

# HISTORY OF DROGHEDA HOMELESS AID

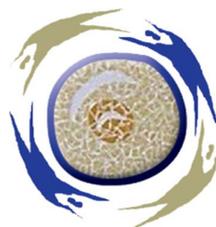
By Sr. Cait Fitzgerald



There had been a long tradition in Drogheda for the Daughters of Charity to provide disadvantaged persons with vouchers for food and other necessities and to provide advice and assistance when this was sought. However in some cases it was not certain that the people would use the vouchers for food, therefore it became necessary to establish a meal service. In 1983 Sr. Cait Fitzgerald established a meal service, comprising breakfast and mid-day lunch for persons who had no means of support, who were homeless and in many cases had alcohol and other addiction problems. This service was provided in a recently vacated building belonging to the Daughters of Charity in Fair Street. About 10 to 12 persons attended on a regular basis. Due to the many needs of this group other services were made available to them at the Centre, e.g. a bath or change of clothes. It quickly became apparent that those attending for meals had no fixed place to go at night and that some form of sheltered housing was required to meet their needs.

An advertisement was placed in the local newspaper inviting interested persons to attend a public meeting on homelessness in the Parochial Hall. This advertisement was placed by Roisin Carton who had, through her work in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, become familiar with the needs of some of the homeless. The meeting was attended by a large number of people. Sr. Cait addressed the meeting and informed everyone of the meal service in Fair Street. A further meeting was held the following week in Fair St .and this was attended by about 12 persons. From this group the Drogheda Homeless Aid Group was established. They met on a weekly basis, and set up a rota for preparing and serving the evening meal.

Food runs in the housing estates in Drogheda were organised on a monthly basis and the response from the people was excellent. Fund raising activities were also organised and the group continued on the look out for new premises.



## The Cottage

A small cottage in Newtownstalaban was offered by its owner Mr Tom O Reilly, Coal Merchant, to be used by Drogheda Homeless Aid. The cottage was occupied at the time by three homeless men, all well known characters in Drogheda, who were availing of the meals service in Fair St.

In January 1984 some improvements were carried out to the cottage by Anco a state-funded employment organisation. Bunk-beds, bed linen, kitchen equipment and curtains were all donated by friends of the group. These women and men did Trojan work, giving generously of their time and expertise. Special mention must be made to Roisin Carton who took responsibility for the refurbishing and cleaning. It was decided to commence having breakfast and lunch at the Cottage and the evening meal at the Centre in Fair Street. Two members served the evening meal in Fair Street and sent down provisions for breakfast and lunch to the Cottage in Newtown. This job was delegated to one of the Homeless men.

By September'84 all meals were served and prepared at the Cottage as the Centre was being sold to the Community Services. Roisin Carton took a lot of responsibility for this service, often cooking the meals in her own home.

Sr Cait was a member of Vincent de Paul Society and approached Paddy Manly, President, for the use of their premises in Fair Street as a Clothes Shop. This request was granted on a temporary basis, and we opened the Shop on Saturday mornings in May 1984. Mollie Kierans took responsibility for this and we ran the shop for twelve months until it reverted back to St. Vincent de Paul.

Premises were then rented from Malachy McCloskey in Scholes Lane for our clothes shop. Patricia Gilmartin was employed under the Manpower Scheme, a state-funded employment organisation and she took responsibility for the running of it with a few volunteers. This lasted for twelve months, when we were obliged to vacate it. Paul Lappin then came to our assistance and procured a place for us in Mayoralty Street. Roisin Clarke took over, as Patricia Gilmartin had completed her time.

The Clothes Shop folded in August of 1998, as Paul Lappin needed his premises and Roisin Clarke's position then ended, as we had failed to procure new rent-free premises.

At our meeting on 23rd June 1984 the Group formally became The Homeless Aid Committee.

Don Gardiner was elected Chairperson.

Roisin Carton, Vice Chairperson

Sean O'Connor, Treasurer.

