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The Aussie child whisperer & THE DISNEY LAWSUIT

The Disney family is royalty in America – so when this Australian mum expelled their child from her day-care centre, the lawsuits and gossip went out of control. **Caroline Overington** visits California's most controversial crèche.

RENAE PLANT GREW up in the tiny bush town of Eumundi, Queensland, in the 1970s, which is another way of saying that her childhood was idyllic.

"I never wore shoes," Renae, 45, tells *The Weekly*. "We weren't scared of anything. I have photographs of Dad holding a king brown snake. That was our upbringing."

Nobody in Eumundi went to crèche because why would they? Aussie kids had access to push bikes and muddy puddles, which were all anyone thought they needed to grow up curious and strong. There was certainly no Baby Yoga.

"Things have definitely changed," says Renae, laughing. "Most parents these days are working. They are worried about letting their children roam free, but they don't want them sitting around bored."

Renae didn't set out to plug that gap and yet she is today director of one of the most exclusive – and expensive – childcare centres in California.

"It's a good news story," says Renae, "but maybe you've noticed that some people are trying to destroy us?"

Well, yes. Anonymous gossip about Renae and her centre started spreading across the internet earlier this year. You don't want to read the worst of it, but apparently she's loopy, she's vengeful, she's sacking staff, she's purging toddlers, she's upsetting parents – you name it and it's been said.

"Most of what gets published is anonymous," says Renae, "and that to me is cowardly, like people don't want to say what is really going on." Which is that she is being sued by the Disneys – as in, the family that built Disneyland – over her decision to expel their daughter from pre-school. Why and over what? Well, that's a playground fight that's going to take some unravelling.

HOW HIPPIY-DIPPY, crazy-la-la would a childcare centre have to be before you decided that it was too hippy-dippy for you? That's the decision parents make before sending their kids to Renae's crèche. Camelot Kids is not the kind of place where kids get plonked in a circle to play with blocks. It very definitely is the kind of place where you'll find toddlers doing Jackson Pollock spaghetti murals ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHELLE DAY

Real life ✦

**Renaë Plant at
her crèche,
Camelot Kids,
with Paco the
bilingual parrot.**



near a room painted aqua to “help to release negativity and offer mental peace” and where you’ll soon find a “Womb Room” with lolly-pink walls to remind babies of what it was like to be inside Mummy’s tummy.

Camelot Kids is in Silver Lake – hippest of the new hip towns, according to *Forbes* magazine – near Hollywood. Its new classrooms, collectively known as the Kingdom, have “environmentally sustainable bamboo floors” to teach children to be “ecologically conscious from an early age”. As for the bathrooms, “every urinal, commode, sink and even the floor is treated with Sanis UltraClean, followed by a fresh water rinse. Water is vacuumed away along with all bacteria and soil, allowing floors to dry quickly. All fixtures are blown dry so our restrooms are ready for immediate use.”

When children arrive at Camelot Kids, they are greeted by a parrot called Paco who is rumoured to speak both Spanish and English. (*The Weekly* tested this rumour; he did appear to answer to both Hello and *Hola*.) Positive interactions between parents, teachers and children are strongly encouraged. There is no such thing as “TGIF – Thank God It’s Friday” – at Camelot. There is “TGIT – Thank God It’s TODAY!” – and there’s Magic Monday, Wonderful Wednesday and so on.

Is any of it a bad thing? Absolutely not. To spend a day at Camelot Kids is to find children in all manner of fun costumes, bopping along to *Little Red Robin*. The Kingdom features a giant tree house – “the tallest place in all the Land!” – with a climbing wall, a fireman’s pole and a foam pit. Camelot Kids – they’re known as Dragons – learn sign language. They have chickens that lay eggs which parents can take home. The chickens also make compost, which gets taken to a local kitchen garden.

None of this comes cheap. Five half-days at Camelot – that’s 9am to 1pm – cost around \$20,000 a year, plus a \$750 enrolment fee, a \$2 sheet fee for “nappers”, \$25 for an earthquake kit fee – and you don’t get lunch for that. Parents are



Above: Renae and husband Livinio with their sons Mateo and Deklan and daughter Ilan at the Camelot Kids centre. Top: The controversial photo on the crèche’s website of baby Deklan with his placenta still attached.

charged \$1 a minute for being late. “We weren’t that expensive when we started,” says Renae, “but as we’ve hired more staff and built better facilities, our costs have gone up. And Camelot is a magical place. We create magic day in and day out. How can you put a price on magic?”

HOW DID A bush kid like Renae end up running a place like Camelot Kids? Well, a word of warning, before you read on. One of the criticisms of Renae is that she’s an over-sharer and it’s “creepy”. She isn’t creepy. She’s tall, with eyes like agate and a beaming, Hollywood smile. That said,

she does admit to being “really open” in a way that can be disarming.

“I know, I know, like I’m always saying to people, I’m sorry, TMI! [too much information],” she says.

