

Tribute to Bernard McIlhone, General Manager, MERAS



Midwives across New Zealand were shocked and deeply saddened to hear on 27 September that Bernard McIlhone, General Manager of their union MERAS had died unexpectedly late the previous afternoon.

Bernard became the first General Manager for the fledgling union MERAS in 2003. He already had extensive experience in the union movement having worked within it since leaving university. He had studied political science and brother Michael McIlhone believes that it was this, combined with a strong sense of social justice that motivated him to make a career assisting others in their working lives.

Bernard's relationship with the New Zealand College of Midwives started when the College decided that 'core' midwives needed their own union to represent them in the workplace. College Chief Executive Karen Guilliland called on Bernard, whom she knew through professional connections, for advice. The discussion was not intended to be a job interview but Norma Campbell, former Midwifery Advisor at the College, who also attended the meeting, remembers that Bernard

had such a clear view of what needed to be done that the College did not need to go further to find its founding general manager. "After a two hour meeting it was clear that Bernard was the man for the job."

Bernard set out to establish a functioning, financially viable midwifery union with a national midwifery Multi Employer Collective Agreement (MECA). "These were ambitious goals" he recalled, writing about the history of the union in *Midwifery News* marking Meras's tenth anniversary in 2013. But by 2005 the union had its first MECA agreement. It had been developed, said Bernard in "a cooperative way where neither party put forward claims but rather looked at existing documents to bring together an agreement that retained the best of what midwives already had while improving the overall agreement".

MERAS set out with the intention, said Bernard, to work collaboratively with district health boards and it was opposed to an adversarial model of negotiation. "We wanted to see the client as central to the midwives' interests with the employer providing support for women centered practice. We wanted the professional midwife to be obvious in the employment agreement."

Bernard has been remembered by colleagues not least for his calm, quiet and humble approach to his work. He did not seek to push himself forward to develop a public profile. He saw his role as advisor and facilitator for midwives to make their own cases.

Under his guidance the union has grown from an initial membership of fewer than 90 to become the main union for employed midwives. As the union has grown there has been a corresponding increase in MERAS workplace representatives and the development of the National Representative Committee (NRC). All quite an achievement in an era when there has been huge rationalisation and consolidation in the union movement.

Karen Guilliland has paid tribute to Bernard on page 6 and thanks all those who sent messages to the College expressing sorrow at the news and extending their condolences to Bernard's family.

It is not possible to reproduce here all the other tributes to Bernard but these edited comments and messages are representative in describing the feelings of colleagues about this highly respected advocate for the midwifery profession:

"BERNARD WAS A GREAT PERSON TO WORK WITH AND HIS CALM, PATIENT APPROACH TO RESOLVING ISSUES WAS WIDELY RESPECTED. UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP THE PRINCIPLES OF MERAS AS A UNION FOR MIDWIVES BY MIDWIVES HAS BEEN DEVELOPED AND NURTURED."

Caroline Conroy, organiser for MERAS

who worked closely with Bernard for eight years: "Bernard was held in high regard and respected by all those he interacted with. The connections that he had from his years in the union movement and those that he made within the midwifery profession have been reflected in the messages that we received which acknowledge and appreciate the huge contribution Bernard made to MERAS and our members.

The growth of MERAS was an achievement that Bernard and all of us involved with the union are very proud of.

Bernard and I worked well together supporting the MERAS workplace representatives, addressing individual issues for midwives, working with members where there were service reviews or changes in the workplace and negotiating the various employment agreements and MECAs. This was recognized by many of the emails we have received, acknowledging that 'you made a great team together'.



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Bernard was a great person to work with and his calm, patient approach to resolving issues was widely respected.

Under his leadership the principles of MERAS as a union for midwives by midwives has been developed and nurtured. As we mourn his loss and journey forward as the union for midwives Bernard will always remain in our hearts as a part of MERAS.

Bernard was a committed family man and leaves behind his wife Helen and three daughters. He enjoyed travel, football and craft beer. Many friends, colleagues and family members attended Bernard's funeral and many humorous stories were told about his life. A moving waiata was performed by all the midwives present.

