

Margaret Topham 1927–2004

Margaret was the ‘mother’ of family therapy in Australia and New Zealand. Once the youngest ever Australian to be a Fellow of Trinity College, London in speech and drama, she trained as both a kindergarten teacher and social worker. In 1952 she was the first (and only) social worker in Canberra, with the Department of the Interior. Later she worked nine years at Yasmarr, the child guidance clinic attached to the Children’s Court in Sydney, then several years in the psychiatry department of Prince Henry Hospital.

In 1967 she resigned and went to Palo Alto, the first Australian to be intensively trained in conjoint family therapy. Her teachers were Fred Ford, Cynthia Peabody and Virginia Satir, with whom she was often later compared. She was one of three non-American Charter Members of the American Family Therapy Association, and the only Australian.

She returned to her old job, using it as a springboard to introduce family therapy to Australia and New Zealand. About 1975 she became the first Australian social worker and family therapist in full-time private practice. She was the first person here to introduce family therapy to the media, to conduct interviews with families ‘live’ in front of colleagues and trainees, and to use the then new technology of videotape to record demonstration interviews.

For some 15 years after her return from California, she took on a punishing round of teaching commitments. She worked with the Colleges of Psychiatry and General Practice and other professional associations, and presented to hundreds of health and welfare organisations as well as the public. She deliberately taught through processes that drew on students’ own experiences

of family life, was enriched through adept use of group process, simulations, demonstration interviews and ingeniously designed exercises such as her ‘eggs in the basket’.

She was profoundly gifted at interpreting relationships through family sculpting. She was a talented unraveller of unresolved stages in the family life cycle, how these were experienced by respective family members, and how to enable them to draw on their strengths. She was expert too at recognising and engaging at multiple levels with the expression of unresolved family issues in the group process of trainees. And those therapists invited to do her family reconstruction marathons remember them with awe.

With her amply rounded figure and brightly coloured, flowing dresses accentuated by striking jewellery and make-up, Margaret, for many years a charismatic presence and bravura creativity, dedicated vision and commitment to hard work and fun. She was larger than life — immensely vibrant, shrewd, energetic and flamboyant, by natural inclination and flair combining a majestic, expressive theatricality with generosity, warmth, humour and wisdom. She was a superb communicator and raconteur.

More than any other person, she forged the groundswell of enthusiastic interest in family therapy that led to the emergence of study groups, family therapy associations and ultimately to national expression through the annual conference and this *Journal*. She had a significant influence as well on the culture of the Family Court in New Zealand. She joined our first Editorial Board and became a stalwart influence there for many years. She was a foundation member of the NSW

Family Therapy Association and an Associate of a WHO Regional Teacher Training Centre. About 1980, with four colleagues, she formed the Family Therapy Institute in Sydney. In various locations it involved several teachers for some 15 years and helped train many capable therapists, and brought prominent teachers to Sydney.

The years of hard experiential teaching both delighted and exhausted her. She became ever more admired, yet knew the loneliness of the public performer. When her mother and younger sister died within eight months in the early 1980s, she lost her illuminating flame. She struggled with the need to keep going, her deep sadness and bouts of ill-health. While sympathetic to the goals of the feminist critiques of family therapy, she disagreed with aspects of their analysis and questioned whether division and blame were helpful. She was dismissive too of some later currents in family therapy, which she regarded as expedient intellectualising, to the detriment of the humanity of families and therapists.

In the early 1980s she became the first Honorary Life Member of the NSW Family Therapy Association. In 1989 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia, ‘for services to medicine, in particular in the field of family therapy’, the only Australian family therapist to have received such an honour. In 1994, she received the first *Journal Award*. At the national family therapy conference in Brisbane in 1998, she made a short, emotional farewell speech to the colleagues she had inspired and taught and to the much-changed world of family therapy. She stood in tears as she received a massive standing ovation.

Max Cornwell