

KERRY LIFE EDUCATION  
PRESENTATION TO E.C.A.D. CONFERENCE, GOZO  
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At the outset I would like to thank E.C.A.D. for affording me the opportunity of sharing with you the activities of the town of Killarney, Co. Kerry, in attempting to come to terms with the growth of substance abuse in our community and trust that our experience might be of benefit to other towns and cities throughout Europe.

Having just come through the June 1999 local elections successfully, the newly elected town council of Killarney decided to establish a "Drugs Liaison Committee" comprising of statutory and voluntary organisations with a remit in the area of substance abuse control i.e. the council, police, residence associations, health authority and the church. The council were concerned with the growth of substance abuse within its boundaries and were determined to examine ways in which it could be reduced. We were also convinced that if we waited for government remedies to percolate through it would be already too late.

Killarney, to those who are not familiar with this "Eden of the West" is in the south west of the island of Ireland and is world famous for its unparalleled natural beauty of lakes, mountains and woodlands with 36,000 acres of national park. Killarney is a tourist town with a population of 15,000 and greater Killarney has a pop. Of 30,000 which trebles in the summer months.

Our drug problems were nothing over and above any other provincial town in the country but nevertheless were steadily becoming more problematic. Where official detection and prosecution statistics of abuse were moderate anecdotal evidence, as determined throughout the election appeared to be much more acute, this triggered the formulation of the committee. Compared to cities like Dublin, Cork and Limerick our problems were small, there was very little evidence of general availability of harder drugs like heroine or cocaine. There was a feeling that we could stave off or at least minimise the effects of the inevitable arrival of such substances if we took corrective action. We decided to direct a lot of our activities on preventative and educational measures primarily. We were also conscious that both nationally and universally there were no, or very few definitives in relation to solutions. We were also aware that as a nation, we were amongst the highest

consumers of alcohol in Europe and there was no one better than us in the abuse stakes, in teen and underage categories.

We decided to explore what was on offer in the way of education/prevention programmes. One such programme was the Life Education system. Established in Australia in 1979 and offered health education in addition to alcohol/substance misuse prevention programmes to children and young people which also covered, nutrition, exercise, peer dynamics (bullying) and self esteem. The education programme takes place in specially equipped Mobile classrooms that travel to the heart of all communities, no matter how remote. Since the original concept the model has evolved and grown. Over 4 million children in 15 countries, now participate in Life Education.

In February 2001, having discovered there was one such facility in the republic, we travelled to Dublin to look at the facility in operation. We were impressed and requested if we could have the unit come to Killarney for a trial period of three weeks, so in June of 2001 the pupils of the nine primary schools in Killarney visited the Mobile Learning centre. It was a resounding success. The favourable reaction from pupils, teachers and parents encouraged us to act. We sought a partner to come on board with us as and South Kerry Development Partnership (S.K.D.P.) who had also been examining the growth of substance abuse in the area, were delighted to oblige and so within a short few weeks we had set up a company limited by guarantee with charitable status, this was the mechanism that was chosen to drive the objective of purchasing and running the Life Education unit, we had also to train an educator and an administrator.

So, we had a lot going for us, we had eight committed idealists, we had a vision, we had a mechanism to successfully drive the project but we had no money, it was estimated to cost approx. 120,000 euros to get it off the ground and sixty to eighty thousand euros per year thereafter annually. We went to the Minister of government in charge of drug control who told us that if the regional drugs task force passed the project, he would ensure us the money. The difficulty with the minister's proposal was, these task forces weren't yet set up and didn't come into being for another two years and we were not prepared to wait so we initiated a plan of persuasion. We went to the local authorities in our area, the credit union, the corporate sector and the churches some voluntary bodies and S.K.D.P.. We were successful beyond our dreams, it should be sufficient to say we procured commitments which enabled us to purchase the unit, pay and train the educator, employ an

administrator and enough finance to keep the project on the road for two years.

We made our first school visitation on 16<sup>th</sup>. February 2004 throughout half of the county of Kerry, serving 77 primary schools annually delivering programmes to 7,500 pupils. These programmes are delivered in an interactive and fun way, they support the social and personal and health education work already in place under the national curriculum, and are being enthusiastically received by children, parents and teaching staff alike. The important follow up work by the teachers confirms that the children retain a huge amount of information and love to talk about what they have discovered during the visit.

An independent evaluation of our work carried out by public health specialist Dr. Tim Jackson in 2008, confirmed the effectiveness and importance of the project.

We continued to expand the boundaries of our work and we extended our service to the rest of the county in October 2007 with an extra mobile unit which was supplied by the regional drugs task force, enabling us to reach a further 8,500 primary school children annually which means that over 16,000 students per year are benefiting from Life Education. We have since purchased a third Mobile learning centre to back up and support our existing services.

Our 2009 five year strategy pledges to deliver a follow on Life Education service to second level students and we have already started to deliver programmes in second level schools. Work is also in progress to strengthen and increase our existing parent and family support work, this is in response to the many requests for additional support received from families and communities.

In addition to our direct educational work we have since 2004, hosted very successful International conferences in Killarney, around substance and alcohol misuse issues. Papers have been presented by such International luminaries as Stephen Rowan, Bertha Madras, Stanton Peele, Dr. Tony Humphries, Thomas F. Babor, Professor Robin G.W. Room, and our own Cllr. Jim Corr, just to mention a few. Our seventh conference will be held this year in the magnificent Hotel Europe on the 7<sup>th</sup>. and 8<sup>th</sup>. October.

We have a special relationship with Staffenstorp in Skane county in southern Sweden and just a few months ago our chief Life Educator spoke at the Swedish equivalent of this conference through the Mayor of Staffenstorf Michael Sandin, and the Mayor and Patrik Runesson presented a joint paper to our conference last year. We are currently exploring mechanisms and frequencies of survey practices on substance abuse in second level schools in Staffenstorp.

I would like to thank you once again for giving me this great honour and privilege of addressing you in the important and sacred work which we are about, to give our children a chance to grow up free and strong and I would like to finish with a quotation that I believe describes more adequately than any words of mine, the objectives we set before us. The quotation comes from a Spanish philosopher, Rodo and I quote

“Assurance on our part in bringing about a work that will survive us, fruitful now and in time to come, exalts our human dignity and gives us triumph over the limitations of our nature, that even after our dissolution into the heart of things there would outlast, as part of all human inheritance, the very best of all we had felt or thought, our deepest and purest essence--- just as the beams of a long extinguished star go on indefinitely.”

Thank you.

Paulina, Hope you are well. I will find it difficult to get there as there are no flights out of Ireland until Wednesday at the earliest and maybe not until the weekend but in any case I am forwarding my paper.

All the very best for now.

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