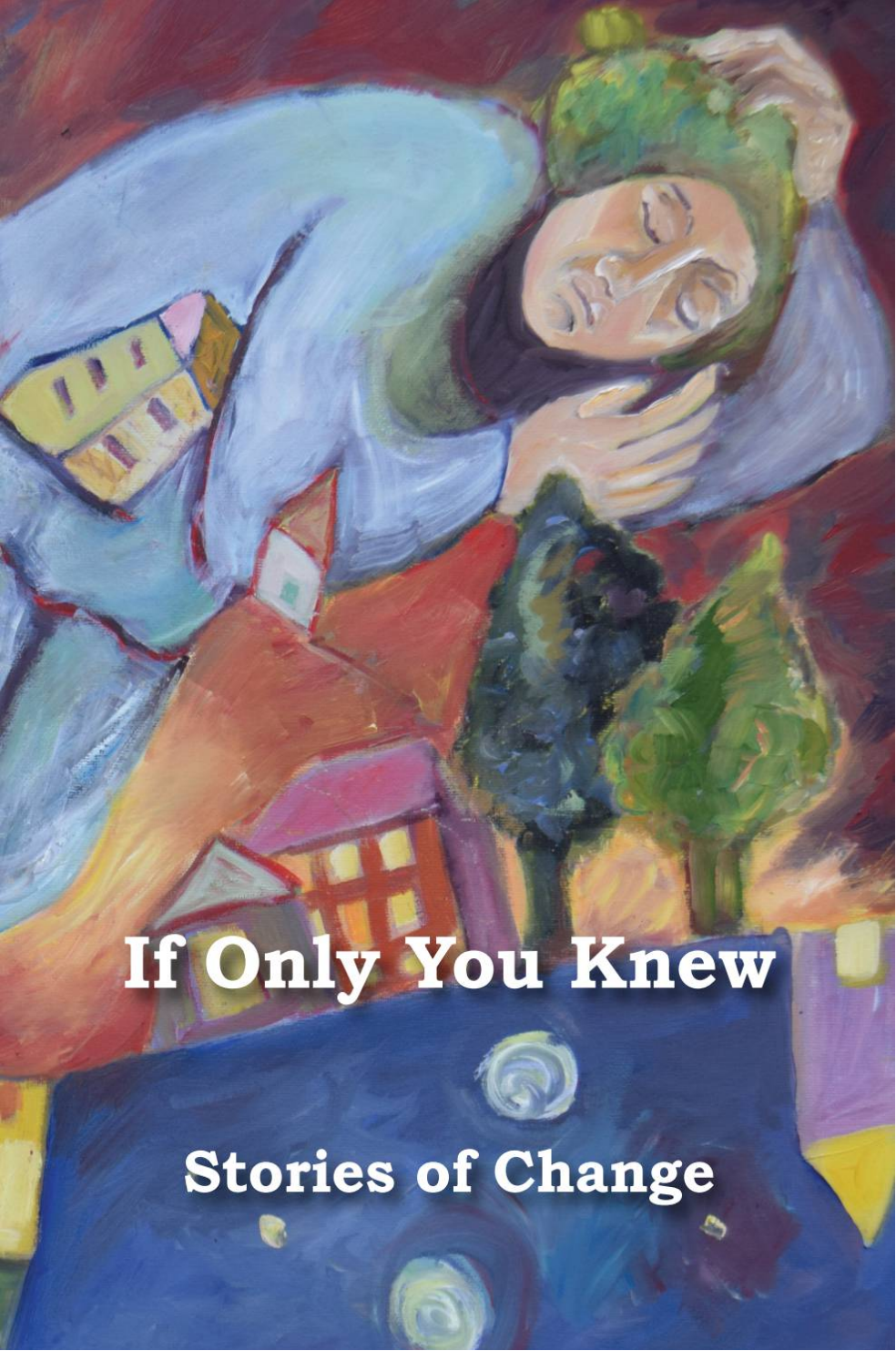
If Only You Knew
Stories of Change

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We would like to thank the Cork Street Fund for making the production of this book possible.

In loving memory of all our friends
who have passed away.

We remember especially Marie and Brendan. Both were founding members of ATD Ireland and sadly passed away this year. We remember their strength and courage in the face of hardship. They will inspire us to continue working for a more just and fair world for years to come.

Ar Dheis Dé go raibh a anam

Foreword

Displayed within the pages of this book is the courage of people. People who have been overlooked. The book is an opportunity for these people to tell stories of the hardships experienced in a society that, in my view, is slanted. These stories will testify to that. The stories are about the difficulties people experience; exclusion, unemployment, addiction and a general lack of understanding within communities which leads to many other social issues. We see the same people fighting with courage and dignity for themselves and for their family and this has to be recognised.

Of course there are bigger stories here. This is just a book of short stories, we don't have room to expand. There's a lot of sorrow and pain in these pages, also love and hope. You get an image, a sense of something, you get a chance to understand a little more because of these stories.

There's a freedom here too. Doing this book, we got the chance to express ourselves. And for a lot of people in the book, that doesn't happen very often. Because they aren't given the opportunities and the space for expression.

This book is creating history. We are telling the history of these people. Their stories. And we need to read these to understand. We need them to tell their story if we want to affect change in society.

Dublin is a city littered with stories like these, stories that have never been told. But if you are willing to ask questions with an open heart, then you have an opportunity to understand a little more about the people who live in this city.

Paul Uzell

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Introduction

"The very poor themselves must become messengers in humanity"

Joseph Wresinski

We are publishing this book on the anniversary of the birth of Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD, and initiator of the International day for the Eradication of Poverty, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year.

We made this book to pay tribute to all our friends who passed away during the last four years. People who experience poverty live in constant stress. Suffering brought by persistent poverty can lead to addiction, mental health issues and a lack of security. It can break lives and exclude people from society. We remember them and their courage to live a dignified life and ensure a future for their families. We also remember their activism to help their communities and especially those most vulnerable.

This book gathers the voices of men and women who are fighting for humanity and dignity. Some of these activists have lived through poverty and exclusion, others who were touched by their courage, joined their fight.

Through the production of this book, we created a real community, open to all, where people were always ready to share or just simply listen to others.

We worked from writings or recordings but always with a willingness to preserve the authenticity of people's words. For many friends who took part in this project, having the ability to express themselves in their own way and with their own words is a freedom they seldom have, which is why we wanted to respect their voices.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the production of this book. To everyone who shared and trusted us with a part of their lives, we thank you. For the beautiful illustrations in this book we would like to thank Carol Betera. A special thanks to Cathy Fowley for all her hard work in helping us to write our 'Stories of Change'.

1 A MAN WITH DIGNITY

— Long Weng —

The year 2017 marks the 100th Anniversary of the birth of Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD. Because of this special year the artist Long Weng, wanted to make a sculpture to celebrate the legacy of Wresinski. This is a text by Long to present his sculpture at the Alliance Française

I have done many sculptures in my time, but this one was from the heart. I want to tell you a story about a man in Ballymun — John. John worked as an office cleaner for 20 years. At one time John was sick and spent several days in hospital. When he came back to work the boss spoke to him and said "John, it's better for your health if you stay at home from now on, we're going to let you go". John was so upset, he got home and locked himself in the room and cried.

So a friend of his, Brendan, went to speak with him. The next day John went back to see his boss. He handed him a letter from the doctor. The letter explained that John was more than capable of doing the work. John also gave him a letter to show his experience and his qualifications for the job.

The boss was so shocked. He was surprised to see this small man being so powerful and determined to get his job back. He was left speechless, he had never had someone speak to him like that. The boss held a board meeting to decide John's fate. After the meeting the boss went to John and asked him very politely "John will you please come back to work".

So I asked Brendan, 'What did you say to John to make him act like this?'

And Brendan said it was all about having dignity.

It was ATD that taught him about dignity, how even a small person can have dignity. It was Wresinski who gave people their dignity. Wresinski was very humble and close to the people, he was an ordinary man.
When you are poor and powerless you forget you have dignity. Wresinski woke the people up and made them realise that they too have dignity.

I wanted to do this sculpture because even though Wresinski has passed away I can see that his thoughts live on through ATD. I used simple materials to do this sculpture because I wanted to show Wresinski as the humble figure he was. And how the ordinary person can use their voice and be powerful.

