

Bethany Bereavement Support Group

The Day My Best Friend Became An Angel

Summer always reminds me of Aoife – she was born in summer, I met her in summer. I moved to Blackrock aged eight and on the first day in my new house I went to the local shop to buy an ice cream. On the way I bumped into Aoife and her baby sister Cliona. It was a hot day and they were wearing jelly shoes and sucking on Mr. Freeze ice pops. Aoife and I were inseparable after that – we played dolls houses, went clothes shopping and to the cinema. We read *Just Seventeen* and kissed boys for the first time! Then we started secondary school. Life changed and we made new friends but Aoife and I lived next door to each other. We no longer lived in each others pockets but we still had a special bond. It was this bond that stuck in my mind after summer 1990. Aoife died in an accident that summer.

That day I was at home. I think it was a sunny day, I can't remember now. But I'll never forget the moment the door bell rang and an out of breath friend told me Aoife

had been knocked off her bike. At the shops. Just now. She must have gone down to the post box I thought. We were both pen pal addicts. She was in Beaumont hospital. I felt frightened for those few days, listening to reports from next door about her progress. Aoife was brain damaged. Aged fourteen I couldn't comprehend this. Neither could I imagine her death. The news was a body blow. I was in the living room with my parents and brother and I can't remember who told us. It might have been Julie, Aoife's and my friend – we had been quite the trio in primary school. She'd been next door since the accident. I hadn't. I burst out crying.

After that I stayed cool. I didn't know how to express my grief so it was best not to cry. I'm not sure if I decided not to or if it was an unconscious reaction. Everybody was crying. Aoife's mother and father. Her brother and sisters. I went next door on the morning of Aoife's funeral. There was an awful moment when Aoife's dad called her name up the stairs, the painful realisation etched on his face a moment later. We were going to Aoife's funeral. That was the last time I was next door for a long time. Thinking about that time now the over riding emotion I can remember is guilt. Guilty that Aoife and I hadn't been as close as we once were when she died. Guilty that her family had to watch me growing up when she was gone. Guilty that I was still here and she wasn't. I knew it wasn't my fault but somehow I felt bad.

And that was apart from missing Aoife. Heartbreak was the other thing. I always thought



of her during my teenage years. Neither of us was hugely academic but I knew she would have done better than me in the Leaving Cert. What would she have studied in college? Now I no longer think of the parallels of our lives if she had lived. She is in heaven. She is happy. Losing somebody my own age as a teenager was difficult as I became aware of my own mortality. It was a shock and an experience that shaped my awareness of death.

So on the night I got a message from heaven I knew it was something more brilliant than a dream or anything I could imagine. An amazing person came to speak to me. This was the first and only time I've seen her since then. We were twenty one. I was mesmerised by Aoife on this night – What a beautiful young woman she had become. She radiated a kindness that I've never felt from anyone here on earth before. I was not stunned that she was here in my room as it seemed as if she was always present – I had just not actually seen her since we were schoolgirls. Now that we were grown up Aoife had come to me with a message. She under-

stood my life, we were both at a difficult age but while I struggled she had a grace I can never comprehend. I had a tendency then to fall out with my friends – my cold shoulder would not thaw 'til I was good and ready! Aoife knew that I wasn't talking to Lydia. She advised that as once she had been my best friend that now Lydia was.

I couldn't believe it when I woke up next morning. Aoife is an angel... Wow! And she had come to see me last night. Of course she had something important to say about friendship – and what better way than to tell me in person. I sometimes look back on that night and wonder if it was just a dream. But no. Seeing Aoife as she is now (or at twenty one, I've changed a lot but I'm sure she is still breathing!) is an experience that I'll always cherish. The immediate impact was that I called Lydia that day and our friendship became stronger – we're still in contact today. The spiritual reward is that I know Heaven exists. Aoife lives there.

Lorna Keating



Pieta House



Joan Freeman

The second speaker at the A.G.M was Joan Freeman who, after the death by suicide of her sister, decided to set up a charity dedicated to caring for people contemplating taking their own lives. As a trained psychologist, she had tended to avoid suicidal patients in her practice but after her sister's death she realised that a number of tragic events had caused her sister to become depressed and that this had been neglected. Perhaps her sister did not need to die. Having come to this conclusion and following library research, she was consumed with guilt and determined to do something about it. The result was Pieta House, opened in Lucan in 2006. Today there are 5 centres, the most recent having been opened in Limerick in the last few months. Pieta House offers one on one counselling to people who are feeling suicidal or have already attempted suicide and to people who self-harm. The sessions may be anything from one a week to seven a week, depending on the severity of the case. The sessions are free which means that the clients can receive the help they need without the extra worry of cost. The Charity now has

50 psychotherapists working in their 5 centres and helped 1200 new clients in 2010. The age range of people using this service is 6 to 83.

