

Wrapping children in a blanket of normality

29th March 1995

HERALD AND TIMES ARCHIVE

Anvar Khan reports on an 'outpost for children' where a caring

Attitude offers stability and contentment and parents share the benefits of family life with a succession of youngsters to whom it has been denied QUARRIER'S Village in Bridge of Weir appears undisturbed by the modern world. The tranquil streets are called Faith, Hope and Love. The gardens yawn languorously towards clusters of bumbling bushes. The monkey puzzle trees, the oaks and firs have been left alone to mature in their own time.

Rich people can afford to buy their way out of inner-city sprawls, poor people live on top of one another. When Quarrier's Village was built in the late nineteenth century, paupers were 10 to a half a tarpaulin. What is most striking, then, about the village's gothic, turreted snugs, is that they are unusually close, for buildings and citizens who are supposed to enjoy the freedom of autonomy of pocket.

I arrive at Ken and Anne Whitty's Dickensian palace on Peace Avenue in the morning. The sun reflects from moguls of snow on to clear windows where pretty curtains are belted at the middle, like buxom Quaker wives whispering in gossip. The snowmen are Bertie Basset creatures, solid and well-rounded, with jaunty, crazy smiles.

Quarrier's Village is an outpost for children in care. And while the area, with its church called Mount Zion, its office, library, and acres of green, green grass, is pure Disney, there's BBC2 documentary material inside. In a letter to The Herald, published on November 30, 1864, William Quarrier, a shoe-maker, and the first man in Glasgow to have a multiple of shops, called for gentlemen of a similar charitable mind to organise a society where shoe-shine boys could be fed and clothed and educated.

Soon, he'd accrued 1400 starving weans and moved them out to a village in the countryside he'd built with the help of public donations.

It was William's experience as a child, learning a trade at the age of seven to support his mother after his father's death, which aligned him with the poor. He wrote in 1872: "When a little boy, I stood in the High Street of Glasgow, barefooted, bareheaded, cold and hungry, having tasted no food for a day and a half, and, as I gazed at each passer-by, wondering why they did not help such as I, a thought passed through my mind that I would not do as they when I would get the means to help others."

"Anne Whitty, 47, is a Community Parent who looks after kids from nine to 20 years of age. She too, decided as an adult that she would like to look after children who would otherwise be abandoned to a system where a roof is guaranteed but emotional support is not. Anne knows it reassures children in residential care to see the same face every day, rather than the one who happens to be on shift.

She explains: "I was brought up in Quarrier's Village as a child, from the age of 11 months until I was 17. I had no contact with my parents. But I had a very special house-parent and was lucky that I had the same house-mother all the years I was here. Others weren't so fortunate."

Anne met her husband Ken, 50, through a Baptist Church in Glasgow. They were married within three years. In 1974, Anne applied for a job in Quarrier's Village as a house-parent. In 1975, Ken, then an engineer at Rolls-Royce, took voluntary redundancy and eventually become a housefather. Thirteen years and 14 kids later (foster, not their own) the Whittys were both made redundant by the regional council.

Ken recalls: "Having worked for 13 years looking after more than 100 of Strathclyde's children, we then had to be assessed to see if we were suitable for looking after Strathclyde's children. The assessment took nine months, the longest job interview I've ever had."

The Whittys, unlike other community parents in the area, wanted to become self-employed and foster on their own. They saved hard and bought the house in Quarrier's Village in which they'd previously worked, a huge vessel where each bedroom is kitted out according to the personality in residence, from grungey to gleaming, from Barbie to Paul McStay. There's a cat and a goldfish too, who, regardless of their primeval wariness of each other, manage to live and let live, a bit like the six foster kids and the three of Whittys' own.

"Has living with strange and strangers' children coloured your view of family life?" I ask Craig, 21, who wants to be an RE teacher. "The ideal family is something I aspire to," he smiles. Craig thinks his parents are "nutters". He's lived with damaged kids since he was 11 months old. "I've learnt not to be judgmental about people, because you don't know what someone's been through."

When Ken and Anne accept a child, they have to live with the fall-out of another family. Most kids have been sexually abused by siblings or parents of both sexes. The Whittys can't hope to change a kid's biology, psychology, history or habits. They can only provide the continuing example of a normal family. In this way, at least, the child has a comparison with his or her own past. "We're really trying to make up for the bad times they've had before," says Anne. Community parents are, given the lengthy period of time in which they oversee a child's life (until he or she is 18), remarkably restricted in the discipline they can exercise over wild, wild kids. There can be no corporal punishment of any kind. Ken and Anne have to be perfect parents, but real mothers and fathers do not. "You have a child for eight years," says Anne, "then they walk out the door and you have nothing in return."

The powers of the local authority are all too pervasive. Each child in Ken and Anne's care has their own personal social worker to which they report. Children who've been in care know how to work the system. There is always the risk that one might maintain out of badness that Ken or Anne has broken a rule.

"Once there's any hint of malpractice, the system swings into action very quickly, and suddenly we're on the receiving end of investigations which can be quite horrific," sighs Ken. "You're walking on eggshells the whole time." Private residents and local schools are supportive of the deprived children who are shipped in from various regions. Quarrier's is still a village which cares. But the Christian faith is, Ken and Anne explain, the "basis of all we do. Without that we'd have cracked up years ago".

"We're not a children's home, we're a home for children," Anne adds. Like William Quarrier, her own childhood memories are a yardstick for the proper treatment of kids in care. "It was never the children's fault, it was their parents or their circumstances. I always thought they deserved a chance."

* Anyone interested in becoming a community carer or fostering a child

please call Strathclyde Family Finding Centre on 0141 227 6044.