Colette O'Connor, Secretary.

Sr. Carmel Raftery P.R.O.

The following were also present: Mollie Kierans, Aafke Clarke, David Mulligan, May Ross, Patricia Mulligan, Sr. Evangelist Presentation, and Sr. Cait Fitzgerald D.C. .

Some weeks later Srs. Edel and Veronica M.M.M., Maureen Dunne, Pius Brown, Jim Meehan



and Eileen O Callaghan joined. The M.M.M. Sisters were replaced by Sr Florrie Goold in April 1985.

While the Cottage in Newtown was a great boon, and we learned a lot from this experience, lack of supervision was a big drawback and space was inadequate. We began to fund-raise in earnest and to seek alternative accommodation. Paul Lappin was on the lookout for a suitable location and we looked at various sites and buildings. Eventually Paul came up with 35 North Strand, Drogheda in September 1985

The premises consisted of two houses and a two-storied garage attached. The owner was Teresa Smith. Those who had seen the premises thought it was ideal for the group and we agreed to purchase it. We decided to purchase the dwelling house and the attached garage for £28,000 and the repairs cost approx £10,000. Community Chest Lottery gave us a loan of £10,000. The Daughters of Charity donated £10,000, the Cistercian Monks in Collon £5,000 and Drogheda Cares at Christmas £2,500. The remainder was collected through fund raising activities.

The purchase of the house was kept secret until February 1986 when news broke out that Drogheda Homeless Aid had purchased 35 North Strand as a shelter for homeless men. The residents of the Cord Road and North Strand set up an action group to campaign against the shelter. Dermot Kierans, Community Services, offered to act as an intermediary and held discussions with both groups. The Drogheda Independent gave great coverage to this saga and a reporter from Telefis Eireann (now RTE) came to the shelter and interviewed Sr. Carmel.

Sr. Carmel had a good sense of humour and was a great source of encouragement to us during this difficult period. It was Sr. Carmel who suggested that we take possession of our new property so in spite of all opposition we decided to take up residence on Friday 8th March 1986.

Sr. Carmel and Maureen Dunne moved in that night one of the homeless men. Sr. Carmel left in June 1990 to take up a mission in Ecuador, South America. Mollie Kierans took over the job of P.R.O.

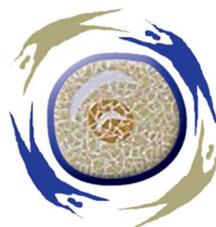
## **Saint Joseph's**

The men from the Cottage moved in to the new premises. Our Committee meetings were then held in 35 North Strand and we decided to name it "Saint Joseph's".

Life went on and we were very busy with bingo and the clothes shop and other fund-raising activities. We needed a cooker, fridge, tables and chairs for the kitchen, also chairs for the sitting room and beds for upstairs. Regular meetings were held with the residents to iron out little problems such as house duties & rules.

In September 1986, Dr. Harry Barry attended our meeting. He offered his services as a voluntary counsellor to the group. He made many valuable suggestions for the group to think about.

We had reached the first stage of rehabilitation, caring for basic needs. We must now continue to put a challenge before the residents rather than encourage them to be



comfortable and continue their drinking habits. Harry also suggested that Antiboose tablets be administered in the house to assist the men who were struggling with alcohol addiction.

Dr Barry pointed out that there are three stages of rehabilitation. First the biggest enemy is boredom so we need an activity centre. Second stage is preparation for employment for those who are employable so it was necessary to contact groups that provide employment such as Manpower. Third stage is preparation for and procuring accommodation in the community.

In 1994 Ms Kathleen Byrne, Counsellor came once a fortnight on work experience. Kathleen continued this service on a voluntary basis for which we were most grateful.

