

# Christine Fuller



On Sunday 16th May, Christine Fuller (pictured surrounded by colleagues and children) got a surprise after the Parish Mass. Members of the Holy Cross Under 5s Committee came to the microphone and announced that she had been awarded a Certificate of Recognition from the Preschool Learning Alliance. (PLA) Christine was completely taken by surprise by this but accepted it with typical down-to-earth modesty.

The award was made in appreciation of her years of volunteering at the Holy Cross Preschool and the Holy Cross Toddler group. Christine has put in many countless amounts of hours with untold amounts of paper work and negotiating to uphold the good reputation of excellent running of our Preschool and Toddler sessions. May she continue to contribute to our community.

The fact that she was nominated for this award by her colleagues speaks for itself!

Here is a brief history of the organisation, taken from the PLA website.

## 1961

In 1961 a young London mother, Belle Tutæv, wrote to *The Guardian*. Belle explained how in the absence of a state nursery place for her young daughter, she had set up a group of her own. The response was overwhelming. Many other parents were experiencing similar problems and were setting up groups too. Belle started to put people in touch with one another.

Within a year, in August 1962, 150 members attended the first AGM of the Pre-school Playgroups Association which was to become a major educational charity.

By 1966 membership had increased to 1,300 and the new organisation opened its first office with a staff of two. Within the next year membership almost doubled again, to 2,200, and the Department for Education and Science provided the charity with a grant to employ its first national adviser.

The aims of the organisation at first were two-fold: mutual support for those running groups and also the lobbying of government to emphasise the importance of pre-school provision and to seek the withdrawal of Circular 8/60 which prevented state nursery expansion.

It soon became apparent however that the new charity and its groups were not merely remedying the lack of state nursery provision; they were accomplishing something much more. The direct involvement and empowerment of the children's own parents had a powerful effect not only on the children's learning but also on the parents themselves:

- Children learn better when their parents are involved. Seeing their own families validated and powerful gives them a secure base from which to progress, and parents who feel part of the pre-school are in a better position to reinforce at home the learning which has occurred in the group.
- Adults who discover, as children do, that "I can do it myself" become confident partners in the world of education rather than mere consumers. In addition to the advantages this offers the child — and any subsequent children — it can also extend personal and educational development for the parents themselves. 40,000 adults a year now attend Pre-school Learning Alliance courses, many of them going on to further training and career developments.

## 1970



For these reasons pre-schools (playgroups) were quickly seen — both within and outside the movement — as having something very special to offer. Sir Keith Joseph in 1973 described the family support they offered as "an essential social service". The *Plowden Report* in 1966, while recommending nursery expansion, had declared that this would succeed only "if it carries the parents into partnership". This emphasis on the role and support of families was echoed in other reports, notably the *Halsey Report on Educational Priority* in 1972 and the *Court Report* in 1976. By the time Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education,

published the White Paper *A Framework for Expansion* in 1972, Lady Plowden was the President of the Association, committed to the unique role of its member groups. In her response to the White Paper, she said, "It is time for those who are planning this nursery expansion to look at the achievements of the playgroup movement". In 1978 she said of the still expanding membership, which by then numbered 13,500, "We must ensure that they and all they stand for remain firmly entrenched in the planning, organisation and provision of facilities for the under-fives and their parents."

## 1980



In 1982, HRH the Princess of Wales became the charity's patron. By then the membership of 17,000 was supported by a network of local branches, a nucleus of field staff and a head office in a south London youth centre.

In 1987 the charity embarked on a far reaching review of its services. This culminated in 1991 when the previously autonomous branch, county and metropolitan sub-committees united to form a single national organisation. As a result of the need to demonstrate the educational value that playgroups offer to young children, the charity's members voted for a formal change of name to Pre-school Learning Alliance in 1995 and also adopted a new corporate logo. Since then many member groups began to change their names from playgroup to pre-school.

A new era of heightened political interest in early year's education and care began in the late 1990's. The introduction of Nursery Vouchers in 1997 brought the potential

for much needed funding into many groups, but unfortunately many schools were attracted by additional funds and either lowered admission ages for reception classes or opened new nursery units. This resulted in a dramatic rise in the closure of pre-schools across the country. This heralded an opportunity for the Alliance to increase its campaigning profile. 1999 saw the launch of the National Childcare Strategy and the Sure Start Initiative, while the *Pre-schools Matter Campaign* sought to reverse the trend of closures, with MPs receiving campaigning letters from members across the country.

## 2000



In 2003 the Alliance warmly welcomed the green paper, *Every Child Matters*, and its underlying aim to safeguard children and give every child the best chances in life and the *changing lives changing life campaign* was launched to raise the importance of parental involvement and parental choice. This campaign continued into 2005 and beyond with a new emphasis on workforce reform and nutrition for under-fives.

In June 2003 the charity was proud to officially open its first neighbourhood nursery and has since been involved in establishing and managing nurseries and children's centres across England, incorporating high quality full day care and a range of services for parents and carers. The Alliance is now the largest voluntary sector provider of childcare in England. During 2003 - 2004, the Alliance was commended

by the Chief Inspector for Adult Learning as one of the top training providers in England in recognition of the consistently high levels of attainment achieved by our learners as well as the excellent quality of the teaching being delivered.

Recent years have seen early years care and education at the forefront of the government's agenda. In 2005 *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten-year strategy for childcare* outlined the government's vision for childcare services across the country. The vision was based around providing parental choice and high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare for all. This was enshrined in legislation by the *Childcare Act 2006*, which was the first of its kind and a milestone for the government's childcare programme. These new initiatives developed an unprecedented amount of consultation in the sector and have led to a review of the qualifications of the childcare workforce, a commitment to providing access for parents to free early years provision and the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* — a play-based framework encompassing the education and care of children from birth until the age of five.

Further support was given to the early years vision in the government's *Children's Plan*, which was unveiled in December 2007 and outlined a number of measures and targets to be reached by 2020 to improve the lives of children and eradicate child poverty. These ambitious plans have been widely welcomed and are still progressing; but there are continuing challenges to overcome before the vision of universal high quality childcare becomes available. The Alliance is a key partner with the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the majority of local authorities and continues to lobby on behalf of its members; pushing for providers to be fully involved and consulted with over changes being implemented in their authority, campaigning for better pay and status for the childcare workforce and urging the government to look at how sustainability issues can be addressed without effecting the offer of free childcare for parents.

In 2007 the charity identified a need for a forum to focus on issues affecting service delivery for informal baby and toddler groups catering for the 0 - 3 age range, in light of the new government agenda. The forum pulls together information to expand on the range of specialist products and services provided to support our 3,000 members working in this area of childcare. The Charity introduced a new divisional structure in 2008, creating dedicated teams of staff to represent the Alliance and drive the agenda forward at a local level. The Volunteer Awards were also launched at our annual conference with huge success, to acknowledge the vital contribution that the Alliance's network of 40,000 dedicated volunteers makes every day, without whom the Alliance would simply not exist.

## Today

Through the commitment of one parent and the support of our volunteers the Pre-school Learning Alliance has developed into a leading educational charity specialising in the early years. We currently provide practical support to over 15,000 early years settings and make a positive contribution to the care and education of over 800,000 young children and their families each year.