

MERAS's new co-leader has wide experience as advocate for women's causes and women workers

Jill Owens has been appointed co-leader (industrial) of the midwives' union MERAS to work alongside Caroline Conroy, co-leader (Midwifery)

"Joining the MERAS team feels like getting back to my roots," says Jill.

Jill, a New Zealander who was living in the USA when her two youngest sons were born, was part of an organisation in Kansas, KALM, that aimed to legalise midwifery. She and her friends smuggled midwives over from Oklahoma for home births in Coffeyville, Kansas, where she lived, and which is just across the border of the two States.

"One of my greatest regrets was not having a home birth myself though I attended the birth of my friend's son William," Jill says. "I was videotaping the birth and got so caught up when he was born that I put the video camera on the floor and missed his Dad cutting the cord. All you can see is the carpet!"

She asked her GP to attend her third son's birth at home, but the GP refused, even though Jill offered to sign a waiver saying she would not sue the doctor if something went wrong.

"The GP said it wasn't me she was worried about. It was all the other doctors in town who would take away her hospital privileges."

A La Leche League leader for around 15 years, Jill learnt valuable skills that transferred into her paid working life. Mentoring leader applicants through systematic letter writing, leading meetings, running workshops, organising conferences, and dealing with media were all part of her roles as District Advisor, Area Co-ordinator of Leaders and Area Co-ordinator of Leader Applicants in Kansas and in the Waikato.

It was her activism that led Jill to the University of Kansas where she attained a Masters Degree in Journalism in the mistaken idea that as a journalist, she could "change the World".

"It is hard for New Zealanders to appreciate just how radical breastfeeding, home birthing, and being part of a whole foods co-operative is in the US mid-West, not to mention being anti-nuclear and anti-US imperialism," Jill says.

Jill's return to New Zealand in 1986 landed her in Huntly where her former husband was the East Mine geologist. She worked as a public relations officer in the State Coal Mines office and was heavily involved in opposing the corporatisation of the mines.

The 1990s were a tough time. Jill edited the Waikato Weekender, a Hamilton community newspaper, worked as a marketing officer for Waikato Presbyterian Support, and took on relief teaching after the family moved to Taupo. Here she started a branch of the Women's Health Network which was opposing the closure of small town hospitals.

"We erected a giant Army tent by the main road through Taupo and painted a red cross on a nappy which we pinned to the tent. After much effort to get the tent up, we realised the guy ropes were on the inside. We had put it up inside-out so we had to pull it down and start all over again!"

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Jill moved to Auckland in 1992 where she was a senior lecturer in journalism at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Not long after she started, she took on the role of women's officer with ASTE, a tertiary sector union. In 1999 Jill was elected ASTE National President.

In 2004 she joined the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) as a lead organiser in hospitals and aged care. Two years later, she was elected SFWU Northern Regional Secretary and then Strategic Industry Leader, Public and Commercial Services (PACS).

"I went to work for the SFWU to make a difference in the lives of low paid

women workers – cleaners, laundry workers, kitchen hands and cooks. We negotiated a DHBs MECA from 35 separate DHB Collective Agreements, which I co-advocated, along with contractor CAs with ISS, Spotless, Compass and OCS.

"I have also been negotiating the Commercial Cleaners MECA, a national Spotless cleaners CA, national CAs with Compass for catering workers in the Defence Force Bases and Fonterra dairy factories, national CAs in the security industry, the School Cleaners and Caretakers CA, and laundry CAs, as well as working on campaigns including "Clean Start" for cleaners, "Healthy Hospitals" for hospital cleaners, orderlies, security and food services workers, and the Living Wage."

In 2015, the SFWU merged with the EPMU to form E tu where Jill became the PACS Industry Co-ordinator. Jill has since negotiated a national CA with LSG Sky Chefs, hotels CAs, and casino CAs in addition to the other national CAs.

"I thought I would stay with E tu till I retired, but the leadership role came up with MERAS and I was lucky enough to be selected. It is sad to leave the amazing women who clean our schools, shopping malls, airports and hospitals, who clean the linen and feed our patients."

