at Pre School. They said they would pick the children up from South Muswellbrook and bring them. Rita Thompson, the grandmother, drove the Pre School bus for free and we only needed to pay for the petrol.

One of the activities that the children enjoyed was the visits by the old people from the hospital. Staff would bring them down, they would be there for hours and parents would make them morning tea. They would stay and play and talk to the children. There was one particular lady who was blind and the children would take her things, place them in her hand and tell her about them. The children would walk up to the hospital and sing for the old people at Christmas time, usually taking small gifts that they had made". 5.

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## **New Developments.**

Everyone was aware of the deteriorating state of the building and that is why plans were commenced regarding the development of brand new extensions. The committee commenced an extensive fund raising appeal and planned in conjunction with Department of Youth and Community Services. After plans were produced for the new building it was decided by the committee to incorporate a room to house present and future programs for children with additional needs. The cost of accommodating children with additional needs was divided between the Pre School and the Department of Employment Education and Training.

Included in these plans was the development of a larger car park. The land had been purchased from the Jaber family two years prior.

"The committee told us that they couldn't afford to purchase so Pat and I brought the land. There was no way I was going to let it go to someone else. The land was too important to the Pre School. I sold it back to the Pre School when they could afford it. We paid \$15,000 for that block and when we sold it back to the Pre School I only added the rates we had paid to the price". 6.

Plans began in 1986 for a new building phase. Work began on the building in September when the Department of Youth and Community Services approved plans for the rebuilding of Stage 1 which involved the demolition of the thirty year old building. The plans were drawn up by Stuart Garrard, husband of Jeannine, as a donation.

The new extensions were opened in May 1988. Mr Don Scholes and Mr Steven Curtis opened the new building. Built at an estimated cost of \$100,000 the building provided a classroom for up to 20 children per session as well as provision for offices, toilet amenities, kitchen facilities, handicapped children, \$5,000 from Muswellbrook Shire Council, \$15,000 from the Rodeo Association with remaining funds from fundraising. During the construction children used demountable rooms and toilet blocks that were donated by the Electricity Commission. Ron Jones, husband of Pam, came in and wired up the demountables and assisted in the installation of toilets.

In 1991 the Pre School used the new facilities to apply for 10 additional places for children. A grant was used to construct boundary walls at the Pre School and undertake extensions to the playground.

Jeannine Garrard tells about the utilization of the new room.

"I started teaching in room 4 with Vicki Priestly. Room 4 was originally used as a toy library. There was a section at the end of the room that was sectioned off with a separate door. There was also access to the area via a roller door at the end of the building. The rest of the room was a classroom. We had a tiny little playground as the fence only came to the rear door of the No. 1 building. We were given old unused chairs by Muswellbrook South Public School that had been stored under a building at the school. They were given a good scrubbing. We borrowed things from everywhere and repainted an old trolley. We made shelving out of besser blocks and covered shelving." 7.

Pre School No. 2 opened during the year after a small yard was constructed. No. 2 offered half day sessions as No. 1 Pre School had moved to full days at that point. Local business such as Drayton Coal donated towards the building fund.

The first Teacher and Director of Pre School No.2 was Deb Wells and the Childcare worker was Lou Sealby. When Deb Wells resigned Lindy Alston took on the role for twelve months. Then in 1993 Dianne Knight became the Teacher and Director for Pre School No.2 and she still works in this position with Lou Sealby as the Childcare worker. They have been a great team spanning over twelve years.

"We are very comfortable working together and Dianne is easy to work with and generous in her work relationship". 15.

"Children coming to No.2 Pre School generally start at 3 years and after one year the children then come back for another experience as full days in Pre School No.1. This extends the time that the families are involved in the Pre School. I am pleased that Pre School No.2 is still able to offer ½ days because it gives families a choice". 11.

The original concept for Pre School No. 2 was for the provision of programs for children with additional needs.

"Since I have been here, the ½ days have provided a way of easing children with additional needs into this environment.

"Because our playground is flat and smaller it is easier to accommodate children with mobility difficulties and state and federal government still supply funding to support children with additional needs in a Pre School environment". 12.

"No.2 has evolved over the years. It was initially seen as a separate entity to No.1 but now there is full engagement with Pre School No.1 and we function as one". 13.

"The most rewarding part of early childhood education is the relationships with the children, their families and their extended families". 14.

