

Anne and Bill Barbour

A Report of the Celebration of their Lives

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Barbour family 'humbled' by sympathy of entire community

BY MICHAEL BRESLIN

SOME 170 people, among them friends, work colleagues and politicians from the four main parties attended a celebration of the lives of Anne and Bill Barbour at the Erne Integrated College, Enniskillen, on Saturday.

They were told by their son, Dr James that the warm-heartedness of people's response to their deaths had been a revelation.

"So many people", he reported, " have written to us , quite a few with accounts of being helped by one or other of them, sadly also very many with parents battling with Alzheimer's disease . And so many people have tried to comfort us and help us to heal, and it is humbling to know that a great many people have been praying for us , and for our non-religious parents.

"Fermanagh's politicians, well represented here today, have said kind things - people holding to ideologies at variance with my father's. At this time of increased fear of a return to violence in Northern Ireland, it gives a bit of hope, to find this empathy and compassion right the way across the political spectrum here."

The gathering included David Forde, the leader of the Alliance Party to which Bill Barbour belonged, Michelle Gildernew (Sinn Fein) and Arlene Foster (DUP) and former Westminster MP, Frank McManus and his wife, Carmel.

Mr and Mrs Barbour's four children - James, Pauline, Charlotte and Tom - were welcomed by Tom Noble, the present headmaster of the Erne Integrated College.

He recalled that their parents' funerals took place in Belfast on November 30. He welcomed other family members, including grandchildren and passed on an apology from Bishop Michael Jackson, Mr Barbour's last classics scholar at Trinity, and Robert Irvine, the chairman of Fermanagh Council.

Dr James Barbour recalled that, for 58 years, his parents made their lives in Fermanagh, and, he noted that so many of their friends were present.

"So even before the funeral, we were beginning to think of how we might arrange for friends here to have a sort of leave-taking. And Tom Noble very kindly took charge, and arranged for exactly this, in this excellent setting."

He recalled that his parents arrived in Enniskillen in 1951 and, how, over the next 32 years, his father's teaching, pastoral care and sports coaching forged strong bonds with hundreds of Portora's pupils and their families.

In the later years of his career, this was shared with his mother when his parents were jointly appointed as houseparents for the girls' house at Portora.

As well as rearing four children, his mother did secretarial work part-time for the first few years in Enniskillen, and later, as headmaster's secretary at Gloucester House.

She took the four-year part-time training to be a marriage guidance counsellor, and for a while she also visited women prisoners in Armagh Gaol. He recalled how his parents became adept at bridge, and that his mother took part in quite a few choral and dramatic productions in Enniskillen

He commented: "I think our parents were immensely fortunate. Their views on several matters were not widely shared in Enniskillen, but people made space for them , and respected their hard work and good intentions, and agreed to differ. They had many friends, and did not seem to make enemies."

Dr Barbour then focused on how his mother's Alzheimer's disease progressed slowly but relentlessly, and as the years went by, how she lost the ability to converse sensibly. Nevertheless, his parents continued in great companionship because of their love of the open air, and they worked away steadily at their garden, and walked daily , except in the worst weather.

He said: "Before her own illness, and in the early stages of it, mother had been terrified of the loss of privacy and autonomy involved in the seemingly inevitable eventual permanent nursing care needed for advanced dementia, and had repeatedly said that she rejected this. In my ignorance I had thought that this was no more than wishful thinking, and I had just assumed that my father thought the same as I. Little did I know.

"I say again: our parents were fortunate people. Mother's progressive loss of mental capacity was a heavy and increasing burden, but for a very long time they were able to adapt their lives so that they could still be happy. They lived longer than most people do, and did not know physical infirmity.

"They lived frugally, but in their 66 years together they always had sufficient. Their love and guidance is treasured by four children and 10 grandchildren. They had the privilege of rearing their family in what still seems to me close to the best possible setting for doing this. The community around them accepted them, and they in turn served that community.

"And, they were able to live independently and privately as a couple till their very last evening. They are much missed, but theirs were full lives, lives to be celebrated. We, their children, are very grateful to our speakers for sharing their memories of our parents with us, And thank you all for being here with us today."

Eric Bullick recalled that Bill Barbour and he worked together in the Alliance Party from 1981 to 1993.

He described Mr Barbour as a uniquely special individual: "Looking back, I realise that I was deeply privileged to have known him. He had so many admirable qualities that it difficult to know where to begin."

Mr Bullick stated that Bill Barbour had long ago recognised that politics was the only route to bring about change in Northern Ireland, and he worked tirelessly to establish and expand the middle ground.

Mr Bullick concluded: "In our innermost thoughts during December we have probably all asked ourselves if there are lessons to be learned from Anne and Bill's deaths.

"But, this afternoon I wish to pose an equally pertinent question: what lessons are to be learned from their lives which were packed with meaningful and purposeful activity, an inherently positive outlook on life, a insatiable belief that our primary duty in this world to bring about improvement in that world?"

"The best tribute would be for each one of us to leave this hall today determined to redouble our efforts to progress the work which was so dear to Anne and Bill's hearts – reaching out hands of friendship and thereby building bridges within our divided community.

"Let us honour Anne and Bill Barbour by continuing their work."

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