2 THE BIGGEST POT IN IRELAND

— Rose Murray —

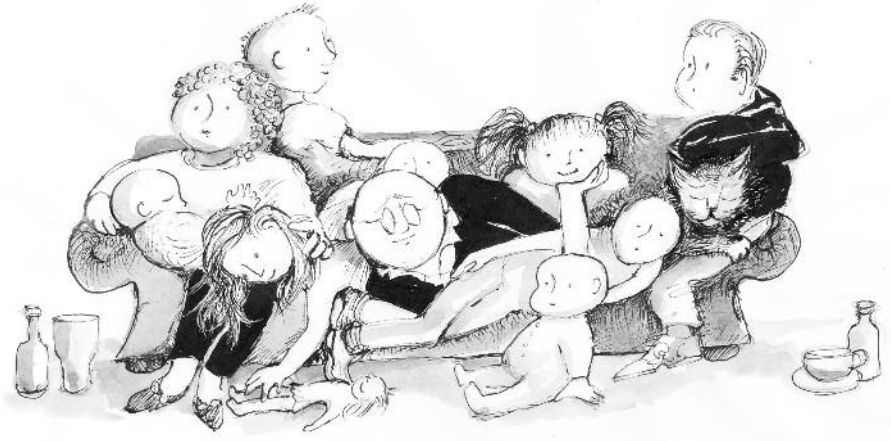
When we were all small and in school, we used to go all out. Me mother would go around to the butchers and get anything, beef, sausages, rashers, anything that she could find went into that pot, no matter what. And a bag of potatoes, or a half bag, whatever she had. We used to go down to Moore Street. And we never bought nothing on Moore Street. We used to go down at half four and that's when Moore St would close and everything was left on the ground. So we used to gather it up. Put it all in the sink, wash it, make sure everything was well washed, stripped the whole lot. And then that was put into the pot. And no matter who'd come in through the door — rosary first and then dinner.

The pot used to be like three rings. Not everyday, only when there was a crowd in the house. I don't know how many kids used to come through our house. Nieces, nephews, the whole lot and me mother would feed them all.

The kids used to be 'On Gur'- sleeping rough. I remember me mother getting up at three o'clock in the morning and going looking for a child that would be on gur. And sometimes they'd be sleeping in the flats that were empty, where someone had died or something, and they'd be in there sleeping. And me mother used to go in looking for them,

take them up, feed them and put them down to bed.
We had a double bed and a single bed in one room, and two single beds in the other room. She only had two rooms at the time. Then, she had a bed that you'd fold out and that used to be in the kitchen. And everyone would get to sleep, on the floor even. And me mother would turn around and say 'If ya haven't got enough room, I have. In me arms'.

So now every time a person says to me: 'I haven't got room for this and that', I say 'ya have, in your lap, in your arms'. God only knows what you'd get up in the morning to. Bodies everywhere and a big thing of porridge in that pot. She had the biggest heart.



3 BATTERED BUT NOT BROKEN

— Debbie Mulhall —

I hid behind closed doors
As my body was used for sweeping the floor.
Nobody knew the fear and the pain
At times I thought I was going insane
Sometimes a terrible mess
But eventually I couldn't care less
How can someone you love do this
Maybe to him this was bliss
Tomorrow he will tell me it will happen no more
But be warned it will be worse than before
You will cry and feel very sick
He won't be sorry he will give you a kick
He will tell you you're stupid and probably thick
It hurts a lot but not as much as been hit with a stick
When the children come along
You try to do better and be very strong
These children you have got to raise
But from him you will get no praise
The children you adore and love
To him it's someone else to shove
They are innocents in this game
To him it's someone else to blame

The child says mammy please don't cry
Mam says don't worry we'll get by
You say to yourself this has to stop
Too many lives are starting to flop
Get out now, don't turn your head
Or maybe you will end up dead
Time for us to start a new life
This time with peace and without any strife
The pain and the bruises you will forget
And when you see your children's faces
You won't have one regret
You will look at your children and
See them playing and enjoying life
So much better than living on the edge of a knife
Don't ever look or think of your past
Enjoy your new life it goes by so fast…

4 A MOTHER'S LOVE

— Annemarie Fay —

I am a 41 year old mother of two. I grew up in Dublin City centre. All my life I was around drugs. I started very young and I've been on drugs over 20 years.

Six years ago, when I was using, I gave my kids up to their grandparents in a voluntary care plan. It was the toughest thing I've ever done. It has been very hard to rebuild the relationship with them. But thankfully I began to work with the system and social workers and things got better.

Last month my daughter came down to me and she said 'Mammy I don't want to live in my granny's anymore'. She wouldn't go home and she wanted to live with me. I'm not in a great place at the moment. I'm really not. I told her, 'Love I'm just not in a good place', and she said 'but I'll still go to school and I'll still…' See there's structure up there for her and she didn't want any structure.
Now she has really good friends, really strong friends where she is. She's only ten minutes away. But I don't want her to lose all that, all that hard work.

So I had to sit in the meeting with the grandparents, my daughter's social worker, the team leader, a lot of people… I was on my own. I had nobody. My nerves were gone, I was very nervous. But what was coming up was 'Where does the child want to live?' My daughter was telling me that

things weren't going well there for her, she wanted to be with me. I said all this to the social workers. But when we were at the meeting I put my hand up and I said 'Look it, I'm not in a great place', in front of them all.

As a mother, that took an awful lot to put my hand up in front of all the 'boots and suits' as I call them, the social workers, the team leaders and the grandparents and all, to say I am not in a great place. I don't want to ruin my daughter's life. It took every piece of my being to be able to put my hand up and say I need help, I can't look after my 17 year old daughter. But I did and I have to say the granny and granda said "Fair play to ya Anne Marie, that's a massive thing and you've come a massive way to be able to put your hand up and say I need help". And that's a big step for me to be able to get clean again.

I can understand any mothers out there that are addicts and they are afraid to say "Listen I can't do this" because they're afraid their children will be taken off them, because that's what happens. If I spoke to another mother I'd say: "work with the system, rather than against it".

Because I feel when you work against the system, you tell one white lie and then boom, you're in quicksand. I always say: to be a good liar you need a good memory. I fought the system when they first got taken and when I got out of treatment, I made amends to a lot of people, including my social worker. I gave her a terrible life. She used to be purple coming into me, the poor girl. But I made amends to her.

I can understand mothers are afraid to put up their hand cause the child will get taken. But there is no good in ask-

ing for help when it's too late, you've no one around you, you're in a clinic and you're slipping. If you ask for help then, your children are gone. You are very vulnerable. You need the right people in your corner. Like counsellors, key workers, you need to be busy doing courses and stuff. You need people that are going to be there, strong people. Strong minded people who aren't on drugs, who are going to be in your corner.

I need the strength to do the work again to get clean. I want it so bad, but I know the work it takes. I want to do this for myself and live life to the fullest. Get my spirit back. Be the woman I was supposed to be. I have my kids, ATD and what's left of my family egging me on. I can and will do this.

5 THE LITTLE THINGS

— Teresa Redmond —

My family is everything to me. No matter how much we fight and all that. They're everything.

I was homeless for a long time, with my partner Fran. If we wanted a hostel, he had to go to one and I had to go to the other. There were no shared hostels for couples. And that didn't settle good with me. So then we ended up living on the street. We did get a place together, but with Fran having epilepsy and taking his fits, they kicked us out. It wasn't too bad then because we had my family, mainly my sister Gloria. We'd go out twice a week and we were allowed stay for a night. Then Tina, one of the family who turned around, and said we could stay two nights a week. We'd go out every Thursday and Friday so we weren't too bad.

It was hopping out of the heavens one night, so she said: "you're not going out in that weather, you can stay". So we weren't too bad. It was Gloria, Richie, Tina, Janet, Martin and Richie J. Gloria didn't have the kids at the time. We used to stay downstairs on the sofa. Fran used to do mad crazy things, and he'd have Gloria and me in stitches laughing.

Yes, I really loved him. And when he died on me, I fell to pieces. All I wanted to do was kill myself and go after him. I ended up in the loony bin. I ended up there a couple of

times. And then they barred me! Imagine getting barred out of the loony bin? Could only happen to me! It's all because I was drinking! And I told them to go fuck themselves! I'm a terrible woman amn't I! But that's it. We'll get on with it. You have to just keep going.

I kept going because I had my daughter Teresa Veronica and I still had me Ma.

There was many times when I thought about throwing in the towel. At least I had a few of my friends that did stay with us on the canal. And they weren't giving up on me. And then once they'd see me they'd say "What would Fran say? Now Fran wouldn't like that of you Teresa!". I stayed a few nights in one of their places. Then I did the most stupid thing I could ever do. I ended up getting a razor and slitting my wrists. That didn't go down too well. I don't have their number anymore, but I do see them downtown at times. On the odd occassion. They have their kids and all now. But I haven't spoken to them in about a year I'd say, I don't have their phone numbers anymore.

I've learned to talk about it. Sometimes me and Gloria could be sitting down in the sitting room and I'd remember something, and I'd say " Gloria, Jesus do ya remember what Fran used to do?" And she'd be there telling me to fuck off. But he would have us in stitches.

He found this pink hat one year up town, St Patrick's Day I think it was. And he was up dancing and all this. Then we went out to Coolock, to my family's place, and he was still wearing this mad pink hat. And he goes to Gloria "Do you like my pink hat?" and he was saying it to Tina and all. And Gloria used to listen to MTV or something at night

and there he was up dancing and all with the pink hat "Let's go, let's go!" And he goes to Gloria "Come on up and dance with me!" and he grabs her. And she's going "Teresa will you tell him to fuck off" and Tina comes down and he grabs her as well.

He's jumping up and down. And Tina turns around and she goes "Teresa what did you give him?' and I said 'I didn't give him nothing, he just got up with that pink hat! It's nothing to do with me!".

Then he sits down and says “Now ladies and gentlemen what did you think of my dancing?” Well me, Gloria and Tina were in stitches. And it’s the little things like that just pop into your head.

