Western Teacher at 50

A life in education

By Jacqui Macliver

SSTUWA legal services case manager Jacqui Macliver (pictured right) has retired after a union involvement that has spanned 40 years. Before she left, she shared with Western Teacher her recollections about her life, as well as her times as a public educator and unionist.

I commenced at Claremont Teachers' College in 1972. When I graduated in 1974, the federal minister for education Kim Beazley Senior presented our certificates.

The following year I was posted to Beacon Primary School in the Wheatbelt region and met Christine Holliday, who would become a lifelong friend. This was also the year Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was dismissed.

At the time I benefitted from equal pay, which had been granted to women in select workplace situations by the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in December 1969.

This was expanded in 1972 and over the next two years to encompass more female workers. These changes were a direct result of lobbying by the union movement.

My future husband's aunt, Eleanor Macliver, had retired on 31 December
that year as it was compulsory upon turning 60.

The next day, 1 January, equal pay for female teachers came into effect. Eleanor had been deputy principal at Eastern Hills High School. At that time women could not become principals.

I married my husband Peter in 1976 and my son John (pictured below, with Jacqui) was born in 1983. Andrew came next in 1987, then Thomas in 1991 and Paige in 1993.

We bought our first house in 1983 and although I was the major breadwinner, only one third of my wage was considered. Peter was an articled clerk and earned very little at that time.

It was student union president Stefan Silcox who persuaded me to join the SSTUWA in 1973. In 1981 I became the union rep at Bayswater Primary School.

By 1985 I was teaching in a tandem at Kalamunda Primary School, which belonged to the Hills District Branch. The following year I became president of the Hills District Branch.

It was in 1986 that I attended my first Union Conference (now known as State Council Conference) at the Sheraton Hotel. This was the first time I met (now SSTUWA president) Pat Byrne and other well-known union figures such as Ed Harken and David Kelly.

I spoke on a motion that: "… temporary teachers be allowed to teach in a tandem". This was met with claps, boos and heckling.

Pat Byrne supported the motion but it took another two years for this to be allowed to happen. During this time many female temporary teachers were forced to resign on marriage and then again on motherhood. The following year the SSTUWA mounted a big push for better pay for teachers.

In 1988 I was posted to North Balga Primary School. I was there for 10 years and became a union rep there, as well as a State Council Conference delegate.

I unsuccessfully stood for Executive two years later, and later taught at Maylands and Maylands Peninsula Primary Schools. At the latter school I was union rep and a State Council delegate, before joining the SSTUWA as an industrial organiser in 2005.

Since 1972 we have seen women being able to become principals and take maternity leave. We have seen the introduction of paid parental leave, superannuation benefits while on leave, as well as the ability for partners to be granted leave on the birth of a child.

When my youngest two children were born in the 1990s I didn't get this but when my granddaughter Lucy arrived in November 2019 her parents were able to benefit from this entitlement.

My own mother came from what would be considered today to be very straightened circumstances. The Scots believed in education and along with her brother and four sisters she was the recipient of an excellent education.

Three sisters became civil servants. Johan, my mum, was a triple-certificated nursing sister, and her brother Sinclair became the sub-editor of the Scotsman newspaper in Edinburgh. He was a Scottish Nationalist supporter, and his beliefs did not gel with the newspaper owners, so he left and bought a farm.

My Aunt Margaret received first class honours from Edinburgh University in Classics, namely Ancient Latin and Greek. She spoke at least 10 languages fluently and was able to converse in many more.

Maggie finished her career at Thurso High School where she was principal mistress.

My mother worked in Edinburgh, Glasgow in the Corbels visiting schools and as a midwife (with a bicycle).

Later in London as a Health Visitor, she volunteered for the Royal Air Force and was posted to Algeria as a Nursing Sister where she saw out World War II.

After the war she went to East Africa as a Nursing Sister for the Labour Party's Ground Nut Scheme, where she met my father John Morrish and married him in Dar es Salam which means "haven of peace".

They travelled all over Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya – wherever Dad's work took him.

In November 1960 we returned to the UK. Dad hated the cold and dark of the UK and, in his opinion, the class system that existed and in November 1966 we sailed for Western Australia, arriving around a week before Christmas.

Dad went to Tom Price and Newman and worked as a Clerk of Works then moved back to Perth and worked for MacDonald Wagner and Priddle, building wheat bins all over the Wheatbelt.

His last position was as Chief Clerk of Works overseeing the building of the WA Institute of Technology (now known as Curtin University).

Mum worked as a matron of a nursing home in Maylands, then later at Royal Perth Hospital in the psychiatric ward, the only area of nursing she was not trained in. She was a member of the nurses' union.

Her view was that the union had revolutionised nursing conditions, and you would be mad not to be a union member. She remained a member until her retirement at 60, again the compulsory retirement age of the times.

Looking back over these years I could not have taken the journey I have without my parents' support, my housemates at college and friends, the support of my husband and my four children.

I owe much to the support of my close friends, extended family (though far away) and colleagues, even those on the other side.

People such as the inimitable John O'Brien, Neil Wilson, Stuart Brown and the wonderful Melissa Rinaldi, have all been part of the story of my life and times in public education and the union movement.

Words cannot express my feelings about the SSTUWA, my colleagues and the work we do.

I will miss the challenges, conversations, debriefs and gossip and most of all, the camaraderie.

Never regret the road less travelled, as it is worth the journey.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.

ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026