With that in mind, off we go: Renae was born in 1971 to a mum who gave birth “on all fours, in less than 20 minutes”. As a girl, she attended Eumundi Primary School, which wasn’t entirely without celebrity. One of her classmates was Pat Rafter (Kevin Rudd also went to it, although he’s much older).

Renae’s dad, Colin “Mick” Plant, was a bushy-bearded Aussie who worked on the railways, rescued road-kill and got around in Stubbies. Her mum, Susan Brown, is Queensland’s “Laughter Lady”, teaching people how to relieve stress by laughing. Renae grew up idolising her parents and also Diana, Princess of Wales, whose picture is to this day on her office wall.

“I actually met her,” she says, “at the old Ginger Factory at Yandina. This was back in the day when all children were taken out of school to meet the royals. I’m running along behind them as they head out to their big black car and Lady Di drops something in the dirt. It’s a tiny little platypus made of clay and I ran up to give it back to her, but a policeman said, ‘She must have dropped it for you’.” Renae still has that platypus. She keeps it in her safe.

So far, so idyllic, but Renae’s world was rocked when she was diagnosed, at age 17, with pre-cancerous cells on her cervix.

“My first Pap smear and they were like, it’s cancer,” she says. “It was a great big growth inside and I remember thinking, how did that happen? And I knew. I was molested at age six and I never told anyone, and I must have held that anger in my uterus and it had taken the form of a tumour that needed to be expelled.” After recovering from surgery, Renae moved to Sydney and then to New York to try her luck at modelling, but “living on carrots and coffee did not suit me”.

She started a business, turning old TVs into fish tanks, before moving to ►



California to start a talent agency. Along the way, she met the man who is now her husband, Livinio, and for a while there, she also became an egg donor for strangers – not once, but five times. “After the first time, when a couple ended up with twin boys, I realised I can’t stop doing this. I just have to help more people,” she says.

Renae and Livinio got married in Cuba. Despite having been told that her uterus looked like “it had been run over by a truck”, she got pregnant fairly quickly, and she was “dying for people to say, ‘Wow, you’re pregnant’, but I could tell what they were thinking: ‘Wow, you’re fat’. I wanted to say, ‘Not fat! Bump on board!’ – so that’s how I started Bump Babies” – a range of maternity wear with “BUMP” written across the front that’s been worn by John Travolta’s wife, Kelly Preston, among others, including Renae, who gave birth to daughter Ilan in 2003 and sons Mateo in 2005 and Deklan in 2008.

“So you can imagine my life: I was running Bump, sitting on a big red yoga ball at my desk, breastfeeding for eight years and desperately wishing I could find decent childcare,” she says.

Camelot Kids was one of the first places she found. It was one room on the grounds of the local public school.

“My first two kids went there, but then when I was seven months pregnant with Deklan, they shut it down,” she says. “There were 60 parents and we’re like, where are we supposed to go? They told us Camelot was \$250,000 in debt. And it was one of those moments – you can either step up, or let the ship sink.”

Renae and Livinio stepped up, taking on the debt and the running of the centre – not exactly easy, given she was about to give birth. “You’ve seen the pictures?” she says, meaning the photographs on Camelot’s website, including one of Renae nursing while fundraising and another of baby Deklan at Camelot Kids, still with his placenta attached. Some of the snarky criticism of Renae concerns her decision to include that photograph



Above: Neda and Tim Disney have taken legal action after their daughter was expelled.

on Camelot’s website, “but leaving the placenta attached is natural,” says Renae, “when your baby comes out, the placenta is pumping with blood and oxygen, and people just chop it off and throw it away. It’s much healthier to let it shrivel up. It’s not like it bleeds everywhere. We treated it with sea salt and rosemary.”

THERE ARE PLENTY of famous-name families in the US: the Kennedys, for example, the Rockefellers, the Clintons, and then there are the Disneys, as in Walt and his brother, Roy, who together built Disneyland. Walt died in 1966, and Roy followed in 1971, but his son, also called Roy Disney, continued to work for the company, which is today valued at \$176 billion (besides theme parks, the Disney company made *Pretty Woman*, the *Star Wars* movies, *Toy Story* and many more). Roy Jnr left a \$1.6 billion fortune when he died. His son, Tim Disney, now 54, is on the board of the family foundation. He is also Chairman of the influential California Institute of the Arts, and he gives generously to a range of philanthropic causes.

Tim and his wife, Neda, enrolled their daughter in a Parent and Me class at Camelot when she was five months old. Eighteen months later, she formally became a Dragon. In legal documents filed with the

Los Angeles Superior Court, the Disneys say they took pride in being Camelot parents, donating money to build the Tree House, providing three fridges and opening their desert home near Joshua Tree for fundraising events. “They did this for the simple reason that they loved Camelot,” the complaint says, “and they sincerely believed that it offered a caring, nurturing environment.”

Last August, Renae sacked four teachers, some of whom were beloved, all on the same day. She won’t say why exactly, but there are some hints on

Camelot’s website: essentially, Renae believes some people are DUCKS (Dependent Upon Criticising and Killing Success) while others are HAPPY (Having A Pleasing Personality Year Round). HAPPY staff can confront DUCKs by saying, “You are quacking”, but if a DUCK refuses to acknowledge the problem, it may be time for “DUCK hunting season”.

