

Mrs McBride's Cornflakes

By Petrina Finn

Mrs McBride lived at the bottom of our street. Standing at her gate with a regal presence and not a hair out of place. Her garden was beautifully manicured with a rose bed in the middle and a fancy wrought-iron gate at the side. Although her house was the same as everyone else's in the estate, I thought the McBride's house was very fancy. To me, the McBride's home-life appeared perfect.

When we were eight, Josephine McBride and myself were in the same class and went on the school bus together. We played in each other's houses – although we were only allowed play inside, on the McBride's staircase, if it was raining. Josephine and I both wore glasses. Although there was something wrong with me and everyone knew it.

Mrs McBride's son, Darren, was 17, tall with shiny black hair. Josephine idolised him and he wasn't annoying like my two brothers. He had a lovely smile showing his beautiful white teeth. Darren had only one arm. There was something wrong with him and everyone knew it.

Darren died in November that year. Mrs McBride came up to our house one day and was very sad. All of us children were thrown out of the sitting-room so Mam and her could talk in private. We quietly listened at the sitting-room door. Mrs McBride was upset because she had heard some people commenting on how she was out shopping just after her son died. She explained tearfully to my mother that she didn't want to go shopping but had no choice as she had young children and had to get ready for Christmas. Also, she explained, the

family still had to eat and, through her tears, said, “Sure, I still have to pour the cornflakes.”

When I was about six years of age, I was diagnosed with a progressive visual impairment. Sometimes my poor vision influenced some of my life choices but I never let it define me. I trained as a physiotherapist, lived abroad, volunteered, married and had a family. Although, at an early age, I knew I could potentially lose my sight, this was never a reality to me. Some may say I stuck my head in the sand.

Josephine McBride moved away and we lost contact. By the time I was thirty-five, I was married with three children – two who were toddlers. My visual impairment had become worse. One day - while my husband was working away - without warning, my sight deteriorated significantly. The shock of it left me sitting on my kitchen floor, crying helplessly and worrying about the future. Then Mrs McBride popped into my head and I realised that I, too, “still had to pour the cornflakes”.

In the months that followed, I got training in the use of the white cane and also got my beloved guide dog, Fionn. Changes were happening all around me, whilst life in our home - with three children - carried on. When things were full-on, I always thought back to Mrs McBride and how she had soldiered on, in the very worst of times, for the sake of her family.

I met her one day, in later life, and told her how she’d influenced my outlook about my disability. I explained the story of the cornflakes and how she inspired me to carry on in my new normal.

Mrs McBride developed Parkinson's Disease and I last saw her walking with her daughter using a rollator. She still had a regal presence and hadn't a hair out of place. I reminded her how inspirational she was to me at the beginning of my journey with my disability. I smiled to myself and hoped that she remembered she "still had to pour the cornflakes".

At various times since, when life throws the inevitable curveball, I remember Mrs McBride and I am so thankful that I learnt at a young age about resilience. My now grown-up children have heard this story many times and I know that they appreciate the significance of "pouring the cornflakes" in their lives.

Thank you, Mrs McBride, for unknowingly teaching me one of my most valuable life-lessons. Rest in peace.