

## **Diana Walker/Laird's Story**

This was written by Diana herself.

To begin at the beginning. It must have been way back in the mid-seventies, when, one winter's day, I was doing nothing more exciting than ironing and listening to 'Woman's Hour', when I first heard about the Corrymeela Community. I can't remember now whether it was a man or woman extolling the virtues of Corrymeela, only that I was inspired by what I had heard. At long last some 'good news' coming out of Northern Ireland! I had actually spent my formative years in N. Ireland, indeed, until about the age of nine. As one only remembers the sunny days of one's childhood, I was therefore extremely saddened when the only news coming out of N. Ireland was that of the bomb and the bullet and tragic tit for tat sectarian atrocities. I then endeavoured to make contact with Corrymeela and was introduced to John Martin, Coordinator of the newly formed Link, this marking the beginning of a long, supportive, fruitful and happy association.

One of the highlights for me in years gone by was the Summer Programme, the making of memories. I always felt that I gained so much more than I could ever give as a 'family week' helper. So many incidents come to mind. One in particular stands out, during a week spent with the Cross Group. (This group was formed by Maura Kiely after the tragic death of her son Gerard, a young student of great promise at Queen's University. He was gunned down one Sunday evening as he emerged from Chapel after Mass. He had no connection or involvement whatsoever with any para-military organisation. After much pain and soul searching, Maura was persuaded to contact others who had suffered similar bereavement, and, as a result the 'Cross Group' came into being.) We were all sitting around chatting after a day of sun, sand and sea, when one of the younger women suddenly ran upstairs in floods of tears, she was quietly followed by a member of the group and I was informed that her young son of sixteen had recently been shot, by mistake, by the army and killed. He had a paintbrush in his hand! There was so much fear and uncertainty at the time, consequently, it was therefore inevitable that numerous tragedies such as this would occur. I suppose that only someone who had experienced a similar bereavement, such as a member of the Cross Group, could even begin to understand the pain that young mother was suffering. It was a privilege to have lived with this group for a week. Possibly one of the most humbling experiences of my life.

Inevitably, and on the whole, our lives are taken up with making choices, and for some people these choices must be extremely difficult. For several years, during the Summer programme I became involved with families referred and funded by the NSPCC to enable them to come to Corrymeela for a holiday break. One family's story in particular, has stayed with me, it concerned a mother and her teenage daughter from her first marriage. Apparently, the mother had subsequently re-married, had several more children, when it was discovered that husband No. Two had been sexually abusing his stepdaughter for several years. Consequently, she was given the choice of either remaining with husband No. Two and having her daughter taken into care, she chose the former. As a result she was only able to meet up with her daughter very occasionally in a safe venue designated by the NSPCC. I often think about this family and wonder how they survived the inevitable pain and trauma caused as a result of this extremely difficult decision and what could be subsequently a horrendous situation.

I am sure the Summer Programme would not have been such fun without the ministrations and presence of George Gibson and Fred Hirsch. George, our music man, our piper, inspired and enthralled both children and adults alike. He was so very gifted, played various musical instruments, had infinite patience, whilst, at the same time managed to have a calming effect on any disruptive children. His gifts were invaluable during preparations for the weekly concerts and daily children's worship. I am sure he must be entertaining the angels now! I can still hear his theme song 'I am the music man, and I can play ...' What can I play?' and then we were off! Fred was also an incredible asset to our family weeks. He even played and splashed with the children in the freezing Irish Sea (way beyond the call of duty) whilst we, the other helpers imbibed in hot coffee on the beach! Fred attempted to do a 'King Canute' by damming the Irish Sea with his young aides (nothing was impossible) and he also encouraged their building skills by helping to create some amazing sandcastles. Like George he had infinite love and patience with the children, some of whom were obviously very disturbed and traumatised. Fred was such a good sport and was happy to join in any game or activity – even of being buried up to his neck in sand! Sadly, George and Fred are no longer with us, they are now rejoicing with the angels. George and Fred were only two of many volunteers who gave so unstintingly of themselves. Their time and talents. We were truly blest in their company and shall be eternally grateful to them for leaving us very many happy memories.

So many small incidents combined, make up the rich colourful tapestry of Corrymeela.