6 CREATING A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR YOUNG MUMS

— Ritha Merembe and Diane Ihirwe Cooper —

This text was read as a testimony at the 17th October 2016, UN Day for the Eradication of Poverty in Dublin.

My name is Ritha, I am twenty-four years old and I have a seven year old boy. Diane is twenty-three and has two boys who are six and four. We both got pregnant when we were teenagers and life changed for us completely. At eighteen years old, we were single young mums with no family support. I remember going home after my son's birth from the hospital. I had no-one to teach me how to feed him, bathe him, change him or what to do when he cries at night, and it was so challenging. I had to figure out all by myself how to look after him, even though I had never even held a baby before. Nights were so tough, because he would stay awake all night.

There was no one who asked me how I felt, or to have a chat with me about how I was getting on as a single young mother. Being a mother is hard in this world, but being a young single mother is extra hard because you also have to be the father to your children, not just the mother.

Diane was also going through the same struggles: like me, she had grow up so quickly. She was meant to have social workers but didn't and so was all alone with a newborn baby and the only option she had was to really fend for herself. Life was just hard for so long and the road was tough, lonely and scary. But the two of us were determined to give our children a better life and we found an inner strength to carry on , to go back to school and try to achieve the dreams we'd had before.

Diane and I became friends and we would speak about all the challenges of being a young mother and hope one day to reach out to others. Because of what we went through, we never want to see any other young mother with no family support or other networks to go through the same challenges we did. We know how it feels to be alone with your child with no one asking you how you feel, check on you in the hospital, give you a call to find out how you are doing or have a cup of tea with you.

Some people need a holding hand, a shoulder to cry on, and we wanted to be people who can empathise with them.

We also wanted to remind mothers that having a young child cannot stop you from reaching all your goals. It could be education, employment, engaging in different activities or anything.

There are barriers such as child care, the stigma attached to being a young mother, mental health issues, but there is power in togetherness, and once we come together we can overcome these barriers and reach for our dream.

We're both studying Social Care and when Diane heard about Social Enterprise Award where people have to come up with an idea about something missing in Irish Society, we applied. What we thought was missing in Irish society was help for young mothers, mothers who are alone, young mothers with no family around, young mothers who are completely isolated and lonely and having to grow up quickly.

Our idea to create a peer support network for young mums won first place. After that we thought, "Do you know what? We have to work towards this. We have to make it happen".

So today we are working on our dream. We have our first meeting of the Young Mothers Network in a few weeks. We're starting small at the moment but the whole idea is for young mums to meet with other young mums, to find strength in being together, to help each other not to lose their goals, or to forget who they are. Yes, they are mothers, but they're still individuals with dreams of their own.

7 EXPRESS HOW I FEEL

— James Power —

I feel lonely and sad
Trying to feel good not bad,
Thoughts of hurting myself will slowly fade away
Life is lived day by day.
Why do I feel people don't listen to me,
Imagination runs away to see
So if I'm lonely, afraid and I'm down,
How do I turn it all around?
Writing is therapy for me to see things through
This is my message to you.
I feel what I feel,
I try not to give in things going on in my head cause it's not real.
If I talk it's a way of healing,
Expressing how I'm feeling.

8 IMAGINATION

— Paul Uzell —

I was sitting on the plane thinking, "Jesus, the change in my life.'"

I was looking out the window at the wing of the plane going through the clouds, the sun was shining, and I got lost in it. My mind wandered and I thought about how I used to have to use my imagination in a prison cell to picture a sky like this and there I was now, living it.

At a very early age I learnt a lot from my mother. My mother would be able to sit down group of children and she'd entertain them all with her mad stories. She'd be making them up, they'd be all exaggerated and everyone would be hanging on the edge of their seats listening to her. But there was a lot of factual things, like she'd tell you about history, and things you wouldn't learn in school.

In the 70s, times were bad. We'd have the blackouts and you'd be sitting around a candle trying to toast a bit of bread. The mother would be telling mad stories about the banshee, we'd be terrified after listening to these stories about a witch who visits certain families. Then she'd send you out the back for bleeding coal, You're a child and you go out to get the coal and you'd be terrified. That was the

way though, the mother would entertain us for hours, making up stories. That's what you need as a child, escapism. She was great at all that.

I think I developed my imagination and strengthened it when I was quite young because I wasn't getting what I wanted anywhere. In school, in the home. The questions I

had weren't getting answered, because I couldn't go anywhere with them without getting shunned.

I remember as a really, really young child, I was thinking about space. I was just lying there and thinking all about space and all the questions that were coming to my mind. All this sort of stuff. I always dreamt of stuff. And being in prison I did the same thing, dreamt of stories to entertain myself. But I think that came from not having anywhere to go in school or anything. I didn't have anywhere to express my voice so I started to entertain the voices within. Imagining what could have been. The endless possibilities.

If I hadn't had an active imagination, I would have been bolloxed. When I think about it, that young and some of the shit that I went through... I couldn't see an outcome, there was no sense of justice. That's a horrible thing to inflict on a child, it leaves scars.

There was a lot in school that you were supposed to do that just didn't make sense to me. I was in there and I was under the thumb all the time. When I was in school, corporal punishment was still happening and they'd leather you. They were vicious. And that was a reflection on society. Because if that was allowed happen in the schools, you can imagine what was happening further up and down the chain.

It's like the song 'Something Inside So Strong' — it wasn't going to break me. I never felt alone because I had something inside me, my imagination or whatever. I wasn't on my own, there were times when I felt so lonely, but I'd just take myself out of it. I'd change society within my mind.

9 THE POTATO PEELER

— Andrew Holohan —

The only thing my mother left for me was a potato peeler. I didn't know how to cook, I didn't know how to do anything, but I turned out brilliant at peeling spuds.

I was homeless at 18 and I was three years homeless. I was in and out of treatment centres. And finally I went into a rehabilitation centre. I don't see being homeless as bad anymore; you have to go through this stuff to be able to understand people. Now I work on an outreach bus, you can say to people 'I've been there, I've been doing the same things', so it's not a disadvantage, in a way it's actually an advantage.

I have a really positive outlook on life now, and I don't have a negative mind. I can't afford to even hate someone.

When my Ma was dying in hospital, somebody told me that I was the reason she was in that bed. That's when I really started using tablets and drinking; I ended up being homeless. And yet I can still talk to that person today. Somebody said to me one time: if you hate a person and they're going on with their life, it's like you drinking poison expecting it to hurt them. And I just value my life too much.

Before, I was grabbing the experience of addiction and putting it on me, but if I didn't go through what I went through, and I'm only 24 now, I wouldn't be helping homeless people. I thank God that I did go through this. It's made me who I am today and I'd much rather be out helping people than sitting at home.

10 THE STRAWBERRY BEDS

— Gavin Uzell —

I was working on the polytunnels one day. This was my assigned work duty in the centre. While I was working, I had some time to think about my life. I had some strawberries growing in the polytunnel and some in the room as well. Inside the polytunnel, the strawberries were growing great, real ripe and real fresh.

I was just standing there one day and I was just thinking to myself: how do they get like that ? I started to realise it's because of the resources, the good environment; it's the heat, it's the water, and it has all the good stuff combined to help them grow, compared to the plants outside. And as I was thinking, I could relate that to myself.

The community I grew up in was very rough and there was a huge lack of resources and a high crime rate. Nobody really cared about it. The majority of the population are all on social welfare, there's no football team, not many resources, the police were always around and generally nobody liked it. My community had a bad reputation. I grew up there and I found it very hard.

I realised, it's not the person that comes out of the community it's actually the resources they have and the refinement that's around them that helps them grow.

Since I was part of that community, I used to think am I ever gonna progress or do well? Is it just me that's a bad person? But it wasn't.

When I was taken out of that environment and placed in a good environment surrounded by good people, I changed. I had counselling and therapy that helped me deal with childhood issues and I realised it. I blossomed there with the help from people who actually cared for you, showing love and stuff.

Some of the people were giving up their free time to come up to the centre and help us. They didn't have to, they just wanted to make change in people's lives. It was a tough programme—it took me ages to get into it, it was hard but I got over it. I still hold on to a lot of the values I learned there. I feel like I can put them values back into my community now. I never really knew about the true value of love until I was in the centre. The program goes in depth about love and acceptance and I learnt a lot about that.

When I returned to my community I noticed very little had changed and it reminded me of the strawberry beds left unattended. Just like when I was working on them strawberry beds, it was the good resources that helped the plants grow. And for myself it was the good resources and the good people that helped me grow. I soon found out that I wasn't a bad person, it was the place that I had to grow up in that had been neglected. It's ironic because it was at the strawberry beds where I developed an understanding of

myself—the key to understanding others. As I matured and my character continued to develop I realised that I can now use my experience to help others.

This experience has taught me what a young person needs to grow. People from disadvantaged communities are seen as bad people. But that's not true. I question is it just a co-incidence that these communities end up in the states that they are in or is it purposely designed by government bodies and councils to be this way.

11 THE BREAKTHROUGH

— Terence Smith —

The big influence in my life was my dad. I thought he was brilliant. Looking back on it, love is blind; I didn't see it at the time, but he was an alcoholic. People used to say it to him and he'd say "Oh I am, but I'm well adjusted'". He was gentle, he'd make a laugh out of it. But he was an alcoholic. And I went the exact same as him. I ended up having a serious breakdown. I got sectioned.

