

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2718

McCue, Helen

(1949 -)

Born 19490410, Canberra Australian Capital Territory

Occupation Educator, Nurse, Refugee Advocate, Researcher

Summary

Helen McCue is best known as a co-founder of Rural Australians for Refugees (2001). A trained nurse educator she worked with the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the Middle East in 1981, was then seconded to the United Nations Relief and Works Organisation (UNRWA) in Lebanon, and subsequently worked as a volunteer in refugee camps in Beirut 1982-83. In 1984 she co-founded the trade union aid body Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA), and was its first Executive Director and regional adviser in South Africa and the Middle East until early 1994. She founded the Women Refugee Education Network (1996) and the Wingecarribee Community Foundation (2001), and was involved in the establishment of Wingecarribee Reconciliation Group (1997).

Details

The daughter of Phyllis neé O'Connor, a typist in the public service, and John Burns, a hairdresser, Helen's family had strong links with the Canberra community. Her maternal grandfather was a bricklayer on old Parliament House, and her paternal grandfather, a linotype operator for the *Canberra Times*, established the printers' union in Canberra. She has two siblings. Educated at local Catholic schools she became a nurse and trade union representative at Canberra Hospital. She married Kevin McCue in 1970 (dec.1979) and travelled with him to London where she obtained further qualifications in nursing. On her return to Australia she completed a diploma in teaching and a degree in nursing education in Adelaide in 1979. She visited China in 1977 and 1978.

After completing a Masters in Health Personnel Education at the University of NSW in 1981, McCue worked with the World Health Organisation in the Middle East in 1981-82, evaluating nursing services for the United Nations. She was then seconded to the United Nations Relief and Works Organisation (UNWRA) in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. Following the Sabra-Shatila massacre she left the UN and worked as a volunteer in refugee and other camps in 1982-83. In 1984 she initiated and co-founded with Cliff Dolan the trade union aid body, Australian People for Health Education and Development Abroad (APHEDA), to provide training for workers in refugee camps. Initially its Executive Director, she later worked for two years as its regional adviser in South Africa and the Middle East until early 1994, when she returned to work as a volunteer in refugee camps in Lebanon.

McCue moved to the Southern Highlands in late 1994 and in 1996 she founded the Women Refugee Education Network (WREN), an education advocacy group to bring women to Australia to talk about their work in refugee camps. In 1997 she, with others, started the 'Sorry Books' in response to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report on the Stolen Generations and was involved in the establishment of the Wingecarribee Reconciliation Group. In 2001 she founded and was the inaugural chairperson of the Wingecarribee Community Foundation, which provides support to local youth, aged, palliative and respite care, Indigenous and environmental concerns in the Southern Highlands. In 2001 she, Susan Varga and Anne Coombs established a network of refugee support groups, Rural Australians for Refugees, which quickly spread to other rural towns across Australia.

Since completing a PhD in political science on women in Islam at the University of New South Wales in 1999, McCue has held various academic positions including that of Visiting Honorary Associate at the University of New South Wales School of Politics and International Relations 2001-04, Associate Lecturer, Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong 2002-03, and in 2005 she taught a course on Women in Islamic Civilisation at the ANU Centre for Continuing Education. Since August 2005 she has been a Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam at Melbourne University, researching Muslim women in Australia, and has completed a book on Palestinian refugee Olfat Mahmood, *Return to Tarshir*, which she hopes to publish. She has received a number of awards in recognition of her work with refugees, international development and reconciliation, and was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2003.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Helen McCue interviewed by Ann-Mari Jordens \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

Ann-Mari Jordens

Created 19 July 2007

Last modified 20 November 2018