Joan gave us much to think about in these days when deaths by suicide outnumber deaths on the roads. How do we deal with the suicide bereaved? Never use the term commit; the act was only decriminalised in 1993 and this term is extremely hurtful.

Try to focus on the bereaved not on the person who died, this person may be at high risk. At anniversary times try to focus on celebrating the life of the loved one, try to make it a positive action.

There are many signs of possible suicidal tendencies; change of normal mood, withdrawal from usual activities, mobile mostly switched off, avoiding eye contact; conversation may change from positive to negative i.e. *I see no point in life*; giving away possessions or becoming more aggressive especially with drink. Any or all of these may indicate a person at risk.

Pieta House also helps the mostly young girls who routinely self-harm. This is quite different from suicide and is usually to externalise emotional trauma which they cannot express verbally (or they may have no one they can express to) The release of changing emotional pain to a physical pain brings calm and peace to these people, for at least a while.

As a charity Pieta House receives funding from the H.S.E. but it is only a fraction of the cost of running this amazing service, the rest is got from fund raising such as the 5k "Darkness into Light" walk held annually.

Bethany Bereavement Support Group contact details:

Bethany Bereavement Support Group,
c/o Rathfarnham Parish Centre, Willbrook Road, Rathfarnham,
Dublin 14.

Bethany Phone: 087 9905299

Email: bethanysupport@eircom.net

Website: www.bethany.ie

News Flashes.....

The Bethany Residential Bereavement Weekend

will take place in Orlagh, Augustinian Community, Old Court Road, Firhouse from

Friday 25th to Sunday 27th March 2011.

This weekend is designed to assist the bereaved in coming to terms with the loss of a loved one. Places are also available for trained bethany members who wish to address their own personal loss. By coming to terms with our own losses we are better able to serve the needs of the bereaved. So I would encourage you to avail of this invaluable facility while it is available to us.

Donation to GEC

If your group has not yet contributed to the running costs of the G.E.C. your donation of €50 would be appreciated as soon as possible.

Parish Report and Register

If you have not yet returned the Parish Report and Register of members form please do so now.

Day of Reflection

For Bethany members

The Lord is with us

(Preparation for the Eucharist Congress 2012)

by **Frances Hogan**

Venue: Clonliffe College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9

Date: 16th April 2011

Time: (9.30 am – 4.00pm)

Cost: €20 per person

(Light lunch provided Tea/coffee sandwiches)

RSVP: Name of Parish group
Number attending

Please respond by 8th April 2011 to:
mastaines@hotmail.com.

Text 0872345432

or to **Bethany GEC Parish Office,**
Rathfarnham Parish Centre,
Willbrook Road, Rathfarnham, Dublin 14.

Urgent Notice.....

An urgent message to all groups from the FSA.

Every group must send in their 2011 bank balance statement whether they are applying for a grant or not.

URGENT

GEC reports to AGM

The 17th AGM of the Bethany Bereavement Support Group was held in Milltown Institute, Ranelagh on the 5th Feb. The chairperson Winnie Keogh welcomed the delegates and Fr Myles O'Reilly celebrated Mass including a touching ceremony of Light for members and their families who had died during the year.

Following a presentation by Nuala Casey and Joan Freeman (report opposite page) the business of the day continued.

The minutes of AGM 2010 were read and adopted.

Treasurer's Report was read by Anne Butler on behalf of Ronan Hughes.

Costs and income are under 2 headings (a) Operational costs (b) Added value service. As these do not balance out the GEC are proposing to continue to collect €50 annually from each group, if funds permit.

Secretary's Report. Groups were thanked for returning Parish Reports, as it is essential to keep the register up to date. 50% of groups made their donations. Thank you.

Training continued at Blackrock,

Clonliffe, Knocklyon and Esker. 9 new groups were formed. The next training course started in Clonliffe on Feb 15 to May 7. Richard Lowry is welcome as the new Director of training.

GEC recommend that groups that train together should arrange to meet in 6 months to have audit and feedback.

