

# OUR STORIES MATTER

PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT FROM  
ABIGAIL WOMEN'S CENTRE

## **OUR STORIES MATTER**

I decided to embark on this photo project this summer after attending a training course on feminist research methods, and became interested in the benefits of the photograph as a medium for sharing lived experiences. Using this approach, I thought this project would be a good way to have the voices of the women heard, and for people to see them as more than just an addict, or an alcoholic- to see beyond the labels and stereotypes and see them as real people who have struggled with many layers of personal tragedies in their lives. I am very grateful to the residents for their participation, and for their honesty and creativity in telling their stories.

Each participant was asked to take a picture of what being a homeless woman meant for them, and then explained why they took that photo, and shared their experiences of being homeless. It was an emotional experience at times, and there were some tears shed as the participants recalled sometimes painful memories. The stories were honest, and completely in the participants' own words. While it was emotionally difficult at times, all participants stated that they felt it was a cathartic experience, and hoped that telling their stories would help others in similar situations. The end result was 16 very different photos and stories, with some participants sharing their experiences about losing their children, or abuse they had previously suffered, or the chaos of moving from hostel to hostel. Many of the women expressed thanks for the support of the staff and said that they felt listened to, and could approach staff day or night if they needed to talk. While sharing their stories of their lives, most also spoke about their hopes for the future- for many this involved finding a permanent home and reuniting with



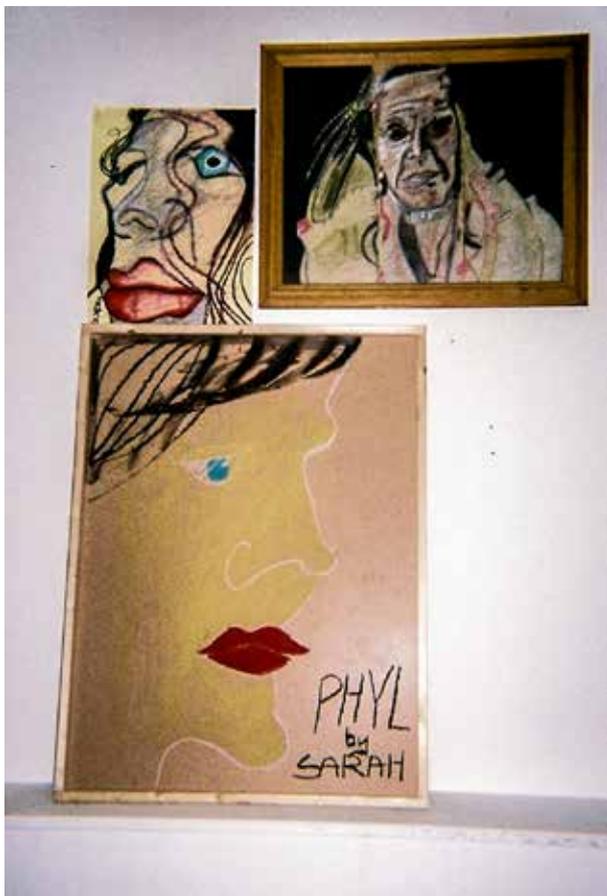
family. Their words are powerful, and show the person behind the label. As one woman stated: *'There's more to me than just a label with 'alcoholic' written on it. I am a sister, I am a mother, a niece. I have hobbies and I have dreams like everybody else.'* I found this such an important statement that I framed this on its own to place in the reception area of the centre, as it sums up the reason for why I began the project.

The display of the photographs and stories is also a holistic approach to the sharing of the women's experiences and reflects the theme of hope. I painted a mural of a woman on the wall who is releasing butterflies that surround the photographs. The woman evokes the spirit of Queen Maeve, who was a strong female warrior in Irish folklore. The butterflies symbolise hope, and the main colours of blue and yellow are colours that represent happiness in many cultures across the world. Each participant choose which butterflies they wanted and placed them around their photo, and all stated they felt the symbolism was fitting. The fragility of the butterflies is supported by the strength of the woman, and serves as a reminder of the resilience women have even in the face of adversity.

A side piece that came up as a result of the women telling their stories was the rainbow mural. This was the result of the participants sharing positive words to describe living in the Abigail Centre, and the support they received from the staff. These words included 'safe', 'supported', and 'respected'. I thought it was important for both residents and staff for these words to be recognised and so I painted the mural to display them. I chose a rainbow because it is a symbol of inclusion and diversity, as well as being a symbol of hope- after the rain comes the rainbow.

