I first met Margaret Sassé through an organisation called ANSUA. Margaret established ANSUA (A New Start for the Under Achiever) Victoria in 1972. Margaret had been working in schools with children with learning difficulties when she came in contact with professionals who were using new and innovative neurological programs to assist children with learning difficulties and developmental delays. These programs were a ‘light bulb’ moment for Margaret, as on a daily basis, she was seeing the immaturities in the motor development of the children to whom she was giving learning support. When she began implementing neurological and sensory motor programs to these children, their learning support programs became much more effective.

It was this passion that began for Margaret a life of dedication to children’s development. With increasing success of the Victorian ANSUA centre, Margaret set about establishing centres in other Australian states. She was responsible for the majority of staff training in what was to become an ANSUA national organisation. All these centres were registered as charities and were not-for-profit. Over the late 1970’s and early 80’s, branches in Coffs Harbour, Brisbane, Darwin, Sydney and Tamworth were established. It was in 1976 that I met Margaret, when together with Jean Rigby, the Brisbane ANSUA Learning Centre (now called Learning Connections) was established.

In the seventies the notion that children with learning difficulties could be experiencing difficulties with their neurological organisation and the way their brains processed information was tantamount to ‘witchcraft’. It was an era when some ophthalmologists were reported to state ‘what do the eyes have to do with reading?’, an era when learning was considered to happen in the book and in the classroom. Few people considered that differences in the way the brain processed information might be in some way responsible. There were sections of the community extremely opposed to ANSUA’s methods and with little brain research (unlike today) to support our methods, we were called ‘witches’, in some circles. In the late seventies ANSUA Queensland was subjected to Government investigation on the safety and efficacy of our methods. A Select Committee given the power to close down the Brisbane branch was set up. Margaret, in conjunction with Dr Mike Ridley from the Coffs Harbour centre and Jean Rigby successfully spearheaded a rebuttal to these claims.

It was events such as this that made Margaret even more determined to grow the work that she had pioneered. Her dogged determination set her on a collision course with the Board of Directors of ANSUA Victoria when she announced that she wanted to run programs for babies, toddlers and pre-school children, and not just patch them up after they went to school and failed. It was obvious to the ANSUA personnel that signs of future learning difficulties were apparent from a very young age, many years before a child entered school.

It was at this point that GymbaROO was born and Margaret’s formal association with ANSUA finished. Her determination was again tested when an action by Gymboree USA to prohibit Margaret using the GymbaROO name in Australia was instigated. This was an extremely stressful event that would have caused many others to buckle under the pressure. However it was these brushes with adversity that seemed to be a catalyst for Margaret to go on to even greater things.

I maintained contact with Margaret throughout her life as we shared knowledge gained from our work, she with very young children and I with schools and teachers. Over the years we engaged in many lively discussions relating to the application of our work and the ongoing development of programs. Although there was growing acceptance of the role of movement and sensory processing in a child’s development and learning, there remained a vocal minority who expressed a different point of view. Margaret’s response to this was “I know I’m right and they’re wrong” and that was the end of it.

Margaret was all for the children. I vividly remember being in a very mentally exhausting workshop with Margaret about 20 years ago and was looking forward to the end of the day when Margaret said: “I have agreed to speak at a Kindergarten tonight, there won’t be many people there, maybe half a dozen but if only one child gets help from this talk it is worthwhile.” The meeting was one hour’s drive away. It was this type of response that was typical of Margaret’s generosity of spirit, her boundless energy and her absolute passion to help children. It was service to children that her life was all about.

Margaret was a true pioneer, she created, developed and expanded the GymbaROO and KindyROO brand into an international organisation that is at the forefront of early childhood development programs. Margaret touched the lives of numerous parents, teachers and children with whom she worked over the years. Her work lives on through the large numbers of individuals trained to deliver GymbaROO and KindyROO programs to parents and their children. Those of us who knew her are very grateful to her for instilling in us the passion for this most important work.

Margaret has left the world a significant and lasting legacy. Through GymbaROO and KindyROO programs, future generations of children and their parents will have access to the knowledge and skills that are necessary for successful development and later learning in school, thereby enabling children to achieve their genetic potential.

Margaret Sassé was the force behind the establishment of GymbaROO and KindyROO. In response to her work with children with learning problems, Margaret set out in 1982, to provide infants and pre-school children with the foundational skills necessary for later learning. It was not an easy road. Maureen Hawke, who worked side-by-side with Margaret recalls some of the enormous challenges that Margaret faced as she strove to fulfill her life’s calling – to help as many children as possible to be happy, confident and successful learners.