

Eric Carle's 'miracle' reunion: After 82 years, legendary author embraces long-lost friend







Children's author Eric Carle and Florence Trovato, the inspiration for his book "Friends."
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'THE EASTER MIRACLE': REUNION OF ERIC CARLE, FLO TROVATO

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Flo Trovato paused, not far from the front door. Palm trees swayed in the Florida breeze last Sunday, a different world and more than 80 years away from a redbrick hill where she'd often visit her immigrant grandparents on the North Side of Syracuse.

She gathered herself, buoyed by the presence of her son Charles and her daughter Angela. They punched a button to announce their arrival. Bobbie Carle hurried out to greet them, wrapping them in hugs, and then they all made their way to the main door

Where Eric Carle, legendary children's author and illustrator, embraced Flo as they'd embraced some 82 years ago, when they posed for the childhood photograph that led to this reunion.

"You haven't changed at all!" Eric shouted, before they held each other for a long time.

Flo brought a bottle of champagne and a loaf of bread, which to Eric carried powerful symmetry: Flo's grandparents were landlords to Eric's family on John Street. When Eric was 6, and the Carles returned to Germany - a departure he always equates with sorrow - Leila Barresi, Flo's grandmother gave the child a loaf of warm, fresh bread to take on the trip.

Almost 83 years later, another loaf became a symbol of reunion.

The meeting was the climactic step in a reunion Bobbie Carle, Eric's wife, calls "[**The Easter Miracle**](#)." In 2014, Eric released a new children's book he titled [**Friends**](#). He built the tale around a black-and-white photo taken in Syracuse during his early childhood, a photo that showed him - as the 3-year-old son of German immigrants - hugging a small girl in a white dress.



John Street in Syracuse, today: Eric Carle's family lived, around 1930, in the third house from the corner. Florence Ciani Trovato would visit her grandparents there; she also lived for a time in the house at the corner. *Michelle Gabel | mgabel@syracuse.com*

In Syracuse, his family often moved from apartment to apartment. When a longtime colleague, Motoko Inoue, asked him about that photo in a scrapbook, Eric couldn't remember the street where the photo was taken or the name of the girl. All he recalled was that she was from a family of Italian immigrants, and that - almost certainly - she was his first true friend.

"Friends" involved an imaginary quest for the girl in the white dress. At the end of the book, Eric included the actual photo and a note for readers:

"I often think about my long-ago friend," he wrote, "and I wonder what happened to her."

That little girl, now 86, walked through his door Sunday.

Flo, a retired New Jersey school secretary, also lives in Florida. Like Eric, 85, she has vivid memories of John Street, where she'd often visit her grandparents. "Such a pleasant part of my life," Flo said.

Still, the idea that an internationally renowned author was moved by her long-forgotten friendship as a child was both touching and almost overwhelming. She had no idea what to expect when she met Eric.

Sunday, he took her by the hand. He showed her around his waterfront home on the Straits of Florida. He sat with her and paged through a book that includes memories of his Syracuse childhood.

"So sweet and soft-spoken," said Flo, any nerves quickly drained away.

"I immediately liked her," Eric said, "as if nothing had changed in 82 years."

Even after everyone settled in for a meal, Eric would occasionally smile and shake his head in disbelief. In 1932, two little children from immigrant families embraced for a quick photo on a city street in Syracuse. Eric believes his mother had the camera; Flo thinks it might have been her aunt.

They would both soon leave our city: Flo's parents took her to Brooklyn, two or three years before Eric's family went to Germany. The odds of them finding each other again seemed beyond imagination.

But this was Eric Carle, creator of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" and other children's classics. The beauty and struggles of his boyhood, he said, provide "the deep springs" of his work.

In his 80s, through the new book, he publicly announced this long-shot dream of finding his long-ago friend. At [The Post-Standard/Syracuse.com](http://ThePost-Standard/Syracuse.com), we decided - without much hope - we'd try and find the answer.