Despite how different the photos turned out to be, there is a common thread linking them all. All the participants have experienced multiple instances of trauma, and rejection from mainstream society due to their substance misuse and being homeless. But as well as being victims, these women are also survivors. They have gotten through experiences that would have broken a lot of people, as well as enduring the stigma of being homeless, but they all still have hope for the future. Each participant stated that they felt their involvement in the project was empowering for them, and they hoped it would be empowering for others, by letting them know they are not alone. This is why I chose the title *'Our Stories Matter'*, because as one resident explained, you cannot reduce someone to a label, or a statistic. Their stories are important, and their voices deserve to be heard.

Caroline Ryan



## ART

I used to be much more focused and be able to concentrate on details in my 20's and 30's. I always enjoyed drawing faces and bodies, as I like capturing expressions. It was a good way to express myself and also it made me feel calm.

Since I became homeless and moved to Novas, I don't feel as good as I was before I was homeless- old age and bog rot setting in! I like that I can do art classes here in Abigail's but would prefer to paint outdoors in Paris, like I did in my late 20's. I still like to draw portraits as it makes me feel calm. Being homeless means I can't paint or play the guitar as often as I would like. This makes me feel very stifled and I can't be as creative as I would like to be. I would like to teach art and music because I feel I have a lot to give in these areas, and this would make me feel very happy.

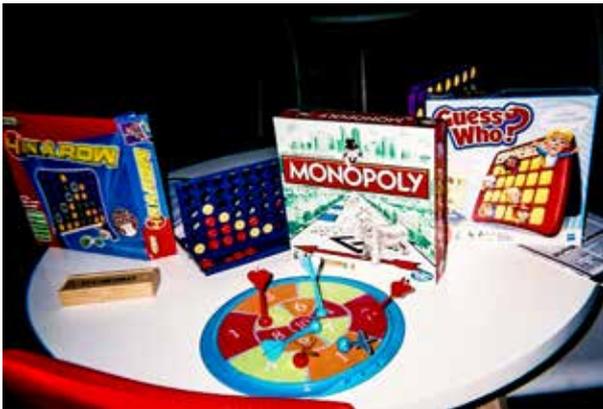


### **BABY SHOES**

I took this picture because these items represent my son, who I just miss from the bottom of my heart. Sometimes I feel like I'm taking 10 steps forward and 100 steps back, but I'm still moving forward. My son will be two in December and I call him my little prince because he came and rescued me. I used to sing 'Rock a Bye Baby' to him all the time in the hospital. It's very difficult being apart from him. I kept all sentimental things, like his first pair of shoes, a nappy from his first packet of nappies, and his teddy. In the future, I can't wait to live with him again. This is very emotionally difficult to write this, it's kind of bitter sweet. These bring back beautiful memories but still make me cry.

## BOARD GAMES

I liked playing games like Connect 4 when growing up with my family. We always got Operation every year, it was a laugh. We would play it every Christmas, it was the main game. I was very small but I remember it being a very happy time.



The games are here but I don't play them as it reminds me of losing my mother and father, two sisters and brother. I haven't been right since then, I don't think I ever will be. I lost my sisters to drugs, and I have battled addiction myself. I used to take heroin and cocaine, and this is why I ended up homeless. I took the wrong road, my mother told me to make the most of myself but we were already on drugs. I was 17 when I first used hostels, since then I've been in and out of prison, squats, hospitals and hostels. I like living in the Abigail Centre because I have my own room and privacy. I like to keep myself to myself. I'm a person that doesn't like others knowing my business. This is the nicest hostel I've been in; I don't think I'd be alive if it wasn't for this place. When you're on drugs, it's the same cycle- up, out, robbing, up, out, robbing. It's broken down my body inside.

I'd like to have a house for my kids and grandchild to be able to visit me in. I'd like to see them more, and to play board games with them as it's been too long since I saw them. I miss that happy family environment, as it's very hard to watch them leaving after I see them. They know I gave up taking drugs and they are proud of me for doing well now.



## **CHAIN AND STONE**

I picked these because these are the things I own the longest, and because of who they represent. I have them since I was homeless. I am homeless since I was 13. My best friend Luke gave me the star when we were both homeless, we are still friends now. He gave me the star for my 14th birthday. It was the best present I got that day and it still puts a smile on my face, and makes me think of fun times.

The rock is a love heart shape. I found this rock on Balbriggan beach when I was 17 years old, I was with my ex-boyfriend when I found it and he said "my heart will forever go on" which made me laugh. Every time I look at it, it brings back the memories of good days.

My little girl bought me the heart locket for Christmas five years ago. There's no picture but it is a very good memory I'll always have with me everywhere I go.

In the future, I hope to have my daughter back, and that we live together in a proper real home. This would make me feel on top of the world.



## DOOR

Its nerve racking living in a homeless shelter, because you don't know who you're living with. You live with strangers from all areas of the planet. This makes me feel nervous. I don't like my room as it gets messy easily but I do like that I don't have to share my room with anyone else. Being homeless means I can't decorate my room how I'd like to, this makes me feel sad.