Eileen O Callaghan was appointed Treasurer in 1985 and Jim Meehan her assistant. Mary Walsh was appointed Bookkeeper. Jim left to further his training and Sr. Florrie took over as Assistant Treasurer until 1991 when Eileen O Callaghan was transferred. Sr. Florrie then took care of the finances until 2000 and beyond. Peggy Carey was appointed Bookkeeper when Mary Walsh left due to family commitments. Peggy continued until 2000.

Colette O Connor was Secretary until 1994 when Siobhan Owens was appointed. Mairin Dunne took over as Secretary in 1985 and Sr.Cait took over when Mairin left in November 1986. Sr. Cait held that post until 2000.

I would like to pay tribute to all our past Treasurers and Secretaries. In addition to these duties they were also involved in preparing and cooking the evening meal. They also built a good rapport with the residents and generously gave of their time to them.

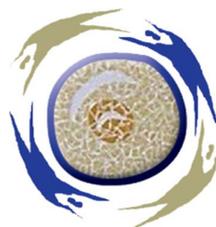
Approximately eighty men were accommodated each year in Saint Joseph's. Their stay varied from over-night to approximately eighteen months. They were helped with their problems and encouraged to seek employment and move back into the community. Some found they had to return to St Joseph's on more than one occasion until they were fully ready for independent living.

Many of our residents had psychiatric problems and Dr. Fred Breen, from Saint Brigid's Hospital, Ardee arranged to send Dr. Subai on a trial basis to meet our vulnerable residents. This was a great support.

The E.E.C. free beef and butter scheme was announced in March 1987. We collected our quota each month from a designated cold store. This was a great boon to us and a significant saving on our food bill.

In July 1987 we had an inspection from the Fire Officer and on his recommendation we had to install fireproof doors, emergency lights, fire alarms and a fire escape in St Joseph's. We contacted Arthur O Leary, retired architect from Los Angeles, who had previously offered us his services, to advise us on the fire escape. Arthur drew up plans for this and also for wardrobes, which we installed in the bedrooms. We received a grant of £8,000 from Social Welfare to do this work.

At this time we also received a grant from Combat Poverty Agency (C.P.A.), which we used to purchase a second hand pool table and to furbish the garage as a recreation area. The second floor was converted into a dormitory to accommodate six men. This dormitory was



unofficially named by the men as 'Siberia' as although heated it was the colder end of the building.

In 1988 Gerry O'Brien was elected Chairman to replace Don Gardiner and he held this position until his untimely death in October 1990. He was very popular with members of the statutory bodies and he gave a considerable contribution to the development of Homeless Aid. He was a good friend to the residents.

## **The Research**

The new Housing Act 1988 obliged Housing Authorities to pay a contribution to Voluntary Organisations towards the homeless. Tony Tynan, Director of Simon Dundalk, arranged to meet Gerry O'Brien, our chairman, with the suggestion we carry out a research on homelessness in the county with a view to put pressure on Housing Authorities to bring the Act into operation. We sought funding for this research from C.P.A. and S.V.P. . The S.U.S offered to do this research for us.

Brian Dillon and Jo Murphy Lawless commenced the research on 1st August 1989. They spent some days in St Joseph's and in Simon Dundalk getting to know the men and interviewing them. They also interviewed the ladies in Ship Street and visited the Family Centre in Saint Finian's Park. They met the Social Workers, Housing Officer and Marie Clarke Manager of the Community Services Centre.

An advisory body was set up to assess the research and take it a step further. This consisted of: Tony Tynan, Denis O Callaghan from Simon, Dave Redmond and Brian Dillon from S.U.S., Gerry O'Brien and Sr. Cait from Homeless Aid, Jim Coussins from C.P.A. and a representative from St. Vincent de Paul.

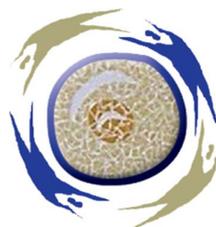
The final draft of the Report was printed by Collon Printing Shop.

