

The Caldecott Community

In memory of my grandmother, Sonia Brown

I don't know how most people meet the love of their life, but I think even for the 1930s my grandparents story is unusual. My grandparents met in 1938 aged eleven; my grandfather recalls vividly being taken by 'a fair-haired girl with golden skin' to see the newts in the pond and he claims he was smitten from that day on (although my grandmother took some further convincing – they didn't start going out until they were 23).

As far as meet-cutes go, newts are possibly not quite as romantic as my grandfather has made them out to be for all these years, but their meeting was unique for much bigger reasons than the unusually outsized role amphibians played in the sparking of romance.



We didn't see much of each other after leaving Caldecott in 1943, but met again when John came back from Palestine. Here we were at the 1948 Caldecott Reunion. Then, in August 1951 we became engaged!

My grandparents met on the day that my grandfather joined the Caldecott Community, a boarding school in Kent for children from 'broken' homes. The Caldecott Community is hard to categorise: it was not quite a boarding school – it was charitable and specifically for 'troubled' children, but neither was it a normal foster home. As my grandfather says, "It was simply a 'community'; a collection of children and adults whose sole aim was to provide for children from 'broken' homes and fit them for life as adults in the wider world."

Caldecott began in 1911 as a nursery for working women in London. It was founded by Leila Rendel, an upper-class suffragette and activist who had strong connections to the famous Bloomsbury Group of liberal artists and intellectuals who were preeminent at the time. The nursery quickly expanded beyond the walls of the inner-city nursery and as its children began to

age it moved to a country house and so the set-up that my grandparents experienced and the successful formula that continued to work for over 50 years began to be developed.

The community relied on Miss Leila's extensive network of friends and supporters – the children's families paid what they could and many paid nothing at all. The Community lived in a series of country mansions in Kent, often loaned or rented from Miss Leila's sympathetic friends. The staff were mostly single women who lost their opportunity to marry and start a family because of the deaths of a generation of men in the great war. They accepted minimal pay in return for board, keep, and the opportunity to look after the children they'd never have the opportunity to have for their own. It is interesting to consider what society has lost with the passing of this generation of women who gave so much.

It morphed over the years from a working women's nursery to a home for children whose families couldn't look after them for a variety of reasons. My grandmother joined the community aged two because her mother was a single, unmarried working mother in 1929, not exactly an accepting time for that situation and she couldn't look after her baby and work. My grandfather arrived aged eleven. His mother left when he was a baby and his father wasn't capable of providing a stable environment, so he had spent his childhood up to that point being passed around uninterested relatives. This was the days before social services and my grandfather thinks he was referred by a concerned teacher. All the children had similar stories and the majority only had one parent at most.

Caldecott was radical for its time because it was founded on a community ethos and never patronised its children or treated them as lesser in any way. This was an incredibly progressive stance to have in a period when workhouses still existed and if the poor were helped at all it was considered a noble act that should only be extended to the 'deserving poor'. Caldecott was in many ways a precursor to the world we take for granted today. In a time without social services, no NHS, and only a very limited understanding of psychology and the impact of childhood neglect, Caldecott managed to see the ways in which these children needed support and helped them in a holistic way simply by providing a secure environment to grow in and a firm moral grounding.

The community nature of the organisation can be seen in how the children were involved in the running. My grandfather mentions in his writings that, "New children were taught very early on that while the adults were nominally in charge, the children themselves were expected to be 'careful and helpful with those younger than themselves'". They were also expected to do their

share of chores and were all taught to cook and clean, including the boys. Boys doing chores maybe doesn't sound impressive to us now in our generation, but it was radical for the 1930s and it produced a married life where my grandparents would alternate weeks to do the cooking and share housework after my grandfather retired. That's a huge difference to what was typical of that generation who married in the 1950s when the housewife archetype was at its peak and men weren't expected to lift a finger around the home.

Growing up, my grandparents always seemed 'different' to other people in an intangible way. They would take in local teenagers who needed somewhere to stay, and took their children on CND marches as babies, political actions like everything in their lives undoubtedly influenced by the Caldecott ethos. They owed their lives to Caldecott: everything from their 63-year marriage, to their careers, to their lifelong love of art and literature. The effect on them was so great that they even named my mother Leila after the founder Leila Rendel.

Communities have a healing power beyond the physical resources they provide – Caldecott produced well-adjusted kids out of thin air because they felt supported, and loved, and they had a network that lasted a lifetime. It's even arguable that Caldecott has ultimately proved more valuable to them than the benefits if their families had stuck around. Although I never attended Caldecott even I, two generations later, am feeling its benefits and I'll be forever grateful to the organisation that gave my grandparents golden childhoods so different from the abusive and neglectful ones they were rescued from. I know the story of the Caldecott Community off by heart because whenever I saw them Caldecott would come up constantly, always with fondness and gratitude imbued in every word of whichever story they were telling.