The psychologist, I'll never forget what she said to me. She said: "well you could look at this as a breakdown, or a breakthrough". I was ashamed of having it. I was thinking: I don't want my kids to know about this, if this gets out. And obviously they knew, because they came to see me. She said: "this is a breakthrough, do you realise the strength you have? People say alcoholics are weak people, far from it!" she said, "it takes absolute willpower for you to drink yourself to death, because you're doing everything that your body is telling you not to do, it's the mind'", she said. Nobody will stop me drinking, I said.

She explained that she'd never met anyone with the determination I had "If you could use that same power in the opposite direction... You're far from weak.'" At that time, their policy wasn't that alcohol was a drug, their policy was that you could control this thing.

Unfortunately I started drinking again after that. My brother was a heroin addict, so I was always afraid of drugs, but now I know that alcohol is a drug. One night I went and got a couple of bottles of cider, I've no idea how long it lasted but when I woke up it was about four in the morning and I opened the blinds and I said to myself - I'm not into religion, but I was speaking to whatever god is - I need to get out of this, I've got no other options left.

I then phoned AA and that was it. It was a woman who answered and she said "Come down we've got a meeting this afternoon. The story you've told me," she said, "I've heard time and time again. I've been there". So she said "Will you come, we'll have someone pick you up for a meeting at 11".

This was four in the morning, so I said: no, no I'll dry out first. I've been in rehab, I understand how it works. "Once you've picked up that phone, that's it. I will have a car there waiting for you'", she said.

The car came and a man picked me up; very respectful man, very respectable car. Then he began to talk about the meeting; "there are probably very few men there", he said, "normally this meeting is with women". "You're going to be nervous", he said, "because it's your first time, but you don't have to say anything. If you just go in, I'll sit next to you", he said, "you need not say anything, there will be a serenity prayer and then they will discuss between themselves the road they've been on and all you have to do is listen". You've been in the same boat? I asked. "I've four children and I tried to commit suicide", he said. I'll never forget it. I said you tried to commit suicide? He said, "a few

times it was that bad'". I thought oh Jesus, it wouldn't enter my bloody head, so I knew what a little swine I was compared to this man. He was willing to commit suicide instead of keeping on but there was something in me, I wouldn't even think of it.

The meeting was down in the basement of the Roman Catholic Church, in the catacombs. I listened to what these people had been through, I've already explained what I'd been through but by Christ they had been through a thousand times worse. To be an alcoholic and to be a woman, there's no comparison, especially when you have children involved. It made me feel that I was nothing, that I didn't have anything to moan about whatsoever compared to what these women had gone through. A lot of them were from middle class families, it hits everyone, from all kinds of different backgrounds.

I never touched a drink from that day. I thought my troubles were over but they had only just begun, life then became reality and to live is just hard, there is no way out of it, it doesn't matter if you're a sinner or a saint, life is difficult but it's about having the guts and the tenacity to just keep on going.

12 THE STRUGGLE OF HOMELESSNESS

— James Power —

One day I wake up,
I need things to slow down,
Busy old life in this city,
As I live in town.

Days are rolling by,
Where homeless people are on the street,
Left to die,
Bodies found in doorways,
Families are left to cry.

Life is hard in Dublin City,
All the homeless dying is such a pity.
So when the streets are crap,
They need money for hostels so they tap.

At the end of the day,
People look down on them,
2030 our hope for poverty ends.

So on a straight path now,
Stable accommodation and CE scheme that's how,
After being homeless five long years,

I overcame homelessness and faced my fears.
I was on the street begging for money,
People were going by, they thought it was funny,
A poor man begging for someone to help me,
Then Parkgate was the place to see.

I got the Granby centre, for a long term bed,
There was someone there to talk to, clear my head,
CE Scheme, rock on,
My addiction recovery is going strong.

I know how important it is to have a home,
In this life I know I'm not alone,

Friends, doctors, nurses, key workers are there,
I'm glad I have people who care.

13 A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

— Mary Maher —

When I started in the life centre I couldn't even read or write. Paul used to give us books to read and I'd be giving out. Now I forget myself and I'd be there reading it aloud and Paul would say 'Don't worry Marie if other people can hear you, at least you're reading it'. One day he said to us 'Would ye like to do your Junior Cert?'. So we said yeah! We used to do two subjects each year. So out of the junior cert, I ended up doing English, maths, home economics, business, woodwork, arts and crafts and history. So I did seven subjects. There was only one I failed in, history; I had no interest in that. But I said, at least I've done something.

I still go now... We go on a Thursday. We're after doing rag-dolls. I do embroidery, I do crochet, anything like that!

I've done a thing for the Church, I've done a peace sign in all Celtic. They never had anything in the church for confirmation so I did something like a symbol of fire in embroidery for when they have the confirmation.

They say to me 'Marie when you're doing anything and you put your mind to it, you get it done. You wouldn't even talk!' I asked Mary, the nun, 'would you try and get some more patterns and I can do a bit of embroidery'. Cause I don't know what we're gonna be doing in September. We

do pottery as well, I've done one of them moulds. I gave it to Paul for his back garden. When it doesn't be on of a Thursday I say 'Oh God'.. I miss it. Tomorrow night it's not on though because we're going out for dinner. 17 of us. And then next week we're giving Paul a birthday party, he's 70.

There's only one woman from not around that comes, she's from Inchicore. Her young fella went to the life centre and then unfortunately he died.. But she's the only one that's not from the area.

It's important to have in the community. It gets you out of the house for a while. We go down there at seven and we'd be there till about nine. When we go in first we have a cup of tea and a chat and then say about half seven we start doing what we're doing. Martin does say 'Who have I got for creative writing tonight?'. And Barry does say 'Who have I got for pottery?' And Mary might say 'Who have I got for sewing?'. So we've a choice of three. They used to take us away for weekends around August. If it was given up now I'd miss it.

There was a woman who lived down the end of the road and she was experiencing a tough time. So it was getting to the stage where she wouldn't even come outside the door! I put her name down for the school. I said to one of her daughters 'I'm after putting her name down for the school and tell her I don't care what she does but starting September I'm knocking at this door and if I've to drag her out, she's coming out'. And she's in the school ever since now. She said to me 'It's the best thing Marie you've ever done, it gets me outta the house.' You have to be careful though, sometimes I knock and she won't answer. I think it's important to keep knocking and let her know you're there.

We need more for the kids up here. There is a playground there across the fields. And they have half of it dug up. Then over in the Equine Centre if the kids want to do anything they have to pay for it. Down the end of the road there, we asked about that bit of field and we were told no, no, no. But they ended up doing garden allotments. Around the back there is a big green space too. And we said 'why couldn't they even put a playground on that?' But no, they're building houses. Now don't get me wrong, I don't object if it's houses for the homeless. But they're taking all our green spaces. We definitely need a shop. It's very far from here, you'd have to walk half an hour for a supermarket.

To have a sense of community, you need these kind of things. All the new houses that are being built, there isn't enough here for people. When the new families come there won't be anything for them. We need these things, a shop, facilities for the kids and that. It would give life to the community.

14 KEEPING ALIVE THE SPIRIT OF THE COMMUNITY

— Martin Byrne —

For years Martin has been collecting stories from people living in his community. Telling stories is a way to help the spirit of the community stay alive for years to come.

The North Wall is in Dublin's docklands. In 1998 in this area, the last of the Sheriff Street flats was knocked down. The community fought to remain housed in the North Wall and residing there myself, we did not wish the stories and the history of this special community to remain buried and silenced in the rubble. A committee of local people formed, and placed an invitation in the window of some shops, inviting young people to submit their stories for a book. We were overwhelmed with over one hundred stories and we launched the resulting book "Listen Up!" in the packed church of St Laurence O Toole.

Since 1998, in collaboration with the North Wall community we have managed to publish twenty-one books with over one thousand contributors. Maya Angelou famously wrote that, "There is no greater agony than holding an untold story within you." Storytelling is integral to the DNA of the North Wall.

Luckily, in parts of Dublin's inner city we have retained a sense of 'us' and of community. Our stories connect us to meaning and to identity and to belonging, and being born and reared in this special place, I'm well aware that neither we nor our stories stand alone. Our stories help us to unpack and become aware and critical of the invisible knapsack of privilege that pervades society and politics. Our stories are subversive and scream that the master-story of the way things are, does not have to be this way.

We need to listen to the people who are suffering at the margins to allow them to change our lives. Heartfelt kinship with struggling people in an attitude of respectful, mutual gift-exchange is the dynamo for personal and for social transformation. Stories are not commodities to be gathered or analysed or used for entertainment. Stories are scared sparks that burn the heart. What moves the human heart links us with the transcendent and opens us out to hope and to love and to grit.

Without our individual and communal stories in the North Wall our lives would be adrift and our community spirit would quickly erode. To understand the people in the North Wall community consult historians, sociologists, social workers, service providers and folklorists and you still may be unsure. To feel and experience the life realities of the people in the North Wall community listen to the stories, songs, prayers, poems and dramas of the local community.

