

CARING

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People

**Tribute to
Hospice:
An Interview
with Dame
Cicely
Saunders**

Camille Gerald,
founder of
Possible Dreams
Foundation

SPECIAL ISSUE:

THE MOST CARING MEN AND WOMEN IN AMERICA



Camille GERALDI



Loving Children With Special Needs

There is no doubt that Camille Gerald is one of the most caring people on the planet. She has devoted her life to adopting and caring for children who are profoundly disabled—children no one will care for. “I’m not a caretaker, I am a mother, and what matters to me is that I matter in the life of a child,” says Camille Gerald, founder of The Possible Dreams Foundation for children with special needs.

In many ways Gerald is not unlike most mothers—she loves her children unconditionally, puts their needs before her own, and derives great joy from watching them grow. In one way, though, she is quite different.

Geraldi is mother to 46 children with Down’s syndrome or other severe mental and physical handicaps who would otherwise end up alone in institutions without the love and dignity they deserve.

Camille Gerald has always been called to care for these special children. Her father was a philanthropist who every year would finance an elaborate picnic for needy children. Camille, who was large for her age, greatly looked forward to these picnics even though she was the subject of ridicule and derision. At these events, she was naturally drawn to children who had Down’s syndrome, because no one was talking to them and because they treated her well and did not make fun of her. Camille was just six at one of these outings when she held an infant who suddenly died in her arms. It was then and there that Camille knew that she wanted to dedicate her life to helping sick children. The next year she designed the logo that has been in use for many years by her nonprofit organization, which until last year went by the name Up with Down’s Syndrome Foundation.

Camille was able to empathize with these children who were shunned by their families. As a teenager she weighed 250 pounds and in college she weighed 375 pounds. The feelings of alienation and loneliness felt by the children with mental and physical problems were well known to Camille. Although she has since shed the excess weight, Camille’s extraordinary sensitivity can be attributed in large part to understanding the emotions these special children were feeling.

Camille has spent the last 33 years caring for needy children. When she was 16, she began volunteering at the Marian Center for Developmentally Handicapped and Retarded Children. At one point she joined a convent and began studying to receive her nursing degree. Thereafter she worked at Miami Children’s Hospital. It was there that she met her future husband, Michael, a pediatrician.

"If you work from your heart, it is the easiest thing in the world to look up at those stars and get your strength from above."

On the night they met, Camille was still on duty near midnight. Although she was paid to work the day shift, she refused to leave a dying baby named Elizabeth whose parents had abandoned her. Mike saw her dedication to ease the suffering of the child and commented on it. Geraldini responded by saying, "Someday I'm going to have a home for children like this." He, too, felt a tremendous love for and commitment to children, and her dream of caring for special needs children soon became their shared vision.

After Camille and Mike married in 1975 she continued working at Children's Hospital with her husband as a doctor-nurse team. During the next few years they had two daughters, a thriving marriage, and successful careers. But Geraldini was missing something. She desperately wanted to share herself and her family with children who were less fortunate. So in 1986, when she got a call about a baby named Darlene who was profoundly retarded, very sick, and had been born prematurely, she and Mike sat down with their daughters and made a decision that would change the rest of their lives—they adopted Darlene. After that, Geraldini recalls, "We just started getting calls constantly from people in the Miami area with children who were born with problems."

Geraldini wanted the children with the most severe handicaps. She and her husband made the decision that a normal Down's syndrome child who was

healthy could probably be adopted, but a mentally retarded or physically handicapped child who was also very sick would not be likely to find a loving family. She notes, "I wanted to be able to provide a family and a home for [these children.]" She has done just that with The Possible Dreams Foundation.

Although it is called a foundation, it is first and foremost a home—the Geraldini's home. She explains: "It is a normal home. We give these children normal toys like any other child would have. They have their dolls, they have their own space, they have their own closets. This is not group living. I want it to be...our home...because it's a family and because they're always with a mommy and a daddy." Right now, 38 mentally, physically, and developmentally handicapped children call the Geraldinis by those names. The Geraldinis also have eight handicapped adult children who still live with them.