If I had my own house, I would paint it red and black because these are my favourite colours. I would put loads of paintings on the wall. I would make sure I would have a bath because I like pampering and relaxing in the bath with a good book.



## **EARPHONES**

My favourite kind of music is hip hop and 90's music. I don't have a favourite singer but I like different kinds of bands. Music helps me feel relaxed. I enjoy music, it's fun. I like going for a walk and listening to music.

I prefer my own room here because I get time to myself and I can relax. I was afraid of living here as I preferred Mount Brown and I was worried that the place was dangerous, so I found it hard to settle. The protesters upset me, they didn't want us here. I'm also afraid of the horses; I'm worried they will come after me. I don't know how to manage that. I'm afraid of horses since I was young. The bangers that the neighbours throw in upset me too. The music distracts me from feeling scared, because the headphones keep the noise out.



## FLOWERS

This is my story about being a homeless woman. I am 42, and I have been homeless for 2 years now. I have had a job for 3 years now and it is a good job that I like doing because I make dinners for elderly people. I do have a good time and a good laugh with all of the staff members and all of the clients. I don't think that it is nice being homeless. I was talking to a good friend of mine and he told me how to go about getting into a hostel for the night, he told me to phone the Freephone. I got a 6 month bed in Mount Brown. Then after that the project moved to Finglas and they named the place the Abigail Centre. It is a lovely place and 40 bedrooms, a dining room, three TV rooms and four landings. They called the landings after colours- blue, white, green and red. I like doing the garden and planting flowers and vegetables.

Our garden is planted with lots of different shrubs, herbs and vegetables, peas, potatoes, runner beans, strawberries, pumpkin, tomatoes, lettuce, these are just a few of the things we have planted that can be eaten. Sunflowers and sweet pea add lovely colour and scent to the garden. The colour of the sweet pea are pink, red, white and purple.

I think the garden is very therapeutic and relaxing because you are out in the fresh air and it really helps you sleep.



## GATES

I took this picture to represent my life in institutional homes. These gates protect us, they make me feel safe because I know none of the neighbours can get at us. Walking down the road is a horrible feeling because you can feel the stares and dirty looks burning into your back. It belittles you, you feel like a schoolgirl walking in a big girls playground, it terrifies you. They throw things at us, call us names, attack us, they've thrown rocks at us. It makes you feel like a lump of dirt on someone's shoes. I know our actions have to be OK too, but it doesn't give them the right to hurt us. We are human, we feel the way they feel. I want us all to get along, I don't feel this will happen but I'd like us to try because I would like us to all be a part of the same community, and to get on like good neighbours. Maybe we can all be friends soon.



## NOTEBOOK

I was writing down ideas for this project in my notebook where I write about my life. I realised what I had lost choosing alcohol over everything else. There were so many mistakes and 'I'm sorry' s and disasters happening that all I could see was chaos, and the page in my notebook showed this for me. It brought up a lot of stuff for me, like being on my own- even in a building with 50 or 60 people you're still alone. I am almost two years sober thanks to Cuan Mhuire and God who never left me.

For my future, my hopes are finally getting a liver transplant and to form a better relationship with my family as I would love to have them back in my life. There's more to me than just a label with 'alcoholic' written on it. I am a sister, I am a mother, a niece. I have hobbies and I have dreams like everybody else.

I feel like the staff treat me like a woman, not just a thing on the side of the road. They allow me to express myself and I'm listened to.



### **PINK SCHOOLBAG**

I have a little daughter, and she's almost three. I try to buy her things every month. This is her school bag for when she starts big school. I got her Crayola crayons as she loves scribbling, although she might draw on my mum's walls! She lives with my mum and dad, this makes me feel that she is safe. I see her every week, and I miss her terribly. I hope in the future that I can have my own place and have her back with me.

I got the prayer book for her because I want her to be able to say her prayers. It's very hard not to have her living with me. I miss her so much and maybe that's why I keep going off the walls, but I know I can't keep blaming that. I have to get my act together for me, to have her back. I love her with all my heart.



### **ROOM WITH CURTAINS**

I don't mind living here, but it is a bit far from where I am from. To be honest, I don't like living with other people who take drugs. I do drink but I don't like drugs. I don't like having to buzz in and out of the gate when I come home. But it's not my home. I would like to be living back on the southside. I hate living in a homeless shelter and I don't know the area I would like to have a home again so I can have my family back together. I would give up drinking tomorrow if I could have this. This is a promise to myself, I swear to God.



### ROOM WITH TOILETRIES ON DRAWERS

To live in homeless accommodation is not great, but to get in the Abigail Centre is great. I have made my room my home. I like the privacy of my own room as before I had to share. It's horrible and very uncomfortable to share a room, you have to have locks on your wardrobe. Here you have your own room and your own peace of mind. I can safely keep stuff here for my daughter.

