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Hall, Lesley

(1954 - 2013)

Born	19541127, Port Fairy Victoria Australia
Died	20131019, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Arts administrator, Chief Executive Officer, Disability rights activist, Feminist, Writer

Summary

Lesley Hall was a feminist and disability advocate who worked throughout her life to empower low income and indigenous people, and people with disabilities, to attain and assert their human rights. She dramatically increased the policy involvement of people with disabilities in Australian and international disability issues. On behalf of the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) she represented and involved people with disabilities in the consultation, lobbying and campaign to successfully achieve the National Disability Strategy and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Lesley Hall is well known for a radical form of activism in 1981, when she and other activists stormed the stage of the St Kilda Town Hall during the Miss Australia Quest. The act has been described as ‘the first public act to place disability as a feminist issue on the agenda’.

Details

Born in the Victorian country town of Port Fairy in 1954, Lesley Hall started her schooling at the local primary school. She then attended a special school (Yooralla) and completed her secondary schooling in Altona. She graduated with a BA and Dip Ed from La Trobe University in 1973-78.

Lesley’s political evolution started at school, when she became aware of the equity (or inequity) issues associated with ‘special’ schooling. The process of being segregated and institutionalised as a young teenager was limiting, indeed, harmful, on many levels. Not only was the education sub-standard, it was socially inadequate. People in so-called ‘special schools’ often did not develop the interpersonal skills they might otherwise have developed in mainstream schools.

Lesley began to develop a theoretical perspective on the experience of oppression when she became involved in disability politics in the late 1970s. She met Richard Berger and Eddie Ryan, who were involved in the newly forming disability activist movement, around 1979-80 and immediately clicked with the group. They were radical in their thinking and their perspective matched her own, which was that people with disabilities should not be segregated, but should be encouraged to be part of the broader community. Very importantly, they must be able to speak for themselves.

An important step towards empowerment was the establishment of the Disability Action Forum (DAF) of which Lesley was a member. The DAF was a unique organisation of people from around Victoria with disabilities, united on a regional basis – not disability specific – to speak and act on their own behalf. As a member of this forum, Lesley was instrumental, in 1981, in establishing the state’s first Disability Resource Centre (DRC) in Brunswick, a place run by people with disabilities, where people could go to find information about services and their rights under law. It was one of her first jobs in the disability advocacy sector.

This activity took place in 1981, the International Year of the Disabled Person. According to Lesley, this year was ‘crucial for people understanding that people with disabilities needed to be involved in and lead projects’. There was a lot of energy, and intense focus on organising and activism.

This was also a time when people with disabilities were gaining the confidence to speak for themselves in more radical, publicly confronting ways. Historically, disability support services had come under the auspices of charities, such as the Spastic Society (now Scope). This was a bone of enormous contention for disability activists, who objected to the charity perspective of support on a number of fronts. Firstly, support offered by charities was generally provided in the form of

segregation, in the guise of institutional living, sheltered workshops and special schools. The charity perspective oppressed people, says Lesley, because it 'focused on people's deficits rather than their strengths' and treated people as 'objects of pity'. So an important platform of political action for disability activists was to cut the nexus between charity and service provision. Their views on the matter were highlighted in the late 1970s in Victoria by a successful campaign of public protests aimed against the Yooralla Telethon and its depiction of children with disabilities as objects of pity rather than humans with agency.

There was a feminist thread to this activism. Lesley was involved in feminist politics in the 1970s which took her to the disability movement at the end of the decade. Her interest in both streams, however, reinforced in her mind the inadequacies of both. There was 'a lot of sexism around' in the disability movement in the early 1980s. But the feminist movement's response to the particular needs of women with disabilities was inadequate and unsatisfying. A significant number of women with disabilities shared her frustration

They established the Women with Disabilities Feminist Collective (WDFC) which offered a space where women with disabilities could go and talk about their experiences and gain strength through doing so. It was also a political action group, involved in organising protests. The Anti-Miss Victoria quest working party was one activity, but there were others organised around housing, employment and transport. WDFC was busiest in the early to mid 1980s; less so in the late 80s to early 90s, although this was a time when other organisations with a gender perspective, such as Women with Disabilities Victoria and WWDA were beginning to take shape.

Lesley was involved in a set of direct action protests that highlighted the gender perspective in the critique of public representations of people with disabilities. The Miss Australia Quest was a beauty contest that since 1954 had run as a fundraiser for the Spastic Society in Victoria. Feminist activists and lobby groups for the disabled had been protesting outside national finals throughout the 1980s.

The International Year of the Disabled put the spotlight on opposition to the quest. As Lesley explained, the beauty quest as a form of fundraiser for disability charities was particularly odious, given its focus on physical perfection 'as the norm all must attain if they are to be fully accepted into society'. Lesley was among a group of feminists and disability activists who got into the venue for the 1981 event. 'The media sprang to life as soon as soon as we got on stage,' she says.

The protests received significant press coverage and provoked a range of responses, including strong support from people within the Spastic Society and other disability charities, to criticism from people with disabilities. There was still a very conservative group that believed segregation, and therefore, the charities that supported segregated services, to be the best way of providing for people with a disability. Despite the objections from this camp, the protest marked a symbolic shift in the mode of public thinking about the place of people with disabilities in Australian society. This was accompanied by a major policy shift in Victoria, initiated by some very progressive people in government, who were listening to disability activists and beginning to 'get' the issues.

The 1981 protest action was, arguably, the first public act to place disability as a feminist issue on the agenda. Throughout the 1980s, the WDFC continued to highlight these issues. Like the women from the DPI (A) women's network, they began to gather a more theorised perspective on the issues confronting women with disabilities especially when it came to women's health and the problems of domestic violence. By the early 1990s, there was some crossover between the two streams. A decade of networking and deep discussion had created an environment where women with disabilities in Victoria knew they needed to do something.

Lesley became involved with Women with Disabilities Victoria in the late 1990s. Her professional work as an advocate in the development of Attendant Care action and planning brought her into contact with members of the network, such as Keran Howe. Lesley was a member of a working party that was examining the issues associated with women with disabilities gaining access to women's refuges, a problem that Women with Disabilities Victoria and WWDA were researching at the time. She lent her support to Women with Disabilities Victoria at a time when the organisation was on shaky ground, to help them return to a stable and sustainable position. She also lent her writing skills to *Oyster Grit*, the breakthrough publication of stories about women with disabilities, written by women with disabilities.

Lesley was keenly aware of the transformative power of the arts for people with disabilities. She worked as an Arts & Cultural Development Officer at the City of Darebin where she promoted the inclusion of people with disabilities in all their artistic opportunities. She was a member of the Art of Difference 2009 Steering Committee and on the Board of Arts Access. She previously served on the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) disability advisory committee and the Victorian Disability Advisory Council (VDAC). She also represented VDAC on the Department of Human Services Industry Advisory Group.

In September 2008 she was employed as the CEO for the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) where she brought her experience, skills and long commitment to human rights for women, people with disabilities and indigenous people to the national and international work of AFDO. She was still working for AFDO when she passed way in 2013.

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Lesley Hall interviewed by Nikki Henningham and Rosemary Francis in the Women with Disabilities Network oral history project [sound recording]

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