

Tribute

Tribute to Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs: Child Protection Champion

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Professor Briggs began her career as a clerk at a chemical plant at age 14 years, and in 1950 she joined the London Metropolitan Police, New Scotland Yard where she worked in the child protection unit. It was here that she witnessed child abuse and the challenging social circumstances for many children, igniting her great interest in the protection of children. After marrying her long-time sweetheart Kenneth Briggs, having children and becoming a foster carer, she undertook her Year 12 studies by correspondence. She furthered her education by studying teaching at Warwick University. She then taught at Chesterfield Primary School.

Professor Briggs immigrated to Melbourne in 1975 with her family to take up the position of Director of Early Childhood Studies at the State College of Victoria. In 1980, she designed the world's first university level, multi-professional child protection course. In 1985, Professor Briggs was appointed Dean of the Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies in Adelaide. She pioneered research in the field of child protection, researching controversial topics such as child sexual abuse and 'paedophilia', enabling her to identify indicators, influences and outcomes. She shared her expertise and assisted government inquiries, royal commissions, educational institutes, police forces, courts, media and of course the general public.

Professor Briggs' ground-breaking research and advocacy earned her many accolades. In 1995, she was appointed Associate Professor. In 1998, she received the inaugural Australian Humanitarian Award. In 2000, she was the first female recipient of the Senior Australian of the Year and, in 2001, she received a Centenary Metal. In 2005, Professor Briggs was made an Officer of the Order of Australia; specifically, she was recognised for 'service to raising community and professional awareness of child abuse and neglect, and as an advocate for effective child-safety education programs'

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, p. 2). In 2004, she was awarded a \$10 million grant from the Australian Prime Minister Hon. John Howard for the establishment of the University of South Australia's national child protection research centre. She became an Emeritus Professor in 2005 and, in 2009, she received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Sheffield. In 2016, she was included in a list of the 100 most inspiring South Australian women in history (The Advertiser, 2016). Professor Briggs did not, however, commit her life to the protection of children for the accolades. She did it for the children.

Professor Briggs had an extraordinary ability to see situations from the victim's perspective. Time after time, she demonstrated an instinctive understanding of what had happened, what it meant to the victim and what needed to be done. She insisted that the victims' voices be heard. She was determined that judges, politicians, police and all professionals working with children should listen. She recognised that listening to children is particularly complex, and involves more than just the words. The example that she discussed on many occasions was so-called 'attention-seeking behaviour'. She often reflected that many failed to ask the essential, central question: 'Why is this child seeking our attention?'

Professor Briggs recognised that some behaviours, some so-called 'symptoms', are but children's attempts to adapt to the unbearable, to live with the unspeakable. She also recognised that children, understandably, may be in two minds about what they want to happen. They may struggle

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to find the words to describe cruel events and their conflicting feelings. Adults, after all, have a very long history of failing to confront child abuse, preferring to turn away. Professor Briggs confronted and described abuse, in all its forms, because she recognised that, if we turn away, we are all the poorer. She recognised how difficult it is for children and young people to report abuse, and how often victims, and those who support them, are labelled 'mad' or 'bad', or both. She recognised that without our help, some victims will go on to become offenders and perpetuate the cycle, and others will never get the chance to become survivors.

Professor Briggs' work for victims extended to helping others who advocated for and supported victims, whether they were protective parents, foster parents or concerned professionals. She passionately campaigned for better education for all those who work with or for children and families. She recognised that the damage done to children by abuse would be greatly reduced if the professions were better educated and better trained.

There are many reasons to celebrate the life and work of Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs. She had an extraordinary passion and energy, combined with a refusal to be defeated, no matter how powerful the opponent. Professor Briggs lived Gough Whitlam's famous 'maintain the rage' speech.

On a more personal note, Freda was a strong, confident and assertive woman. She was also very kind, loyal, honest, energetic, generous and superbly intelligent. She was very strong in her convictions, but also open to other's opinions. Freda loved life and lived life to the fullest. She genuinely enjoyed her work, going on lecture tours, and ensuring that professionals and the public, both nationally and internationally, were informed about child protection issues. She also enjoyed holidaying and going on cruises. Whilst on holidays she still could not resist the opportunity to educate others, visiting schools, universities and any other organisation in which she could offer her expertise.

Her energy and zest for life was incredible. Age did not contain her activity, dress or work. She always dressed immaculately, advocated hard, succeeded beyond even her own

imagination and lived life like a 20 year old. Freda was very social and enjoyed the company of others. She was as popular in her private life as she was in her professional life. She was truly infectious. Freda was always honest and respectfully direct, sincere and unpretentious. Freda did not see herself as above anyone else, she was down to earth and always treated people as equals, which is why she always made everyone feel comfortable.

Freda passed away in April this year, but her legacy will live on in the professional field. Her vibrant, genuine and delightful friendship will always be treasured by those who knew her and loved her. It was a privilege to be part of such an exceptional woman's life. The world is a better place because of the presence of Professor Freda Briggs.

References

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Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, born Freda Akeroyd in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, on 1930 December 1, dedicated her life to the protection of children. Her passion, determination and strength of character were the foundation of her many accomplishments.

Dr Lesley-anne Ey and Professor Chris Goddard were invited speakers at the 'Celebration of the Life and Achievements of the late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO', hosted by the Premier of South Australia, Hon. Jay Weatherill on the 16th of June 2016 in Adelaide. They were both close colleagues and friends of Freda.