Introductions are made at the beginning of each new family week, staff and helpers identifying themselves by dressing up in some outlandish outfit relating to their role in the week ahead. As you can imagine, this performance helps to 'break the ice', can be extremely hilarious, thus setting the scene for the forthcoming planned activities. However, amongst the new arrivals were two young people, twin girls of thirteen years - not in the least impressed, and more or less inferring that we had all gone stark staring mad! They had obviously been brought along under duress. They were the youngest of a family of eight children, where, a widow had reared them all single-handedly, and was in dire need of a holiday. After twenty-four hours of sulking and being obstreperous, they decided that Corrymeela was not so bad after all and began to join in the various activities with great enthusiasm, so much so, that by the end of their stay, they were the ones who cried loudest and longest on the Corrymeela bus as it wended its way down the hill, vowing to return when they reached the required age enabling them to act as volunteers.

In some respects, it is very easy to forget the wider world when involved in a Corrymeela family week. However, this week was different, there was an imperceptible tension in the air. Bobby Sands, (a resident in the Maze Prison at the time) the first of the hunger strikers was nearing death. Others had joined him; they were all protesting against imprisonment without trial. Sadly, the inevitable happened, Bobby Sands, when he died, became the first martyr of the Maze. This event could have had a devastating effect on the remaining days of those resident groups from both sides of the conflict, Nationalists and Unionists, sharing a holiday at Corrymeela. We had heard of the women who had taken to the streets of Belfast protesting loudly by clashing bin lids – a terrifying sound for some under the circumstance. Thankfully, the groups had gelled sufficiently to enable them to share their hopes and fears, which they did way into the wee small hours. And so ended a Summer Programme family week with difference.

Ye another story comes to mind of a family whose young Mum courageously coped alone with several wee tots. All her brood suffered from learning difficulties thus creating an added problem for her, she was absolutely worn out, and we endeavoured to ensure she enjoyed a complete rest and holiday to remember. Several of us were assigned 'a child', and believe you me, it was a full-time job! My young charge was like 'quicksilver', and as a consequence, one had to be constantly vigilant and on the alert. One morning, whilst dressing my adoptee, we hunted high and low for his shoes, eventually, he took me by the hand and led me to the perimeter of the cliff top, tearfully informing me that he had thrown the offending shoes 'over the mountain' – scary!!! Fortunately, Corrymeela carried a lot of 'spares' to cover such an eventuality. Incidents such as this made me realise more than ever, that we live in an unequal world, when I consider the burdens some people have to bear.

Very many years ago I received a request for the late John Martin, Coordinator of the Link to represent Corrymeela at a prestigious conference on N. Ireland at Ushane College in Co Durham. My immediate instinct was to refuse, there was no way I could stand up and talk coherently in front of such an august group, which included Gerry Fitt, M.P, Monsignor Michael Buckley, Bishop Swindlehurst, plus several other prominent speakers with Fr. Kevin O'Keiff who chaired the proceedings. However, to cut a long story short, my first husband, John Walker, persuaded me to take part. I asked everyone I knew to pray for me and tried to forget that I had actually acquiesced and agreed to attend during the run-up to conference day. Inevitably, the day dawned, the sun shone, I felt sick! John drove me to Ushane, I arrived, knees knocking clutching my wee sandwich bag. I was welcomed, informed that my contribution would be the grand finale in the chapel (the size of a cathedral!) and very beautiful, which meant I had to endure hours of agonising waiting before I was my turn to take part. I groaned inwardly. The conference began, I was fascinated and captivated by the interesting content of each participant, and very quickly forgot about self! Lunch time came, and I was about to enjoy my simple repast, when I was informed that, as a guest speaker, I was to eat with the 'rich and famous', the sandwiches were hastily crammed into my bag! The afternoon speaker turned out to be equally spellbinding. 4pm was upon me, I had to line up in the vestry with clergy, ordinands etc. My 'hit' was incorporated into the Mass – what a privilege! Low and behold, I knew one of the students quite well as he had been a volunteer with the Tyneside Cyranians. I explained the reason for my presence, he was very reassuring and miraculously an amazing calm pervaded mind. The prayers had worked, thank God! The students collared me afterwards, did we have a local Corrymeela Support Group, No? I must start one, they promised their help and encouragement, and, as a result, the Northumbria Corrymeela Support Group came into being. God really put me 'through the mill' that day, no doubt about it, he, she, certainly works in mysterious ways