

Tribute to Barbara O'Neill

ANN JACKSON is retired former principal of the Central Remedial Clinic Special School and former technology and special needs advisor with DES. Ann was a colleague, a co-committee member and friend of Barbara O'Neill.

The death of Barbara O'Neill this January came as a great shock to all her friends and colleagues in the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) and in the wider world of special education. Barbara had a wonderful supportive family life with her husband, two sons and a wide circle of relations. Sadly her husband Johnny predeceased her but her love of and pride in, her sons Kern and Mark sustained her. She also had her beloved pets - there was always a story about a cat or a dog.

Barbara started her teaching career while she was a member of the Presentation Sisters. She gained experience teaching at both primary and post-primary levels. Her first job on leaving the order was as a temporary teacher in a special class in North William Street. At this time special classes had been set up in very many primary schools around Dublin and other cities to cater for the educational needs of "backward children". Like many of her contemporaries she had found her "calling" and to quote herself "she was addicted within a month". Thus began her life's work in special education.

Encouraged by her principal at the time, Barbara Black, as she was then, completed the "Diploma for Teachers of Mentally and Physically Handicapped Children" in St Patrick's College in Drumcondra in the school year 1968/69. The "Course", as it was affectionately known, was the first, and only, professional development course for teachers working with pupils with all types of special needs in Ireland at the time. Of course a diploma course specifically for "teachers of the deaf" had existed since 1957. Barbara was one of an exceptional group of committed teachers and inspectors, most of whom went on to be pioneers in education, championing the cause of specialist and innovative education provision for children with special needs and disabilities. She always spoke very warmly of her time on the "Course" and she acknowledged that she learned so much from both the lecturers and her fellow students. I imagine, given the calibre and backgrounds of the group, that the discussions must have been stimulating and enlightening!

Barbara was so proud that her class of 1968/69 were instrumental in setting up NATSE, the National Association of Teachers in Special Education (later renamed IATSE). She always credited Seosamh O'Drisceoil with having the initial idea of the need for a support group to combat the isolation experienced by many special education teachers working around the country at the time. She often reminisced about that first year of the fledgling organisation - trying to build up an initial membership and correspond with teachers in special schools and special classes across the country. Letters were hand-written or typed and then copied on the old Gestetner duplicators in someone's school - labour intensive activities at that time!

Barbara's commitment to special education is obvious from her career path after she finished the Diploma in St. Patrick's College. She went on to work as a teacher in St. John of God Special School in Islandbridge and in St Michael's House Special School in Grosvenor Road. In the mid-1990s she took on another pioneering role - that of setting up a special school for pupils with severe or profound general learning disabilities within Cheeverstown Services in Templeogue. At this time the Department of Education had committed funding and resources to provide statutory education provision for this cohort of children, hitherto cared for exclusively within medical and care services. This was a challenging time of transition for both the medical services already caring for these children and the new schools set up to provide specialist education for them. Barbara took on the principalship with her usual enthusiasm and dedication. She was sensitive to the needs of the pupils as they moved into a new school environment. She worked cooperatively with hospital staff to ensure that children availed of optimum care and educational opportunities. She was especially committed to organising professional development for the school staff. She continued to develop the school in a progressive way until her retirement in 2003.

Even then Barbara found it difficult to completely break her ties with teaching and special education. She was much in demand as a substitute teacher in both mainstream and special schools for several years. She was recognised as dedicated and creative with a particular interest in pupils with complex needs. She always had a success story about a child she helped by the use of music or the creative arts.

Barbara had always continued her interest in IATSE, the association she helped to set up. For a time in the 70s and 80s she was busy with her work and family life and was less actively involved in the organisation but always

kept a watchful eye on developments. In the late 80s there was a resurgence of activity and the association expanded and changed to meet the emerging needs of teachers in special education at the time. One of the most notable of these developments was the launch of the REACH journal in 1987. The journal is highly acclaimed in academic circles and is widely referenced by teachers and researchers both at home and abroad. It became, as the late Sean Griffin, its first editor, predicted, “the flagship of special education in Ireland and a forum for informed debate in changing and challenging times”. The association set about several innovations - a change of name, new membership initiatives and the introduction of a newsletter - and in 1988 the first IATSE conference was held.

Barbara was excited by all these development and was no doubt encouraged by her friend and colleague, Noel Dillon, a prime mover in the organisation at the time. She became a member of the IATSE central executive committee (CEC) and soon became an invaluable organiser and motivator. She was a bridge between the old original organisation and the newly renamed and revamped association of the early 1990s. She took on several officerships and was President from 1994-96. She was especially pleased that she was President for the Silver Jubilee of the Association in December 1994. In an editorial article she wrote proudly of IATSE “Confidently striding into the future, thrusting to contribute to the nation’s policies”. Éamon Ó’Murchú, also a member of the diploma class of 1968/69, wrote that “it is indeed fitting that Barbara O’Neill now holds the prestigious office of President of IATSE as she was one of that group on the special education course in 1968/9 who attended the meeting and became a founder member of our association.”

During her time on CEC Barbara was involved in many innovative projects including North-South collaboration, regional seminars and representation of IATSE on a variety of DES consultation bodies. In the early 1990s IATSE joined EASE, the European Association of Special Education, which provided access to information and research from the wider European community of special education as well as funding for conferences and projects. I had the honour of be elected to the Board of EASE and served as Secretary from 1992-94. Barbara followed in that role for the next 2 years. After the demise of EASE some time later both of us would look back with nostalgia and be grateful for the new colleagues we met, the new ideas to which we were exposed and the opportunities to travel and see something of the diverse European special education scene. In spite of the extra work involved, Barbara really enjoyed both the professional and social aspect of her time with EASE. She was already

a great traveller and frequently would go off to explore new horizons on her own. So she particularly valued the chance to travel with EASE to several interesting European cities.

On her retirement Barbara was awarded Honorary membership of IATSE in recognition of her significant contribution to both IATSE and special education in Ireland. She felt especially honoured to be so recognised by her peers and she wore her silver badge with pride. In addition she continued to support the Association and the CEC by assisting at annual conferences - chairing sessions, helping in the hospitality room, greeting guests and visitors, - and by attending AGM each year. She served as an honorary auditor for a number of years. She will be missed so much.

Her contribution to IATSE and to special education cannot be measured by listing out her various roles and posts. As an old Hebrew proverb says, “A child is not a vessel to be filled but a lamp to be lit”. In her teaching career Barbara brought light and joy into the lives of so many pupils with special needs and their families. Her time in IATSE was characterised by dedication, hard work, creativity, and above all her ability to use her experience of the past to inform new initiatives and projects. Her genuine interest in people and her positive attitude marked Barbara as a special teacher, colleague and friend.

We extend our sincere sympathy to Barbara’s two sons, Kern and Mark, to her daughter-in-law, Lindsey, to her beautiful granddaughters, Amelia and Evelyn and to her circle of family and friends.

“The song is ended but the melody lingers on” (Irving Berlin).

Quotations in this tribute are from the following sources:

Farrell, A.M. (Ed.)(2012) *The Course: A History of the Special Education Diploma in St Patrick’s College 1961/62 - 2011/12*. Dublin: St Patrick’s College.

Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) (1994) *IATSE: Celebrating 25 Years*. Dublin: Author.

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