



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by Professor Nuala Finnegan, UCC, on 9 November 2023 in the Royal College of Physicians on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa on Mary Crilly

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Mary Crilly is a founder member and Director of the Sexual Violence Centre Cork and I am particularly pleased to be presenting this award in this its fortieth anniversary year of providing services to victims of sexual violence in Cork. Mary is originally from Fairview, Dublin and moved to Cork as a separated mother with her two young daughters. She was asked by a contact to join a group of women as they discussed the setting up of a Rape Crisis Centre, to mirror the model that had already been established in Dublin. The Cork Rape Crisis Centre was duly established in 1983, later becoming the Cork Sexual Violence Centre, and, as mentioned, this year marks 40 proud years of its existence where she remains at the helm. Of its early phase, she writes in a piece in the Cork newspaper, the *Echo*, that she gave it 6 months. Originally located in the Quay Co-Op which functioned very much as a counter-cultural hub in Cork in that period, they were raided by the Special Branch after 9 months and told to pack up and go home by the Superintendent. In deeply conservative 1980s Ireland, working to support victims of sexual violence was seen as a profoundly anti-family gesture and support for the establishment of refuges for those fleeing abuse, a mechanism for the breaking up of the sanctity of the Irish family. The toxic pervasiveness of myths pertaining to victims of sexual violence ran deep and there was much abuse of Mary, of the people who worked at the Centre and raised funds, and of the many women and men who suffered abuse.

Paula Meehan’s extraordinarily powerful, “This Poem is a Zone of Sanctuary”, written in Mary’s honour on the occasion of her receipt of the Freedom of the City by Cork in June 2022 captures something of the energy generated by the work of the Centre:

this poem is a zone of
sanctuary it will speak the
unspeakable [...]
it promises a language to bind body to
soul its business is truth
its business is justice
it holds these words as a solemn promise to those shackled in hells of earthly
torment it will carry your witness a cherished gift
it opens its doors to all who need shelter
it is humbled by your courage when you cross the
threshold it takes your hand
it unclenches your fist finger by finger
it opens to the light the lines of your future that channel your energy to make yourself
whole this poem is a poem of sanctuary
its words are refuge from the abusers of words
[...]

The fledgling centre has gone from strength to strength providing services to victims of sexual violence in Cork city and county. Its renaming as the Cork Sexual Violence Centre, as distinct from the Rape Crisis Centre, was important. It had the effect of broadening the mission and transforming the perception that the Centre responded only to individual cases of rape to provoking a wider conversation about the destructive impact of sexual violence including familial sexual abuse and trafficking, on individuals, families and broader society. Critically, it empowered men to come forward – today men make up 20% of the Centre’s service users – and its links to other categories of vulnerability like homelessness, are well-known.

The mission of the Centre is to educate, advocate and provide counselling care for victims of sexual violence. Their core values include survivor centred care, holistic and humanistic care. They operate an open door policy, and maintain a commitment to hold perpetrators to account, and to develop and nurture local national and international networks. It is Mary who epitomizes the values of the Centre and it is those values that we celebrate today as we honour her life's work with this award. The centre operates a Telephone Helpline, supports Attendance at the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit (SATU), offers, Crisis Support, Counselling, psychotherapy and art therapy, Court Accompaniment, Advocacy and Referral as well as the Preparation of Victim Impact Reports. Now, thoroughly professionalized in all its dimensions, communications strategies are effective, coordinated and well planned. A recent example from 2018 is the #Fixed- it campaign. Drawing its inspiration from journalist, Jane Gilmore, it set out to challenge the media and re-write headlines to combat the perpetuation of stereotypes and dangerous myths that contribute to misinformation and victim-blaming. The campaign was run on Twitter and Instagram whereby pieces of text from well-known publications were re-written, and "fixed" tagging the news sources so they could see the new headlines and by-lines directly. True to the Centre's mission it has built up a powerful network of international contacts and Mary has worked with multiple organizations globally, having just returned from participating in a project against human trafficking in San Francisco and currently engaging in a consultation exercise with activists in Lithuania to name but two recent examples.

A dedicated feminist activist, Mary worked initially in a voluntary capacity at the Centre, gradually moving into paid roles through different employment schemes. The first person in her family to finish the Leaving Certificate, she went on to graduate with a Diploma in The Psychology of Criminal Behaviour from University College Cork and subsequently, the MA in Women's Studies with a thesis on gender-proofing of City/County development plans. She compiled a guide for victims of Sexual Violence in 2007 – victim-centred and full of compassion. Mary has witnessed and been party to much of the change in Irish society and institutional responses to sexual violence for the past four decades. She is most noted for her tireless campaigning for policy and

legislative change in the fields of sexual violence, sex trafficking, domestic violence and she advocates for a radical re-imagining of our adversarial legal system. She believes that the young people of our country are key to effecting change and when I have had the pleasure of working with her on many initiatives at UCC, femicide vigils, fund-raisers, flashmobs, I can attest to the fact that Mary is always there when students and young people are involved or need her help. Indeed her current work in Safe Gigs sees her at festivals the length and breadth of the island.

And so, we salute Mary's "magnificent wildness" to quote another line from Paula Meehan's memorable poem, as I have the honour and privilege of presenting her for the award of Honorary Doctor of Laws.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hanc meam filiam quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.