

## Dr Shirley Newsome Dibden AM

Born N.S.W. 26-4-21, died S.A. 8-1-96

*Roger Rees*

The Flinders University of South Australia

Dr Shirley Newsome Dibden, one of South Australia's leading educators and community workers, has died at the age of 74.

Shirley Dibden provided over forty years of distinguished service and leadership on behalf of children with learning disabilities. Shirley never received formal professional educational and psychological training. Formal training was after all very difficult if not impossible for a young wife with five children in the 1940s. Yet via wide reading and practice Shirley demonstrated a detailed grasp of the issues. Her commitment and insight made her a natural researcher, leader and advocate.

In the early 1950s Shirley Dibden identified the needs of children with learning disabilities long before this category of disability was recognised in teacher education and psychology training. In the early post-war years Shirley recognised that some children clearly experienced severe difficulties with learning and in particular severe difficulties in acquiring literacy. Shirley Dibden's observation and research indicated that the learning difficulties these children experienced were quite separate from other skills and talents. This was not an easy issue to champion. There were many sceptics and considerable opposition, not least from a community who believed that these children were "just lazy" or from the professional community who believed that any talent or disability was pre-determined and immutable. However, Shirley Dibden was already developing a keen understanding of the issues while at the same time demonstrating that she was a most effective negotiator and advocate.

A distinct feature of Shirley Dibden's lifetime work in education was that she recognised needs and organised support well in advance of their formal recognition by education professionals. Shirley Dibden undertook all of this work throughout her life as a volunteer. Prior to her marriage, Shirley worked as a volunteer, untrained peripatetic teacher of the hearing impaired. In 1940, especially in rural Australia, children with hearing impairment received little support and even less understanding. Shirley Dibden's work with children with hearing impairment demonstrated the holistic style that was to become her hallmark. She recorded and wrote about the situations she observed. These writings and advocacy focussed on children's health and welfare as well as their education.

Shirley Dibden is best known for her work with children with specific learning difficulties. This took Shirley into the minefield of dyslexia. In South Australia, Shirley Dibden was the principal catalyst for improved understanding of children with severe reading difficulties. In the 1960s she helped found the Dyslexia Association of South Australia. This later became the Specific Learning Difficulties Association SPELD Inc. For the next 25 years Shirley was a tireless teacher, Executive Director and lobbyist. Throughout this time she developed close links with higher education in the U.S.A., the United Kingdom and Australia. She taught teachers and academics about the field of learning difficulties at the same time as she promoted understanding of this disability for families. Her role as a leader has been demonstrated by over 40 years of promotion of

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numerous local, state, national and international seminars and conferences. In 1976 Shirley Dibden was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to education and the community. In 1990, when an estimated one million Australians were illiterate, Shirley Dibden called for more money, time and effort to be put towards the education of such people. In 1994, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Flinders University as recognition of her outstanding work in education and literacy.

Shirley Dibden influenced governments, the corporate sector as well as Educators and the academic community in order to improve the education and lifestyle of children and adults with learning and other hidden disabilities. She never sought status for herself. As a scholar she understood the complexities of word blindness and learning disabilities. As a teacher and manager she facilitated opportunities for improved learning. As a mother

she nurtured, as a citizen she created cohesion and generated hope. Children and their families were motivated and ennobled by her presence. All this was undertaken with warmth, modesty and humour and a never failing capacity for constructive human relationships. Never losing sight of the need to undertake research, and quickly use improved understanding to fashion more effective education and welfare programs, Shirley Dibden was a pioneer educator.

In order to commemorate the life and outstanding work of Dr Shirley Newsome Dibden, a Research Trust has been established in her memory. Donations in memory of Shirley Dibden can be made to the *Shirley Dibden Memorial Research Trust*, c/o I.S.L.D., Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide S.A. 5001.

Shirley was the wife of the late Dr William (Bill) Dibden and mother of Anne, Jacqueline, Anthony, Lindy and Sarah.