



The Travellers in Prison Initiative wishes all our readers and their families a happy and peaceful Christmas.

Newsletter of the Travellers in Prison Initiative

Issue 1

December 2015

Travellers Meet the Pope

More than 300 Travellers from all over Ireland attended an audience with Pope Francis in Rome in October. Relatives of the victims of the Carrickmines fire tragedy who were given special seating in the Vatican for the mass.

Appearing to refer to the tragic Carrickmines fire the pope said: 'We no longer want to attend family tragedies where children die of cold or in the flames....'

Alison Nevin from Lissenhall in Swords, Co Dublin, was the first person to receive the Pope's blessing. Dan Connors and his mother Biddy, and Bill Connors and his mother Mag, were also blessed by the Pope.

Margaret O Leary Connors from Southside Travellers Action Group said *'to know that the Holy Father is with us even when the Government does not appear to be with us, that is why we are so religious, we can rely on our religion'*.

Ronnie Fay, co-director of Pavee Point, who was on the pilgrimage, said *'the Pope spoke to us strongly about the need for inclusion, the need for education and that society needs to be more inclusive and compassionate to the Roma and Travellers around the world'*.



Biddy Connors meets Pope Francis in Rome

The Pope said:

'Roma and Travellers are at the heart of the Church - not just at the outside'

Travellers Demand Action

Travellers and settled people joined forces at a protest outside the Dail in October to demand action on the Traveller accommodation crisis.

The protest was organised by Minceirs Whiden (Travellers Talking, an all Traveller group) following the Carrickmines tragedy.

Speakers at the event included Brigid Quilligan (ITM), Martin Collins (Pavee Point), Maria Joyce (National Traveller Women's Forum) and Hughie Friel (Minceir Whiden).

Hughie Friel called on the government to 'tackle anti Traveller racism' and 'to re-instate the Traveller accommodation budget, which was cut by almost 90 per cent from €40 million in 2008 to €4 million in 2015'

In a heartfelt speech Maria Joyce from the National Traveller Women's Forum said:

'Serious questions now need to be answered on how this tragedy has been allowed to happen and real action is called for to make sure this never happens again'.



Pavee Point gathered over 5000 petitions from Travellers and settled people calling on the Taoiseach to set up a Traveller agency to bring about improvements in accommodation, health, employment and education for Travellers. Presenting the petitions to the government Martin Collins said "Travellers cannot be allowed to experience discrimination, degradation and to be forced to live in sub-standard conditions for another generation. We need to see results. A Traveller agency is needed to drive progress in an accountable and transparent way, turning policy into action."

Carrickmines Fire Tragedy

The Travellers in Prison Initiative expresses its solidarity with the Traveller community and in particular the Connors, Lynch and Gilbert families following the tragic death of five adults and five children at the emergency halting site at Glenamuck Rd., Carrickmines in November.



Hearses carrying the remains of the victims of the fire



Michael McDonagh Manager of Meath Travellers Workshop

Tough Life

I know sometimes the road gets tough
And sometimes life just aint enough
When all your troubles come to bear
And Life begins to feel unfair

You want to give up and block it out
Stand up, scream, punch and shout
But in the end, only you can say
What becomes of this awful day

Do something that would make them proud
Stand up strong and say out loud
You won't give up, you will be strong
To get back, to where you belong

They are up above now, looking down
In your heart, and all around
To you their love they do shine down
To fix your heart, so Mam don't frown

So when sometimes the road gets tough
And life feels like it aint enough
Think of the people, Mam who loves you
best
And God will look after the rest

By William Hourigan RIP

Travellers Peer Groups in Prison

Meath Travellers Workshops Ltd has been working with Travellers in Wheatfield prison since May 2014.

The Programme is called “**Traveller Prison Links**”. The Programme initially started with two aims:

- 1) to help Travellers in prison to empower themselves and reduce the level of re-offending
- 2) to provide training on cultural awareness, prejudice and racism and to improve relationships between prison staff and Travellers.

As it was a pilot programme there was a steering group set up to advise on the programme. The steering group was made up of the Governor, the Chaplain, a teacher, prison and probation staff and most importantly 2 Traveller inmates.

The Programme includes discussions about Traveller history and the origins of Travellers, Prejudice and Racism, Relationships, Decision making, Role models, and Storytelling.

The group worked together to produce a book called ‘**I am a Traveller in Prison**’ which included short stories, pictures and poems. This was a great achievement in many ways. These men felt valued for their input, some of the stories were entertaining and provided interesting reading material for Travellers to practice their literacy skills. The writing of the stories was a chance for some self-reflection; and it was also explained that their stories would be shared with youth projects and they could help someone else avoid going to Prison.

The pilot programme was a great success and some of the inmates went on and took up places in training workshops and school. A poem by William Hourigan, who has since passed away is featured on this page.

The Travellers in Prison Initiative hopes to support the setting up of similar groups for Travellers in other prisons

Prison Links Programme in Loughan House and Castlerea Prison



Sligo Travellers Support Group (SSGT) has been delivering the Prison Link Programme in Loughan House for over six years. Travellers in Loughan House have been busy building wagons (pictured on the left) and designing glass mosaics. Together with staff from Loughan house SSGT have also delivered training on drugs and alcohol awareness. They have also organised outings to festival days to showcase the items that they have made.

Over the last few months they have been delivering training in Castlerea prison together with the Midlands's Mediation Service and Castlerea prison staff. They hope to expand these programmes further in 2016.

SSGT appreciate the great support that they have received from the staff and management in both Loughan House and Castlerea prisons, the North West Region Drugs Task Force and the St Stephens Green Trust.

About the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI)

The Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) was set up to try to ensure equality for Travellers in prison and to reduce the chances of them returning to prison. The background to the TPI can be traced back to research carried out for the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) in 2014 called 'Travellers in the Irish Prison System'. The research was based on interviews with Travellers in prison in Ireland about their experiences in prison. The report came up with a number of recommendations that could improve the outcomes for Travellers in prison and reduce the risk of re-offending. The TPI will try to ensure that this report is available for you to access in the prison library if you are interested.

The St Stephens Green Trust recruited two part-time staff members in April 2015 to work on the TPI. Anne Costello is the Programme Co-ordinator and David Joyce was employed as Programme Officer. David has since resigned to take up a career as a solicitor.

The staff will work with Traveller organisations, the Irish Prison Service, the Probation service, HSE and Travellers in prison and their families to try to implement the plans.

The project is funded by the St. Stephens Green Trust, the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service. The HSE has provided funding also to carry out research to better understand the situation for Traveller women in prison.

Anne can be contacted at anne@ssgt.ie or 0876577666

St. Stephens Green Trust also provides funding to Traveller organisations to work with Travellers in prison and their families.

They are currently funding Traveller organisations to work with Travellers in prison in Wheatfield, Limerick, Midlands, Castlerea and Loughan House