

Ballyroan Community Care and Meals-on-Wheels

A story of Voluntary Work and Community

In 1972, Roisin O`Looney, a mother of five children, recovering from illness and watching her husband struggling to mind the children, run the household and hold down his job, thought that other families might be in the same position and could do with a helping hand.

With the support of some neighbours, initially from Ballyroan Road, a survey of the area was undertaken and the response indicated that there was an interest in developing a support service. In addition, Roisin spoke to the Little Sisters of the Assumption in Camden Street who offered practical advice and encouragement. In March 1972, Roisin called a meeting and 25 local people attended. Thus, the Ballyroan Voluntary Social Corps was formed.

The agreed guidelines for the Corps were:

- Non Sectarian,
- Each Volunteer to offer 1hour per week, stating their Preferred time/type of voluntary work ,
- Service to operate on a reciprocal basis,
- A rota was set up to cover home help.
- Confidentiality was assured at all times.

The motivation of the Corps was the Christian ideal of service to others through which they sought to improve the quality of their lives and that of the Community.

The scope of the support offered by the Corps to young mothers and the elderly included:

Doing the Shopping

- Preparing Meals
- Laundry/Ironing
- Transport to/from hospitals, for various appointments etc. Drivers were in much demand as, unlike today, in a new emerging community in the foothills of Dublin, cars were in very short supply.

- Cleaning
- Social visits for a friendly chat

A child minding service was also provided in various houses on 2 afternoons a week from 3-6 pm. In addition, a group of local nurses provided nursing aid to our sick and invalid neighbours. This included bed baths, physiotherapy, exercise, applying bandages or dressings, and injections, under the supervision of the local doctors. The membership of the Corps grew rapidly over the period to over 120 people, covering the entire parish.

Tribute must also be paid to the local Sisters of Mercy, in particular Sr. Catriona and Sr. Therese Carmel, who gave great practical support and encouragement to the Corps from the start. The Sisters had established two fine schools in the early 1960s, namely Scoil Naomh Pdraig and Sancta Maria College. The Sisters gave the Corps the use of a room in the school for their monthly meetings, and Sr. Catriona served on the committee. From the onset, Fr. O` Sullivan, the Local Parish priest was an invaluable guide, support and Spiritual Director to the Corps at all times. Rev. Wilson, Rector Church of Ireland, Rathfarnham Parish was also involved.

The structure of the Corps operated around 9 unit leaders, each responsible for a local street, terrace or area, reporting to a Central Committee on a monthly basis. Referrals to the Corps for help and support came from local doctors, clergy, from the local Health Centre and Community nurses and from concerned neighbours. Help was provided to many a young housewife confined to bed and to the sick and elderly. One can appreciate the peace of mind this support provided.

Finance for the Corps, to cover regular expenses such as Insurance, phone calls etc. was raised by running monthly cake sales in their homes. These were popular social occasions and were always well attended. The money paid for cakes could sometimes be over generous, reflecting a desire by some to thank the Corps for the work they were doing. Many lifelong friendships and a deep sense of community developed and grew from that time.

At Christmas, hampers and any available spare funds were distributed to needy families in the Parish, delivered through the different Churches, or through the Sisters of Mercy.

When the need arose, the Corps arranged to send a sick child to Lourdes and helped the mentally handicapped in the area. The Corps always worked closely with the local clinic and doctors.

An acknowledgement of all this work came about when President Mary Robinson invited the Corps to the Arus for a cup of tea.

Meals-on-Wheels

Meals-on-wheels in the Ballyroan Parish started in the early 1970`s, when the local Health nurse advised the Corps that four elderly people living alone needed a mid-day meal. Initially, the Corps cooked and delivered these meals. As the demand for meals increased, Sister Catriona proposed that the meals be cooked in the convent kitchens. Through the late 70`s, and as the Parish aged, the need for meals continued to increase. Following meetings, the Eastern Health Board agreed to pay a small subsidy for the meals service, and a small charge was introduced for the recipients. At that stage, it had become very apparent that there was a need for a much more organised meals service. In 1981, the Ballyroan Community Centre was opened, and included a kitchen. The Corps took over the operation and management of the Meals-on-Wheels, cooking meals and desserts for c.35+ people, delivered by a rota of volunteer drivers. A small number of meals were also served in the Community Centre. This greatly expanded service provided meals initially to the Parishes of Ballyroan and Rathfarnham. Subsequently, the Parishes of Templeogue and Knocklyon were added.

Around this time, the Voluntary Social Workers Corps was incorporated as the Community Care group. The work continued and the Red Cross trained and certified six volunteers to assist the community nurses in the care of the sick and elderly. This training was paid for by Community Care. However, the demands on the Corps were changing with the increasing age profile of the Parish. State supports, services and regulation grew and the need for the earlier Corps services steadily declined. In addition, pressures on families were increasing, with both parents working and new needs began to emerge for them.

