

Kathleen Stewart is typical of many women of her time; she trained mainly for the single life. On gaining academic excellence with prospects of a brilliant career she trained with natural and willing anticipation to marriage and family life. From February, 1940, for over nineteen years she remained within the private sphere as wife and mother, church and community worker. Eventually when her young child was in secondary school she felt the limitations of her mining community and accepted part time, then full time teaching at the Newcastle Grammar School for Girls, where she became Headmistress from 1968 to 1976.

A postmaster's daughter, Kath was born in Warwick, Queensland in 1912. She was the youngest in a family of seven girls. Her eldest sister was twenty two years older and the sister next to her was seven years her senior. Perhaps it was in the early years, with her sisters around her, that she learnt to identify comfortably within the female environment that was to be so much of her professional experience. Her parents understood the potential that was to blossom early in her academic life and despite considerable financial sacrifice sent her to the Brisbane Girls Grammar School.

Following her father's death Kath, at the age of thirteen years, worked hard to gain one of the twenty five Queensland Open Scholarships available at the time. This was her only opportunity for further education. In 1930 she entered the Queensland University with free tuition and twenty six pounds a year for living allowances.

Life on campus was academically and socially satisfying. She studied English honours, the Classics and History, while also involving herself in music, drama and sport. Deeply committed to the Student Christian Movement she gained friendships which were to last a lifetime. It was "a liberating time of life and something I would never have done without." She met her future husband and the two planned to marry on his return from post graduate overseas studies. Six years later, after teaching in the independent girls schools of Herberton, Warwick and Toowoomba, she set aside her profession. The unsettled war years followed, then in 1947 they moved to the New South Wales Coalfields for further experience in Coal Research.

Life in the coal mining townships of Kurri Kurri and Weston were special and unique. The communities were reminiscent of their Welsh and British origins. Kinship between the miners and the miners families; the tempo and simplicity of the lifestyle; the seven o'clock morning whistle; and the "push bikes" wending their way back through the streets in mid-afternoon, spoke of a community separate and different to the bustle of city life. Kath lived and moved in Church and Community until in 1959 with some trepidation she moved back into her former role within the female independent school system.

Relating to girls is what Kath has always known. She soon settled in, enjoying the challenge of the total school experience. Her early education in Queensland helped her to identify with isolated families seeking a good education for their daughters. Her philosophy was (and still is) that where possible girls should remain at home. Hence as inland schools improved and numbers decreased it was not difficult for her as Headmistress to accept the closure of the Boarding School after more than fifty years.

Kath was never ambitious for the headship of the school; regarding it as a response to need rather than a professional promotion. Yet with it came satisfaction and challenge at a time of change and modernization at school and state level. Important new buildings were added through government funding. Her love for the arts and classics made the Tyrrell Library of great significance. The introduction of the School and Higher School Certificates brought the satisfaction of seeing her school take its place among the better academic schools of the area. The importance of community interaction through debating and sporting activities was a personal achievement and her involvement at community level on the Board of the College of Advanced Education is indicative of her commitment to the wider community.

Kath does not see her professional opinions as underrated but she does accept that there was prejudice against women in the past. She saw her fully male School Council honest enough to stand against her, yet prepared to accept her personal level of expertise. As one of two women on the College of Advanced Education Council she believes "she was accepted as a person, not a female person", and her opinions valued because of her years of experience. She believes that women in education have always been acknowledged, but not sufficiently accepted as capable of taking senior and administrative positions. Change has come gradually over forty or fifty years and "life for women is now much more fluid," especially with young men being more willing to play their part in the rearing of children. This has made it possible to combine an academic career with a home and family. For her own part; she is cautious lest children be neglected for the sake of personal ambition. As a wife, mother, and woman educator, life has been difficult at times, but she is satisfied with her story.

QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION.

This is an interview with Mrs. Kathleen Stewart recorded on 26th September, 1986. Mrs. Stewart was formerly the Headmistress of the Newcastle Church of England Girls Grammar School from mid 1968 to December, 1976, when the school was removed from diocesan control and incorporated into the Pittwater House Schools for both girls and boys.

Kath, where were you born and what are your most early memories?

What were the steps that led you to University?

What aspects of University life were most significant for you?

What were your parents' ambitions for you in terms of marriage or a career?

You were in the Coalfields for seventeen years. Perhaps you could explain the most significant effects those years had for you as a University graduate, and a career woman.

The steps that led you to the Newcastle Grammar School?

What were your main achievements at the school?

The closing of the Boarding School was the end of an era. What led to this important step after fifty years of boarding, and what was the significance for you?

There must also have been difficulties for you as being wife and mother, and Headmistress?

Even though historically your working career was very recent. Did you see difficulties in your role as a woman educator?

And finally looking back over a life time; what do you believe are the most significant changes that have occurred in the growing role of women in education; and in society?