



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

# Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

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Volume 2  
Issue 5 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 2

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January 2002

## Address to the Second Anniversary Dinner of the Wollongong Women's Centre

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### Recommended Citation

Armour, Lenore, Address to the Second Anniversary Dinner of the Wollongong Women's Centre, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 2(5), 2002, 5-9.

Available at:<http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol2/iss5/2>

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### **Abstract**

I have been asked to speak on behalf of the people here tonight, and others who could not be here, to pay tribute to Ruby Makula. I have apologies from Maureen Magee who due to her illness cannot be here and Sally Bowen who is out of the country. Both of these people contributed to this talk, as, in line with good feminist practise, the words I'm going to say represent the combined thought of a collective of women.

## Address to the Second Anniversary Dinner of the Wollongong Women's Centre

*Lenore Armour*

*19<sup>th</sup> June 1982  
In Honour of Ruby Makula*

I have been asked to speak on behalf of the people here tonight, and others who could not be here, to pay tribute to Ruby Makula. I have apologies from Maureen Magee who due to her illness cannot be here and Sally Bowen who is out of the country. Both of these people contributed to this talk, as, in line with good feminist practise, the words I'm going to say represent the combined thought of a collective of women.

I am honoured to have been asked to speak tonight and a little concerned that I may not do justice to the sentiments of all the people here, or that I might leave out something important, so afterwards others might like to add more to what I am going to say.

Because we are feminists we consciously try to avoid the traditional leadership patterns adopted by most organisations. Sometimes by doing this, we often neglect to give credit to the people who through their own personal commitment, contribute way beyond the normal limits of energy.

I know Ruby took an active interest in the Dr. James Asthma treatment in the early 70s. This was a system of exercises that gave asthma sufferers, especially children a great deal of relief.

In 1973 when the now legendary three women chained themselves to the steelworks gate in order to get publicity for Jobs for Women at AIS, Ruby was there.



Lenore Armour at the  
opening of the WWIC

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This was an important incident in the development of feminism in our area, for the courage of those who were there led to the awakening of many who saw it on television and followed it in the paper.

There were attempts at this time to set up a women's refuge by members of Women's Electoral Lobby, Women's Liberation and other interested people. If my memory serves me well we called this the "Women's Action Campaign". But what was to be known as "Sally House" failed I believe due to the fact that there was no interaction between women's groups. So it was too soon for a centre.

Ideas were springing up all over the place and women's groups were forming, but this time, I'm sure Ruby would agree, was a consciousness raising period. Of course there were the long time female activists who had always been working in the district, but at this time we were starting to understand that there were issues specifically relevant to women and that they WERE important.

Ruby will remember that International Women's Year in 1975 saw a few media concessions to the fact that women did exist in Wollongong. The *Mercury* ran an International Women's Year column and WIN 4 filmed a two-hour special called *Access Women In Wollongong*. Robyn Slater who hosted the show, set the scene by telling the viewers we weren't a group of radicals. Consequently there were those of us in the audience who endeavoured to show that we were just that. This was an interesting time. It was so obvious that there were some good groups represented in the TV audience but why were they so separate?

The International Women's Day march in 1975 also showed this lack of unity. Some of us went up to Sydney in a bus while others stayed in Wollongong and handed out leaflets.

1976 saw further developments of women's groups. Ruby took an active interest in these despite her studies. The University started the Women in Society Course, The Teacher's Federation established Women Contacts in South Coast Schools and Women in Education were examining sexism in their teaching. Ruby was enthusiastic about these developments. Of course there were others that were forming at the time.

In 1977 when the Illawarra Non Sexist Education Committee got a Commonwealth Grant for \$23,000 to set up a resources centre, Ruby was an interested member. Groups were becoming aware that grants could be obtained. Ruby was very conscious of this and worked to bring groups together but still there hadn't been a cause that could unify women on an issue.

At a meeting of the Marxist Study Group, Ruby told of her

concern for the case of Judith Anne Mitchell [see speech by Val Dolan] who she believed had been wrongly imprisoned.

