

# Valerie Riches

Campaigner on the family whose low-key approach was grounded in research and expert opinion

**V**ALERIE RICHES, who has died aged 93, was for many years the driving force behind Family and Youth Concern, an organisation set up to support the traditional family based on marriage.

She was one of a cohort of determined women, including Mary Whitehouse and Victoria Gillick, who challenged the orthodoxies of the permissive society. Mary Whitehouse became a household name largely because of her appetite for personal publicity, but Valerie Riches adopted a lower-key approach.

When in the late 1970s she met Bill Deedes, the editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, to discuss ways in which the paper might cover her organisation's work, Deedes told her that she should take a leaf out of Mary Whitehouse's book and adopt a higher profile. But Valerie Riches shot back: "Mrs Whitehouse has her way of doing things, and we have ours." She recalled that Deedes respected her for standing her ground and the ensuing discussion went well.

She realised that changes in public policy were most likely to

result from a measured approach grounded in research and expert opinion. So she assembled a team of professionals, mostly from medicine and education, who would join her in making submissions to public inquiries, meeting with ministers, preparing briefing papers for MPs and responding to the media. Family and Youth Concern had no political or religious affiliations and steered clear of activism.

Valerie Riches did not believe that the changes that made divorce easier and decriminalised abortion, homosexuality and pornography had come about by chance. She was convinced that they were the result of lobbying by groups hostile towards the traditional family - ignoring the possibility that changes in public policy might have reflected developments in society.

She understood, however, the scale of the opposition to her views. When she said to Ian Donald, an obstetrician and gynaecologist who was a sponsor of the society, that the odds were stacked against them, he replied: "Valerie, when you die you must



Riches: single-minded but fun-loving

be able to say to yourself: I did all I could." She was able to say that.

She was born Valerie Mowbray at Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, on August 8 1924, the youngest of six children. Her father Frank worked for a company that made pianolas and her mother Florence (née Hooper) was the daughter of a music-hall magician. But radio and records drove the pianola firm into receivership and the family moved to London, where her mother ran a boarding house.

The family home was destroyed by a bomb in 1941, after which

they went to Taplow. In 1943 Frank died and his widow moved the family back to London, where Valerie worked in the Admiralty.

After the war she became a receptionist at Ibbs and Tillet, the musicians' agency, which gave her free concert tickets - a bonus for a music lover. In 1947 she married Denis Riches, whom she had met when he sat next to her at the Princes Theatre to watch *Così fan tutti* in 1944. After the birth of her children, she became a stay-at-home mother, then began to think about another career.

She trained as a social worker, but was dismayed by what she saw as the "value-free" approach, with no rules and no moral judgments. Her experience as a mother convinced her that everyone needs boundaries, and her career as a medical social worker came to an end when she refused to offer abortion counselling or to provide contraception for underage girls.

In 1971 she learnt of the formation of the Responsible Society by Stanley Ellison, a North London GP, to stem the "tide of immorality", and soon became honorary secretary. She disliked

the name and eventually changed it to Family and Youth Concern. She received no salary and the society's office was in her house, initially in Highgate.

When her husband got home, they would eat a quick supper then spend the evening on the current campaign. Guests were sometimes startled as the conversation moved from contraception to abortion, with Aids for the next course.

Although single-minded she was a kind, reasonable and fun-loving person whose advice was relied on by her many friends. In 2007 she and Denis, who had been received together into the Catholic Church in 1982, published *Built on Love: An Autobiography for Two*.

She retired from running the society in 2000, and in later years she admitted that achieving its goals remained elusive.

After the death of her husband in 2007 she longed to be reunited with him. She is survived by their children, Venetia and Jeremy.

*Valerie Riches, born August 8 1924, died April 12 2018*