

Maura Kiely's Story

It was in 1975 when Gerard was murdered. Maura felt she would like to meet others who had experienced a similar event. There was nothing around in the Churches to enable her to do this. She met Father McEvoy who told her she had to do it and that he would help. In those days the death notices in the paper not only mentioned the people but also gave their addresses, so Maura went to the Irish News and Belfast Telegraph and started to write down the names and addresses of people whose loved one had also been a victim of the troubles. She went with the list to Father McEvoy and he told her she shouldn't just ring them. So, she started to go round the houses and ring door bells. The first person she met, she spent 4 hours with. The same happened in the second house. She felt she would make slow progress like this and had the sense that people really would like to meet. Father McEvoy told her that Corrymeela House might offer her a meeting place. So she met Ray and he offered her the meeting room in Corrymeela House and they met for the first time in September 1975. Between 80 and 100 people turned up and they began to have regular monthly meetings every first Thursday in the month. Father McEvoy, John Morrow and Ray Davey always attended these meetings. Maura didn't know anything about Corrymeela or what the Community was about and what it did. This changed when the group went to the Corrymeela Centre for a picnic in the following spring. They went on a Sunday afternoon which normally would be time off for the staff there, but all the volunteers and staff members were there to greet them and offer food and hospitality. This was in 1976. John Morrow then told Maura that his sister and her husband lived also in the Dundonald area and one day Alastair Kilgore appeared on her doorstep and invited her to come to their cell group. There she learnt more about Corrymeela. The idea for the first family week for members of the Cross Group grew out of that first meeting. This was the first time that families who had lost members in the Troubles came to the Centre as a group.

As the Troubles got worse, people were reluctant to leave their area and come to Corrymeela House, so they started meeting in the East, North, South and West of the City. For the members of the Cross Group Corrymeela became the place they could go for a holiday. Maura continued to attend the cell group and Ray asked her whether she and Edmund would become members. This happened in 1977 and she still did not really understand what Corrymeela was about. But it felt important. Maura had grown up as a Catholic and had experienced Northern Ireland as a bigoted place. At 18 with a good qualification she came to Belfast to work at Stormont where she experienced discrimination because she was a Catholic, but as she was soon to marry which meant leaving the civil service, she was not too worried. She could later see that Corrymeela was somehow trying to undo her experience. She moved into her house and was the only Catholic in the area. She hadn't been aware at the time that this was a strongly loyalist area. Her neighbour was the head of the civil service, but estates like Ballybeen and Tullycarnet were not far away. Maura told the story of two men coming to visit her not so long ago after the funeral of their mother. They wanted to apologise to her because they made Gerard as a small boy walk in their children's parade up and down the street on the 12th July beating a drum. While Gerard perhaps enjoyed it they were aware that they did it to tease him and they were sorry about this now. Maura was the sort of person who accepted things and just got on with life as she found it, and generally this worked for her. Deep down though, she knew that Catholics were being treated unfairly and, without fully understanding it, she sensed that Corrymeela was trying to do something about it.

For Maura some of the highlights were Summer Fest where she was involved in the planning group. The visit of Mother Theresa was a very special event that has stayed with her. For her it was important to see so many people from different walks of life being together, worshipping together and learning together. Summer Fest brought in people from all the Churches which wasn't always happening in other parts of the programme. This was particularly important to Maura as she felt that Corrymeela was (and still is she believes) very Presbyterian and that so often she had been the

token Catholic. However, it did not matter to her. She liked going to the Centre to help in the kitchen so that Mary her daughter could be at the Centre. Mary loved the place and she made many friends there, friends that she is still in touch with. For Maura it was not about Mary meeting Protestants as she was already doing it in the street and neighbourhood, but more about the values and ethos of the Centre. However, she remembered one event which was upsetting. At a worship different people were asked to say the Lord's Prayer in their own language and so it was said in German, French, English etc. Mary got up to say it in Irish which caused a great uproar, and it took Father McEvoy some time to calm the situation.

Being in Corrymeela has not changed her attitudes. She has a strong faith and is a committed Catholic. For her the hope is that we can have a shared future where we accept and respect everyone and give each other space. She retains her own opinions which she wants others to respect and in turn she will respect theirs.

Things have changed in her area. There are now more Catholic families and while they still send their children to Catholic schools, not all go to Church regularly. This is one of the changes she has notice most over the years.

Maura hasn't been staying at the Centre for a number of years. She misses the old house and the informality of it, e.g. she remembers mass being said in a bedroom. The Sunday Services were always Protestant. This did not worry her. The cell group was important to her as was the Mill Group. It was a way of meeting with Corrymeela people. She remembers difficult discussions around the time of the election of Bobby Sands. She feels that some of the hard-line attitudes expressed at that time have now changed.

It was the Cross Group which raised awareness of families who had lost members through the trouble and their pain and need which brought Maura to Corrymeela. In turn the Cross Group lead to the formation of Wave and Maura was also involved in setting up Cruise.

For Maura, Corrymeela was a vehicle to express her needs. This in turn contributed to giving Corrymeela a sense of purpose and identity. Maura was always called upon to talk about the Cross Group to groups visiting the Centre. Did Corrymeela shape Maura? She feels, not though she would accept that it enriched her life by providing her with good supportive friends who are still around for her. She feels that it did influence and shape her daughter.