

# Helen Rutledge

January 1950 – February 2025



It has taken a village to adequately describe the contribution Helen made to the SLT profession.

Many thanks to the team below – Marilyn Costello, Jo de Seriere, Adele Peart-Baille, Heather Drysdale, Jo Davies, Sally Kedge, Deborah Gray, Rachel Davenport, Amory Cable, Pip Cartmel, Rachel Oliver, Sarah Martin, Kathy Arlidge and Linda Coyle for sharing their reflections of a colleague and life-long friend who is sadly missed by us all.

Some of us contributed our thoughts at Helen's farewell ceremony in late February.

Marilyn wrote, "Inspirational, courageous, compassionate, caring, intelligent, an independent thinker, astute, and yet fun loving but with a practical approach to life. A strong and direct person, real, bold, logical and exceedingly honest because she cared. A loyal friend and great listener."

Jo wrote, "I first met Helen over the interview table when she applied for a lecturing position. Helen got the job! It has been one of my greatest pleasures to have had her in my life ever since. At work she was generous, firm and fair with students – willingly sharing her knowledge and vast experience. They really enjoyed her lectures in child language disorders. Students and staff were all very sad when Ben's work took them overseas.

Generosity is my stand-out word to describe Helen. She put her heart and soul into every relationship and every project in which she engaged.... walking alongside people, always interested in their wellbeing and whatever they were jointly pursuing. She was generous with her time and always a good, caring, sharing, supportive, non-judgemental listener – a beautiful human being."

Adele wrote, "As a colleague, Helen was smart, insightful and hard working. We worked together, along with Jo Davies, to lead the newly structured Communication Service across Auckland. I came to appreciate Helen's ability to understand the fine line between well prepared and 'overcooked'!

She worked with you, supported you, welcomed peoples' contributions, but at the same was unafraid to step into the leadership space to make decisions, and make things happen.

Our friendship has strengthened over the last 25 years and although Helen had left her Special Education management job to go off to become a celebrant, we kept in touch."

## **Helen's SLT career**

Helen graduated from Christchurch Teachers College (CTC) in 1969. Her SLT classmates from that time still meet regularly – this year in Sydney in April, sadly without Helen.

Before she died, Helen wrote that "Valerie Lewis, Gwen Broadley, Desmond Wood and Joan Farrar come to mind as great mentors in my early career years."

## MOVING TO TASMANIA

### *Marilyn reflects*

After graduating, Helen worked in Greymouth before moving to Tasmania where she and Marilyn shared a house and many adventures. Helen was highly regarded as a speech-language therapist, implementing wonderful programmes at St Michaels Special School in Launceston, and the School for the Deaf and the Language Unit in Hobart. During this period Helen also completed a Masters in Special Education and had the opportunity to spend 6 months in the UK studying and observing in facilities for Language Disorders through a Tasmanian Department of Education Travelling Scholarship.

## BACK TO CHRISTCHURCH

### *Jo reflects*

Returning from working in Tasmania, Helen worked at Van Asch School for the Deaf before becoming a lecturer in the SLT department at Christchurch Teachers' College where she made a huge impression on the staff and students with her warm, generous personality and huge expertise in child language disorders. Sadly for us – and all too soon – Ben's work took them overseas.



Helen and Sonia Heeneey in Jo's office

## IN WELLINGTON CIRCA 1988-91

### *Heather reflects*

When Helen came to Wellington we knew we had someone special. She worked as an SLT in the double clinic based at Porirua East filling in while the position was advertised for a senior speech-language therapist. She wasn't the senior but in outlook and experience she was and she helped in transforming us.

I was doubly lucky as I was in the clinic next to her and so daily, I got everything she had to offer. Every day after the last children went, we would start talking. And talking and talking. Helen was a great talker and a great listener. Back in those days we operated a mostly one-on-one model and we would see children of all ages with different speech and language issues one after the other on the half hour. Preparation happened in the hours before and after plus evening

and weekends. We did lots of talking about SLT practice, current therapy approaches, service delivery models etc. For a period, we were joined by Carolyn Grace and the talking continued. Helen shared her skills with everyone in the district across Wellington, Porirua, Kapiti, Horowhenua, the Hutt Valley and Wairarapa. She helped us brush up on fluency, on language analysis, on supporting language comprehension but more importantly she showcased a children and families' first approach. She was seldom stern and mostly just wonderful.

Her skills were quickly recognised through the wider special education sphere and when she finished in her 'filling in' role she was invited to work as a second Advisor in special needs in early education in the area. But she kept coming to NZSTA meetings, to in-services etc and offering us all her wonderful warmth, experience and expertise.

For me personally she was a friend. Over this period, she supported me through several ups and downs including a miscarriage, moving house and she attended the birth of my second child.

## AND FINALLY TO AUCKLAND

*Sally Kedge, Deborah Gray, Rachel Davenport, Amory Cable, Pip Cartmel, Rachel Oliver, Sarah Martin, Kathy Arlidge and Linda Coyle and Jo Davies reflect*

'For the SLTs working in Education in Manukau in the early 2000s, Helen was a mentor and role model for so many of us. She and Sarah Martin led a big, busy team of SLTs – a mixture of Kiwis and many from overseas. Helen was instrumental in setting up a series of retraining modules for SLTs wanting to return to the field (NZ was very short of SLTs at the time) while she was working in Wellington which were excellent. Helen and Sarah also set up a program for supporting beginning therapists across the wider Auckland region. Both the modules and programme of support for beginning therapists made a significant difference in providing professional support to key groups of therapists.

Helen's strong, kind and intelligent approach was obvious to all. Helen, Ben and George were incredibly hospitable to many groups of SLTs at their house in Pauanui and Helen was so supportive and interested in our lives. Good food, laughter and endless conversation took place around walking, swimming and lounging about. Many stayed in touch with Helen and with one another even when scattered around the globe. Helen facilitated a culture of care and connectedness that lives on today.'





### *And Jo Davies writes*

As mentioned by Adele Peart-Baillie, Helen was foundational in establishing the communication service across Auckland in the 1990s. As attested by others, Helen was extremely supportive of her staff, particularly SLTs arriving from overseas. She took them into her home and away for fun weekends in Pauanui. Helen was always kind, thoughtful and helpful. She coordinated our new graduate recruitment programme across Auckland, even after she had left, and was a very strong advocate for SLTs. Interestingly SLTs are now by far the largest occupational group employed by the Ministry of Education. I am sure that Helen had something to do with that, flying the flag and raising the profile.

### **After SLT, Helen became an active Celebrant**

Dianne was the Celebrant at Helen's farewell. She wrote, "Deeply intelligent Helen loved learning but she was a natural mentor as well and so many of us here in this room do, or understand things in a different way because of Helen. She didn't believe in resting on your laurels; she knew that life and the world keeps changing and you must keep abreast of this by continuing to upgrade and hone your knowledge. For her, education was a lifelong undertaking."

Helen will live on in our memories. ●

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