A Seminar was arranged on 20th February 1990 and Rory O Hanlon, Minister for Health was invited to launch the Report in the M.M.M. Auditorium. It was an Awareness day and many organisations in the town were represented. Patsy Fitzsimons, Housing Officer attended and Paddy Lavin, County Manager arrived for the open forum. Workshops were held and reports from them were as follows:

- (a) Representatives from the various organisations to work together to devise a policy whereby the homeless can be helped and supported during the various transitional stages
- (b) Involvement of the residents themselves.
- (c) Filling in of entrance forms.
- (d) Youth homelessness was also discussed. Jo Murphy Lawless has done research on this for C.P.A. She felt that a project for youth at risk would be funded by C.P.A. provided the application was properly presented.

Michael Clarke was elected Chairman in 1990 and served in the position for two years. Sean O'Connor, was then elected Chairman after Michael's retirement at the next A.G.M in June 1992, and held this position until the year 2000.

There are no words that could do justice to Sean and his contribution to Homeless Aid. His expertise and experience in dealing with the Homeless situation and the respect and



compassion he showed to each resident was truly remarkable.

Mollie Kierans donated a plot in St Peter's cemetery, for those who had no family and named it "The Community Plot" .

Mollie Kierans, who worked generously for Homeless Aid, was a great fundraiser. She passed away in November 1999 after a brief illness and had requested a collection be taken up at her funeral Mass for Homeless Aid, instead of donating flowers. This amounted to £480. May her generous soul rests in peace.

On Sunday the 15th November 1987 Homeless Aid held an open day to thank the people of Drogheda for their support and to enable them to come and visit the house and see the work we did.

Richard Bowden was our Auditor until 1988 when John Mc Donnell took over as Richard had too many other commitments. Both men gave of their services gratis for many years.

44 Francis Street was given to us in 1988 by the Siena Convent with a proviso that we allow the residing tenant to remain there until his death, which occurred in May 1995. We then refurbished it, installed a shower and rented it to two of our residents.

In February 1988 we began negotiations for becoming a company limited by guarantee having charitable status. Filch Mc Hugh who was employed by Brannigan & Matthews, our solicitors, facilitated this process, and we received our certificate of Incorporation from Filch and became a company, "Drogheda Homeless Aid Association," in March 1988 with copies of Memorandum and Articles of Association. This was necessary in order to accept 44 Francis Street from the Siena Convent.

On 20th June 1990 we purchased 15 Green hills with a grant from the Department of Environment for £18,000 processed by Drogheda Corporation.

Early in 1994 our garden at the rear of St Joseph's was slipping. Residents at the top of Cord Road pointed this out to us. Sean O'Connor contacted Paul Lapin. Paul then prepared plans. It was necessary to dig two feet deep into the ground in the yard area and fill it with concrete to support and erect a retaining wall. Paul Lapin completed this in five weeks. We did not realise at that time that we would be building a new hostel. This wall had to be demolished with the new constructions in 2000.

We were anxious to buy 34 North Strand, the property next door to expand our kitchen cum dining room facility, and following negotiations this property was secured.

As we needed professional advice at this stage, Sean contacted Arthur O'Leary, Architect who came along, examined both properties and found both houses to be sub-standard with a life span of approximately 5 to 10 years.

On hearing this we were shattered and had no alternative but to demolish the house and re-build.



## **Rebuilding**

Luckily for us 15 Green hills was vacant at this time so we decide to use it for office space and as our base in the interim. St Joseph's was demolished 29th May 1999. Dundalk Simon Community offered to accommodate some of our men. We also had St. Louise's and 1 Riverbank, which we had on lease, to fall back on. The men we were unable to accommodate were referred to Harper House for B&B the expense of which was refunded by Homeless Aid.

Arthur O'Leary was seconded on to the Committee and was invaluable to us. He prepared an architectural design for the new building. Turlough Mc Kevitt was then contacted and appointed as our architect. Arthur also prepared an over-all budget. Brendan Fullam, Housing Officer, processed the funding for the building from the Department of the Environment.

