

Quaker peace worker toiled hard

Mike Crean

Every movement has charismatic leaders and “unsung” workers. Christchurch woman Mia Tay was in the latter category with New Zealand’s peace movement. She once described herself as “one of the ones that got things going”.

Tay worked behind the scenes for 40 years to ensure peace groups maintained pressure on governments and the people. She died recently, aged 73.

Born Mia Brusse, in Holland, she was raised in a Quaker environment. She became a Quaker, so involvement as a peace activist was no giant step. “It was just part of the flow of life,” she told university student Susan Bourke in 1998.

Her early years, in World War II, were precarious. Her father ran a Quaker farm school for Jewish children and her mother taught in it. They helped bring Jewish children out of Germany and reach safety in the United States, in defiance of the Nazi occupation.

Tay became ill with killer disease diphtheria while a toddler. Confinement from other children, lack of good food and the removal of some children to concentration camps helped form her social conscience.

The family moved to the village of Emmeloord after the war and Tay’s father supervised Polish refugees in land works. She attended school there until 1952 when her father’s job ended. The family moved to New Zealand as state-assisted immigrants. They settled first at Wanganui where her parents got jobs at a Quaker school. Tay began her secondary education there. Her father then won a position at Crop Research, near Lincoln, and the family shifted to Christchurch in 1955. Tay went to Linwood High School briefly, before switching to Avonside Girls’ High.

She told Bourke that reading about apartheid in South Africa for a school project sparked her abhorrence of inequality and war.



AT A GLANCE

Mia Tay, born Ommen, Netherlands, June 15, 1941; died Christchurch, June 25, 2014. Survived by husband Frank, children Ah-Lek, Peng and Kim and eight grandchildren.

She made two “personal commitments” then – that war was wrong and that she belonged with Quakers.

Aiming to be a social worker she began studies in sociology at the University of Canterbury in 1960. She met economics professor Frank Tay, who had come from Singapore, in the university cafeteria and they married. Arrival of their children delayed her graduation until 1968.

Peace activism began as a pushchair protester marching against New Zealand involvement in the Vietnam war. She took part-time work in 1975 as office assistant at the Canterbury Environment Centre, focussing on peace and disarmament issues. From there her involvement grew as she attended meetings and conferences. She was a founder member of The Peace Collective, from 1977, which promoted non-violent action.

Tay’s contribution ranged from organising workshops to making elaborate “rainbows” of coloured plastic on polythene piping as

banners for display tables. She was an instigator of the floating lanterns ceremonies to mark Hiroshima Day and Nagasaki Day. She made many of the wood and paper lanterns and organised the first event, in 1976. The ceremonies were held every year from then and she never missed one. This year’s event, at the Peace Bell in the Christchurch Botanic Gardens on August 9, will commemorate her contribution.

Others claimed credit for establishment of the National Consultative Committee for Disarmament, in 1977, but peace worker Kate Dewes says it was Tay’s idea. This group co-ordinated efforts by a range of groups in Wellington and lobbied the Government – with success. Tay did much of the secretarial work, at no pay and with only some expenses met. She worked also in the Peace Office at Christchurch, doing secretarial tasks and co-ordinating production and sale of publications to schools, churches and the public.

As peace organisations grew bigger, Tay became busier. The evolution of various groups produced the Peace Forum, in 1981. She was employed as manager and paid \$20 for a 10-hour week. She worked much longer hours and her pay rate later was doubled.

Tay was proud that the Peace Forum’s non-violence training helped minimise violence in the 1981 Springbok tour demonstrations.

Its background work and networking were keys to promoting New Zealand’s nuclear-free legislation, she said.

Dewes says, among other activities, Tay drafted the idea of Christchurch as New Zealand’s first Peace City and took it to the mayor and council, in 2001. She received a Peace City Award in 2005 for her commitment. She remained a thoughtful and generous provider of cakes, drinks and dinners for fellow peace workers.

In Search of Peace

World-wide

By SUE STOVER

Armed with an economy-class air ticket and joining their sessions on their backs, Jos and Angela Brusse left Christchurch last May to see the world.

They are back in town now, with tales to tell of their six-month tour of the world.

Their tour was an unusual one. These backpacking travellers are not young footloose wanderers. Jos (pronounced "Yoss") and Angela are energetic, grey-haired and recently retired.

Jos was a technician in applied microbiology at Lincoln College. Angela taught weaving at the sheltered workshops.

And their travels took them away from the tourist glitter and into the corners of the world where people are actively studying "peace."

For 50 years, Jos has been studying non-violent action. In 1926 he joined his first peace group in his native Holland.

He and Angela taught at a Dutch Quaker school during World War 2, and immigrated to New Zealand in 1954 with their family.

They decided to travel around the world in order to catch up on research in peace studies, and to make contact with people of similar interests.

"Right around the world we found a strong but slender ring of peace-minded people," Angela said.

As they plane-hopped across America, the Brussees found peace groups involved in the on-going challenge of

disarmament, but they also found groups grappling with more localised problems — American Indians, housing, simplifying lifestyles.

In New York City, they found peace activists working in ghetto schools, using non-violent techniques to ease the angry tensions that make learning impossible.

In Europe, they found the long-established peace research institutes.

In the Netherlands, peace research is publicly supported by the Government. A Bill was recently passed by the Dutch legislature to subsidise research into "social defence" — the use of non-violent action for defending Holland.

The Brussees said that the Dutch armed forces are unimposed, work a 40hr week and are allowed to have long hair.

Peace education is also encouraged. Jos said that a week of Dutch national television was to be devoted to peace education.

The Brussees found that Denmark famed for its non-violent resistance during World War 2, is heavily armed now.

"Public opinion supports the army." The Brussees learned that the Institute for Peace and Conflict Research in Copenhagen had closed for lack of support.

It was in Sweden that the Brussees found the most powerful and affluent peace research body — the Stock-

holm International Peace Research Institute. SIPRI is heavily funded by the Swedish Government and is located in a modern skyscraper.

In contrast, the Oslo Peace Research Institute has limited funds, and is housed in a creaky historic building.

"We could not stand up straight in the corridor," Angela said, laughing. "And we had to walk single-file."

Both the Scandinavian peace institutes are researching the international arms race: the balance of power and proliferation of weapons.

But at Bradford University in England, the Brussees found a wider definition of "peace research."

Bradford has established a chair of Peace Studies. Students and faculty are researching the "peaceful and the unpeaceful" in personal, group and international relationships.

In India, the Brussees found many groups trying to implement the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi.

Some groups were aiming at intellectuals by publishing international journals on Gandhi's teaching. Other are working with lower castes, setting up kindergartens, teaching skills such as knitting and book-binding. As Jos and Angela travel-



Jos and Angela Brussees, with familiar friends — their trusty pocks — in St Albans last week.

led, news from New Zealand filtered through to them. They read about the visit of the US Truxtun while they were in England, and in Delhi they read about the USS Long Beach.

"These visits and our trouble with the All Blacks, they hit the news," said Angela. In St Albans visiting their

daughter Jos and Angela are catching their breaths before starting a new life in a Quaker community in Wanganui.

"We want to put into practice some of what we learned on the trip," said Angela. Jos plans to continue studying the history of non-violent change. "My interest lies with people," Angela said. "I want to live in an alternative way: trying to live peacefully and to see people as people."