1 facilitation weekend was conducted by Gobnait O'Grady.

2 bereavement weekends were held in Orlagh. The next session takes place 25th to 27th march. Places are limited and early booking is advised.

The newsletter is coordinated by Deirdre Ó Muirí and all groups are urged to submit notice of events, stories, poems etc. to help our work with the bereaved.

A day of reflection is to be conducted by Frances Hogan, a scripture scholar, on the 16th April in Clonliffe College.

All visits to families should take place in pairs to comply with the Bethany code of conduct.

The Chairperson's Report Winnie was most encouraged by the distances delegates had travelled to attend. Nuala Casey was a witness to how we can reach out to



the bereaved. We should never give up our efforts even when things are slow.

The Orlagh weekend helps greatly in the support of the bereaved and we should make sponsorship available to clients we feel would benefit from it. Members themselves are recommended to participate in this healing retreat.

The day of reflection will be part of our preparation for the Eucharistic Congress.

Use FSA grant for travel, Bethany phone use, buying books and the cd which could be handed out at the service of light.

Three amendments to the constitution were presented. Two were passed and the third: "to provide a voluntary parish based ministry,

which aims to support all the bereaved through the grieving process (within a faith based perspective – where it is shared)" was amended after lively discussion and unanimously accepted subject to the words in brackets being omitted.

James Garland was proposed by Rosemary Davitt of Castleknock and seconded by Patricia Cunningham of Churchtown and elected without opposition to the G.E.C.

Gerry Ryan has stepped down from the GEC and we thank him for his organisation of our recent Days of Reflection and his contribution to the GEC for many years. The meeting concluded with a final prayer.

Keynote talk at 2011 Bethany A.G.M. by Nuala Casey.

Nuala began by emphasising the following points. Blessed are those who mourn, they shall be comforted. Do not be shy to approach the suicide bereaved. Craig, 17, took his own life 20th Sept 2005. The aftermath was a nightmare. Nuala tried to achieve normality. Bernie Little of Bethany helped greatly. There is a major need for support, be sensitive – listen

Craig had been unhappy during the year but seemed better and was back at college. On returning from a meeting Nuala found him and she related the horrific sequence of events that followed in detail. They called the ambulance and while waiting she knelt before the statue of the Di-

vine Mercy and begged that it wasn't so, that she should be taken, not her beloved son. The ambulance took them to Vincent's hospital where she had to formally identify her son. The grim procedures which accompany all sudden deaths had to be endured and the family got home at 12.30

There are no words to describe this kind of grief. If the grief at a death from old age, illness or an accident comes in waves, then this comes in tsunamis, said Nuala. She longed for his presence while trying to function normally for the rest of the family. She felt no anger towards Craig only longed for his presence day and night. The family grieved in their own individual ways and the strain of

this was an added burden.

Nuala told of the wonderful help of Bernie Little, now retired Bethany member who listened with sensitivity when it was needed. She found that switching from her own to other's grief could help her to bear her own.

Craig took his own life but he did not commit anything and she finds any mention of the words "commit" and "suicide" very distressing. A part of Nuala died that night, as part was also lost with the death at 17 months of

her son Glen many years ago she believes that they were both received into the arms of a loving and merciful Jesus. Nuala finished by exhorting us to approach the suicide bereaved without fear, to just be ourselves and to use the skills we have learned in Bethany.

This moving talk from a calm, courageous and dignified mother was greeted by a standing ovation by the large audience. She gave the glory and honour to God.

Members of the General Executive for 2011:

Myles O'Reilly SJ (Spiritual Director),
Winnie Keogh (Chairperson),
Moirá Staines (Secretary),
Ronan Hughes (Treasurer), Anne Butler, Brendan Nugent, Maeve Mason, Deirdre Ó Muirí, Gobnait O'Grady, James Garland.

Praying for the dead

My parents used to speak of an old man they knew ____ a man unmarried but greatly loved and highly regarded by relatives, friends and neighbours. Surrounded by people as he was dying, he seemed unconscious but he slowly opened his eyes, looked around him and said "Ah, lads, now for the great mystery." Then he closed his eyes and quietly died.

Death is for us the great and ultimate mystery. I sometimes quote Natasha in Tolstoy's "War and peace." Kneeling by Prince Andre's bed as he died from battle wounds she said "Where is he now? Where has he gone?"

A mighty mystery.