When Jeannine Garrard began teaching at the Pre School it was on a casual basis. Shirley had come to know Jeannine when her oldest child, Meredith attended. This was how many of the staff in the early years came to be there. Shirley could always see potential in others. Eventually Jeannine was employed to do special needs work using Commonwealth funding. It was Jeannine's role to apply for the funding and required resubmission each year. The children had high special needs. She says it worked well for her children as well as she would go off to work with children and go home with them at the end of the day. Her daughter Alison actually called her Mrs Garrard while she was at Pre School.

When Jeannine became Director due to Shirley retirement there were many things happening in regard to the grounds.

"The new building had been completed but the grounds hadn't been completed as the children's play environment. That's when we consulted Prue Walsh (a playground consultant). One of the first things I did as Director was to move the fence at the end of Room 3. It was at the end of the classroom and there was a blind spot for supervision. According to Prue's design we began work on the playground" 8.

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## **The Work and Support continues.**

"There was much voluntary work done by the parents and the staff. Working bees were very well established. They were a good social event too. We tried charging levies to the parents but I think people enjoyed the social contact as well as the satisfaction of completing a goal. I can remember once I had a brilliant idea of asking prisoners from St. Heliers to demolish the fort. I had it planned that they would probably take all weekend to complete the job. They had it all taken down and transported to the dump within an hour! For the rest of the weekend we had them cleaning gutters and pruning and painting. They did all of this with great creativity!

There were many generous donations. Bayswater Colliery offered to provide exit lights and install them. It turned out to be a much bigger job than they expected but were thanked for their generous \$2,000 donation. Drayton Coal donated \$1,000 for establishment of No.2 Pre School. Matt Hartup's contribution in designing and constructing the shelving in the new shed was terrific. He came and spoke to us about our needs and went away and designed the selves for a specific purpose. Matt later went on to construct a bridge between the two decks in the megadeck area and a system allowed the sandpit lid to be raised with one handle. Some parents offered to undertake major jobs. Noelle Duncan painted the exterior walls herself in small stages. In one year parents undertook a huge fundraiser. They organized a "Starry, starry night" – a special dinner dance – and raised enough money to install 5 split system air conditioners heating and cooling the entire Pre School. In 1992 when an extensive retaining wall needed to be constructed local TAFE teacher, Troy Van Balen arranged for the TAFE students significantly reducing the cost.

The life of the Pre School was full of ways for parents to be involved. There have always been lots of afterhour's things with parents – Mothers and Fathers Nights, discos, welcome barbeques, school readiness evenings, information evenings. Parents were encouraged to concerts, morning and afternoon teas, and special days like grandparents days".

"I was the last president of the mother's club. When there was a mother's club meeting the staff would take the children on an excursion to the library so that there was room for the mothers and their toddlers. A number of mothers have come in for special times like bathing their babies. Those babies have often ended up attending Pre School when they were old enough.

The children were always taken out into the community for excursions to places like the vets, the library, the hospital, farms, the fire station, the ambulance station and local schools. The Pre School has been visited by some very special people over the years. One particular friend was Bruce Campbell who came for many years as Santa Claus at Christmas time. When fire destroyed classrooms at Muswellbrook South Public School we had a lamington drive and donated all of the funds raised to the school. We also purchased pencil cases and filled them with textas and pencils for each of the classrooms that had been affected by the fire".

9.

The current director of the Pre School No.1 Verna Esdaile came as a relief teacher for a staff member on extended sick leave.

"The empathy, care and respect of the staff towards the children and their families inspired me. Their commitment and the quality of educational programs as well as the strong relationship between the families and the Pre School staff were then and still are fantastic".

16.

"I became Director of No.1 at the beginning of 2002. I have seen further improvement in our buildings and equipment through the continued support from our families and community. These strong community links are what has helped to make our Pre School exceptional".

17.

Jeannine also reflects on the success of the Pre School and its role in the community.

"I think the beauty of the Pre School has been in the relationship and the ethos of the place. An old African saying goes "It takes a community to raise a child". I think it takes a community to raise a child. The Pre School is a community – a special family with a unique connection.

It is a huge responsibility to be caring for other people's children. The staff at the Pre School has always acknowledged that. Most of the staff members can identify with that as they are mothers themselves. A large part of their work is about relationships – with the children, between children and with their parents.