Arthur & Sean negotiated the price of the new building with Mc Cebes Construction Company for approx £900,000. During the construction Arthur attended all the site meetings and was in touch with John Murphy, Quantity Surveyor, Turlough McKevitt, Architect and the Engineering Consultants.

Arthur processed all invoices prior to their being sent to the Corporation for payment. He also took responsibility for purchasing all of the interior furnishings and kitchen equipment which cost approx £100,000. Arthur worked for us on a voluntary basis and refused to accept expenses for all the letters, emails and phone calls he made on our behalf. He saved us so much money through his price querying and research.

While we didn't envisage the need for so many offices and staff quarters, the new building proved to be flexible to accommodate the changing needs of the operation of the hostel.

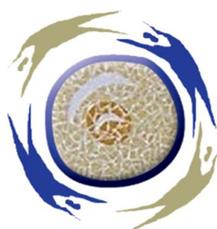
Jim Curran joined the Committee in April 1995 and was appointed Project Leader working part time in 1996.

Jim also worked as a night caretaker and eventually went to live in our premises at 44 Francis Street. He also represented Homeless Aid at the meetings with builders and architect, during the building of the new hostel. Jim left Homeless Aid in the spring of 2000.

## **Peace & Reconciliation**

In 1997 Theresa Wood put in an application for a grant on our behalf to Peace & Reconciliation, this programme was set up to help employment in the border areas. The initial grant was successful and a later application by Theresa was made to apply for funding for a Co-ordinator and Settlement Officer.

The two positions were advertised on the national and local newspapers and interviews were held on 28th June 1999. Michael Dredge was chosen as Co-ordinator and was appointed on 24th August 1999. Michael was glad of the interim period before the new hostel opened to familiarise himself with Homeless Aid and to establish contacts. Michael organised a day for the Committee to get together to set up aims and objectives and then draw up the policies and procedures for the new building. Michael organised the first "Sleep out" on the steps of Saint Peter's Church to raise funds and awareness for the new building



on the 12th December 1999.

Jim Curran was appointed as Settlement Officer. Both Michael and Jim resigned during 2000.

Karen Smyth was appointed to fill the post of Manager on the 17th July 2000. Francis Regan took up the new Resettlement Officer's post on 12th September 2000. Karen and Francis prepared for the official opening of the new hostel, assisted by Frances Dunne, our new FAS Supervisor.

## **The Block Mounting Project**

From the beginning we envisaged a Work Shop for the residents to build up their self-esteem and confidence. However it was not until 1990 that we succeeded in setting up a Block Mounting business in the Stables on Bachelors Lane owned by the Augustinians. Charlie Downs took responsibility for this.

We bought the machine from a Company in Blackrock, Co Dublin for £2,000 and a member of their staff came to demonstrate. Charlie and one of the men went to Dundalk to learn about the project.

The Social Employment Scheme began in March and we were allocated four persons on the scheme two as Caretakers and two for Block Mounting.

Charlie invited the residents in St Joseph's to see the Block Mounting with a view to employing those who would be capable, as certain skills were needed to measure the wood and manage the machinery.

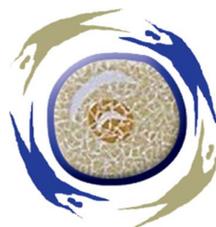
Charlie resigned in Oct 1992 and Neil Johnson took over. The Augustinian Community needed the premises so we vacated them and set up in Constitution Hill in 1994.

The FAS Scheme was expanded that year and we were allowed 11 participants and a Supervisor. A weekly grant of £10 per participant was allowed for materials. In-service training for participants and supervisor was also envisaged. Neil Johnson resigned due to health and Michael Mc Murrow was appointed in December 1995 on a monthly basis. A photocopier was purchased in September 1994 for £2,500 from Image. We also purchased an underpinner and compressor for £1065. This was a machine to facilitate the framing of pictures.