Look at the North Wall over the past twenty years of rapid social change and on many levels storytelling of itself makes little difference. Through storytelling together the community becomes volitional actors, empowering agents to find energy to fight the next fight, get back up off the chair and make it through the rest of the day without giving up. It is the little stories of little people that count in the end. I think it was Simone Weil who wrote that survival itself is a grace and that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Individuals are changed and that makes a difference.

Part of the claim on me as a brother who is Christian is to amplify the voices and the stories of the silenced or the bruised in the North Wall and Cherry Orchard, revealing to all people, especially those who may feel, because of poverty, that their wing is broken, that they are not alone. God talk from the edges is very different from propositional theology so loved by academics and centralisers.

With the arrival of summer it is time for me to trawl again for a new collection of stories for the proposed twenty-second book due out next year. I am as excited embarking anew on this mystery tour as I was in 1998. As a bit of a misfit, working in education with youngsters at the edges, whose voices have been generally ignored, denied and insulted, I am privileged. Working alongside the North Wall community helps me to be more human and to become less puffed-up with importance or answers. However, moments of rapture and of ravishment are but occasional in the North Wall, so please don't place too much store on these precious stories.

15 NOT ALONE

— Christy O'Carroll —

I wallow in my misery
And fail to understand
Why was I chosen one
To be dealt a lousy hand

I know I'm not alone
The numbers could be legion
They're found in every town
In every different region

I feel I should rebel
And cause a mighty row
In the law should catch me
Then I'll have to bow

I cry to my companions
Can someone lift me up?
Instead I'm told to suffer
I've got to drink that cup

A helping hand appears to me
A friends is by my side
He listens as I name my woes
And never once does chide.

A ray of light begins to shine
It brightens up the room
It tells me there is hope out there
Get rid of doom and gloom

Reach out to those who are in pain
Who suffer that same fate
Give them the hope that stirs you
Get moving before it's late

Together we can make a stand
And let our voices speak
Instead of down to lowest depths
We can scale the highest peak
So the lesson to be learned
Is clear for all to see
Don't try to go alone
You've got community

16 THE PINK SHIRT

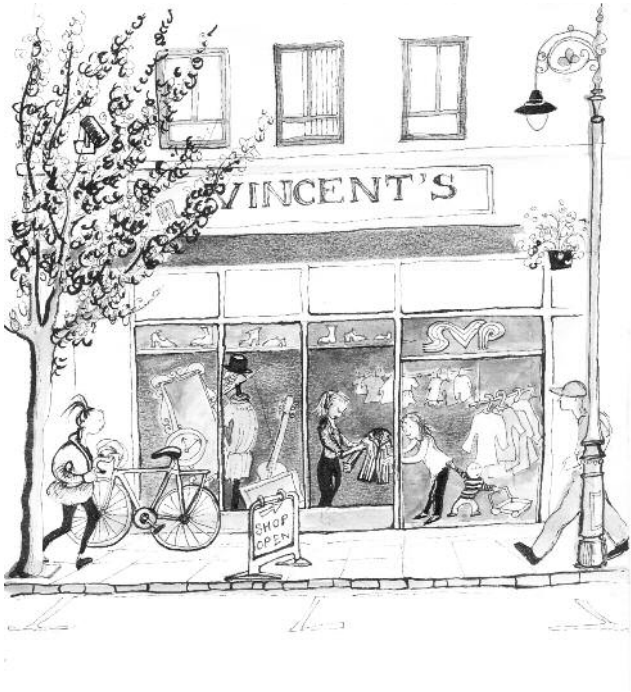
— Gloria Redmond —

I went back to school to learn how to read, write and spell and most importantly because I have children. When they went to school they got homework. They would come home, they would ask me to help them. I would say: Go to your dad he will help you. It made me feel bad.

So I said it to my friend Carmel. And she said "Leave it with me"". The week after that on the Wednesday, Carmel said she had got me an interview to the school around the corner. It was on the Tuesday at 7 at night. I was nervous so Carmel said she'd come with me on the Tuesday. I went home and told my partner Richie and his sister Tina. They said it was good. I thought they would think I was stupid but they didn't. I went into town to tell my family. They said the same.

My mother asks what I was wearing to the interview. I said what I had on me. So we went to the Vincent's shop and we had a look around. My mother found this pink shirt. She said "Gloria what do you think of this shirt?" I said it was nice and that I liked the black stripes. She went up to the woman at the counter and asked how much it was. The woman said €3. So she said I'll take it.

We left the shop and I brought her home. She handed me the shirt and said that's for you. She said "Wear that going



to the school". I said ok. She said "You wear that and you will get a place in the class". So I came home and they asked me "how did the day go?" I said it went great. Tina and Richie asked "What did my mother say about me going back to school?" I said she was ok about it.

Tuesday night came. I went with Carmel to see Pat that runs the class. I wore the pink shirt with my jeans. So Pat called my name. I was nervous. We went into the room. Pat asked the stuff she wanted to know about me and I answered her. Pat offered me a place in the school and said 'I will see you on Tuesday at 10 am'. Pat said she liked the

shirt. I thanked Carmel for coming with me and she said you're welcome.

Tuesday came. I went up to the school and Pat introduced me to my tutor. Her name is Breda. The project about Dublin Lives came up. They told me about it and I said ok. I sat there and started to think of a story. I couldn't think of a good story. It was when we went to see my younger sister Jasmine that I thought of the story.

A week later I said it to my older sister Teresa. Teresa said "If you need a hand to do the story I can help you". So I wrote the story with the help of Teresa and my mam. Because if Teresa was not too sure on it she could ring mam. When I wrote Jasmine's story all the family were ok about it. I wanted to write the story about my sister Jasmine because she has a disability and sometimes people don't see Jasmine as a person. They only see her illness. They think "If I touch her I will get what she has". They don't look at Jasmine and see her. When we look at Jasmine we see a person who is fun and kind, she melts your heart and has a smile to die for. It makes you feel anger that some people only see the illness instead of seeing the person. Some people are like that with people that are different.

So when I wrote this story I didn't know how people would feel about the story. But everyone in the class liked the story. There was a woman in the class who had a son with an illness. She asked me why did I write the story about Jasmine. I said because I want people to see Jasmine as a person. I said you should write about your son. She said no. I said ok because she wasn't ready to do her story.

I brought the book home and everyone read it. When Teresa came out, I showed her. She was not too pleased with her name being at the bottom as an author. She was annoyed for a while. After a while she said it was a good story and she got over her name being there. I said I put your name down because you helped me with the story.

I write a story every year for Dublin Lives. It's a good thing to do. Everyone writes a story or poems. Some stories are sad and some are about fun things. I think when I read them I find them all great. I find the class good and I learn new things. I am able to help Sean, Micheal and Aaron with finishing their homework. I have grown up a lot. I went back to school to learn and to become a writer some day.

17 MY VOICE

— Noleen Fallon —

It's important to have somebody to believe in you, to find your voice and really be heard.

I think probably one of the biggest people, through my adult life, who would have changed my perspective about speaking out and confidence would have definitely been Françoise. Before that I would hardly speak out in a group or anything. I was very shy. I was grand one-on-one but anything other than that... Even as a child I was very nervous, very shaky, growing up I was an introvert. You wouldn't even know I was there. I always had my opinions but I never expressed them. At first I was thinking: Oh my God what's this one trying to get me to do! But the more I got to understand and know her; she really encouraged and pushed me.

She'd be like "Go on, I know it's in you, go, go, go". And bit by bit I did. That was a huge thing, like when we were in Brussels speaking at the European Economic and Social Committee. We were separated first into groups; I was in the room and I was definitely the least educated person in the room, and I knew that within ten minutes of being in the room. Even people for who English wasn't their first language, they spoke much better English than I did and that's my first language! It was quite intimidating. And they were all third level educated it made me nervous even to just talk; I felt like you'd be looked down on just because of your di-

alect alone, like you know because you don't have great words to explain what you're trying to say. Words that they'd understand quicker and you'd have to think about it.

But we went for a break halfway through it and I did express to Françoise how I felt. She was very insistent: "No, no don't you dare feel like that, Noleen these people that are here, ok a lot of them are very well educated but they're here because they want to hear from people like you, they can only read about these things they want to hear it from people who have lived it". She really spoke to me and when I went back in I felt more confident. I decided to speak a bit.

When I was talking I could see the interest in what I was saying, so I began to think. I thought they'd kind of be looking at me going "Yeah, yeah, ok, whatever", but it wasn't like that at all and it really gave me a whole different outlook on everything. No matter where you are or how little you feel, you're not. So that was definitely a big impact on me.

Now it wouldn't bother me to get up in front of a crowd and speak. Of course you'd always have them dithery nerves but it wouldn't bother me whatsoever. I find I am a lot more outspoken, anywhere I go. I feel I have a lot more determination in me. I don't let anybody speak down on me. I hold my own. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you're the same. And that has made an impact on me; I encourage my children to be the same and it does make a difference to them. To not be afraid of who you are and don't think no one is better than you.

