

Tribute – Brian Gannon 1939 - 2017

Merle Allsopp

As we trace the threads of all of our different relationships with Brian today, we all know and celebrate different facets of this most talented man...Brian the musician, Brian the artist, Brian the writer, the editor, the publisher, Brian the mentor and Brian the friend.

But I would like to celebrate Brian Gannon, the father of the child and youth care profession in South Africa.

Since 1975 when the first conference gathered 100 people involved in residential care from across the country, and the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) was officially started, the child and youth care profession has come a long, long way. We have over 10,000 child and youth care workers in the country; CYCWs must be registered with a statutory body; and must undertake formal, nationally recognised qualifications. And the NACCW has just held its 21st Biennial Conference, the twentieth such event (after that initial visionary gathering) which is looked forward to by child and youth care workers across the country as an essential biennial professional inspirational injection.

I am not sure if this is what Brian and the other early founders envisaged those 42 years ago, but I do know for sure that it is hard to accurately articulate how central Brian was to initiating what is often called a child and youth care movement in South Africa, and how integral he was in the early development of the field in our country.

I was fortunate enough to meet Brian in 1981, just after he had initiated the first formal training course in child and youth care work. I had met clever people before then, but Brian was truly in a league of his own. That was because in him was combined a fearsome intellect, superb oratory skills, loads of charisma and an interest in ordinary people.

Brian taught child and youth care work in a wild and delicious manner.

He peeled away illusions to allow people to see the world differently – through the eyes of a hurting child or parent. He did for so many people what (I think) we all really want – he illuminated a true understanding of another's reality, and helped people to really connect with each other.

Brian was a gifted teacher. He was able to take a modest, humble and sometimes distorted offering by a student and find in it something valuable and profound. Most good teachers can do this. What was different about Brian was that he did it so unaffectedly, so sincerely – and all the time. The elements of this extraordinary capacity are qualities, not skills to be taught – compassion, empathy and a fundamental belief in people's capacity to grow and change. But in Brian, added to these qualities was the sense of timing and the story-telling skill of a stand-up comedian!

There is no doubt in my mind that the NACCW could become what it is today because people in child and youth care work were drawn together around Brian.

And if one looks back at the organisational records, it is obvious that he had a very strong vision for the organisation. The conference proceedings of 1975 show that a total of 98 conference resolutions were taken – so Brian formed the

NACCW with the express vision of changing the world! Further testimony to his visionary capacity is the fact that the NACCW constitution that was born out of that first conference is still largely unchanged today.

I recall in those early NACCW days how hard-working Brian was. He loved to work. He loved child and youth care work. And he was very, very generous with his time. I recall him helping child and youth care workers with their assignments on a Sunday; and how he would attend meeting after meeting to help a children's home to do the work they were doing better.

Added to all of this talent, Brian was able to write beautifully. His writing is fluid, light, easy to read, and at the same time, often profound. In the local journal he started on a single sheet of paper, now known as Child and Youth Care Work, we still regularly reprint his early writings because of their enduring relevance and value. It was that publication that kept the threads of the NACCW together across time and space, and his commitment to this work is apparent in the stylishness, attractiveness and readability of those first two decades of journals.

I think, I don't know for sure, that Brian did not care for the strife – the politics – that inevitably come with trying to keep a large number of people cooperating across competing interests, and he moved out of the NACCW, to focus his interests on CYC-Net. This endeavour provided the South African field with key ingredients for growing academically and professionally – access to child and youth care work literature, and an opportunity to connect with a bigger child and youth care world. Brian had, in the 80's, opened a portal for the local field into the developed child and youth care world, and his work on CYC-Net widened that

access, and helped the local field to be seen as committed players in the international child and youth care work arena.

Some time ago I interviewed Brian during some research I was doing on the NACCW, and typically self-effacing and firm as he could at once be, he refused to be drawn on his centrality in the development of the organisation. He brushed aside my allusion to his charismatic leadership with 'oh no...once you start things they take on a life of their own...other people come in and they bring their skills and the organisation gets going'.

On the last occasion when I saw him in the nursing home I tried – for the umpteenth time – to link him definitively to the achievements of the NACCW. During that visit he was not always himself, but on this he responded clearly, characteristically and firmly as only Brian could, 'Oh no, it was everybody – it was everybody'.

But Brian... without you nobody would have been there...there would not have been an 'everybody'...

We give thanks for, and celebrate the life of Brian Gannon, the founder of the NACCW and father of the child and youth care profession in South Africa.

About the author

Merle Allsopp is a child and youth care worker who has 35 years of experience in the sector. She started her career as an online CYCW, and served as the director of a children's home for 5 years. For the past two decades she has worked for the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW), most of this time as

director. Throughout her career she has championed the development of SA CYCW. She has been involved in all aspects of the development of the profession, writing training material, inputting into policy, advocating for tertiary education for CYCWs, developing models for the appropriate deployment of CYCWs, serving as the Chairperson of the Standards Generating Body for CYCW in South Africa and serving three terms on the statutory regulatory body, the Professional Board for Child and Youth Care. She has a Master's degree in child and youth care work from UNISA, and she edits South Africa's regular publication Child and Youth Care Work.

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