



Woven in Renfrewshire

Led by Fablevision the project focuses on the lives of local care-experienced women.

The project has created temporary artworks in Renfrewshire's public realm with artists Dr t s Beall, Kayleigh McGuinness, Karen Herbison and Audrey O'Brien.

In Audrey's work, she focusses on the healing power of sphagnum moss used by carers for centuries, creating small embroidered objects called 'moss comforts'. Audrey has interviewed carers and introduced the project to the Kairos Women+ group and others at the Disability Resource Centre.

One of the highlights of the Woven in Renfrewshire project was the chance discovery of a real-life story of moss gathering during World War One. Local resident Kate Clark shared her grandmother Katherine's experiences with us, as a child in Lanarkshire. Katherine would often recollect gathering moss as part of a group of primary school children. An emotive story with universal themes and cultural importance, it is delivered as a heartfelt tale handed down through the generations.



Interview with Kate Clark, great granddaughter of a moss gatherer, Katherine.

Audrey O'Brien 2024

Extract from transcript

AO: What do you know of sphagnum moss?

KC: it is an antiseptic, and it was used for dressings during the First World War. I remember thinking as a child, why would a bit of ground be antiseptic for these poor soldiers?

AO: How do you know of it?

KC: ...from my gran saying that she had collected the moss as child. I think it was with the school and I thought that was amazing, a bit ground, a bit of greenery being used for such a thing.

My gran showed me exactly where the sphagnum moss was gathered.

AO: How did your grandmother introduce you to the moss?

KC: (All my summers were there in Bogside) and we used to go for a walk on a Sunday, I think, mostly a Sunday, if my grandpa was with me it would be a Sunday. They were always pointing out things, you know, where they used to dam the river, and swim and stuff like that. And that's where she told the story

of sphagnum moss which I was just fascinated by.

AO: When did she mention it? Did she mention it multiple times?

KC: There's no way I would recognise it from her telling me once. If I saw it I would say, is that sphagnum moss? I'm sure I had picked some of the moss, just out of curiosity.

There is a picture of my gran holding me, as a baby in their new house at Rigside. The hills in the background you can see...Tinto is peeping out at the back. Those are the hills that she walked in. That's the area we walked in. For the sphagnum moss specifically, it was just more or less outside their back door.

AO: Why do you think it was important for her to let you know about the sphagnum moss?

KC: It must have been an interesting and exciting thing to happen at school in 1917.

I think it was just the thought that they were out of school and outside. They obviously did enjoy it, and thought it was a meaningful thing as well. She was very much brought up like that, a community worker. Everybody worked together and she had lots of different responsibilities as she grew up. She was on the Cooperative

Women's Guild and she was always doing things.

AO: Where were you when she first told you the story? How old were you?

KC: I'm thinking I would be about 8 years old. Would be about 1959. She would be into in her 50s.. She'd be 53.

AO: Why does this story matter to you?

KC: It makes me think of my gran. When you think of the history of it.. The people who found out that the moss had a property that was useful, that will forever fascinate me.

AO: How do you feel about your great grandmother's moss gathering now? When you look back on it, what feelings does it evoke?

KC: it's lovely to know she is part of that history. In Kairos, in our history projects, It's about how important everybody is and we all need each other all of the time.

AO: Legacy of the story - what can we learn from it, what does it help us to understand?

KC: People have a history, an old person is somebody who's done lots of things, had a life that's far more interesting than what they're often given credit for some times - generally women or working class people. It is to value what people have done and to learn from it, to inquire and keep the questions

going. Somebody in a group I was in once said " it's not getting the answers, it's keeping the questions going".

My great granny was quite an unusual person. a wee bit political for that time. She's the one that got the vote in 1918. She knew what to do with it. My gran, her daughter, was brought up very socially aware.

AO: Why is her story important to share?

KC: everyone's story is important, gathering the stories is like gathering the moss.

AO: What have you learned from being a carer?

KC: when you become a carer or, or you are a carer it's as if ...Well, I'm a carer so I can't do this or I was doing this, but now, I had to it to be a carer and people feel they're almost devaluing themselves, rather than saying, you know, carers should be the ones at the top of the pile.

AO: Reflecting, your great grandmother walked to the top of the pile. It would be lovely if all carers feel they are at the top of the pile, cared for and visible.

Image front cover: black and white photograph of a woman wearing a pinny housecoat holding a baby on her hip. Scottish hillside in the background. Colour photograph layered underneath of sphagnum moss.

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