

MENZIES FOUNDATION

Annual Report 1999

IN MEMORIAM:

HARRY CHRISTIAN GIESE, AM, MBE

1913-2000

by Dr Eric Wigglesworth, AM

Those of us who have been privileged to visit Fogg Dam at daybreak can readily attest the pioneering spirit and infectious enthusiasm of the late Harry Giese who died on 4 February, 2000. All of us can attest his loyalty to and affection for his adopted home in the Northern Territory and for his fellow Territorians. To walk with him through the streets of Darwin was a memorable event for, despite his lengthy stride and rapid gait, progress was slow. It seemed that every second person wanted to thank him for some kindness, to tell him of some family event or to seek his advice on some problem. He knew them all and, as the walk continued, he would describe the family, financial or other relevant details that underlaid each discussion. It was a humbling experience.

Harry Christian Giese was born in Greenbushes, Western Australia in 1913, and educated at the Universities of Western Australia (BA, DipEd) and Melbourne (MEd, DipPhys Ed). After a period of teaching, he volunteered for war service in 1939 but was asked by the Commonwealth Director-General of Health to become Director of National Fitness in Western Australia. Here he stayed from 1942 until 1944 when he transferred to Queensland as the first Director of Physical Education.

It was here that he married Nancy Wilson on 5 May, 1946. That marriage provided Harry with a happy and secure home base right up to his death. With "Nan" Giese becoming Chancellor of the Northern Territory University, this long working partnership brought great benefits to the Australian community. The Foundation expresses its deep sympathy to her and to the family.

In 1947 Harry Giese transferred to the Commonwealth Department of Health as a National Fitness Officer and in 1954 he moved to Darwin where he served as a Member of the Legislative Council from 1954-1973. During this period he completed a Churchill Fellowship and held the positions of Chairman of Committees (1963 to 1965); Director of Social Welfare (1954-1970); and Director of Child Welfare (1959 -1970).

In 1974, after Cyclone Tracy, Harry Giese served on the Darwin Disaster Welfare Council, which played a large part in the relief of Tracy victims and in July 1978 became the first Northern Territory Ombudsman until his retirement on age grounds at the end of that year. His community activities were legion and are far too numerous to be listed here. However, many of us remember the way he spoke with pride of his work with the Marriage Guidance Council and the Spastics Association, for both of which he was the founding President. His community services were recognised by the award of an MBE in 1965.

In short, he had already completed a life of distinction before he joined the Foundation in 1979. In that year he accepted the invitation to become the founding (and, as it turned out, the only) Chairman of the Foundation's Northern Territory Committee from 1979 to 1985 (when the State/Territory Committees were discontinued). In addition, he was a member of the National Board and its Executive Committee during the same period and also served as a member of the Foundation's Research Grant Review Committee from 1981-1984. In 1985, following the change in structure of the Foundation, he used his experience as Chairman of the NT Oral History Unit to record a series of interviews which later became the starting point for the Foundation's History.

In all these honorary positions he made forceful contributions to the research aspects of the Foundation's work. Perhaps the strongest was at the first Menzies Foundation National Seminar in Melbourne on 2-4 October 1980 when he reiterated his view that the health needs in the Northern Territory required examination at the highest level. He suggested that the time was opportune to find a working relationship between the embryonic Northern Territory University and the Menzies Foundation. His idea was to develop some tertiary structure that would examine those matters which had a significant bearing on the health and wellbeing of the people living in the north and the things that could be done to improve the quality of life for the people in this region.

Partly as a consequence of that powerful speech, but also because of his continuing advocacy, persistence and enthusiasm, the Foundation held a seminar in 1981 and a further Workshop in 1982, entitled respectively "Living in the North" and "Towards a School of Health Research in the Northern Territory". As a consequence of those meetings, the Menzies School of Health Research was created in Darwin and incorporated under its own legislation on 12 December 1985.

Harry Giese was a member of the School's Board of Governors from 1985-1995 and Deputy Chairman from 1987-1995. As recognition of his major contribution to the health of Australians who live in the North, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 1997.

In any recital of the impressive litany of memorials that have been created to commemorate Sir Robert Menzies, the name of the Menzies School of Health Research will always figure high. Since its inception the school has flourished beyond all expectations, thanks largely to the high quality of the staff and in particular to the founding Director, Professor John Mathews AM.

Of relevance here is the fact that the continuing contribution made by that School to the health of Northern Australians is a tribute to the vision, the enthusiasm and the advocacy of Harry Giese who first identified the need for such a school and who later vigorously pursued its establishment and strongly supported its work.

We Australians owe him much.

Dr Eric Wigglesworth, AM