

## The Pioneering Spirit

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen ... Thank you to the National Council of Women of Victoria for giving me the privilege of speaking with you today and especially for the opportunity to speak about my profession of home economics – also the chosen profession of countless other (mainly) women around the world.

Home economics is not only a profession but also a field of study. So let's start at the beginning. When and how did home economics begin?

Within any movement or initiative, there is often one person who is acknowledged as the founder. For home economics this person is Ellen Swallow Richards who is recognised as the instrumental figure in the establishment of the home economics profession in the early 1900s. Ellen Swallow Richards, a pioneer or perhaps – in today's terminology – a superwoman.

Born in 1842, she grew up in rural Massachusetts, an only child and a tomboy who was home schooled by her parents, both teachers. Due to her mother's ill health, at an early age she became a very accomplished cook, housekeeper, seamstress and gardener. Often with a book in her hand, she was astute in mathematics and had exceptional organisational skills. Yearning for greater educational challenges, she was disillusioned that there were no opportunities at that time for women in New England. Suffering from depression she was heartened to learn about a new Women's College called Vassar opening in New York. She enrolled, thriving on the rigours of study and developing an interest

in chemistry which she saw as intrinsically linked to many of the issues of the day such as poor sanitation and nutritionally inadequate diets.

After persistent efforts, Ellen was eventually accepted at the reputable Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as the first female student, being given 'special status' as the officials (male, of course) didn't want any complaints about having a woman in the class. She thrived at MIT becoming an expert in water quality and the first ever female instructor at MIT, campaigning on women's issues. She initiated the school lunch program, still in existence today in North America and she became a champion for the science of nutrition and nutrition education to encourage healthy eating and improved quality of life for individuals. Late in the 19th Century, she gathered together a group of contemporaries who over a ten-year period discussed the essence of 'domestic science' and so the formation of home economics as a discipline to improve the quality of life for individuals and families came about (Joyce B Miles, [www.ellenswallowrichards.com](http://www.ellenswallowrichards.com), reproduced in *Victorian Journal of Home Economics* vol. 48 no. 2 2009).

The discipline became known as home economics, surprising perhaps to some that this is in fact the original name, domestic science and domestic arts being later names. In some parts of the world, home economics is now known as consumer science or family and consumer sciences. The International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) recognises the original name of home economics and in 2008 celebrated its centenary year, thereby giving home economics the status of a 'mature' profession of more than 100 years standing.

Given the different names over the history of home economics, it is not surprising that our name still arises today as an issue along with the stereotypes of home economics that sadly exist. Yet when questioned on the name (mainly

as being old-fashioned), I can't help but respond with 'So what would you suggest instead?' to which there is usually a pause followed by 'Mmm ...'. I guess there isn't another name, is there, that covers the breadth of home economics? So while this can be a little frustrating, I actually find it heartening because most people have a pretty good understanding of what home economics is all about. Once they start to think about it, they realise it includes and draws from a range of disciplines situated in the human sciences and including among other things: nutrition education; child development; family studies; food literacy; food preparation skills; resource management; decision-making and consumer citizenship. While its historic origins are in the home and household, home economists of today '... are concerned with the empowerment of individuals, families and communities, and of facilitating the development of attributes for lifelong learning for paid, unpaid and voluntary work and for living situations' (IFHE Position statement 2008, [www.ifhe.org/175.html](http://www.ifhe.org/175.html)).

In September 2011 an article appeared in *The New York Times* entitled 'Time to revive home ec'. While the opening statement of 'Nobody likes home economics. For most people, the phrase evokes bland food, bad sewing and self-righteous fussiness' made me cringe, there were some wonderful statements worth considering:

Today we remember only the stereotypes about home economics, while forgetting the movement's critical issues on healthy eating and cooking ... Indeed, in the early 20th century, home economics was a serious subject ... Eventually, however, the discipline's basic tenets about health and hygiene became so popularized that they seemed like common sense. As a result, early proponents became to look like old maids instead of the innovators and scientists that many of them really were (Helen Zoe Veit,

[www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/opinion/revive-home-economics-classes-to-fight-obesity.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/opinion/revive-home-economics-classes-to-fight-obesity.html)).

So old maids ... or innovators, scientists ... or perhaps pioneers? While the profession has its roots in North America, and our international federation was formed in Europe, we have had our fair share of pioneers in home economics in Australia and particularly in Victoria.