The Block Mounting project moved to Duke Street in October 1996. The FAS contract ended in September 1996 and Michael's appointment also terminated. The Scheme resumed in October and Theresa Wood was appointed as our new FAS Supervisor with responsibility for all our FAS workers in St Joseph's, St Louise's, Block mounting, and the Pre-school in the Halting Site in Mell as this came under our umbrella. During this period the Halting opened a Homework Club to facilitate the older children.

Theresa had many gifts and had a good relationship with the staff. Theresa interviewed the staff periodically, noted their progress and channelled them into suitable training courses funded by FAS. Many of them were able to progress into other employment.

As we had to look beyond our own residents for more qualified employees in the Block



Mounting, FAS were unable to subsidise a project that would be in competition with ordinary businesses.

Homeless Aid and FAS then enabled two of the workers to start their own business in the BlockMounting by renting the equipment to them at a nominal rate. The two workers ran the business for twelve months; it then closed on 2nd October 1998.

## **Homeless Women**

Once we had secured premises for Homeless men we were concerned that there was no facility available for Homeless women in Drogheda, so in January 1987 we purchased 12 Ship Street for £500. While it was most inadequate for space and facilities it served us well while we were on the lookout for a more suitable place.

A new Housing Act was issued in 1988, so in January 1989 we purchased 26 North Strand to replace 12 Ship Street with a grant of £29,349, from the Dept. of Environment, processed by Declan Nelson, Louth Co Council.

The house at 26 North Strand was a three-bedroom house, one being a family bedroom suitable for children. We named the house St Louise's. On 13th April 1989 renovations were complete and Bishop Lennon blessed the house and said Mass there. Declan Nelson also attended the Mass.

Bishop Lennon was a good friend to Homeless Aid from its inception. He attended many of our meetings when we held them in Fair St. and his advice was invaluable to us in those early days. He died suddenly in October 1989. May he rest in peace.

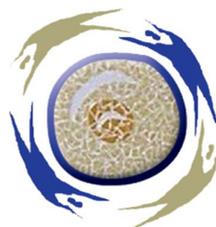
Approximately thirty women and children used St. Louise's each year. Many of the families were fleeing domestic violence. Without funding for night supervision we were obliged to close St. Louise's in January 1997. It was then used as an annex to St. Joseph's.

Homeless Aid expanded its FAS community employment scheme to provide staff and our own Supervisor Theresa Wood to assist the newly established Drogheda Women's Refuge to open. The Women's Refuge provided a daily service for Women and Children fleeing violence until January 1998 when it opened Twenty-Four hours a day.

## **Conclusion**

No words could express our gratitude to the people of Drogheda for their continual support and generosity - Drogheda Corporation, the N.E.H.B., the Dept. of Social Welfare, FAS, Drogheda Partnership, Drogheda Cares at Christmas, Drogheda Rotary Club, Lions Club, Catholic Workmen's Total Abstinence Society, Flo Gas, Combat Poverty Agency, The Religious Orders, Primary and Post Primary Schools, Coco Cola Atlantic and to the many other groups and individuals who donated food parcels and cash.

We also thank Avonmore (now Glanbia) for free milk and the St. Vincent de Paul for free coal to our houses and for their support and friendship to our residents when they moved into flats. This was a great boon as loneliness is a big problem at this time. The St. Vincent de Paul also invited all our residents to their festive dinner on Christmas Day.



We appreciate The Drogheda Independent for their coverage of our progress, and articles from time to time.

I cannot complete this brief history without paying tribute to the wonderful women and men, committee and staff members and friends of Homeless Aid who held a key part in the development and evolution of our service to the homeless. We were fortunate to have such excellent people with which to work and to form friendships.

The Official Opening was prepared and organised by our new Manager Karen Smyth, Francis Regan Resettlement Officer and Frances Dunne our new FAS Supervisor.

Mr Dermot Ahern Minister of Social and Family Affairs did the honours on the 20th September 2000.