Apart from the meals-on-wheels, the building of the Community Centre enabled a range of activities to be organised by Community Care. The scope of these activities developed to include:

- Whist
- Bingo
- Indoor Bowling
- Arts/Crafts
- Extend - exercises to Music for our Active Age
- Christmas Dinner for our older citizens
- Visits/excursions/outings to Panto`s and Musicals
- Coordinating security alarms for the elderly

The rent for the hire of rooms for these activities was paid by Community Care

In 1988, the kitchen was enlarged, and additional equipment installed. This enabled Community Care (with some difficulty) to cook and provide c.70 meals and desserts to our Community. In all, over 150 Volunteers were cooking and delivering meals, and an active Committee was organising social activities in the Centre. A tribute is paid here to all those committee members and officers, who through all those years kept the Corps activities and finances, including the meals on wheels, running smoothly and efficiently. It is worth noting that, in 2005, the Community Care group won an award from SDCC as the best voluntary group and were presented with a plaque at an award ceremony. During 2009/2010, when the Centre was closed for a major re-furbishment (see below), the Meals-on-Wheels were provided by the Health Centre in Tallaght, collected by our volunteers and brought to Fr. Brendan`s house for collection and distribution by our drivers. A remarkable feat of logistics and nobody left without a meal!

A very Special Anniversary

In 2007, a celebration was held in the Church of the Holy Spirit, Ballyroan, to mark the 35th anniversary of the founding of the Community Care Group (formerly the Voluntary Social Workers Corps). From the initial idea and commitment of one person, over 200 people celebrated a dream for community support that had been realised beyond all expectations. The mass was con-celebrated by Bishop Eamon Walsh, Father JK O`Sullivan and the then Parish Priest Fr. Gerry Kane.

The mass included a procession of symbols representing the very many activities in which the Corps were involved:

First: a candle representing the ethos of absolute confidentiality, which on the advice of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, would be essential when going into the homes of others.

Second: a teddy bear and storybook, representing childcare, a welcome respite for busy or sick mothers.

Third: a Red Cross tabard and carer's handbook. Fortunately, the corps included a number of nurses, and also many trained by the Red Cross.

Fourth: a cake and cup and saucer, representing the cake sales and coffee mornings which helped neighbours become acquainted, and raised money for worthy causes.

Fifth: lunch containers from Meals-on-Wheels, which would contain the meals and desserts cooked in the kitchen by our teams of volunteers.

Six: a carrier lunch bag, as a reminder of our drivers. These men and women might be the only friendly face an elderly person would see all day. Without their involvement, the service would not operate.

At the end of the ceremony, Roisin was presented with a bouquet of flowers by Fr. O'Sullivan. He was the right person for this as he had been a rock to the Corps in the early days. To spontaneous applause, he also planted a kiss on Roisin's cheek! Roisin spoke briefly to thank the Little Sisters of the Assumption for their advice and support. Also thanked were the Sisters of Mercy (the family on the hill and educators of so many of our children) who in the early days provided a venue for meetings, and facilitated the making of the meals-on-wheels from an early stage of our Parish; they were supportive in so many ways. Many of the original Corps team were there to be photographed after the ceremony. It is also worth noting that many of the original Corps remain active and continue to volunteer in the Centre or in the many other voluntary services operating in the Community of Ballyroan.

Later in the Community Centre, with a glass of wine, some food, and a piece of anniversary cake old friendships were renewed. The atmosphere was one of joy and community spirit. Many lifelong friendships were formed through the

Corps and exist to this day. A video recording of the entire proceedings was also made.

Our Modern Community Centre

In 2008/2009 The South Dublin County Council (SDCC) took ownership of the Community Centre. They completely upgraded and re-furbished the Centre, including a modern kitchen for our meals-on-wheels. They also built the Ruah Centre and refurbished our library to the standard it is today. The Centre re-opened in 2010, and is now called the Ballyroan Community and Youth Centre. It is run by a voluntary Board of management, with a strong Community focus and ethos. It is a designated Charity and is incorporated as a Company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital. It employs a Manager and 12 Staff and is open 7 days per week. It also provides work opportunities and training for those on CE or other back to work schemes. We receive and acknowledge some welcome grant aid from SDCC, Pobal and the HSE.

The Centre now provides a very wide range of services and activities to our local Community. All age groups are catered for from young children, teens, adults, active age and our elderly community. Last year, the footfall through the Centre was over 80,000.

In 2012, and following discussion and careful consideration, the Community Care Committee and members decided to integrate the meals-on-wheels and their other activities under the management of the Community Centre. Today, all the original activities/services and many more are now being provided to our Community under the leadership and management of the Centre. The meals-on-wheels are still cooked in the kitchen and delivered by our drivers. Over 150 Volunteers are still involved in this operation. What a wonderful example of Community spirit.

So it is true to say that the spirit of volunteerism and community, exemplified in Ballyroan by the founding of the Ballyroan Voluntary Social Workers Corps all those years ago, lives on in our Community Centre as a provider of service to our Community. In this year (2017) which is the Golden Jubilee year of the Ballyroan Parish, it is a fitting legacy to all those who served and continue to serve as Volunteers in the Corps and in our much loved Community of Ballyroan.

This brief history of Community Spirit and Volunteerism in the Ballyroan and surrounding area is dedicated to all those who served and continue to serve our Community. A very big thank you to all of them.