



# KATHLEEN NOONAN

## “Being different in the schoolyard can single you out. And another world of pain begins”

**BACKSTORY: 1928**

### Mogul's magnanimity makes for mayhem

New York real estate mogul Edward West “Daddy” Browning was no stranger to controversy and scandal. In 1926, eyebrows were raised and tongues wagged when the 51-year-old Browning began publicly courting 15-year-old Frances “Peaches” Heenan, whom he married several weeks later. The marriage was short-lived with the messy divorce becoming fodder for the gossip columns.

Prior to Christmas in 1927, the publicity-seeking Browning announced that he wanted to play Father Christmas, inviting reporters to his office building to show off an entire floor of toys, which he would send to children from all over the world who wrote to him.

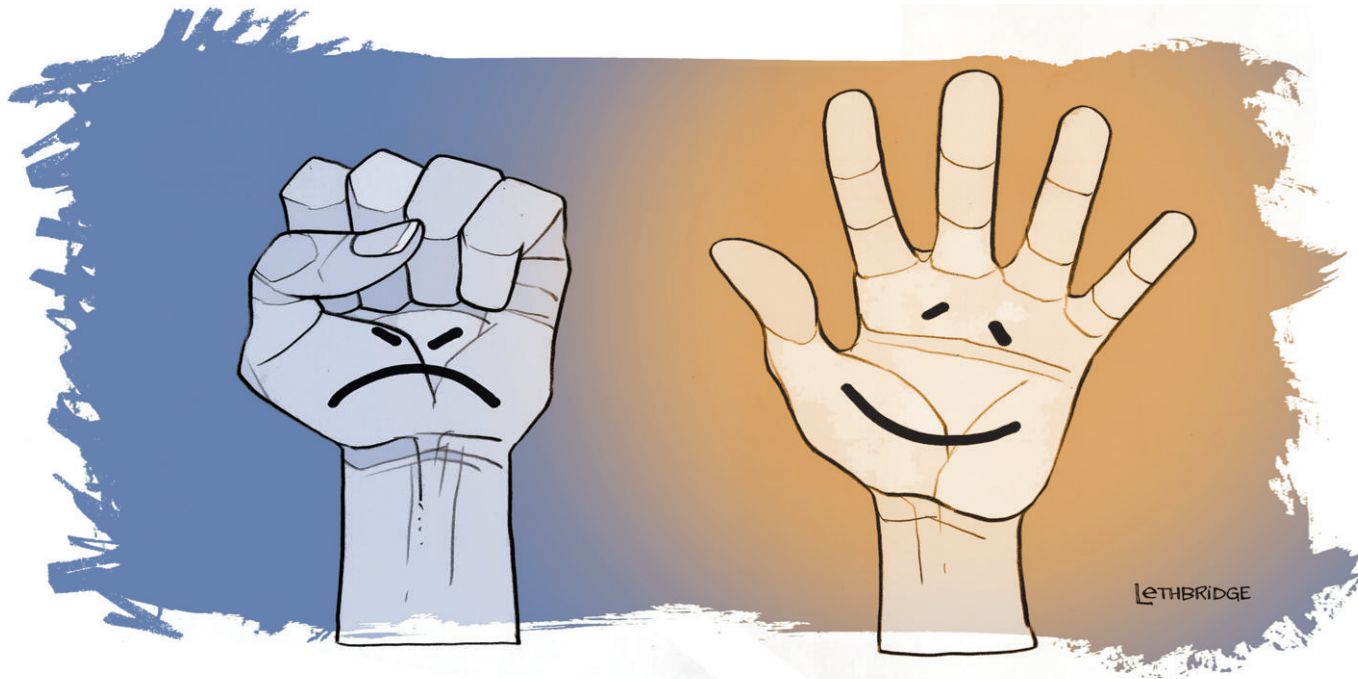
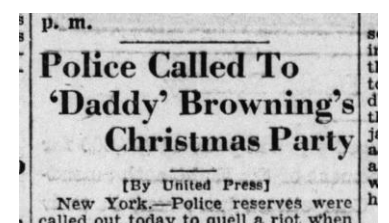
The following year, Browning went one better, this time giving away a reported 600,000 presents over two days to children who visited his offices at 1860 Broadway. Advertisements promised a team of Santa Clauses would distribute presents from inside the office.