The staff are great, they help a lot- despite the crap I give them, but I don't do it intentionally! I love them really.

I first became homeless when I was about 17, I'm now 35. I was a victim of rape but the DPP said there wasn't enough evidence to prosecute. This made me feel really shit- everyone already didn't believe me. So I have been in many homeless shelters, and have sometimes had private rented. I once had my own home with my son, but since the rape trial my life fell apart and I left my house. I want to have my own house again, my key worker helps me with this. Only for the staff I wouldn't be around, they have fought for me.



## TEA AND DRUGS

Its been a really rocky road with my drug use, very unstable. I started taking drugs aged 9, I remember standing behind a coal bunker with my older friends sniffing gas. I told them I was older. It made me feel good, at the start I was doing it for fun. I stopped recently because I was told I could lose my leg because I was injecting into my leg. In jail I had to keep being brought to the hospital because my whole body was shutting down slowly but surely. I didn't care because I was so caught up in it, but I did really care.

I was told I had HIV, its like a kick to your gut, it's the only way I can explain it. It was a big time wake up call because I went from healthy to fading away fast. It took me very quickly, it was invading my body. It was like cancer. But now I take medication and I feel a thousand times better. For anyone else, be careful, never use your works in your friends house, because they aren't really your friends.

I get a lot of support from the staff, you can talk to them day or night. They make us feel like we are wanted and welcome.

## WOMAN IN BED

When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is reply to the staff and say that I'm alive. Then I open my drawer, take out 110mls of methadone, and take a tray of zimmovane. Then I go to the toilet, come back in, and pray that everything stays down and I don't throw up, and I try to fall asleep again. Most of the time I do throw up. I also worry if I'm in trouble from anything I did the night before.



Then I wake up in the afternoon, and reach for a big bottle of vodka with shaking hands. I sweat, but I'm also freezing, the cold sweat runs down my legs and back. I mix up a very strong mixture of vodka and lemonade and try to down it all. Once I get that down, I go for the next one, it takes me 3 or 4 before I feel OK. This makes me feel horrible. I feel ill, I feel scared. After the second bottle, I don't care about anything. The third bottle, I think 'Oh my god, what am I doing, am I ever going to get out of this homeless life?' I think about my kids, I think about how I know I will end up in hospital. I know my body is shutting down but I still drink because I am scared. Then I drink more, as I press what I call the 'fuck it' button, and I still drink more. Staff tell me I can make it and I think 'yeah, right'.

I wish every night to wake up in the morning with no staff, no rules, just my kids, just my family, no drugs, a normal life. I don't even know what normal means, and I don't understand love. I don't understand mother/daughter love, my kids don't come near me and it kills me, it strikes me through my heart.

My motto is: I'm a survivor, not a diver. I hope that by telling my story it helps another person out.



### **WOMAN ON FLOOR WITH FOOD**

Homelessness can happen to anyone. It's not a nice environment to be in as it can lead to misuse of alcohol and drugs. It's very lonely and this can lead to stress and depression.

I took this photo in my friend's room as I prefer to hang out there rather than the main areas. When I first became homeless, I felt nervous because I am nervous meeting new people and I didn't know who I was going to be living with. But I found it easy to get to know people in here. I like sitting with my friends at night and eating a bowl of cereal and chatting with them. In the future I want to be out of homeless services and I'm excited to see what comes in the future. I'm going back to school so I can have a more positive future. You do become a different person when you're homeless as you do change with the situation.

## **ABIGAIL WOMEN'S CENTRE**

The Abigail Women's Centre meets the needs of vulnerable women who have experiences of homelessness and who require supported accommodation for a temporary period.

The facility offers a range of rehabilitation and stabilisation interventions designed to assertively engage with the vulnerable women who have been experiencing homelessness with the aim of supporting the women back into independent living in their own home, with supports as required.

Opened on the 15th of December 2014, Abigail Women's Centre operates a harm reduction policy. It does not put barriers in place for entry and accepts clients as they are. It seeks to reduce the harm in the behaviour of clients and ultimately stem the patterns that led to homelessness for them. From the outset, the project pioneered care and case management protocols and the holistic needs assessment. It is this policy that now informs the nature of care provided to Novas clients in all our services and underpins our client centred approach. The new Finglas based centre is a continuation and expansion of the previous Mount Brown Service.

Issues facing Abigail Women's Centre clients include; family breakdown, physical and sexual abuse, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health issues and a history of homelessness. Individualised care plans are drawn up for each client, based on their history and current needs and are utilised in assisting a clients' exit from homelessness. Residents are treated in a compassionate and non-judgemental manner during their stay with Novas.

