

'Humble' Pacific Island elder an indomitable force in life

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POKO MORGAN: Her focus was to develop people.

RAROTONGA-born Poko Morgan was an indomitable force for early childhood education, an inspirational teacher, a Fulbright Scholar, a former member of the Cook Islands Legislative Assembly, and a respected Rarotongan language author.

She was a leader and advocate for Pacific Island women and children living in New Zealand and a respected elder of the Pacific Island community. She was an influence far beyond the shores of her adopted country.

Poko was a foundation member of Pacifica, the forum of Pacific Island women dedicated to promoting education, and was its from 1989 to 1992.

Her achievements are more remarkable in that she lived with bi-polar disorder for the last 30 years.

Poko's advocacy ended on September 15. A stroke late in August was followed by pneumonia and other complications.

She died in Waikato Hospital, aged 72.

Relative, friend and fellow Pacifica member Mii Teokotai describes Poko as a person who knew what she was saying, and said it well. She was kind, helpful and at the same time humble. Her focus was to develop people — anyone who needed help found it with Poko.

Teupoko Ina Utanga was born at Avarua, Rarotonga, on October 1, 1934, the eldest of six children of Ripeka and Utanga. Her father was a teacher.

Poko attended Avarua Primary School where she won a scholarship to St Matthew's Collegiate, Masterton, New Zealand.

She trained as a primary school teacher in 1953-54 at Ardmore Teachers Training College — and met fellow teacher trainee Guy Morgan. They married in 1955 and Poko's first teaching year was in Auckland.

They had five children in 14 and careers that took them to teaching posts in the Cook Islands, Fiji and rural New Zealand. The family moved to Rarotonga where Poko lectured at Nikao Teachers College from 1958 to 1962. She was elected to the Cook Islands Legislative Assembly in 1961 and represented the Cook Islands at the South Pacific Forum that established the South Pacific Games.

In late 1962 they returned to New Zealand. Poko taught at Tarawera School for three years followed by two years at Wharepaina Maori School.

Next they taught in Fiji at Levuka Public School, Ovalau, for five years. After returning to New Zealand in 1973, Poko taught at Naike School. The family moved to Tokoroa in 1974. She taught at Balmoral Primary School in 1975, and Tokoroa East School from 1976 to 1978.

For four years she was a Tokoroa- based itinerant teacher of Maori, supporting five South Waikato schools. Poko completed papers at Palmerston North College of Education on contemporary practices and issues in Maori and Pacific Islands and Maori Language.

In 1986 came a Queens Service Medal recognition of her community service.

Poko was seconded to establish the Multicultural Resource Centre in Tokoroa from 1986 to 1988 with a focus on educational needs from early childhood to tertiary level.

In 1986 Poko's songs and poetry in Rarotongan were published, followed in 2001 by her account of 11 Cook Island women pioneers in New Zealand.

From 1988 till retirement in 2004 she was executive director of the Anau Ako Pasifica Programme, developed to enhance parent and caregiver skills as first teachers of children and to support the establishment of language nests.

In 1990 Poko was a Fulbright Scholar in the US for further studies in early childhood education.

Her tools were ever sharp and well used. It seems every time a team of educational experts was needed eyes went to Poko. For a dozen years she was a member of the Tokoroa High School Board of Governors, and for four years chairperson.

She served twice on the South Pacific Arts Council.

Son James says Poko's time in Tokoroa was the busiest of her life, marked by constant struggle with the debilitating effects of bipolar diseffective order — her achievements were a tribute to her strength of spirit and support of husband Guy and family. Poko was brought home to Tokoroa and lay in state at the Tokoroa High School Marae before a funeral service at St Luke's Pacific Islands Presbyterian Church. Family services were also held at Avarua, Rarotonga. Guy predeceased Poko in 2004. She is survived by four sons, one daughter, and 12 grandchildren.