

Twenty One Years Evolving Cork Rape Crisis Centre 1983 – 2004

By Esther N. McCarthy



International Women's Day is celebrated worldwide on March 8th every year. On International Women's Day 1983, Cork Rape Crisis Centre opened its door to provide services to victims of Rape for the

first time. This year, Cork Rape Crisis Centre marked 21 years of service provision. The Centre offers vital services for women and men who have been sexually assaulted. Mary Crilly is synonymous with the success of the Centre which has evolved and developed so much in the last two decades that it is changing its name to the Sexual Violence Centre, to reflect the full range of services provided for victims of abuse.

Pure Fluke
When the softly spoken Dublin lady moved to Cork in 1977, it



wasn't her intention to get involved in anything remotely like the Centre. "It was pure fluke, really. A neighbour in my housing estate asked me to come along to a meeting; there was about 7 or 8 of us in the beginning. I had never been involved in women's groups or anything like that, I was separated with two young children and a job in the civil service. I never imagined that 21 years later, this is where I'd be."

Milestone

The road less travelled by is often the most arduous. That the Centre has survived, much less thrived is testament to the determination and tenacity of Mary and others like her. In 1982, there had been just 12 rapes reported in Cork and 80 reports national. Rape was not something that was openly talked about, there was a shame and a secrecy that accompanied the term and that made it difficult for people to deal with. "There have been many lonely times and some very hard times," admits Mary. "When we started out, people used to ask us why we hated men so much. There were a lot of misconceptions about what we were trying to achieve. We simply wanted to help people who had no where else to turn." Milestones have a tendency of tapping you on the shoulder and politely but insistently asking you to reflect on your life. Having reached their 21st birthday, Mary couldn't help but muse on what the Centre was all about. "Many of our clients have been abused as children, we have men ringing us up, there is a significant increase in the number of young people who are seeking help. The average figure of reported sexual assaults in Cork City and County last year was roughly 160. Bearing in mind that only 1 in 4 victims report an assault and you can see that there is a lot of work to done."

80% Know Attacker

There are numerous reasons people don't want to report crimes of a sexual nature. Some may feel that they won't be believed, that the blame may somehow be directed towards them, that they may have deserved it for some reason. Research shows that a staggering 80% of victims know the person who raped them, which makes the prospect of going to the police all the more daunting. "People try to turn rape into something that happens between two people, that it's nobody else's business and

as long as society keeps minimising these crimes, they will continue. I've seen lives that have been completely destroyed because a member of the family or a close friend assaulted them and it's taken them years to actually tell anyone about it. The burden, the toll of carrying something like that around with you every day is enormous and I think anyone who can muster the courage to ring us up or call in to us and is ready to deal with what has happened to them is just so brave. It's a very hard thing to do," asserts Mary. The centre has a FreeFone number, 1800 496 496 and a staff of highly trained, fully accredited counsellors who will see the client within 24 hours of the call. Most clients are seen once a week for a year and a half, depending on the individual. The service is free. Mary believes another reason that a lot of people don't report crimes is the implementation of the law. With less than a 5% conviction rate, Mary feels very frustrated with the whole process and feels the perpetrators of the crimes are the ones who are protected, with many cases not making it to courts and psychiatric reports being sought before cases will go ahead. "There's a case at the moment, this guy is being charged with possessing images of child pornography and the case has been adjourned 9 times because there's a big issue about whether he can pay for his treatment or not. Victims don't get that choice. What kind of message are the courts sending out?" demands Mary.



Burn Out

Most of us are lucky enough to be able to walk out of the office everyday and leave work behind. For others, this is not an option. Through the early years, the seeming futility, the endless hours, the constant

strain and Mary's own inability to switch off took its toll. "Over the years, I did burn out," Mary admits, in her usual open and honest manner. She is very transparent, this confident, compact woman and all that is visible is her real desire to help people. She has no ulterior motive, no hidden agenda. She's somewhat of a dichotomy, for while she is open and gentle, there's steel beneath the softness. There's a lioness lingering, this lady is a fighter. "I went through a stage where I was trying to do everything, when I was so immersed in everything that I went to counselling myself. It was a wake-up call for me really and I suppose it exposed my own vulnerability and helped me take a step back." Her own experience of going through the process of counselling allows Mary a certain perspective and she can empathise with those who are receiving counselling through the centre. She has come through the bad times and the future is looking bright, both in her personal and professional life. Mary's two daughters grew up accustomed to their crusading mother and are very proud of all she has achieved. 24-year-old Sarah is studying Women's Studies in UCC and Niamh, 23 is in the CIT studying Computers. The renovated building in Camden Quay is a marvel to behold, with three stories of bright, comfortable counselling and meeting rooms and with the new name, the Centre is surging forward.

Funding

Funding is always a huge issue for organisations such as Mary's. Last year the Centre received EU183, 800 from the Southern Health Board, who are the only source of statutory funding for the Centre. This amounts to 47 cents per head of population in Cork City and County. It costs a minimum of €350,000 to run the Centre and it's dependant on fundraising and donations for the remainder of its operational costs, and for all developmental work. In March, Mary launched a Patron Scheme as a means of generating addition revenue in 2004 and the years beyond. "I really feel this scheme will be strongly supported by the Private Sector and individuals," says Mary. The Centre has been designated an eligible charity by the Revenue Commissioners, which render donations of €250 and over eligible for tax relief. *

Imperative Services

Dr. Mary McCaffery, Lady Mayoress has a long established relationship with the Cork Rape Crisis Centre and has been one of its biggest



supporters. A gynaecologist based in Tralee, Dr. McCaffery also runs the Infertility Clinic in the Erinville hospital. She's very aware of the consequences sexual assault can have on the physical and psychological well being of women. "As a gynaecologist, I see women who desperately need the support and counselling that Centres like the Rape Crisis Centre can provide. Any sexual unit I ever worked in would always have volunteers to offer counselling after an exam. It's hugely important that women are supported at this acute time. Every woman deserves access to these imperative services. It's thanks to people like Mary Crilly, whose commitment and dedication is enormous, that this crucial help is available to women. Mary gives so much of her own time and of her self to this. She's to be commended. I believe the need for a more structured service around the whole country needs to be addressed. A lot more funding is vital for both the medical aspect of sexual assault and the counselling side of things."

That there is sexual violence in our City is a lamentable reflection on our society. That there are people like Mary Crilly in that same society and places to combat that most insidious of crimes, is something for which we should all be extremely thankful.

*For more information on the Patron Scheme, contact Mary on 021 450 5736 or email info@sexualviolence.ie
www.sexualviolence.ie