On the morning of December 22, Browning's publicity proved a little too effective as an estimated 30-35,000 people showed up. Bedlam ensued when Browning opened his doors; jostling within the crowd caused some people to faint, others to be trampled, and mothers and children to be separated in the confusion. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported (see clipping, below):

“A riot call was sent to Police Headquarters and to the W. 68th St. Station, which brought out 150 additional policemen. Ambulance surgeons from Roosevelt Hospital treated the injured ... Traffic on Broadway was snarled for more than an hour. The W. 68th St. Station became a haven for lost children”. A group of women and children were treated for cuts after being pushed through a store's plate glass window. Order was gradually restored and police formed a human chain around the building to allow orderly admittance.

“Next year I'll hire Madison Square Garden and have a real party,” remarked Browning.

**MYLES SINNAMON**



As bushfires, cyclones, drought and all the sadness in the world crowd in around us, how about a little good news? But first, I need to set the scene, and the scene isn't pretty.

It's lunchtime and the boy says, not for the first time: “Are you going to finish that?” This overweight boy has just scoffed his lunch at a Brisbane cafe, finished off his sister's sandwiches and a large thickshake. After lunch he slips into a fast-food shop for a high-calorie snack. He can't seem to stop eating. He and his sister have escaped devastating family violence with their mother, moving states and are settled into a new home. She is fine. He's not.

Research shows children in violent homes are more likely to be obese at age five than those from violence-free families. Eating is comforting, when Mum is injured, in hospital, in hiding, unavailable. It's just one of the ways living with violence impacts on children. Others include grief, shame, anxiety, and regression. Some become over-protective of their mothers and siblings – the family's guardian. Some continue to walk on eggshells. Some children take no notice of their mother, who has been the powerless victim all their lives, treated like a dog in the family home.

Why would they listen to her when, now as head of the family, she says turn the television off and do your homework?

Worse still, occasionally some boys take over the role of using Mum as a punching bag. I've met one such boy. Nice kid. Face closed like a fist. Dad encouraged him to abuse his mother – hit or be hit. Sick, hey?

None of this behaviour is their fault. Children often need reprogramming. So, you see, helping families start a new life takes a lot more than just getting them out of danger. It's tough, it's complex, yet if done well, it works. And it is vital if we as a society don't want an army of damaged children walking around, becoming adults, booby-trapped with all that pain and anger inside – little time bombs.

A huge part of “making a new life” is school. The normalcy, boundaries and routine kids crave can be an essential part of the healing process. Some children thrive at school, as finally they are safe. But even the best school isn't necessarily a wonderful experience. Sometimes it can be a brutal hunting ground. Being different in the schoolyard, talking or looking different – the wrong hat or shorts – can single you out. And another world of pain begins.

Back in 2013, I was as stropy as hell about shoes, after a meeting where we learnt children staying in Queensland's DV shelters were going to school without proper school shoes and uniforms. Almost 3000 children spend time in these shelters. Most need to start afresh because the violent partner stalks their old school. Some of these traumatised children, without the right uniform, are a lightning rod for further bullying.

I foolishly thought government or a large corporation would immediately step up. No. Sisters Isabella Bevan and Carmel Martin emailed. Maybe they could help “a couple of shelters”. That morphed into

Zephyr Education Australia, a lean, efficient organisation that today supplies complete high-quality essential schooling needs – specific to each child, school, and year – for 73 shelters in Queensland. They took on Tasmania's seven struggling DV shelters and Zephyr has just started in Western Australia.

From now until Christmas, the Zephyr volunteers, mostly retirees, like some crew of sweaty, dedicated elves, will be working away in Isabella's garage in her apartment block, preparing enough school packs, uniforms and shoes for 650 children to meet the rush of kids in shelters starting new schools in January, who haven't a stick of school gear. Computers for high school students have been added. Zephyr transports the gear all over Queensland, up to Weipa, out west. It's a logistical miracle done on the smell of an oily rag, ingenuity and goodwill. Zephyr is 100 per cent volunteer with no administration costs. To donate or help: [zephyrfoundation.com.au](http://zephyrfoundation.com.au)

#### AND ANOTHER THING ...

Readers, thank you for your emails and letters throughout the year. This is the last column for 2018, as weary word-arrangers need to carry out “research”, which entails finding a quiet place to lie doggo with a box of cold cherries. An occasional gin may be involved, and many books. Am planning a Patrick White and Elizabeth Harrower jag. Give me those few essentials for Christmas and I am deeply content. Stay cool, readers, and see you on the other side.

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