In 2008 Home Economics Victoria – for whom I work – celebrated its 50th birthday. As I stated in the Foreword in our commemorative journal at the time (*Victorian Journal of Home Economics* vol. 47 no. 1), it was a distinctive occasion and we were very mindful that the celebratory dinner may be the last time to bring together and draw upon the memories and expertise of our founders and those extraordinary women who were there at the beginning. We continue to be in awe of these women, who were dedicated, committed and passionate about their profession. However, there was a striking dichotomy which on the one hand saw these women as homemakers yet on the other hand fighting for equal pay with men, access to superannuation and status for home economics in schools.

We refer to some of these women as our elder stateswomen. One of our life members, Claire Finniss, was also a political activist and was present at the Victorian Legislative Assembly to witness the passing of the Bill for the Teaching Service (Married Women) to remove the marriage bar in the Education Department.

This enabled others such as Doris Embling, also a life member of Home Economics Victoria, to achieve promotion and rise through the male-dominated ranks. Doris began a three-year course in home economics and soon realised

that three-year trained teachers would be discriminated against compared to those teachers who had completed a four-year course. Not to be deterred she fought for a four-year course and ‘agitated’ the Education Department who eventually succumbed, allowing her to complete a fourth year if she could procure additional candidates to also complete a fourth year. To this day Doris, now aged 86, is very proud of being awarded the first Diploma of Domestic Arts which holds the distinction of ‘Certificate number one’. However, the constraints continued and upon her marriage Doris lost her permanent position (and the recent promotion). In Doris’s own words ‘The penalty for marriage and motherhood was that fifteen years after I joined the Education Department I was demoted to the lowest possible denominator’ (1987, in a paper written for the Institute of Educational Administration). Notwithstanding these barriers (and the 15-year set-back), she became the first female principal in the Victorian Education Department before being promoted to an inspector and finally, Assistant Regional Director.

While the home economics profession is almost entirely a female-dominated profession, there have been significant men who have supported its philosophy and enabled it to prosper. Early parliamentarian King O’Malley is mostly remembered as founding a national bank, known today as the Commonwealth Bank and for establishing Canberra as the nation’s capital. He is, however, less known for his role in home economics. A constant supporter of women’s rights, O’Malley immediately on his marriage ensured that his wife was financially independent. Both King and his wife Amy strongly believed that the future of the nation rested with encouraging and supporting families. Upon their deaths they left their entire estate to accumulate interest for 21 years to eventually provide 30 scholarships each year for students of home economics. These awards remain today as one of the largest tax-free scholarships available to tertiary students in Australia.

Sir William McPherson is another name that comes to mind. In the 1920s he donated £25,000 to enable the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy to be built. Later the college amalgamated with RMIT University and sadly today, they have seen fit to discontinue the course (known as Consumer Science) despite strong enrolments and meeting the needs of a niche market.

Similar stories exist from around the world. In 1901, the Japan Women's University was founded by Jinzo Naruse who promoted the education of women as equal to men. The university began with a strong home economics department and continues today to offer home economics courses. Similarly, the first women's university in India was established by a visionary who was inspired by the story of Naruse in Japan.

In the *New York Times* article referred to previously, author Helen Veit states 'When universities excluded women from most departments, home economics was a back door into higher education. Once there, women worked hard to make the case that "domestic science" was in fact a scientific discipline linked to chemistry, biology and bacteriology'.

Despite what is considered by some to be a 'back-door entry', home economics became a strong profession gradually increasing its status within the tertiary sector. Strong women led the charge including the legendary Jean Pollock who convinced the Victorian Education Department to purchase Larnook, a mansion in Armadale, and to create a separate teacher training college for Domestic Arts teachers. What a woman ... what a pioneer. I wish she were still alive today so that I could try and capture some of her spirit to assist and advise with current day endeavours with the Education Department and universities.

During these times, home economics courses were very sought after. I can recall one of our retired members telling me that she had originally applied to do law at Melbourne University only to be told by her father 'I'm not having a daughter of mine do law; you'll do home economics instead'. Certainly when I trained it was the hey-day of home economics. When the first Bachelor of Education (Home Economics) was accredited, yearly intakes were around 80 and the status of home economics was high.