You know I'm not up here to say 'Oh pity me'. It's not like that. I'm happy with me little life. Ok I live in a 'bad' area,

I know that, but there's still a lot of good people in it. I don't go around miserable because of where I come from. I'm happy enough as it is, I don't have any expectations, I don't stand up and speak to get sympathy on myself it's not about that.

If I get up to speak about anything, it's just to have a bit of understanding about people who live in 'bad' areas like me. We're not looking for handouts, we're not looking for sympathy. We're just looking to be equal and not looked down on.

I am thinking of a career change at some stage, but it's just the security of that job at the moment and the kids are still in school... I was thinking about going back to education, I've never done my Leaving Cert so I know there's a lot of closed doors but I know there's ways out of it. Where you can do a certain course on this or that. I think what I have to do is seek information, educate myself on what I would need to do. I was thinking maybe I'd like to work with young people because I'm good with young people.

18 TRANSFORMATION

— Kevin McGuinness —

October 2012 was the beginning of a conflict which would alter the course of my life, and set me on a path to self-destruction or transformation. This was the month when my housemates and I received notification that our rented house was being repossessed. Receivers had notified us that they were now in ownership of the property and that we should begin to pay them rent. However, the organization who were claiming ownership of the property refused to provide us with a lease or any kind of rental agreement. Therefore, we refused to pay any rent until such times as this was provided.

The organization harassed us with emails and phone calls demanding payment of rent. I had begun a course of study in September and this situation was badly impacting on my sleep, my study, my work placement, and my mental health.

Fear of the unknown and the real possibility of experiencing homelessness in the very near future had given way to a state of melancholy, apprehension and loss of control concerning my own life.

The situation had reached a crisis point in December. After seeking advice and assistance from various statutory agen-

cies and other organizations, I found that the only one which was of any help was Threshold. Threshold were very upfront and honest with me about the situation, legislation concerning both the receivers, our rights as tenants, and the fact that we had every right to call the Gardaí if the receivers arrived at the property in an attempt to change locks. This, they stated, could amount to a criminal charge against the receivers. However, it would be unlikely that the Gardaí would take any part in the situation if we were to call them.

After the first week of January 2013, we received notification that we had seven days to vacate the property. This was an unrealistic timeframe and my housemates left quickly to move in with friends. However, I had no such luck, as not one of my friends offered to take me in. I was already feeling humiliated, betrayed and let down by the state, people whom I had known and considered friends for many years, and by society as a whole.

For the first time in my life, I actually felt cast out and pushed to the margins. I continued to squat at the place that I previously called home, as it was the only place where I could currently sleep and shelter. I looked everywhere for a room to rent. Being honest, I volunteered the information of my current situation to homeowners who were advertising rented accommodation.

This was usually met with a sudden atmosphere of distrust and prejudicial attitudes towards me. I was finally offered a room at the end of January 2013, and I moved in immediately.

The anger and frustration that I had felt against the system, against society, and against the state itself burned deep. Lack of confidence, fear, sadness, anxiety, and every negative thought and emotion from my experience became a catalyst for motivation.

I had continued to attend my classes when possible, and knew that whatever happened, I had to finish my course. It was the only connection to society that I had left. Without it, I would lose myself and possibly my very existence, and I pushed through and obtained my certificate.

Through much introspection, and evaluating my experience, I concluded that the only way that I could be listened to or taken seriously, would be to become educated. I therefore applied to begin a degree in Social and Community Development.

From here, I pushed forward. Devoting my time and energy to education, developing my academic ability, critical thinking, and experience. I engaged in multiple volunteering roles during the four years that I spent in college. I finally reached the end of my degree and finished my last exam on the 16th of May 2017. I finished with a second class honours which I was delighted to receive.

I still volunteer and seek to support those who experience social exclusion and marginalisation. I have moved on from my experience and have come out a much stronger person. I have become infinitely more confident in myself and my ability to challenge flaws and failures in social structures when necessary, and to listen to those who need to be heard.

This experience has proved that education is the ultimate and fundamental component in the process of empowerment. No one can give us power, but many can hold us down by their status or position. Through education coupled with experience, we gain wisdom and can challenge power that obstructs our personal progress. We can gain power by challenging an immoral authority.

Sometimes it takes negative experience to set the individual on the path. Sometimes we need to be guided and shown a way, but it is the individual who must take the leap. As Morpheus said to Neo in The Matrix 'I can only show you the door. It is you who must walk through it'.

19 ONE DAY AT A TIME

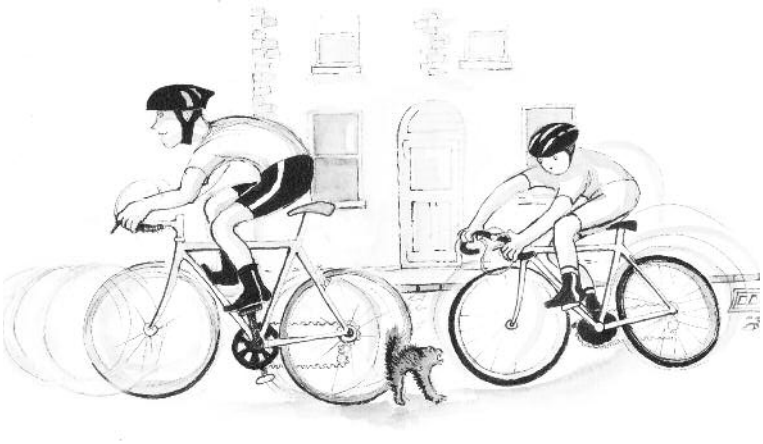
— Michael Donoghue —

Three years and five months ago, I got out of prison and I ended up having a nervous breakdown. But then I went to Matt Talbot and other places, I go and do my writing and other activities. I do like helping on the street, doing a soup run. That's how I have changed. And I gave up the cigarettes and drinking. I used to do nothing. If I was doing other things like I used to do, that was a problem, I was robbing and all, I'm not doing that anymore. I've changed my path.

I help other people as well. In a way I can't help them - it's them who can help themselves. The way I look at it, it's them that have a drug addiction, I can't help them. It's up to themselves, I wouldn't tell them what to do, I'll probably tell them what's wrong and what's right and try to help them but at the end of the day it's them that have to change. Just even having a coffee with them or something. And talking and then trying to get them to understand, it's one person trying to help the other.

I love to cycle, I've done a good few races like doing—sponsorship cycling—and I cycle three days a week and then I go swimming three days a week as well.
It's a hobby, keeping yourself busy. It's better to be doing something like that for you, it's a path. And it helps with everything, getting a proper sleep, keeps you from losing

your mind. It keeps you fit as well. I stopped the running, it was too much on my knees, and now I have taken up cycling and I love it.



I do meditation as well. Meditation is all about lying down and calming your mind. Breathing and stretching from head to toe and then your body feels all relaxed. It's good for me. Quiet time, have your eyes closed for 15 minutes and then, you're finished. But it's nice. It's so important for your mind as well.

I'm still in the Matt Talbot today, doing a bit of voluntary work every now and again. When I got out—I was in prison most of my life—I had to change my life around. I'm stronger now and I know what I'm doing. And then I spend

time in the chapel as well. Well, a lot of us do, it's a community chapel, it's not catholic or protestant—it's sort of a praying and talking. It teaches good manners and respect. It's important to be able to let the grief out.

It's what it is, it's a different life from one day to another day. It's like you take one day at the time and do the things you have to do. Getting into a routine. It's all about what's good for you.

20 CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY

— Gary Broderick —

Gary is the director of the SAOL Project based in Dublin's North Inner City. SAOL is a community project focused on improving the lives of women in addiction and poverty.

If a person is an addict, they are looked down upon as someone who has chosen to bring upon themselves a terrible ailment; and that they brought it upon themselves through greed and selfishness. They are seen also to have harmed their families and their community and frequently only complete recovery to a substance free lifestyle is expected before forgiveness and support is re-offered. While this judgement is harsh for men, it is much harsher on women and harsher still on mothers; in an unequal society, tougher rules exist for women. In Ireland, as in many countries, addiction is seen as a great human failing.

I discovered through the women I work with how such judgement ignores the fact that most people caught in addiction are also caught in poverty. The lack of hope that fills daily life gets eased with alcohol and drugs. The release experienced from the substance, the belonging they feel from the initial shared experiences of drinking or taking drugs,

the worries that drift from the mind when drunk or stoned all occur in a world that is hungry, cold and unrelenting.

The woman who uses substances is filled with shame and guilt. She carries that burden inside, no matter how confident and happy she looks outside. For she believes too that she should have known better; that her pain was not so severe, that she should have coped. She rarely considers that many things contributed to her addiction. She doesn't consider that the trauma of poverty, daily struggle and despair forms the need for release; and that the false release from a substance is only temporary before further despair emerges from the addiction she didn't know would come, arrives.

In our work with the women in SAOL it was a long process before we began talking about poverty. But then we talked about poverty in our country, in our community, in our street and eventually about poverty in our own homes. It was difficult at first but once the words had been spoken they could not be contained. Suddenly a veil had been removed and the true picture was revealed. The shame and guilt that had masked the poverty in the room was exposed. But in the kindness and sisterhood of the group, the shared isolation of poverty was stripped of its strength and the women start to speak freely about the experience of a life of struggle and courage...

