

Liz Cloutier: Humanity and Openness

By Lillias Cowper



Liz is so well known for her amazing homemade bread that she could rest on her bread-baking laurels alone, yet she has done many other wonderful things in her life.

Her wit and humour is part of the British charm that is so compelling to us born-and-bred Canadians who still have a special place in our hearts for the Brits. When I found out her parents worked for MI5 – the British Secret Service – during World War II during a casual conversation during our choir break, I couldn't wait to sit down with her and get the whole scoop.

The reality of having both parents working for MI5 was sobering and secretive, which can be very scary for a five-year-old and can affect a family very differently than the drama in books and movies. Her father, a classics scholar at Oxford University with an ability to speak several languages, worked undercover in Europe during the war. Her mother worked in England but all was hush-hush – “catching butterflies on Cyprus” was a code phrase young Liz heard used many times. She couldn't help noticing how often her mother bicycled to nearby Blenheim Palace, which was Winston Churchill's birthplace and MI5 headquarters.

During the 1940 Blitz, the family moved from London to East Anglia and then to Kidlington, a village just outside Oxford. Liz's earliest memory in Kidlington was as a four-year-old finding the water in the

toilet frozen – perhaps a common experience in British homes without central heating.

The village had many Jewish refugees during the war that came to work at Oxford University. Her godfather Robert Strauss was one of these refugees. He was separated from his wife and son during their escape. The story went that his wife used a picture of the Virgin Mary to bribe a ship's captain to take them across the North Sea to England. Her insurance for survival was 13 hats that she brought with her to bribe English women deprived of beauty during the war. She was put in Holloway Jail, where luckily a relative of Liz's found her and took her to their village where she was reunited with her husband.

Liz finished school and did her nurse's training at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. Her grandfather, a country doctor, had also trained at St. Bart's. Liz trained as a midwife and took additional psychiatric training.

In 1967, after working for a couple of years, she travelled to New York City to work at the non-profit Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Liz said if you want to know the health of a nation, go to the women's ward in one of their hospitals. She sadly noticed quite a difference in the health care provided in New York than at home. In postwar England there was a push to improve public health care as it became obvious to the general population, mainly because of the London children sent to the country during the blitz, that many poor people received little health care and had very poor nutrition.

She then worked in Vancouver from 1968-72. On a return boat trip in 1972 she met and fell in love with Clem Cloutier, a Quebecker. Although he was embarking on a trip around the world, they stayed connected and married after his world-travelling year. They moved to Edmonton where

he worked at the Royal Alexandra Hospital and she had babies – Andrea in 1975 and Marie in 1977.

Liz stayed home for 12 years, then returned to work. She was brave enough to work in the first pro-choice abortion clinic, which received threats and had to deal with many protesters.

She has been a Unitarian since she was 15 years old, when she told her mom she didn't believe in what was being preached at her local church – and her mother agreed.

Her involvement in the UCE walking group, Chorealisis choir, going out for brunch after the service, and especially cooking in the kitchen with Rev. Brian Kiely are all very treasured times for her, and for us, too. Her daughter Marie comes to the church sometimes and we see how wonderful her offspring are, including her twin 13-year-old grandsons.

Liz has a wonderful attitude in her humanity and openness to sharing her life. Her fortitude shone through when she had adversities and her joy shone through discussing the joyous times in her life. She has many pearls of wisdom, like: “If it moves, feed it”.

I am saving the best story for the last. I asked why she loved living in Edmonton, coming from so far away. She said she loved the friendly people and the river valley, and she felt safe. Once she was robbed in her own home during broad daylight and she chased the robber away with her skillet raised high in her hand and lots of expletives. That scared him away for good.

I hope you too get a chance to talk to Liz. Ask about jolly old England and it should be good for a laugh.

Interviewed 2013