We cast a wide net, starting with old records at the [Onondaga Historical Association](#). Dead end after dead end led to what can only be called a digital Hail Mary pass, an Internet search that brought us to one Angela Trovato, in New Jersey.

She'd been looking for family history linked to her great-grandparents, the Barresis of John Street in Syracuse. After hearing the story, Angela told us there was a chance the girl in the white dress might be her mother, Florence Ciani Trovato, a Syracuse native. We contacted Flo, who was intrigued; she remembered how her relatives said she played with a "German boy" in the 1930s on John Street.

Angela found a way to prove it, beyond all doubt:

On Easter Sunday, she discovered her family not only had a copy of the original image showing Eric and Flo, together; they had a photo of the two children, arms around each other, that Eric had never seen.

"In those two pictures, we look so easy together, so compatible," Eric said.



The photo that triggered Eric Carle's search for a long-lost friend. Eric in 1932 on John Street in Syracuse, with a little girl who turned out to be Florence Ciani Trovato. *Submitted photo*

You can tell, by seeing the images, the little children were good friends.

Eric's book describes the girl moving away, an accurate memory: Flo's parents took her to Brooklyn before she started kindergarten. Her dad was a barber, and her family endured some harsh years in the Great Depression. She went to work shortly after high school, and she met and married Charlie Trovato, with whom she'd raise three children.

Charlie died in 2007, a year away from their 60th anniversary. Flo, after a lifetime of hard work, had enough left in savings to retire to Florida.

A year ago, out of nowhere, she [learned through a journalist](#) that Eric was trying to reach her. On Easter, they had a conversation by phone. They spoke of a meeting in September, but [that reunion fell apart](#):

Eric became gravely ill. For more than a month, he said, his condition was "near death." Those closest to Eric braced themselves for losing him.

Then he rallied, a turnaround described by Ann Beneduce, his editor and close friend, as "near miraculous." While he's still recovering and he sometimes makes use of a wheelchair, Eric's strength is coming back. In December, after a long break in correspondence, he contacted Flo to wish her a happy birthday.

They made plans to meet in February, at Eric and Bobbie's Florida home.

This time, nothing got in the way.

Over dinner, they looked back on their long lives after John Street: The people they've loved, the children they've raised. Flo was thrilled to learn Eric is finishing another book; the best way of staying well, she told him, is always finding a purpose.

Before Flo and her children had to leave, Eric led them on a tour of his studio. They noticed how a copy of the photo showing Eric with Flo still hangs above his desk, a photo he kept there for emotional reference while he worked on "Friends."

For Eric, the image recalls some warm and peaceful years in Syracuse, just before traumatic change. Eric's mother had grown homesick for her homeland. The family left Syracuse in the 1930s to return to Germany, where the Nazis had ascended into power.

Eric's memories of that period are intertwined with war, horrific violence, bombing raids. His father, drafted into the German army, was "physically and psychologically broken" as a Russian prisoner of war.

Once the war ended, Eric said, the decision was easy. He was still an American citizen. He left for New York City, where he eventually became a celebrated author and illustrator.

He didn't know Flo was building her own life, in the same place.

Eric never discarded the photo of the girl in the white dress, a symbol of a warm and secure time in his childhood. Sunday, he marveled out loud at how

Trovato means "found" in Italian. He wondered how different both their lives might have been if their parents had decided to settle in Syracuse.

"Clearly I loved her the way a 3-year-old can love," he said, "and she must have felt the same way about me."

He based that on what he sees in two snapshots, these two brief instants, on the North Side of Syracuse. Two little children were separated by the quiet and relentless forces that rule everyday lives, until they came together again - after almost 83 years - for an impossible reunion.

Very quickly, they felt comfort in the other's company. Before Flo left, she invited Eric and Bobbie to someday come to her home for dinner.

The meeting, in itself, was a miracle. What they learned, after more than 80 years:

They still are friends.

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