> *"Those living in poverty are the very source of all human ideals since it is through injustice that humanity has discovered justice; through hate, love; through contempt, dignity; through tyranny the equality of all human beings."*
>
> *Joseph Wresinski*

21 THREE VOICES

— Lynn Whelan —

I think anyone that's been homeless is very brave from being on the streets with kids for so long. When you're dragging kids from here to there, from a BnB to a hostel, and back again, it's very hard.

When I was made homeless, a friend of mine took me in with my 6 children. This was before I was even accepted on the homeless list. In a one bedroom flat, there was 11 of us. And they were little at the time. And her children were young. So when it came to bedtime, it was hectic. It was very hard. But it worked.

I was homeless for nearly three months before I was given anything like a hostel. But it wasn't a hostel, it was a concrete jungle and it was horrible. There was nothing in them days; you got thrown into a bleeding flat with nothing on the ground only a bed. Put in one room with your whole family.

I stayed there for about a year and a half, and then they put me somewhere else and that was just as bad. I had my own bedroom with my daughter Amy and the boys were put into another room. But you had still to share the kitchen, the toilets and the bathroom. Horrible so it was. It was a dive. Then a social worker put my name forward to have a house because I was homeless for so long. I got

the appointment and the interview for the house. I was waiting and waiting and then I got a house there which was only supposed to be for twelve months but I was three and a half years in that. And you're not allowed to bring friends in or nothing.

I was afraid to tell them I had six kids in case they wouldn't accept me. So I said I'd four, but one was in prison at that time and then one used to get in over the wall. It was horrible. All the time, they knew that Dean was getting over the back wall, and one day they pulled me over it. I couldn't lie because it was all on camera. He was allowed in all the time.

I had to keep going because of the children. You don't have a choice. I was their mother, I had to look after them and protect them. The way I was treated, I didn't want them to be treated like that. I was a year without the kids altogether. I put them into voluntary care because I couldn't cope. I was an alcoholic. My family helped. My sister took two of the boys, my mammy took one; my daughter was always

with me. And the other two thought they were old enough to go from pillar to post but they weren't. They were still only kids. They worry you, you know, no matter what age they are it still hurts.

My children remember being homeless, but they don't remember the bad times because I never let them have bad times. Well, I tried. Like going camping in the Phoenix Park, they thought it was, God love them because we were near the Zoo, they thought it was great. When the cars would

be going by, or when the park rangers were around, you'd have to stay quiet. But the kids would be out cold.

I got a little tele that worked off batteries, it was great. It was ten pounds, tiny, but at least they were looking at something. They didn't know the house was boarded up until three years later. I had to tell them. They were only kids at the time.

Years later when I got a house, they put a tent out the back and they loved it. With a tele plugged in going through the house. My kids never went without a meal because I never let them. But I'm their mother, I had to look after them and protect them. You're always going to be affected by what happened in your past, especially being homeless.

I'm in the house twelve years now. These days some of my kids, my two grandkids and myself, are all at home. The place is wrecked over the guards and over them fighting, doors off the hinges and they can't fix them; they never got a trade, because of being homeless or being locked up. The only trade they know is running around the streets from being homeless.

My son was promised a flat when he was coming out of prison, like a bedsit or something, and it never happened. He's got three charges up against him now again; I think that's all he's used to know after so long.

When we were homeless there was nowhere for him to go, nothing for him to do. For all of them. They never got a chance to learn a trade or anything. They don't know how to put a plug on or a light bulb. So they all turned to robbing.

They're old enough now - they should have their own place and maybe then, they would have survived on their own, paid their rent, got their messages and everything. They have kids as well, but it's much easier I think, for a girl to get a house with a kid than a man.

My daughter is staying with me too. Being the only girl, she was always looked after from family and that. But she's a hard life too, she's homeless now. She has a lovely baby - she'll be one at the end of June. Please god she'll get her own place soon. But I doubt it, because she won't go homeless after being homeless as a child. Before she came living with me, she asked me. She said "can I come stay with you?" And she told me she was pregnant and I nearly hit the deck. But you're not gonna say no to your daughter, or your sons. No matter what, I don't care. I'd go homeless again for them. And I would. And this time I'd buy a bleeding caravan.

22 THREE VOICES

— Sandra —

It's mainly the same for every person that is homeless. Everyone, we've all been through the same, it's the same stories, the same shit. It can be a little bit harder for a few. It's horrible being homeless. But for me I always had my family to turn to.

I got thrown out of my flat, I had the two girls at the time and I was about seven years homeless all together. It would have been even more. It was tough for the whole family though. My sister wasn't allowed to take me in, because I got evicted from my home; the corporation would be checking in on her if I was living with her. You'd have neighbours complaining and stuff. So they could have got thrown out of their place for taking me in. That was hard too, because they wanted to help but they couldn't because they were afraid. It was terrible. You had to go homeless, into a hostel whether you wanted to or not.

When I was homeless I never really had to sleep on the streets, I always had somewhere to go.

My first time being homeless when they put us into the place in town, we were put into the women's hostel. I used to bring my daughter Jessica in every night and you'd go into this little room and have colours and stuff with them, trying to do things with them. Because I'd be afraid to go into the room and watch the tele, mixing with other people,

I'd stay in the room with Jessica. The rooms were there to mix with people but I used to be afraid - I wouldn't go out there when I first became homeless. I'd be afraid to let the kids mixing with people and they'd see or sit in the company of addicts and that.

After that, I went to a bunch of different places. I remember one; it was just a big building, filthy so it was. About ten families having to use the one bathroom. We used to have to bathe the kids in the sink in our room, because you wouldn't want to go into the bathroom. I also remember, there was a house that was empty so I just went in there with the kids. I was there for three and a half months before anyone moved us. I thought I could go to the corporation and get the house then because it was empty. But that didn't work.

When you are homeless you feel like you have to give the children money, because you're trying to overcompensate. My two, when they were homeless they were in school all the time. I don't think they suffered that much from homelessness. I think it was more me, like I was put into one BnB and after that I was in places where I had my own room, I had my own kitchen and bathroom, it was like a small apartment. So I can't remember much bad about it anyway, for the kids. I can't remember them going through that much and they don't seem to remember that much either about it because they don't talk about it; and to see the girls talking, they be laughing and joking about when they were homeless, in hostels and that.

They loved Eirwood Green it was like a big house to them, we were three years there and that was only supposed to

be for twelve months. I was in Hill Street for nearly three years so they were sort of sheltered. They loved Hill Street. I had a bit of help from some people, key workers and that. It was like living in a flat in Ballymun. You have to really work with key workers and social workers. I found Focus Ireland very good, they really help me. I got my house through Focus Ireland.

Today? I think my situation is similar to Lynn's, my daughter is only after becoming homeless there the last three months and she's only starting off now, she has children as well. And she was homeless with me as a child so it really is a circle. She was renting off a landlord and she became homeless in the last two months. So it's only starting for her now, and her three children. She's in mine everyday so she might as well be living with me as well but it's being homeless because she hasn't got her own place. The kids do be all over the place with not having their own home. It's a big process now being homeless, going from one place to another.

23 THREE VOICES

— Samantha Conroy —

Some children are so young when they're homeless that they don't even remember what they were going through themselves. You'll only remember what you want to remember; sweeping problems under the rug.

When I was a child, I remember being with my Ma in a hostel years ago, I remember the washing everywhere and stuff, years ago so it was. I used to hate when I was in a hostel as a kid and all the young ones would be coming in with all their munchies and they'd be out in the games room. But I was out of the game sitting there with nothing. I couldn't go playing the games but sometimes I think I probably should have.

I was in care but I was running amok through the streets every night. They didn't care. I'd go into a Garda station and wait for the outta hours. Then you'd ring at eight o'-clock because if you don't ring at eight you won't get a bed. Then they'll come at three o'clock in the morning, bringing you in a taxi up O'Connell Street and hand you three smokes and a burger and say "Try again tomorrow night for a bed". It's not like that now for when you're under eighteen. There's a new law, but it wasn't there when I was a kid. They still shouldn't have been able to do it.

I was going off the streets into school every morning in my uniform. I used to sit in the Garda's street, on the steps on

Store Street and do my homework. And the Garda would be going in past me with the prisoners and they'd buy me something to eat. Some of the Garda used to say to me if you haven't got a bed you can stay here. Not go into the cells or anything just lie across the chairs. Sometimes the Garda station would be the worst place to be because people would be all drunk.

When I was in hostels, it was horrible. They'd be coming into you saying "Get out of other people's units"! How can you make friends if you're not even allowed go in and sit in other people's units? Probably two families per unit, just a little room and they don't want other people in cause that's where all the shit stirring starts and they get bothered so they keep people separated. Even what Lynn said about being homeless is putting it lightly, doesn't say what we really went through. Perverts coming up to you on the street and all.

I had my son Dyson when I was 19 and I had my own place but it was in a Convent. I had my own kitchen and bathroom. It was just like a one bedroom apartment but your visitors had to sign in at the desk and there were cameras everywhere. They were up knocking then at ten o'clock to get everyone out. Very intimidating when you have a fella or something and he is wondering why you have to sign in? You could say it's your Ma, but what Ma has a white collar and a cross?

