

Helen Crummy – born to be great

Normally in August Edinburgh is abuzz with festivals and the fringe, every railing and every piece of street furniture is adorned with flyers for the most fabulous and brilliant act ever to be staged.

There are many figures who have become associated with festival culture in Edinburgh – perhaps none more so than Dr. Helen Crummy MBE (10 May 1920 – 11 July 2011).

Dr Crummy was a founder of The Craigmillar Festival Society (CFS), and served as the Secretary for the group until 1985.

This month we focus on her statue which is located outside the Craigmillar Library. The statue was created by Tim Chalk and was unveiled by 21 March 2014 by Richard Demarco and Ruth Wishart.

Helen Murray Prentice was born in Leith, the eldest of six children. Her mother was Joanna Blaikie and her father John, was an accomplished fiddler and a watchmaker. Helen's early desire was to become a teacher but due to family circumstances she quit school to work in a shop even though she was 'top of the class'.

In 1939, after war was declared she was conscripted and she served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). She achieved , serving as an administrative Corporal under Air Chief Marshal "Bomber" Harris. Helen married Larry Crummy in

1942 and later there followed three sons.

Many people are familiar with the story of Helen, the daughter of an accomplished fiddler asking the local headmaster if one of her sons could have access to violin lessons – the answer was no. Helen had already been active in the community creating a mothers' support group but now determined to bring music to the community she and others created the CFS – a venture which has been lauded worldwide for its innovative approach to community arts, social change and community action.

Researching Helen you get the feeling of someone who would not be fobbed off easily. Perhaps one of her greatest successes came in 1975. Frustrated by growing poverty, growing unemployment and ignored by the Scottish Office and UK Government, the CFS applied for a grant directly from the European Community (as it was known then). Helen travelled to Brussels and presented her case for aid from the European Economic Community's antipoverty program. The CFS was awarded over £200,000 to combat poverty.

The Craigmillar Festival Society, the grass-roots philosophy behind it was soon attracting international attention, and in 1976 its principles were set out in a Comprehensive Plan for Action, which became a standard text among social scientists. In the same year Helen Crummy was awarded an MBE which, typically, she insisted was not hers, but an award for the community as a whole.

The sculpture depicts Helen in a seated position handing a violin bow to a young boy. The action takes place in a doorway – perhaps a portal to a new future. The panels of the door are decorated with casts of clay scenes created by local adults and children. To the rear of the sculpture is a model of Craigmillar castle the scene of many production by the CFS.

An open book celebrates Craigmillar as a place to live, and

the talents of women.



A montage of the statue to Dr Helen Crummy MBE outside the
Craigmillar Library PHOTOS Martin P McAdam