

Violet Brand MBE (1929 - 2020)

Obituary

Violet Brand (nee Boughton), who has died at the age of 91 was a remarkable woman who achieved a great deal as an educationalist specialising in Literacy and also in the world of the Brass Bands.

She was a campaigner and pioneer in the fight to get dyslexia acknowledged as a condition by the then Department of Education in the late 1970's prior to the publication of the Warnock Report, which in turn formed the basis of the 1981 Education Act which recognised Special Needs in children of school age.

Simultaneously she supported her husband Geoffrey, an internationally renowned conductor, particularly of brass and wind bands, and worked with him as a co-editor of 'The British Bandsman', the leading brass band newspaper, from 1967 – 1975, temporarily putting aside her vocation as a literacy educationalist.

These activities would have occupied most people for most of the time but, throughout her adult life she was an inspiring and loving mother of her two children (Michael and Gill) as well as her four grandchildren , eight great -grandchildren and her wider family.

Violet was born in Canterbury in 1929, one of four children whose father and mother were deeply involved in the Salvation Army. This provided a daily framework for her life until she left home in 1947. The framework was not only one of worship, but also was the backbone of the family's social life and values. Duty, care and calling were important and for her mother at least she was destined to be a Salvation Army Missionary Officer.

Another major influence on her life was her beloved father, Frank, a bricklayer by trade and an ardent Socialist and Trade Unionist. Violet remembered delivering leaflets for the Labour party and celebrating its success in the 1945 election. Her political training and awareness was to become important in later years.

These twin pillars of the Salvation Army on the one hand and Socialism became the cornerstones of her own personal values throughout her life. She also acknowledged that living through WW2 in Canterbury, which was frequently bombed with loss of life, was another seminal influence on her. These traumatic war years, starting when she was ten years old taught her that life and work must continue under all possible circumstances.

In later years she drew on her wartime experiences in Canterbury to write her trilogy of children's books "Emma's War".

In 1947 Violet went to Eltham teacher training College in South East London where she met Geoffrey Brand a trumpet student at the Royal Academy of Music

Shortly after qualifying as a teacher Violet remained in London and in 1949 started work at a primary school in Kentish Town. She soon realised not only that some children were not learning to read, but also that her training had not equipped sufficiently to help them. This

was the beginning of a lifelong dedication to helping children and adults with reading and spelling difficulties, although there were a few detours along the way.

In 1950 Violet and Geoffrey married and lived in Colindale, north west London. They had two children, Michael and Gill.

In 1955 Geoffrey stopped working as a professional musician and became a BBC producer. They moved to Rickmansworth, in Hertfordshire. Violet was still a full-time mother but as soon as she could went back into part-time teaching, particularly of children with reading and spelling difficulties, getting a job at nearby West Hyde School just outside Rickmansworth, where she made a remarkable difference to some young lives.

Her understanding and interest developed further in the 1960's when she attended the Word Blind Centre and then studied Psychological Aspects of Severe Reading Difficulties at the Tavistock Clinic, London, an establishment of high reputation, with Miss Irene Caspari (1966 -1968). Here she found like-minded colleagues working at a high-level of research. Over time they later formed the groups and campaigning structures to bring about the essential changes necessary at the highest level in the teaching of literacy to children in the UK.

In 1967 she and Geoffrey decided that he would leave the security of a BBC income and enter the precarious world of freelance conducting. But with two teenage children they would need to provide an assured means of supporting the family. So with friends they acquired two companies: one was R Smith & Co Ltd, the prestigious brass band music publishers founded in 1857, and the other was the brass band weekly newspaper 'The British Bandsman'. Although Violet was named 'Assistant Editor' of the British Bandsman she effectively ran it on a day to day basis from 1967 – 1975, but always collaborating with Geoffrey on policy. It was a major step for her but she was brilliantly fitted for the job with a background in brass bands, a fine understanding of written language and a love of people. She was much more than Geoffrey's wife and she was an important personality in her own right.

Violet and Geoffrey went on to write "Brass Bands in the Twentieth Century".

One of the important brass band activities they enjoyed together was the bi-annual courses of the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain, of which Geoffrey was appointed Musical Director in 1967. At these residential courses Violet joined the house staff looking after the well-being of the teenage members of the Youth Band, many of whom were away from home for the first time. Even after 50 years many have recalled that her sympathetic and understanding ear was a great comfort whilst they attended those courses.