Currently, the Geraldinis and their children live in several houses very close together; ultimately, they would like to live together on a working farm, where

older members of the family can put their skills to use. They recently bought a tract of land in North Carolina where they had hoped to realize this dream, but local community opposition put those plans temporarily on hold. So they continue each day, holding, helping, stroking, loving, and caring for their children.

A typical day for Geraldini—if there is such a thing—goes something like this. She rises before dawn to greet the morning shift of employees and volunteers and to get the children ready for school. She wakes, washes, dresses, and feeds the kids and gets them on the school bus. Then she catches a quick nap to restart her day after the children leave. Throughout the day Geraldini cares for the kids who do not go to school, as well as oversees the foundation's many programs. She takes the kids to doctors' appointments, checkups, eye exams, and other appointments—all of the things a mother does for her children, only 38 times over. In the evenings, the younger children eat first and then she cooks for her husband and the older



Photo by Matthew Barrick

LOVE FOR KIDS: Geraldini has a special tenderness for children whom others might not find loveable—those with severe handicaps and illnesses. She takes them in and becomes their mother.



Photo by Matthew Barrick

DIVINE PROVIDENCE: The Possible Dreams Foundation survives on donations and divine providence. Today 38 handicapped children can call the Geraldis Mom and Dad because of that providence.

kids. She sleeps an average of two hours a night, because she keeps vigil over the children who are prone to night screams and head banging. When the sun comes up the next morning, Geraldí gets up and does it again.

How does she do it? She is fueled by the power of her desire to help her children and she has known no other way. She says, "For me it's all I've wanted. I've always had handicapped children in my home on weekends. I can't remember my life when I've not wanted to take care of children who were less fortunate than me. If you work from your heart it is the easiest thing in the world to look up at those stars and get your strength from above."

Despite the tremendously complicated mechanics of caring for a family of more than 40 people, Geraldí spends a great deal of her time performing outreach services. She has become a valuable resource in the community, providing counseling and

support to more than 11,000 families. She says of the parents whose children she has adopted, "No parent threw their children away here. Every parent loved their child enough to make the right decision about where they should live." The Possible Dreams Foundation provides the following medical services to the community: medical care, infant stimulation, early intervention, counseling, on-the-job training for handicapped adults, hospice care for infants with terminal genetic diseases, and day-long, short- and long-term respite care. Families pay on a donation basis.

The Geraldís receive no money from the government and they do not charge a fee to birth parents whose children they adopt. Geraldí believes they survive on donations and what Mother Teresa called "divine providence." She explains, "Every month I can pay my bills and people say, 'How?' I answer them, "Through divine providence."

Mother Teresa is my mentor. She worked with all of the needy children and I work with the handicapped children. I just wanted to take them in."

There are skeptics, of course, who can't believe what Geraldí has accomplished. "People say to me, 'How do you do it; how do you go out on a limb every day?' I say to them, 'I don't go out on a limb, I am on the twig that is falling off the limb but isn't that where the flowers are?' It's no problem, I love it."

When asked for her definition of caring she said, "It is definitely putting others before yourself, but it is also not forgetting about yourself because if you don't care about yourself you can't help anyone. Caring is wanting to teach and spread the word so that other people can learn to care and want to do the same thing that I do. I really feel that I was given a tremendous blessing."

When asked what advice she gives to her young children she says, "Never look at anybody like they are a lesser person than you. Always treat everybody with respect and dignity. Do everything with pride and share what you've got with the next person."

Geraldí gives this kind of awe-inspiring love to each of her children every single day. She lives her life one day at a time and tries to give her children "the absolute best day they could possibly have, every day." Yet, rather than feeling totally drained, Geraldí is energized and happy. "My happiness within my home and within this foundation is the children, to see what they can do, to see their potential because everybody said they were limited, to watch them grow and become something. I am happy because they make me happy."

Geraldí knows that she has been blessed with the opportunity to care for the special children who have come into her life. She in turn has been a blessing for those who have looked to her for love and security.

Finally, the entire world has been blessed by her caring and loving presence and by the power of her example. □