Like Emily McPherson College, the days of Larnook are no longer and the college disappeared with the demise of other specialist teacher training colleges when universities subsumed the training of future educators. However, as times change, so do we and while change is inevitable, we need to be creative with how we deal with these changes. When Deakin University discontinued its home economics education degree, a former president of Home Economics Victoria who I trained with said, 'Blow the lot of them (well, perhaps the language was a little more colourful than that )... we're already a Registered Training Organisation, can't we just do it ourselves?!' And so two years later, we began with the first intake of students for our very own postgraduate vocational diploma of home economics education, recognised by the Victorian Institute of Teaching as an endorsed course for the teaching of home economics (and health). Not a bad effort given we had no funding to do this. It was a proud moment brought about by a group of committed home economics educators ... forging a new way forward ... pioneering new initiatives.

Home economics has been good to me and I have met the best of women, some of whom devoted their whole lives to their profession. Dorothy Meurer, who sadly passed away just last week at the age of 92, would regularly phone and we would discuss the current state of home economics education. She remained passionate about home economics, believing that nutrition education was a

vitaly important part of school curriculum. ‘The longer I live, the more convinced I am of this’, she said (*Victorian Journal of Home Economics* vol. 47 no. 1 2008).

Involvement with the International Federation for Home Economics has also afforded me the opportunity to meet some amazing home economics pioneers from other countries. In 2009 I attended the centenary conference of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (formerly the American Home Economics Association). Long-time members were acknowledged, even the 90-something-year-old who had been a member for 73 years. It was on this occasion that I met Janett Gibbs, who each time there is an international home economics congress or council meeting organises a group, making all of the travel arrangements for her colleagues, the number usually only limited by the capacity of a large bus. I said to her that I hoped she was bringing a large contingent to Australia for the 2012 IFHE World Congress which Home Economics Victoria is hosting, to which she replied, ‘I’m certainly planning to’ and then she added ‘All going well of course, as I will be 93 by then’.

This brings me to the world congress which I somehow found myself Chair of. What seemed like ages away it now just six months away. As an organisation, Home Economics Victoria agreed to take this on – to bring the world of home economics to our doorstep (dream number 2000 from up to 80 countries) and to embrace the opportunities such an event would provide for the future of our organisation. We’re also pretty proud that this is to be the first home economics world congress to be held in the southern hemisphere in the 104-history of the International Federation. It is also giving us an opportunity to speak up for the profession. As our promotional material states, ‘The time is now. Global alarm bells are sounding and the headlines are not new: obesity epidemic; food

security crises; unsustainable food production practices; fracturing families and communities; loss of life-sustaining skills within the home. The list goes on' (June 2010, *IFHE World Congress 2012 First announcement*, [www.ifhe2012.org](http://www.ifhe2012.org).)

It affords us the opportunity to move beyond the stereotypes and the sometimes unfair and misguided perceptions about a profession that dares to focus on the home, on individuals and families and on the development of practical life skills.

While there is a call from some quarters to 'bring back home economics', the fact is we are alive and we are vital. Throughout Victoria and '... right across Australia, home economics teachers have long been the backbone of life-skills education ... Calls to bring it back reflect an abiding respect for the work of these teachers and high regard for their capabilities, fuelled by a surge in community energy and action regarding food and cooking skills' (Home Economics Victoria 2011, 'Time to speak up for home economics', *Education Matters* magazine, July issue, p. 60). What we don't need is yet another celebrity chef or a fly-by-night healthy eating initiative. It is interesting the number of such individuals and groups who we meet in the course of our work who espouse the virtues of healthy eating, wellbeing and the importance of practical life skills as if it should be a revelation to us. I must say that more often than not, we are very tempted to say '... don't tell us how to 'suck eggs'.

It has been a great honour today to share with you about the home economics profession. No other profession provides such a sophisticated and multi-dimensional approach to linking knowledge with experience and promoting sustainable wellbeing. And so the breadth and diversity of the profession, sometimes considered a weakness, should be regarded as its strength. There are

many pioneers, many superwomen who have gone before us and from whom we can gain much inspiration. They provide me with much inspiration as I continue in my role at Home Economics Victoria. As we embark on this world congress, which will no doubt be the biggest challenge our association has ever taken on, may we always remember those wonderful women who have gone before us ... leaders, ground-breakers ... pioneers.

So once I again I thank you for this wonderful opportunity to speak with you. Thank you for your attention and I wish you all a very happy Australia Day.