Many midwives have acknowledged the person that Bernard was describing him as a 'lovely man'; 'a great trade unionist and a lynch pin for MERAS'; 'Bernard will be missed by many people' and 'Bernard was an invaluable asset when he helped me a couple of years back, and was a kind and approachable man'."

Kelly McConville, Chairperson of the MERAS National Representative Council (NRC):

"Dear Bernard, I really have enjoyed working with you over the past thirteen years. I want to thank you on behalf of all MERAS members for helping to create, shape and develop our midwifery union.

MERAS is recognised nationally as leading the way in the industrial representation of employed midwives. You have enabled us to have a collective midwifery voice and to be actively involved in the decision making processes that come with growing a union that best supports our midwifery philosophy and practice in an employed setting.

It has been a privilege to know you and to have been an active part of this journey. The skills and expertise that you have shared in your different approach to furthering midwifery objectives and goals I acknowledge and will continue to use. For me you will always be a part of MERAS."

Kathy Anderson, an NRC member from Christchurch:

"Bernard always had a happy smile and positive manner. He would treat everyone equally, and had a knack of turning any conversation back to the point as things drifted off the subject. He never left any meeting without a plan of who was doing what. His presence in our region and nationally will be sorely missed."

Yvonne Morgan: "I worked with Bernard on the MERAS national committee for several years and always valued his

gentle yet persuasive approach and his knowledge of union and human resources law. He had a passion for the work of midwives, especially core staff, and will be very sadly missed."

Norma Campbell, Director of Midwifery, Canterbury District Health Board: "I worked closely with Bernard in my former role at the College as Quality and Sector Liaison. My work took me around the DHBs particularly looking at interface issues but more often than not also identifying industrial issues. Bernard was a fierce negotiator but was not only an industrial negotiator. He was a strategic thinker and had a vision that a midwifery union should be led at the coalface by midwives so they could express their issues.

"He was always clear that he was not the 'face' of the union but rather this was the domain of midwives. As a result you will see few photos of him around publications or the website. This stemmed from his belief system where he really could not, at a deep level, understand why women were ever treated differently from men and compensated differently. The world he wanted for his daughters was one where misogyny did not exist and women were recognised and rewarded in the same way as their male counterparts for work that was the same.

Bernard was a huge support for me in my role at the College. He spoke lovingly of his family and the trips he was planning overseas. Bernard was hardworking, ethical and great at his job. He was a kind and caring man who is such a loss to his family and all who knew him."

Kevin McFadgen, Employer Advocate, MERAS MECA:

"I first met Bernard in 2007 when we were negotiating the MERAS MECA and I have negotiated the agreement with him each time since then. It was a pleasure negotiating with Bernard as there was always an amicable and friendly environment that encouraged open and honest discussion. He was absolutely honest, trustworthy and his word was his bond and at no time did I ever hear him say a bad word about anyone. This reflected on Bernard as a person.

He was passionate about midwifery and always had the best interests of the midwives as his first priority. His friendly and approachable manner made discussing issues a whole lot easier and the fact that he was willing to listen to our point of view would, in a lot of cases, provide a better outcome.

His passing is a terrible tragedy and he will be missed by hundreds of people, including myself, though my special

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condolences go out to his family, the College and the hundreds of midwives around New Zealand who have relied on him for so many years."

Cee Payne, Industrial Services Manager for the New Zealand Nurses Organisation:

"Bernard was a very dear friend along with his partner Helen during our shared lives in Christchurch. Our work as young unionists started in the Canterbury Clerical Workers Union at a time when we still had compulsory unionism in the private sector. We shared a passion for 'a new brand of organising' – essentially getting out into the 19,000 workplaces that the union covered and talking to members about the value of belonging to a union – voluntary membership was imminent.

Bernard was a strong and determined advocate for working people; to me he was 'a working man' at heart with a wry sense of humour, determination and passion.

As a friend he was fun, generous, exacting on the things that mattered most to him, loyal and loving. He loved Helen so much and even when he was at his most determined he would have a grin on his face from ear to ear.

You will be missed union comrade and friend."

Farewell Bernard you may have gone but the work you did for midwives and MERAS will not be forgotten.