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for a text book -
older people

A Lifetime of Community Participation

I rang Ruth Crow to ask her if she could contribute a segment to this book or to arrange a time for an interview. She was hesitant, partly because, for her, age was not an issue and partly because she did not want to be portrayed as a model for other older people. She said she would love to write something for me but she had too many other commitments to find the time to meet my deadlines, so she suggested we meet for an interview. I found myself in her living room that afternoon because she was just putting the finishing touches on one article and had time to squeeze me in before she launched into another paper which also had a pressing deadline. The article she was completing was for the ~~Community Child Care 25th Anniversary celebration to which she would be the guest speaker. After a lifetime of radical involvement at this level she is now a life member of the organisation.~~ ^{on children's security} She also gave me fliers to take back to the community centre advertising a one day seminar she was organising with other community groups at the local university. The topic for the day was *What sort of society do you want Australia to be?* These were just two of the things she is presently involved in.

(1)
Make
out

Ruth Crow, is an 80 year old woman who could easily pass for a very fit 70 year old. I met her in her housing commission unit which is part of wonderful new public housing development in North Melbourne. It was easy to see where her priorities lay as she showed me around her well designed unit on the fifth floor of an attractive architecturally designed complex. The lounge had three pieces of furniture, a comfy cane chair, and two unusual couches. One she designed herself to fold out into her bed. The 'bedroom' had been converted to a study with a computer, copier, library and neatly arranged files, overlooking a great view across the Western suburbs of Melbourne.

Ruth Crow is certainly no ordinary woman, although her hope for society lies in the actions of ordinary people. She believes ordinary people make history. People who do not talk about the world but actually get out there and change it in small ways. She gets tired of people who make comments that she obviously works hard to keep herself busy; she does things because she believes in the task never to fill in time. She is the sort of person who regularly needs to examine her life to see what she can relinquish in order to fit everything in, rather than someone who needs to look for things to do. She abhors the assumption that many people

community bus

make, that older people have time to waste and are happy to wait around for public transport and other services. She has none of this.

She is an associate to the Victoria University of Technology, where she sometimes gives lectures and has a great deal of other ongoing contact with students. In 1993 she became a Member of the Order of Australia for *the promotion of participative urban and social planning*. She produces the *Ecoso Exchange Newsletter* which circulates to 300 people every three months and includes readers like Joan Kirner, Barry Pullen and Brian Howe. She also works with the *Crow Collection Association* which administers the Crow Collection of writings which were donated to the Victoria University. The collection has been catalogued and circulated on the internet for ongoing access. The *Crow Collection* is a compilation of the writings and works of ^{Maurice} Maurice and Ruth Crow which document many years of social action and community development. The *Crow Collection Association* also organises forums for the promotion of community participation and development.

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(The CPIT started in early 1920's) one of the

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participatory

Malnutrition in Australia

Ruth was virtually one of the first and last members of the Communist Party of Australia which closed in 1990. She joined the party because of her deep concern about the development of fascism in 1936. She has remained committed to grass roots community development and opposed dictatorial leadership all her life. The first question I asked her was how she sustained her commitment to community development and community process over so many years. She replied, *because its wonderful, I believe that people are social beings who can achieve a lot more if they are all participating together.*

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I found this inspiring, as while we all see the benefits of community participation it is often easy to get ones fingers burnt and to pull out all together. But Ruth survived the splits, traumas and red bashing of the communist party members and other community organisations for over 60 years because she saw positive things happening at a local level all around her.

She has *relinquished* her involvement in many organisations, more recently. It was a choice she and her husband made just prior to his death in 1988, when Ruth was in her early seventies. She believes you can only relinquish involvement if an organisation gets to a point where it can manage without noticing if you are absent, then it is independent and time to leave. She has become quite accomplished at relinquishing organisations which thrive on their

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own. Her Curriculum Vitae lists 46 organisations of which she was a part at various times over a period of 60 years. She continues to participate with energy in short term projects which advance community action and ideas exchange in areas of alternative housing, urban design and public transport, childcare, and forums to examine the changing shape of society. She remains on the committee for the Urban Camp but now avoids too many meetings which require her attendance at night.

The most difficult thing about interviewing Ruth was her incredible breadth of experience, areas of involvement and enthusiasm for ideas. A question couldn't be settled with a single answer as there were so many facets to her involvement in a whole range of areas. Her responses triggered memories of people, circumstances, reflections on issues which were all most relevant and interconnected. Her life has been too full to capture in a few short sentences.

