

# The McLeods

## Founders of The Spastic Centre

Audrie and Neil McLeod had a vision for people with cerebral palsy in New South Wales – and it was a vision that spread throughout the world.

The compassion and lifelong devotion of Audrie and Neil McLeod will always be remembered, by The Spastic Centre, and by the many people with cerebral palsy who have achieved recognition, success and acceptance. They stand as a fitting tribute to these remarkable couple.



Audrie & Neil McLeod, c. 1960s-1970s

The McLeods lived by the motto 'Nothing is Impossible'.

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### **AUDRIE LILLIAN MCLEOD, CBE, MBE (1912 – 1992)** *Co-founder of The Spastic Centre*

Audrie Lillian McLeod, a trained nurse, her husband Neil, and their daughter Jennifer who had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, arrived in Sydney from Perth in the early years of World War II. Not accepting the advice they received from medical specialists that nothing could be done for Jennifer, they were making their way to the USA. They had read about Dr Earl Carlson, who himself had cerebral palsy and was successfully conducting programs for children with similar disabilities.

However, the McLeods decided to stay in Sydney until the war was over and then continue to the USA.

During this time, Audrie's leadership qualities and sheer determination began to emerge. She was interviewed on a radio program about her belief that children with cerebral palsy could be educated and, with appropriate therapy and support, could take their place in society. Other parents of children with cerebral palsy also shared this view. Through the radio program, Audrie invited those parents to contact her.

The Spastic Centre was founded on the 9 December 1944.

On 30 January 1945, with a capital of £32, 14 children and 25 parents, the use of a house at Queen Street Mosman, on loan from Arthur Sullivan, and two motor vehicles from the Mosman National Emergency Service, The Spastic Centre commenced operations.

Supported by dedicated parents and loyal staff, Audrie McLeod was able to obtain financial assistance from governments, introduce innovative methods of fundraising and

rally assistance from the corporate sector and the general public to build the new buildings that The Centre would need.

In 1954, the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association was formed. Mrs McLeod became the first President and was the NSW delegate to the International Cerebral Palsy Association. Mrs McLeod hosted many visits from overseas organisations and dignitaries who were keen to learn from The Spastic Centre model of a parent-inspired and managed organisation.

As the demand for placements at Mosman increased, a new school was built and later extended. It also became evident that, as the children grew older and reached school leaving age, further facilities and services were needed. A large parcel of crown land was obtained at Allambie Heights on which one, and then a second supported accommodation hostel was built and a large factory offering vocational training and employment was also constructed as well as a medical treatment and training centre.

From 1945 until 1982, as the Honorary Superintendent, Audrie McLeod was The Spastic Centre's Chief Executive Officer.

She was a Director of The Spastic Centre from its inception until her retirement in October 1988.

For her services to people with disabilities, Mrs McLeod was awarded an MBE and later a CBE.

Her daughter Jennifer, who was the inspiration behind The Spastic Centre, past away in 1986 at the age of 48.

On Sunday, 4 October 1992, two days prior to her 80th birthday and one month prior to her 60th wedding anniversary, Audrie Lillian McLeod died peacefully after a long illness.

She left behind a memorable and distinguished record of leadership, achievement and success. Her legacy are the people with cerebral palsy in New South Wales, their parents and an organisation that is one of the world leaders in the provision of services and facilities for the people with physical disability.

The vision, compassion and lifelong devotion of Audrie McLeod will always be remembered. The Spastic Centre itself and the many people with cerebral palsy who have achieved recognition, success and acceptance stand as a tribute to the work of this remarkable woman. She lived by the motto 'Nothing is Impossible'.

**NEIL MCLEOD, OBE (1909 – 1993)**

*Co-founder of The Spastic Centre*

Neil McLeod was born at Pinjarra Western Australia in 1909 and, as an orphan, at the age of 12 left home to join the workforce. He was one of six children.

Neil undertook a variety of jobs in rural Western Australia and some years later returned to studies and ultimately obtained an Accounting Diploma.

In 1932 he married Audrie Mell and settled in Perth. Their first child, Jennifer, was born with cerebral palsy. Not accepting the medical advice that nothing could be done for her, they decided to head for Sydney and wait until World War II had ended. They intended to proceed to the USA, as they had read about an American doctor who had cerebral palsy and was carrying out successful programs for children with similar disabilities.

The McLeods never made it to the USA but instead founded one of Australia's leading organisations for people with physical disabilities, The Spastic Centre.

From humble beginnings in 1945, The Spastic Centre, under the leadership of Neil and Audrie McLeod, rapidly expanded to meet the increasing demands for new services and facilities. Neil McLeod met and conquered these new challenges.

Whilst working as a Branch Manager for Burroughs Ltd, Neil was also the Chairman of The Board of Directors and the Honorary Treasurer of The Spastic Centre, from 1945 to 1974.

As people with cerebral palsy completed their schooling, Neil had a vision of establishing a large factory where people with physical disability, after training, would work side by side with able-bodied people. This vision became a reality and, in 1961, Stage 1 of Centre Industries was completed. The facility was largely built with volunteer labour and donated materials, totally organised and coordinated by Neil McLeod.

Over the next 11 years the Centre Industries factory was extended on three occasions, following the winning of major contracts from Telecom, Sagem and GTE Australia Ltd.

In 1974, Neil resigned as a Director of The Spastic Centre to take up the full-time position of Managing Director, Centre Industries. At this stage, Centre Industries was employing some 300 people with physical disability and 200 able-bodied people.

So successful was the Centre Industries model of providing training and employment opportunities for people with physical disabilities, that a similar factory was established in Kansas USA in 1975.

The work of Neil McLeod was recognised by many overseas organisations, representatives of which visited The Spastic Centre to see what could be achieved in the areas of accommodation and employment for people with physical disability. So impressed were the Japanese that The McLeod Society was founded in Tokyo in 1976 as a tribute to the McLeods and their work for The Spastic Centre.

Neil McLeod, as Chairman of The Board of Directors was also the driving force behind the construction of the other buildings erected on the Allambie Heights site.

Neil retired as Managing Director of Centre Industries in 1986.

In 1979 he was awarded Father of the Year and was honoured with an OBE for his outstanding services to people with cerebral palsy.

Neil McLeod passed away on Saturday 30 October 1993 after a long illness.

Neil McLeod's vision, compassion and life-long devotion to people with physical disability will always be remembered. The Spastic Centre itself and the many people with cerebral palsy who have achieved recognition, success and acceptance stand as a fitting tribute to this remarkable, yet humble man.

On his retirement he wrote a book on the history of The Spastic Centre and called it 'Nothing is Impossible'. This title gives some insight into the vision and motivation of Audrie and Neil McLeod.

Audrie and Neil were survived by their younger daughter, Robin.



Neil & Audrie McLeod c. 1980s