

# Bridging the gap between conflict despair and Hope

## Group marks a decade of dealing with Troubles trauma

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**M**ORE than 13 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement the people of North Belfast continue to suffer from the impact of more than 30 years of armed conflict. Indeed the north of the city has some of the highest rates of unemployment, social deprivation and suicide in the six counties as well as the greatest use of prescription drugs for mental health problems- much of which can be traced back to the legacy of the Troubles.

A decade ago this week the Bridge of Hope was formed in the New Lodge to help local people deal with the after effects of the conflict and help victims and survivors move on with their lives.

Based in the Ashton Centre, where within one square mile 635 people were killed during the conflict and over 2,500 injured - the set up of the Bridge of Hope in 2001, said although they set up four years after the peace accord, North Belfast was deep in turmoil as the Holy Cross blockade was in full swing and civil unrest was rife across the city.

Community worker Irene Sherry, who founded The Bridge of Hope in 2001, said although they set up four years after the peace accord, North Belfast was deep in turmoil as the Holy Cross blockade was in full swing and civil unrest was rife across the city.

"The initial idea for The Bridge of Hope came in July 2001 around the time of Holy Cross," she said.

"There had been a gun attack at the Ashton Centre and a re-traumatisation, by that I mean we were seven years on from the ceasefire in 1994 yet this attack retriggered the trauma of the

people who were there.

"There were a lot of people who were looking for help. We had been talking about a stress management programme as we were aware of the many people who were killed or injured in the area, of the high levels of prescription medication and high levels of stress related illnesses.

"North Belfast is a very resilient community, but something had to be there to help people cope with the traumas that they had been through."

On November 26 2001 singer turned addiction counsellor Frances Black officially opened the project that was funded with £5,000 from the health trust. At first the Bridge of Hope concentrated on complementary therapies that would help local people find an outlet to deal with their stress.

"From a personal point of view I had been accessing reflexology and was impressed with the results," she said.

"To begin with we were delivering five hours of therapy a week, today we offer up to 150 hours of therapy every week. At the start we offered just complimentary therapies. There were a lot of people asking what it was and what it could do for them.

"It really was very much word of mouth when people realized it really was helping. It was really proving itself in terms of viability."

In 2003 the group was allocated Peace II funding and were able to progress the therapies they offered, realising that they were providing a vital service to the local community and could capitalize on the success they had in reaching out to people.

"After a year or two we realized that we needed progression for the individuals, we couldn't just do a six week therapy course with them and expect them to be ok.

"In 2003 we began delivering accredited training. We thought when we brought individuals in for therapy we could then help with their personal development and offer them accredited training which would raise their em-



Irene Sherry who founded The Bridge of Hope in 2001

ployability levels.

"Today we have 13 complimentary therapists and eight of them trained with us. This is a massive achievement in terms of leaving an ongoing legacy.

"We are very close now to having helped 5000 people since we started up through therapies, training and life coaching."

The Bridge of Hope is also involved in researching the needs of victims and survivors. Over recent years substantial pieces of research, cross community confidence building and dialogue sessions have been channeled through their offices, which, with the help of participants, has helped steer wider society onto a path of greater awareness, reconciliation and healing.

One aspect of this work, 'Making Sense of the Past in the Present' has already firmly established itself in this field of research as an important attitudinal tool.

As part of their work in helping the different communities understand each other, potted history bus tours were organised to offer individuals the chance to hear at first hand different community narratives about the conflict from homegrown Belfast 'born and bred' tour guides.

Today The Bridge of Hope has three main sites, one in the Ashton Centre, one in Duncairn Gardens and one in Henry Place as well as outreach centres in Mount Vernon, Ardoyne, Tigers Bay, west Belfast and Tyrone.

Irene said despite the hard work they have undertaken in the past ten years there are still people within our communities who are profoundly affected by the Troubles. They have even found evidence of third generational trauma, where grandchildren of those killed or injured in the Troubles feel the impact of the horror.

"It is a challenge for all of us to reach out to all those people who haven't accessed services.

"We have high levels of people accessing the programmes but there are always more that can be helped. From a very human point of view because of the number of attacks (during the conflict) whole communities were impacted

"People are now having to deal with those traumas, a lot of those were suppressed. In recent years we have seen people with body ailments such as headaches, IBS, back pain, these are all symptomatic of trauma within the body. It is important people recognise there is help they can access."

The community worker said as the Bridge of Hope looks to the future, she can acknowledge the good work they have carried out over the past decade and more they hope to achieve in the coming years.

"I am very mindful that the Bridge of Hope is just one piece of a jigsaw across North Belfast along with counselling, welfare rights and advice and other services. There is a greater recognition amongst health authorities now that they need to address health inequalities, particularly in North Belfast. No doubt the impact of over 30 years of conflict needs to be addressed.

"North Belfast is a wonderful resilient community, the strength of the people is second to none, I have worked here for 14 years and I've learned a lot. People want to move forward and things have moved forward but there are a lot of challenges still ahead with addressing the health inequalities and poverty,

"We need to try and create the opportunities to give people more skills and attract community investment. Looking back on the last ten years it has been an amazing journey. If we continue to work together we will give this community what it needs and deserves."

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