One observation that Ruth made was that modern society is losing its in-between spaces and in-between people. The people who are not always close companions but who are part of a neighbourhood who watch out for each other and greet each other in the street. Who meet by chance in public areas and stop to chat. Who watch out for the interests of other people's children and encourage them to feel that there are other people who care about them beyond their family circle. The caretakers, street cleaners, posties, local shop assistants who know everyone and know if they are okay. Recent emphasis is so much on individual achievement that it has lost its sense of responsibility to care for the well being of others. It makes me think, that while the next generation may be fitter and better resourced in its old age, it may well be lonelier and more isolated if the in-between spaces are not restored.

While age has effected quite a few changes for Ruth, including her role in a family which now spans four generations; the loss of her life companion and friend; her changed living circumstances and her need to withdraw from active participation in many different organisations, she maintains a level of involvement in community projects and in her contributions to publications which exceed those of many younger people. For Ruth, age is not the issue, she does not like the concept of focussing on older people as a separate group in society. She does not like the concept of age segregated neighbourhoods. She wasn't too convinced about a book which focuses on activities for older people. Older people are active

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individuals who can contribute to the well being of society in the same manner as younger people. The important issues for her are around social justice and equity, citizenship and community responsibility, effective urban design and flexible public transport, community based childcare and community resources which enable children to grow up with a strong sense of community spirit and service to humanity. Being old does not change the driving forces of Ruth's life.

In the article which Ruth wrote with her daughter Julie, for ~~Community Childcare Care~~, Ruth sums up her commitment to society. The article discusses the importance of children being *brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of humanity* as was stated in the 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child by the League of Nations. The article then reflects upon the changing emphasis and even changed wording of the 1989 Charter of the the United Nations which focuses on the individual life of the child brought up in a spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. While acknowledging the fine words, Ruth expresses concern that there is room to interpret the statement to support self interest and passive expectations without ^{raising a consciousness to act to achieve these aims.} ~~a consciousness to do anything about it.~~ A very different meaning than the original statement. Ruth and Julie write:

Thus child rearing is the responsibility for the whole of society. Inevitably one of the spin-offs when adults accept this social responsibility is that the children's lives are enriched through being in constant association with people who have a vision of better human relationships between generations and who are involved in realising it. And there is a spin-off in the opposite direction ... adults' lives are enriched when children 'devote their talents to the service of humanity'.

In the early 1940s the campaign for preschool education was inspired by the slogan Put Magic in the Lives of Children. Those involved in social movements put magic in their own lives.

Ruth's motto could well be that people of all ages can add magic to their lives by acting on behalf of others through community participation.

15/8 / '96

Dear Meredith,

Congratulations on your document. You certainly caught the essence of my life in our interview and I enjoyed your use of words. The article flows very well indeed. (and I'm not wanting to be patronising)

Just a few minor corrections. See my red scribble.

1. I am not wanting to become associated with Community Child Care now and would prefer it if you just wrote :- an article on children and society. I am not writing it for CCC but will give them a copy. I think their AGM is a low key affair, their main pre-occupation is with the Federal Budget. I think their celebrations for 25 years will be a separate occasion. I don't want to big note myself as they may big note someone else for that.

2. On page 2, the waiting around for "community buses" is much worse than public transport, and affects older people more than young, so, if room add the words community buses,

3. I think it best not to list names without asking each person, so leave out these names please.

4. .Maurie always put my name before his so we may as well keep it up. He and I prefer the familiar name "Maurie" rather than Maurice.

5. The CPA started in 1920s so I was not the first by any means. Sorry, it does mean a loss of poetic expression but we can't alter history.

6. I would like the words poverty and malnutrition in Melbourne to be added. I was not only concerned about international politics.. I was really more motivated by concern over poverty (our own included).

The rest is perfect. You end exactly like I would like to end such an article. You really have quite an empathy with the person you interview and that is a trait to be valued. I have added this as I have had quite a few interviews in my life and appreciate it when the interview is done well, Glad I was able to give you time. Best wishes with yourm project.

I have hastened my reply to lety you know how pleased I am and how I will be looking forawrd to a book you are responsible for.

Greetings from

Ruth Crow .