To *The Weekly*, Renae says, “Call me iron-fisted. Call me whatever you want. Unlike public school, I can fire teachers ... For me, once you know it’s time to move on, it’s better to do it on your own terms. If you stay longer, you become bitter and, in the end, you are the cause of your own demise.”

In their lawsuit, the Disneys say

Camelot parents, many of whom communicate on a private Facebook page, were “abuzz” with worry about the purge. Neda asked Renae why the teachers were sacked, but says she was

told that it was basically none of her business. A short time later, Neda used the same Facebook page to invite Camelot parents to her home for an end-of-year cocktail party. Some parents wondered if one of the sacked teachers might be allowed to come. Neda says she always thought this was a bad idea and that no teachers were invited.

In any case, Renae got wind of the party and it must be said that at least a little of her famed positivity quickly evaporated. ▶

“Call me iron-fisted. Call me whatever you want. I can fire teachers.”



Left: Renae is proud of having taken a stand against what she regards as online bullying.

“Having any group parent meeting is not in anyone’s best interest,” she wrote in an email to parents, adding, “Please do not show up on the first day of school, smile to my face, then gossip behind my back and expect me to take care of your child each day ... This is not a parent co-op and this school is not run or dictated by parents.”

What’s more, any parent who turned up at the party should immediately “seek alternative care for their children ... LONG LIVE CAMELOT. Have a gorgeous day.”

Parents were startled. Had Renae threatened to expel their children? A nervous Neda promptly cancelled the party, but it was too late for their daughter. In a separate email directly to the Disneys, Renae wrote, “It makes me really sad that something you did has put [her] incredible love for Camelot in jeopardy. It is extremely dangerous behaviour and we do not tolerate that at Camelot ... we are not willing to offer a spot for [her] for the new school year.”

The Disneys were stunned. In an email to Renae, Tim said, “This is just shocking and appalling ... Renae, reflect for a moment on the fact that you have threatened to expel every family at the school – and actually expelled [our daughter] – if they talk to each other in UNAPPROVED ways or to UNAPPROVED people. That’s straight up crazy.” The Disneys sued, saying that Renae had in effect punished a four-year-old because they “had tried to discuss a

matter of the utmost concern: the education and safety of their child”.

The news soon found its way onto the internet and nasty, mostly anonymous commentary about Renae followed. She has been called “a money-hungry name dropper” and an “alpha mean girl”. Critics posted photographs of her on the floor, surrounded by empty champagne bottles. One post included a lurid description of her 40th birthday party, with anonymous attendees saying, “almost everybody was drunk ... some parents were using ecstasy and some were doing blow [cocaine]. At one point, we had to pull the bus over because this couple needed to get off to throw up.” Renae denies this, saying, “We took everyone to Long Beach, hired gondolas and watched the sunset. To then say we pulled the bus over so people could vomit is wrong. We pulled the bus over to buy more booze. Because when I throw a party, I make sure everyone has access to good-quality wine. And not chardonnay, like they said.”

Without doubt, Renae has also attracted plenty of support online, from parents who adore her and the school. There is no suggestion that the Disneys are involved in or sanction the anonymous campaign. What’s really curious is that none of the stories about

the lawsuit – without which there is no story, just gossip – named the Disneys, despite the fact that their names are on the court listing. So, while Renae was getting the hatchet, their identity remained hidden.

The Disneys’ lawyer, Jordan Susman, told *The Weekly* that the Disneys did not want to comment for this article, other than to say “the lawsuit speaks for itself”.

Later, Neda Disney called, her tone fraught with worry. She wanted to explain her family’s side of the story, she said, but she felt embarrassed by the media attention. She added that she was “suing for \$10,000 to go to the fired teachers or a charity ... We don’t want money for us, of course.”

For Renae, the issue has become one of standing up to bullying. Not by her of children and their parents, but of her online. “This has been the hardest thing I’ve ever had to endure. There were times when I felt suicidal,” she says. “But I also felt like saying, for goodness sake, this is not the end of the world. This is childcare.”

Except that, for some parents, failing to gain access to good-quality, affordable childcare can feel like the end of the world.

Cut back to the bone, this story isn’t about Camelot Kids, or Renae’s party bus, or the Womb Room. What it’s really about is anxiety: parental anxiety over what we’re doing to our kids. In less than a generation, millions of middle-class parents – not just in California, but in Australia and all over the world – have given up raising their children barefoot in

the backyard, in favour of professional childcare centres. For some, it’s been a choice; for others, a necessity.

Either way, it’s been a big shift to a patchy landscape. Some childcare

is magnificent, some is dreadful, and if you’re one of those lucky parents who have found the former, you probably feel like you’ve won the lottery. Now imagine that you were, suddenly, to lose that place and then because the care of children is now a business and business does not have to care – well, where America goes, Australia follows. This lawsuit was inevitable. ■

“This has been the hardest thing that I’ve ever had to endure.”