This was the time where Ruby really showed her capacity. She constantly rang people, she organised public meetings, she convened the "Free Judith Anne Mitchell Committee". She wrote letters, went on deputations. She learnt the legal system very quickly, learnt how to deal with politicians and bureaucrats, she visited Judith Anne in gaol, she visited her relatives and after months of tireless energy giving which is hard to believe in retrospect, Judith Anne was freed and completely exonerated. The court admitted she had been wrongly imprisoned in the first place and had not had adequate or efficient legal representation.

Ruby and many of the Free Judith Anne Committee became members of the Wollongong Women's Collective and soon the emergence of the ACTU Working Women's Charter group in 1975 gave us a focus to get together on issues which effect women.

The need for a Women's Centre was *now quite obvious*. We had started to see the advantages of combining forces.

The first International Women's Day march to be held in Wollongong was in 1979 and it was a wonderful success. But one of the greatest boosts to ensure that this combination of many groups was cemented was provided, strangely enough by an outrageous attack upon the International Women's Day marchers by the *Illawarra Mercury*.

Ichabod's column re-printed a photograph of the march and denigrated the marchers indicating that they should take part in a grooming course to be conducted by a local model.

This angered so many people and with Ruby's encouragement and the support of legal representation we secured a rare public apology from the *Mercury*.

But what was so significant about the apology was the list of groups which were publicly identified as supporters of women's issues.

And I quote here the list:

This newspaper apologises to the undersigned groups:

Wollongong Women's Collective  
Illawarra Non Sexist Education Committee  
Wollongong Street Theatre Group  
SRC Wollongong University  
NSW Teachers Federation Illawarra Association  
Wollongong Working Women's Charter Committee  
South Coast Miners Women's Auxiliary  
South Coast International Women's Day committee  
Nebo Miners Women's Auxiliary

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The Australian Union of Students  
The Non Sexist Resource Centre

It went on to say, "We regret any denigration and personal insult that may have resulted from the article ...This apology is extended to all those who participated in the International Women's Day March 1979."

Many of these and other groups formed the basic working group aimed at setting up a Women's Centre. Some groups have disappeared and others have been established.

So the decision to have a women's centre cannot be pinpointed to any one date, or group or individual. It grew out of the activities of the 1970s.

It *can* be said however that without the personal qualities of Ruby Makula the centre may not have gotten off the ground.

I know you will be cross with me Ruby, for giving you this credit but I can assure you that all of us who were around at the time know how your balanced level headedness, your rational approach and your tolerance got us through.

You have the ability to make anyone feel comfortable regardless of their age or their political ideology. Whether you are showing someone around your lovely garden or discussing academic theories you have the ability to respect different opinions. You recognise the good in people and you have the ability to draw it out of them.

I think it would be true to say that humanity is your "cause" and without your conviction and dedication to that cause we would not be sitting here together tonight celebrating the second anniversary of the Women's Centre.

Everyone who contributed to this speech referred to your generosity with your energy, your money and your time.

An anecdote best seems to sum up the way we feel when someone like Ruby gives us her support.

I quote Monica Chalmers' first meeting with Ruby.

I first met Ruby as I was dishing out leaflets in Fairy Meadow during the day time. This woman accepted a leaflet, walked away reading it, stopped, turned and came towards me. I thought, 'Well, I'm gonna cop something here,' and waited with sinking heart for her to reach me. When she did she said ... 'Do you know, I've been in this country x number of years and this is the first time I've been approached with anything like this!' and she was on my side!!!

Ruby has the courage and conviction to carry out any thing she undertakes, and she is always POSITIVE.

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We remember her bravery at the official opening of the Women's Centre having found out just prior to the day how sick she was.

Now, while she is discovering calm and satisfaction in her life through yoga and meditation, she continues to show that she cares for others by providing encouragement and support.

Ruby, I know I have left out many things, and that someone else might have told this story from a different angle so others might like to add to what I've said.

But one thing I'd like to say before I finish and that is 'Thank You Ruby'. Thank you for being a good friend, and thank you for giving up *so much* for the good of others.



Ruby Makula and Carmen Niland  
at the opening of WWIC