Over the years Geoffrey widened his conducting activity, developing an international profile, and as together they grasped the opportunities offered by his international engagements Violet was able to develop her own links within the literacy worlds abroad. Geoffrey recalls that one morning on a music tour in Sydney he woke up and found she had left the hotel early, leaving a note to say that if he turned on to ABC Television that morning he would see her doing a live interview about children with reading difficulties.

As in 1967 they were willing to take risks, and in 1975 they changed course again. With the children having left home they jointly decided that the weekly editorial duty of 'The British Bandsman' newspaper was too restrictive so they sold the newspaper.

Violet immediately took a job as Adult Literacy Tutor Trainer at Harrow College of Further Education and continued her own career. For the first time she was working with young, mostly male, adults and she decided that she would create her own assessment test for each new student enrolling. These tests were crucial for her students but also for her own research. The patterns of difficulties she observed convinced her that phonics was the only way to teach the English language and that sounds and symbols needed to be introduced in a very structured way.

Her work at this time deepened her interest in teaching illiterate adults as she was aware of the social and personal consequences of illiteracy. She had a profound insight into people and she literally changed the lives of many of those who she taught 1 – 1, receiving many letters and testimonials from pupils and their families. In the coming years she would work training tutors for the Adult Basic Skills Unit as well as teaching in prisons.

During the late 1970's she and others shared the growing realisation that literacy levels were not improving due to structural defects in the education system in the UK. She approached these defects in a number of ways, initially in creating what became known as the Watford Dyslexia Unit. This was an extraordinary and pioneering establishment. It was a local way to fill the crater in the UK education establishment caused by the unwillingness of the Government to acknowledge the existence of what we now call dyslexia and provide much - needed funding for special tuition.

Violet's political upbringing came to the fore at this point, sharpened by the success of Margaret Thatcher in the 1979 General Election (she always referred to her as 'That Woman') as part of a high-level political group lobbying intensely to persuade Government to enact the recommendations of the Warnock Report. This Report formed the basis of the 1981 Education Act, which, after a huge fight, made important provisions for pupils with Special Educational Needs which were now recognised in legislation. The government would now have to allocate money to them. At heart Violet was always a socialist and dedicated to providing equal opportunities for all.

In parallel with her campaigning and providing practical local solutions for individuals she also found the time to persuade the RSA (Royal Society of Arts) to set up a Diploma in teaching Specific Learning Difficulties. The ratification of the Diploma by the RSA was an important imprimatur. Violet pioneered the course and created the syllabus. After the initial year the course was expanded with huge numbers enrolling. In 1994 she was awarded the MBE for services to Adult Literacy. She went on to be an Assessor for the qualification.

The final piece of the jigsaw in Violet's professional life was the creation of her own teaching material creating what she called 'Spelling Made Easy' in the early 1980's. This 'Multi - Sensory Phonic' method was first published in 1984. The sales by a small publisher in the first 10 years were astonishing: she had discovered a vacuum in the market. There was no phonic material as children were taught by the 'Look and Say' method. As one Special Needs teacher said about her well used copy of these books "Violet Brand was my hero".

Moreover, her reputation and now her position as an author meant that she was invited to speak at many meetings on different elements of dyslexia throughout the UK. She was a powerful speaker – and quite radical. As her reputation grew in the UK she was invited to speak abroad, particularly in Australia, and New Zealand, where she met and worked with

Marie Clay. She spoke and worked in Africa too – in Ghana, Uganda, and Soweto. Even after retiring Violet went on the volunteer at her local prison at Bovingdon helping with basic literacy skills.

Violet was a very modern woman in the way she managed to balance her family role, even to the extended family of siblings, nephews and nieces, with her own goals in her professional life. She was a wonderful Auntie.

Her devotion and support for her younger sister, Frances, developed MS in her early twenties and lived until she was over 70. Violet's devotion and support for Frances, was an amazing and tough emotional journey.

Despite her many personal and public achievements her family remained her priority at all times and for all generations. Her two children gave she and Geoffrey four grandchildren- Katy, Helen, Ian and Jessica. They called her the "jetsetting granny", and she held what she called 'Grandma's Lunches' well into their teens. These was apparently hilarious and enlightening occasions.

As one of her grandchildren has now written " As I get older I find myself more and more in admiration for how she went through life... with all the right priorities and all done without letting on to us what hard work it must have been."

Her long marriage to Geoffrey was the absolutely fundamental building block of her life. He always generously said that what Violet achieved in her own field was more important than his achievements in his. Perhaps it is more the case that neither would have achieved as much as they did without the love, encouragement and freedom they gave to each other.

MB April 2020