But all life is a mystery and so is everyone in it. I am a mystery even to myself. As the writer Henry James put it "Never believe that you know the last word about any human heart." The president of the European Union, Herman Von Rompuys, expressed it recently "all human beings must, at some point in their lives, choose between mystery and absurdity."

The vast, vast majority of the human race will say that an awful lot of things and events leave us with questions, baffle us, are mysterious but life and we are not absurd, are not pointless. There is a point to living; there is a point to dying, despite the pain and bewilderment and unanswered questions.

We've all seen our nearest and dearest die. We've experienced the rending and tearing that goes with the death of someone loved by us. As one person said to me, "It's like having your insides ripped out by a j.c.b."

Whatever the age of the person a death is a death is a death. You adapt to it, you adjust to it. You keep on living, one step in front of the other. But you never "get over it".

I have written that every life is a mystery and death is the great and final mystery. But a mystery is not a full stop, it is not a cul-de-sac. It is an invitation to



enter into, to explore, to deepen, to develop, and to grow.

Writing as a Catholic Christian I can say that those we call "the dead" are not totally separated from us. True they live outside time and space and we with our "clay shuttered senses" cannot see or hear or touch them. That is a limitation on our part.

But they and we belong to the Communion of Saints, the family that is composed of the Blessed in Heaven, the souls in what we call "Purgatory" and those who walk the earth. The Blessed in Heaven we pray to and we know they number the canonised saints and the infants, and they watch over and pray for us. We do not know the eternal destiny of anyone else. How can we? So we just pray for "The souls in Purgatory" and we exclude nobody. Friends, families, relatives, people we couldn't stand on earth, people who couldn't stand us, people who died leaving marvellous reputations behind them and people like Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot.

Our prayer is a bridge across the chasm of death and it is a debt we owe all the dead.

If our prayers for some people are not needed they go to others in need. Man's economics are very wasteful. In God's economy nothing is wasted. No prayer is unanswered.

Lord you hate nothing you have made. So we leave those who have left this world in your hands. May their souls and the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen.

Fr. Bill Fortune.

Esker training weekend

As another Esker training session came to an end, Winnie and Deirdre took the train to Athenry Co. Galway to take part in the closing ceremonies. This Redemptorist monastery is situated in rolling glacially deposited countryside close to Esker Riada, from which its name derived.

We were in time for the ceremony of burning letters to loved ones and processed with the group singing hymns as we went. We returned to the main room where each person brought up a photo and a memento of their loved one and briefly explained what it meant to them. The items were lovingly placed and formed a moving display round the altar.

Lunch was then served in the refectory, where the bonds of friendship which had been formed over two weekends, showed in the buzz of good conversation..

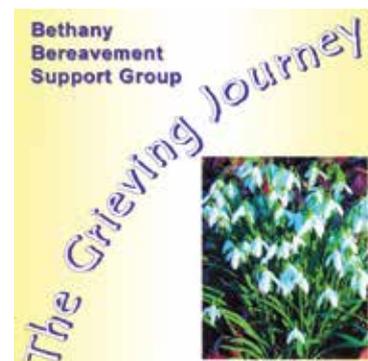
This close knit group of 38 people from the north and the west had bonded very well over the two weekends of the training session and the sense of purpose and mission from them was powerful. They knew just why they were there and what they wanted to do when they returned to

their groups or founded new ones in their home parishes.

Although the group was much larger than normal, the team, put together by Sr. Mary Glennon, managed to include everyone in all the activities as seen by us in their participation in the mass. Team members were Leader Sr. Mary Glennon, Maude Prendergast, Donna O'Donoghue, Marie Tracey, Fr. Johnny Doherty, Sr. Margaret Buckley, Jane Tracey and Kathleen Heavey.

We returned to the main room for Mass and the commissioning ceremony which closed the training session. Mass was said by Fr. Johnny Doherty, who has been a staunch friend of Bethany for some years. Winnie performed the commissioning of the groups and new groups were given a candle which would be used at meetings. Pre existing groups brought their own candle. The ceremony is short and sincere and as I watched, 3 people from Loughrea, 4 from Tuam, 2 from Moycul-len, 9 from Greenlough Co. Derry, 7 from Hollywood Co. Down, 7 from Ballybane Co. Galway, 6 from St. Joseph's Galway made their commitment to Bethany.

The Grieving Journey CD



Personal stories, reflections, and practical suggestions for times of grief.

Cost: €5.00 (plus €2.00 for postage)
Order through GEC, contact details are above