



On the shoulders of Giants

Living too far from friends for much social activity, my growing years were spent riding my reluctant old horse, Goldie, round the farm in search of bird nests or with my head in books.

Snug under my grey floral eiderdown and out of earshot for chores, my guides, Ursula le Guin, S.E. Hinton and L.M. Montgomery were followed by Anne Frank and Chaim Potok. Their words painted pictures of lives I could only imagine.

Reading, though, is a one-way conversation. Around the age of ten, the Brownes moved in across the road, and my world changed forever.

English, retired, he a former Royal Engineer with the British Army, these two had spent a lifetime travelling the world. They had landed up in our small settlement of Te Kawa West, to be near their dairy-farming son and grandchildren. Not just Mr and Mrs Browne; this was Colonel William, MBE, and his wife Myra. Browne with an e.

Every Sunday afternoon, I would cross the road and climb the hill and be welcomed into their home.

Tipple was at 4pm precisely and Mrs Browne would bring my lemonade and their gin and tonics in sparkling Waterford crystal tumblers. There was a small bowl of snacks for each of us. From their favourite chairs, they would ask about my week: What was new at school? What was I reading? What did I think about world events?

And then the stories would begin, with me a willing audience and the Colonel a willing storyteller.

Army trained to have a photographic memory, the Colonel's recall of detail was extraordinary. He told tales of army life in colonial India, of building and sailing yachts, of living on islands. I sat and listened by the hour, soaking up these snapshots of other worlds.

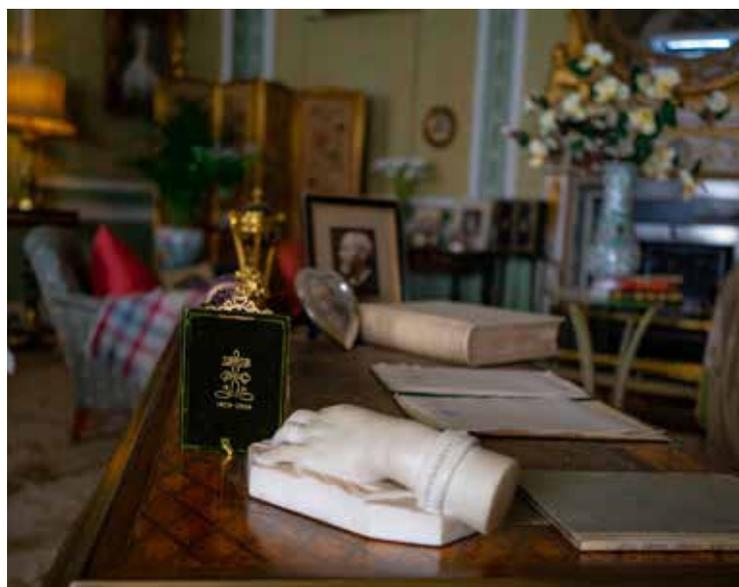
Their home was filled with a lifetime of travel memorabilia, from hand-knotted rugs to ships' chandlery, from Indian teak tables to watercolour paintings. There was a suit of armour in the dining room and a cannon on the front lawn. And books, on every topic, on every table.

I travelled the world in that living room. The Colonel and Mrs Browne opened their hearts and home to me. They shared stories and hospitality, and I became like a granddaughter to them. I was fascinated to learn about worlds I could never have imagined. In return, their curiosity about me and their interest in my life, affirmed that even a 10-year-old girl was worthy of being listened to.

When asked recently, by a group of older women, for ideas about how they can empower younger women, the Brownes came readily to mind.

Empowering is undoubtedly about lifting others up, but it doesn't mean reaching down from above. It's far more powerful when you stand alongside, recognizing the value of mutual exchange. Many of my friends grew up in homes where children were seen and not heard. And where knowledge was transmitted not shared. Obedience valued above curiosity.

Having lived full and deeply interesting lives, the Brownes were eager to know how I might do the same. When the late Dr Stephen Covey wrote, 'Seek first to understand, and then be understood,' he could have been reporting on my visits up the hill. The stories I heard were magical but they were the backdrop to deeper conversations.





The Browne's support and encouragement manifested in three ways. They listened. They learned. They laughed.

Despite my age, youth, inexperience and naivety about the world, Colonel and Mrs Browne took me seriously, cheering on my dreams and asking questions. They spoke of how the world was changing, with excitement rather than regret, never saying 'In our day', or 'You are too young to know.' Instead, they wanted to hear my views and, like my Dad, encouraged discussion and debate. They recognised that I had a valid perspective, not just as a blank slate on which to write their wisdom.

I learned what I thought by talking and discussing things aloud with them. As our discussions widened, so did my understanding of the world and my beliefs about what mattered. Confident that my thinking would be challenged, but not dismissed, I became more articulate.

Laughter came with ease. I brought school yard 'knock knock' jokes and they explained Punch magazine cartoons. Mrs Browne's wry and patient sense of humour had us wandering her garden in fits of giggles.

Our weekly conversations would stretch into the early evening, before I left, reluctantly, with a head full of stories and ideas. My imagination stirred by possibility, the ten minute walk home was never long enough to process it all. In fact, the lessons were that we listened, we learned and we laughed. Empowerment is mutual, if we let it. So, who are you lifting up and being lifted by?

Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life – How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from www.jennymagee.com If you are looking to make significant changes, contact **Jenny** via email to jenny@jennymagee.com

