



THE
EXCEPTIONAL
VERA GOOD

A LIFE BEYOND THE POLKA DOT DOOR

Nancy Silcox

This lively biography compellingly traces the exceptional life of Dr. Vera Good (BELOW, LEFT). Born in 1915 into an Old Order Mennonite family in Waterloo county, and now a centenarian, Vera Good made her mark as an educator, concluding her working career as an executive producer of children's programming for TV Ontario (1965-1981). She laid the conceptual design and was the first executive producer for the long-running children's series *The Polka Dot Door*, for which she received a Gemini award in 2000. Prior to her work with television she was highly regarded as an innovative educator, serving in a number of schools, while also holding significant administrative posts. In her early 30s she served in India as a volunteer with Mennonite Central Committee (1946-1949), during the turbulent years when India gained independence. Her post-secondary education took her to diverse locations and institutions, including the Stratford Normal School, Goshen College (Indiana), Northwestern University (Chicago), and Columbia University (New York City) for her Doctor of Education.



Nancy Silcox (RIGHT), an award-winning writer, has twenty years' experience as a high school teacher, and concluded her career as a counsellor in the Special Needs Department at Wilfrid Laurier University. She holds a Master of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Waterloo, and wrote an education column for the *Kitchener Waterloo Record*

for eight years. After her retirement in 2005, Silcox moved into full-time freelance writing as a Columnist for *Waterloo Region Record* and a magazine features writer for *Grand Magazine*, *Arabella Design Magazine*, *Canada's History*, and *Canadian Antiques and Vintage Magazine*. Since then she has written a dozen books, with an area of specialty in personal biography, historical biography, and art. She has received two Queen's Jubilee medals and a Canada 150 medal for excellence in writing.



WEEKEND EDITION



Etcetera

The remarkable woman
behind Polka Dot Door, W3

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behind Polkaroo



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PETER LEE, RECORD STAFF

Vera Good, the first producer of Polka Dot Door, wasn't sure her heart was in it right away: "Television? I wanted to be in the schools."

The teacher behind the Polka Dot Door

By Nancy Silcox

When Vera Good was 4, she'd wait outside on the sidewalk, hoping to talk to one of the teachers who walked by the family house after class. "Every time I'd ask her: 'When will I be old enough to go to school?' I wanted to go so badly." A few years later, she wrote a letter to Ontario's minister of education, asking him how she could become a "teacher of teachers." You could say that Waterloo resident Good, now 92, has had a lifelong love affair with learning.

After completing Grade 8 in 1929, Good remained at home for a year. "Many Mennonite girls did this," she says. She then returned to classes at KCI, enrolling in the three-year commercial program. "I still wanted to teach, but knew I'd have to work for awhile to afford going to teacher's college." And work she did — for the next seven years, in the office of Kaufman Rubber Company. At age 28, with some money saved, she returned to KCI and completed her Grade 13 credits — with honours, earning a \$100 scholarship to attend Stratford Normal School (teacher's college). "It was a very generous amount at that time," she recalls.

At age 30, Good finally attained her goal. She was hired to teach at the one-room Riverbank School outside Breslau. "Thirty-two children from Grades 1 to 8," she recalls. "I quickly learned what was good and not so good about educating children in a one-room schoolhouse," she says with a laugh. Good remained there for two years.

Given the dedication shown in realizing

her youthful dream, her decision at this point to take a leave of absence to do a three-year service placement with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) seems surprising. She defends her decision.

"My thinking was: 'I've got all the time in the world to teach; I want to explore a bit of the world.'" She asked to be sent to "somewhere in Europe, to work with children." Instead, she was posted to the MCC office in Calcutta, India to do administrative work. When she expressed her disappointment to MCC, they advised her to "trust in the Lord." In retrospect, Good says the advice was sound.

In 1946, when Good arrived in India, the country was at a crossroads. India was on the brink of achieving independence from Britain. The great Indian spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi, was preaching peaceful resistance, and calling for an end to bloody sectarian violence among Hindu, Muslim and Sikh factions. Good recalls hearing Gandhi speak twice in Calcutta — the second time in 1948, a day before he was assassinated. "The city went completely quiet after his murder," she recalls. "It was like the hush before the storm; before authorities discovered what group had killed him."

In 1949, Good returned to Canada, but only briefly. She had decided to pursue her second goal to become a "teacher of teachers," and headed to Goshen, Indiana to complete her B.A. Then, interspersing graduate courses in education with teaching stints back in Ontario, she attained a master's degree in education from Northwestern University in

Illinois, and a doctorate of Education from New York's Columbia University. Not bad for a little Mennonite girl from Waterloo County!

By this time, Good's star was firmly on the ascendant. She returned to Ontario, and in quick succession, moved first into school administration, then was promoted to the Ministry of Education, as its first female inspector. She expected to remain in this role indefinitely. In 1966, her life took an unexpected turn.

"The ministry announced the introduction of educational television, but they had no programs ready to air. I was hired to fill the void," she says. She admits beginning her assignment with little enthusiasm. "Television? I wanted to be in the schools." Still she put her heart into the job, and soon creativity blossomed.

In 1971, the children's program Polka Dot Door aired. Good was its initial executive producer. A serendipitous mixture of instruction, fun and adventure, the show's star was the mysterious Polkaroo, a mute kangaroo-hybrid, resplendent in a polka-dot muumuu. With a modest laugh, Good calls Polka Dot Door "my main claim to fame."

Good retired from TVO in 1981 and took her talents to Jamaica and Belize where she assisted in setting up educational television programs in those countries.

A member of Waterloo County's hall of Fame, Good is characteristically restrained about her life's achievements. "The Mennonite faith encourages us to do something worthwhile with the gift of life. I've just tried to follow that."