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Obituary

Ruby Whitelaw

1963 - 2024

Neil McMillan

In Memory of Dr Ruby Whitelaw

It is with deep respect and gratitude that we remember Doctor Ruby Whitelaw, a dedicated and compassionate advocate for residential childcare, whose contributions to the field have left a lasting impact. Ruby passed away suddenly on 20th December 2024 and will be dearly missed by colleagues, friends, and all those whose lives she touched.

Ruby began her journey with Kibble, a Scottish charity for children and young people who have experienced trauma, in 1996 while pursuing her social work degree at the University of the West of Scotland. Even then, she had a remarkable ability to juggle responsibilities, a skill that would define her career. For 25 years, Ruby poured her heart and soul into Kibble, taking on a wide array of management roles that spanned residential and intensive services, foster care, day care, and secure care provision. In later years, she led quality assurance and child protection with the same level of dedication.

Ruby's work wasn't just a job - it was her mission. She was fiercely committed to the children and young people she cared for, always striving to improve their lives. Her passion drove her to continually enhance her knowledge, earning post-graduate qualifications in social work management, child protection, and social work practice teaching. She eventually achieved the prestigious Doctor of Philosophy - a testament to her quiet but immense pride in her capabilities.

At Kibble, Ruby will be remembered as someone who was feisty, firm, and fair. She was a brilliant mind who did not suffer fools lightly. If there was a difficult conversation to be had, Ruby never shied away. She was unapologetically honest, and her high standards inspired others to strive for better. Ruby believed in professionalism, not for its own sake, but because she knew it was the cornerstone of delivering the best care for children and young people.

In 2021, Ruby took her talents to the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) at the University of Strathclyde, where she began sharing her hard-won wisdom, experience, and insights nationally across the children's care sector. It was a natural progression for a woman who spent so much of her life



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lifting others up. She became a respected academic, contributing valuable research and insights to the field. Her publications, including those in the *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*, have influenced both policy and practice, ensuring that her legacy will continue to shape the profession for years to come.

With a career spanning almost 30 years, Ruby was a tireless champion for children and young people in care. She worked to improve policies, practices, and outcomes for some of society's most vulnerable children. Her work was characterised by her unwavering commitment to child-centred care, her innovative approach to practice, and her ability to inspire those around her.

Ruby's ability to handle multiple tasks with ease and efficiency was legendary. As they say, 'If you want a job done, give it to a busy person', and Ruby embodied that saying to the fullest. It's no exaggeration to say that when Ruby left Kibble, it took a full-time person to do just half the work she had been doing.

But Ruby wasn't just about getting things done. At her core, she was guided by a profound sense of social justice and fairness. She was famed for having the moral courage to stand up for those who couldn't stand up for themselves, and her advocacy lifted countless people. She was a mentor, a coach, and a friend. As a manager, Ruby balanced honesty with genuine care, earning the respect and admiration of colleagues and students alike. Ruby's legacy is vast. It lives on in the countless lives she touched - children whose paths she helped brighten, colleagues she inspired, and students she mentored.

Ruby was a true humanitarian who had a keen interest global politics, particularly the politics of oppression. Growing up mixed race Bajan and Scottish in a small community with a 99% white Scottish population, and raising her children there as a single parent, she did not have her challenges to seek on that front. This carved her into a strong and feisty advocate of social justice, something that would remain a part of her for her whole life.

She had a keen interest in the civil rights movement. She also had a strong commitment to charity, particularly in developing contexts, and will be remembered for the large sums of money she raised to build schools for children in Malawi. Not content with raising money, she also travelled to Malawi where she participated directly in building projects and made lifelong friendships with several people from villages in Malawi.

Beyond her professional life Ruby was a parent and a grandmother. She raised two amazing children on her own and of whom she was immensely proud. Both went on to follow in their mothers' footsteps in a life of public service, with her daughter Lisa serving as a police officer, and her son Kevin in the British forces. Ruby lives on in the name of her granddaughter 'wee Ruby' who was lovingly named in her honour.



Ruby was also an incredible friend with a huge social network. She will be remembered for her kindness, wisdom, and generosity. She was a mentor, a friend, and a source of guidance and support for many. She loved music and dancing and was deeply involved in the northern soul music dance and fashion scene, and the revivalist mod culture. She would regularly be seen out and about in her beloved vespa participating in scooter rallies across the UK or dancing the night away at northern soul nights and gigs.

Ruby taught us that making a difference is not about grand gestures but about showing up every day with dedication, courage, and heart. She was a force of nature - dedicated, determined, and deeply compassionate. She spent her life not just working but truly living her purpose: to make the world better for children and young people who needed it most. As we honour her memory, we also celebrate her enduring impact on the field of residential childcare. Her work will continue to inspire and inform future generations of practitioners and researchers, ensuring that her vision for compassionate, high-quality care lives on.

Our thoughts are with her family, friends, and all those who had the privilege of knowing her.

About the author

Neil McMillan is and Executive Director at Kibble Education and Care Centre in Scotland and was a long-time colleague and friend of Ruby.

