

Relative Values

The drug policy reformer and artist Amanda Feilding, the Countess of Wemyss and March, 73, and her son Cosmo, 31, talk about altered states of consciousness and her very unorthodox attitude to parenting. Interviews by *Caroline Scott*. Photograph by *Tom Pilston*

Amanda

I've got two boys: Rocky is the eldest and Cosmo is five years younger. Their father, Joe [Mellen], and I aren't together any more, but we were for over 25 years, we just never got married.

When the boys were small, we were quite isolated. We were living at Beckley Park, the family home [a Tudor hunting lodge near Oxford], and we didn't move in social circles particularly. I liked the peasant idea of breastfeeding for ever and sleeping in one bed.

I don't like boarding schools, so they both went to day schools. Cosi went to St Edward's, which was nearby. Everyone said: "Well, the risk is he won't get into Oxford." I did care about that, but he got in anyway. He got a first in classics at Balliol.

Joe and I worked, but quite reluctantly because he was anti making money. He's an idealistic sort, but bills had to be paid, so we had a printing press and produced beautiful multilayered prints. Our great love, though, was exploring the brain and consciousness.

In our home there were no taboos. The children never particularly smoked with me, but they knew they could. My feeling is that young people experiment, and it's better that they do it in a safe environment. The children grew up knowing that you could smoke pot and work, and even enhance your cognitive function if you're clever and combine it with other substances. Actually, Cosi stopped smoking while



he took his exams at Oxford.

I'm rather an outsider and I'm sure it's partly a result of growing up at Beckley Park. My father, Basil [the great-grandson of the 7th Earl of Denbigh and the Marquess of Bath], was highly intelligent, very anti-Establishment and a bit of a hippie. He'd paint in the day and farm at night. Money would run out, so we'd have no heating, no hot water, no petrol.

I was the youngest of four and spent a lot of time on my own as a small child. That's when I became interested in altered states of consciousness. In 1998 I set up the Beckley Foundation to research the effects of psychoactive drugs such as cannabis and psychedelics, and I've dedicated my time to that ever since. Working with Imperial College London, we published the first neuroscientific study of the impact of LSD on the human brain earlier this year.

My family gets on terribly well, but outside of that inner circle I'm not very good at relationships. I think that's to do with being completely open. Of course, one

doesn't want to embarrass one's children, and I do try not to. For years we went to the Burning Man festival. I'm a slightly known figure in those circles, so it's a bit "We have our mother with us, but what does one do? Everyone loves the old girl and her silly ways, so we'd better learn to put up with it."

Everyone loves Cosi. People warm to him because he warms to them. I love the way he looks after people, particularly society's underdogs, but he can equally talk about sports results.

I honestly think both my boys are terribly fond of me, which is lovely, and I adore them.

Cosmo

Most kids find their parents embarrassing at some point, but it was definitely more pronounced for me. I was christened Cosmo Birdie for a start. The thing people knew about my parents was that they were druggies who drilled holes in their heads. [In her twenties, Amanda carried out the ancient practice of trepanation, which people believed could improve health and wellbeing.]

As I got older, I developed a huge respect for what Mum stands for, but trust me, there was no cachet in it as a kid. She's quite bohemian and has a pronounced posh voice. I can remember her coming to pick me up at school and shouting: "Cooee Bubba!" Not really what you want.

Later, when I was about 16, I became proud of her having a rebellious nature. My friends



FREE REIN
"There were no taboos," says Amanda Feilding of family life with her son Cosmo. Above left: Amanda going to a party in 1970, an hour after her trepanation

LOVE

thought she was cool and wanted to hang out at our house. My parents were very liberal and so is my stepdad, Jamie [James Charteris, 13th Earl of Wemyss, 9th Earl of March]. Our lives weren't anarchic, but there were no rules for the sake of rules. I was well behaved, but the family joke is that my brother, Rocky, rebelled by becoming a Tory politician. [Rock Feilding-Mellen is deputy leader of Kensington and Chelsea council.]

People knew that my parents were druggies who drilled holes in their heads

Mum is a strong personality, but in a lovely way. All she wants is to be with her loved ones. Her own family isn't close — we're quite a nuclear unit: me, Rocky, my dad, Joe, and stepfather, Jamie.

Mum used to dream of things like watering deserts. She loves ideas and possibilities, and sees every new piece of drug research that her foundation does as an exciting thread. I have helped her with some of her studies and she really believes that something that can cause so much harm has the potential for great good.

Mum puts herself under stress, though. Her work has taken over to the point that it's probably not good for her. All these years she never got addicted to drugs, she just got addicted to work.

I never felt I had to experiment

STRANGE HABITS

Cosmo on Amanda

Mum's interest in trepanation, which is drilling a hole in your skull

Amanda on Cosmo

For the past 30 years, he's watched Spurs lose at football out of loyalty to his father

with drugs to be close to her, but when I did, I understood how she felt. Drugs were never taboo. I've always done things in moderation, so I guess I'm a happy consequence. If I had never taken any drugs, would she have been disappointed? Well, I haven't tried trepanning yet. Mum, Dad, my stepdad and stepmum all have and say that it works. It seems an extreme thing to do, but the curiosity is there — I'm tempted.

Growing up, Mum being a weirdo was tough at times, but there was never any doubt that Rocky and I were her number one priority. And I realise now that although she might seem weird on the outside, inside she's actually more grounded than pretty much anyone else I know ■ beckleyfoundation.org