When you are mother with your kids in the street, you overcompensate because of the guilt, especially when you are an addict as well, your kids are already getting slagged over you so you wanna make sure they don't go without.

You blame yourself because you think you didn't give your kids the right tools in life. You made bad choices. But I guess someone has to learn outta them don't they. That's just the way it is.

Today, it is like it's history repeating itself but it's bad history that you don't wanna repeat. I went through town yesterday and I remember I used to go and find a place to hide for my sleeping bag but these kids were out in broad daylight in the middle of Dorset Street! The system don't give a fuck, things are getting worse. Today you have to prove so much to the social workers or people of the administration. People need to march on the Dail or do something about it. The other side of that is you have to want help to get help.

You pick up very bad habits from when you're homeless. I'm a hoarder now. I never had anything, from being moved to hostel to hostel. So now when I have something I'd be afraid to let it go because I never had stuff. That's why we fight so hard to hold on to what we have, look at the place around us with the homelessness. Like it might not be long before one of us lose our houses. And that's the sad reality. It could be anyone of us, could be me.

Being homeless takes your dignity away, your dignity is gone. I don't think I'd be able to handle being homeless these days. I think it'd kill me. You don't think you have much inside your four walls but at least you have your serenity and your dignity behind it. It doesn't matter if you're sitting there clattering your teeth at least you have somewhere to go. It makes a difference.

24 THREE VOICES TOGETHER

— Lynn, Sandra and Samantha —

We've known each other now for years, long before we became homeless. It helps that we can all relate to each other, we've shared many of the same experiences. We've all been through some really difficult times.

When we were homeless, we have memories of the same places, and for two of us we were together in the same hostels for three years in total. Then we got our houses, around the same time too. So we were still together. We're 13 years now in the houses, so it really has been years.

Even with the drugs, we went through all that together. Addiction and everything. Addiction is a very strong word, and it's a very strong thing to go through. We are trying to look after each other.

It's been difficult. Even today we are worried about our children and their future. You never want to see your kids go without and that's part of being a mother. They're the responsibilities we take. We have to fight so hard to hold on to what we have.

It's important to have good friends around you though. No doubt we've had our rows, like we have our ups and downs.

But it's great to have such good friends, even though it was through being homeless that made us so close. It's great to know that you have a good friend, someone who's there for you. We support each other. You have to be strong, be there for each other and stick together.

It's the small things that help, it's like if you're looking for a tea bag and you don't want to be asking anyone else on the road, but you know you can ask each other. You couldn't go knocking on anyone else's door. You couldn't go asking anyone else like that, so it's great to have a good friend that you can rely on and ask.

We do care about each other, like we worry when we don't see each other at the weekends - that's what friends are meant to do. We support each other like a family. It's all been good. Well not all! Everyone fights. But it's good to know we're still there for each other.

25 I THANK YOU

From the shoulder up to the head
I thank you for the years.

For hearing these things around me
Thank you for these years and music.

I thank you for these eyes that see
how wonderful it is
To pick all those colours up
From the flowers and the people

And now I put my hands over my ears and my eyes
And keep them there for about ten seconds, and taking them away
And listen to the sound that's wonderful
And the eyes they're wonderful

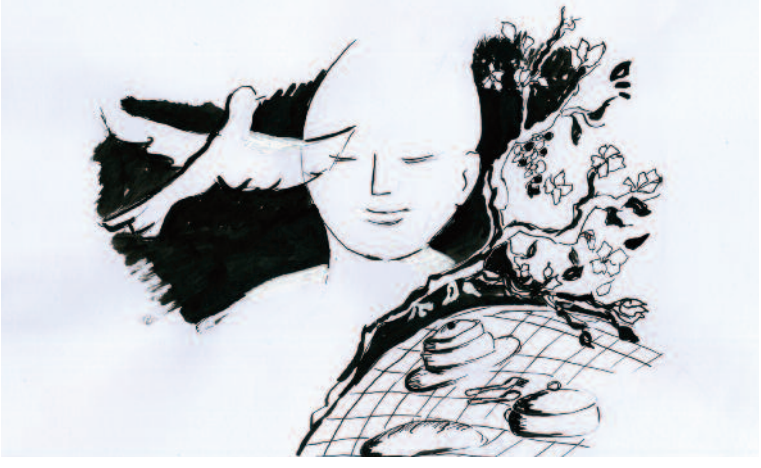
I thank you for the mouth
Which actually keeps me alive
As a young child how I looked a food
I loved the food and had a longing for it
I thank for the few teeth I have left

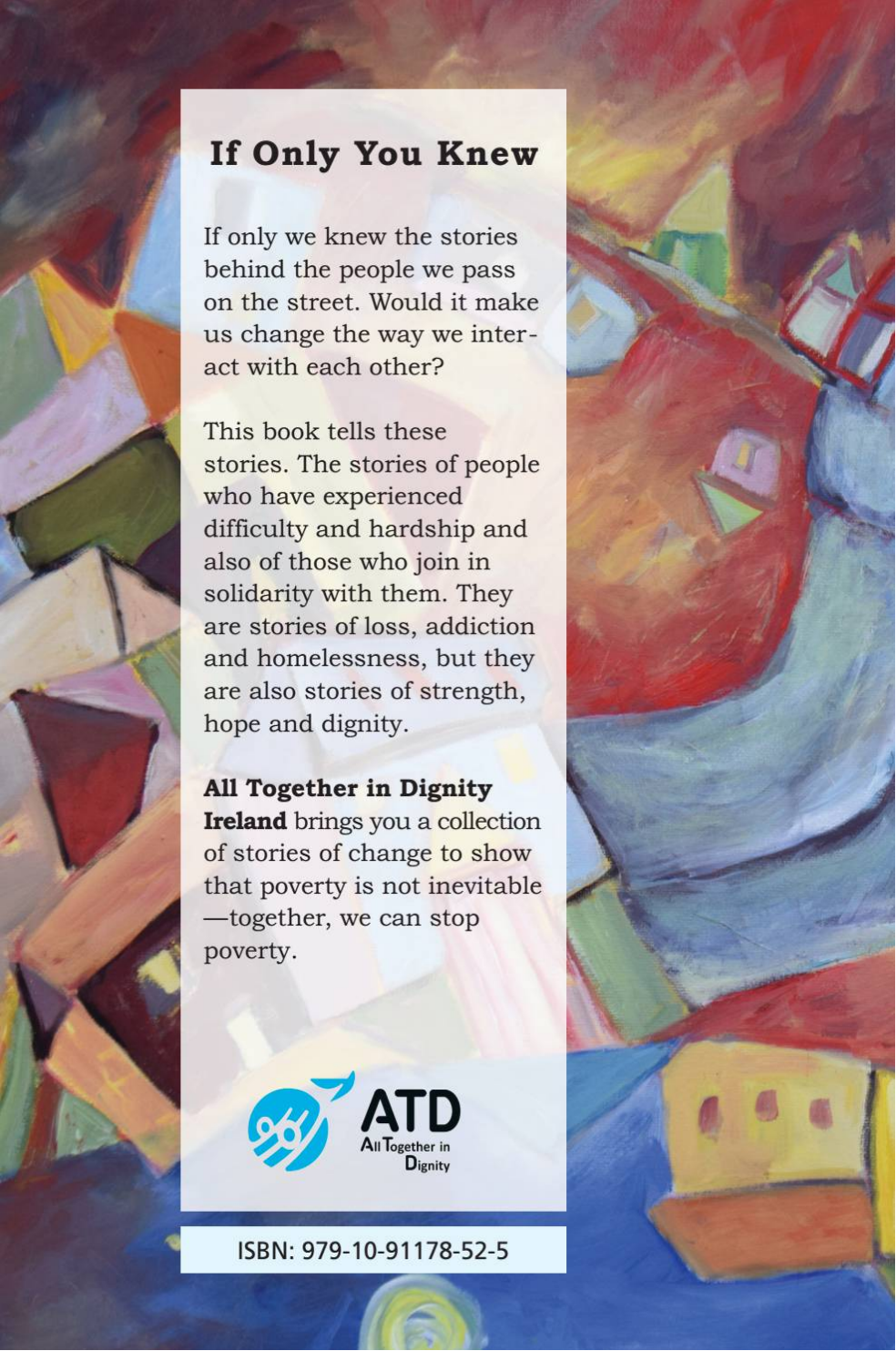
I'm thankful for being able to talk
I'm thankful to the mouth.

I thank you for the nose, for smelling change that
breathing in and out

I thank you for my hair old and grey, now I don't have
time for it
And the brain inside there
How sorrowful it is for others
Who can't cope with it
And others who can
Some people can't cope with the brain
And some can't cope with the other person's brain

I'm thankful for the brain
I'm getting used to the pain
I'm thankful .





If Only You Knew

If only we knew the stories behind the people we pass on the street. Would it make us change the way we interact with each other?

This book tells these stories. The stories of people who have experienced difficulty and hardship and also of those who join in solidarity with them. They are stories of loss, addiction and homelessness, but they are also stories of strength, hope and dignity.

All Together in Dignity Ireland brings you a collection of stories of change to show that poverty is not inevitable —together, we can stop poverty.

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