Jill says she knew she would enjoy working with midwives, but what has surprised her has been the very positive reaction to her move to the midwives union.

"Midwifery has become a cause that touches everyone – even the casino gaming floor manager, HR people, and employers' advocates with whom I interact," she says.

Jill's first big role for MERAS will be joining the MERAS negotiating team and concluding the DHBs MECA.



Jill Owens



More news from MERAS



Caroline Conroy,
MERAS Co-Leader
(Midwifery)

MECA discussions

The MECA negotiations

recommended on the 22nd May. Progressing these negotiations will be a major priority for MERAS negotiating team. MERAS has previously provided the DHB negotiating team with the areas we want to focus discussion and as you know one of our key claims is a pay differential for employed midwives to recognise the skills, experience and scope of practice of midwives. Regular updates will be provided through the emailed 'MERAS updates'.

MERAS Staffing Standards for Maternity Facilities document

This document was developed several years ago by MERAS in discussion with its membership and was then revised in 2014 again in discussion with MERAS members and the Midwifery Leaders Group. The document provides a comprehensive vision for the staffing, leadership structure and opportunities for midwives working in maternity facilities. The document has been used by many maternity managers and Midwifery Leaders as a guide when planning for maternity services. MERAS is delighted that the 'National Maternity Monitoring Group' has recently endorsed this document.

This document will also contribute to the CCDM (care, capacity, demand, management work) that DHBs are progressing, with this document providing the framework for midwifery services.

What's MERAS doing ?

There is often a lot of work happening 'behind the scenes' to support members

and the development of MERAS. These projects and initiatives are developed by the MERAS leadership team in discussion with the MERAS NRC (national representative council), MERAS members, NZCOM and Midwifery Leaders. Here is an update of those various initiatives:

Recruitment and Retention Strategy

This Strategy has been developed from the framework of 'Recruitment, Retention and Responsiveness' that MERAS has been using since January 2017 in many of its discussions with DHBs. The framework has been described in previous editions of the MERAS page in the Midwifery News. The Strategy is being developed jointly by MERAS and NZCOM and expands the original framework to also include the LMC community midwifery workforce and consideration of how maternity facilities are used. The Strategy was circulated in draft earlier this year, feedback is currently being considered with changes being made to the Strategy before being finalised.

Senior Midwife roles and payscale

MERAS has been undertaking work to identify the number of different senior midwife roles that exist and the responsibilities of those roles. With this information MERAS is now ensuring there is a consistent approach to the way these roles are graded and paid and will be trying to achieve some consistency in titles. MERAS has identified some inconsistencies and where necessary is working with individual midwives and DHBs to address this.

MERAS website

MERAS has started to review its website. We have already reviewed the phone numbers and email addresses on the site and will now be undertaking a

major review of the layout and content. If members accessing this website have ideas on how it can be improved please email us your ideas.

MERAS Membership brochure and QLP brochure

MERAS will be reviewing both these brochures to ensure the information within them is current and meets the needs of members.

Training for MERAS workplace representatives

MERAS has developed a 'guide' for its workplace representatives and is now in the process of planning some training workshops for its growing number of MERAS workplace representatives.

MERAS Membership

MERAS membership continues to grow around the country. MERAS now represents most employed midwives working in DHBs and other maternity facilities. MERAS provides a comprehensive approach to supporting midwives in the workplace, providing advice for individual midwives and workplaces as well as advocating at a Regional and National level for employed midwives. MERAS works closely with NZCOM on many issues which have components of both workplace, industrial and professional. Talk to MERAS if you have a concern in your workplace.



For MERAS Membership e-mail
merasmembership@meras.co.nz
or call 03 372 9738

Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting for the New Zealand College of Midwives will be held at the Energy Events Centre, Rotorua on Thursday 23 August from 7.30pm to 9.30pm.

The following Consensus Statements are to be ratified at the AGM:

New consensus statements

- Antimicrobial Resistance
- Long acting reversible contraception
- Donor human milk and milk sharing

Revised / updated consensus statements

- Alcohol and Pregnancy
- Assessment of baby wellbeing during pregnancy