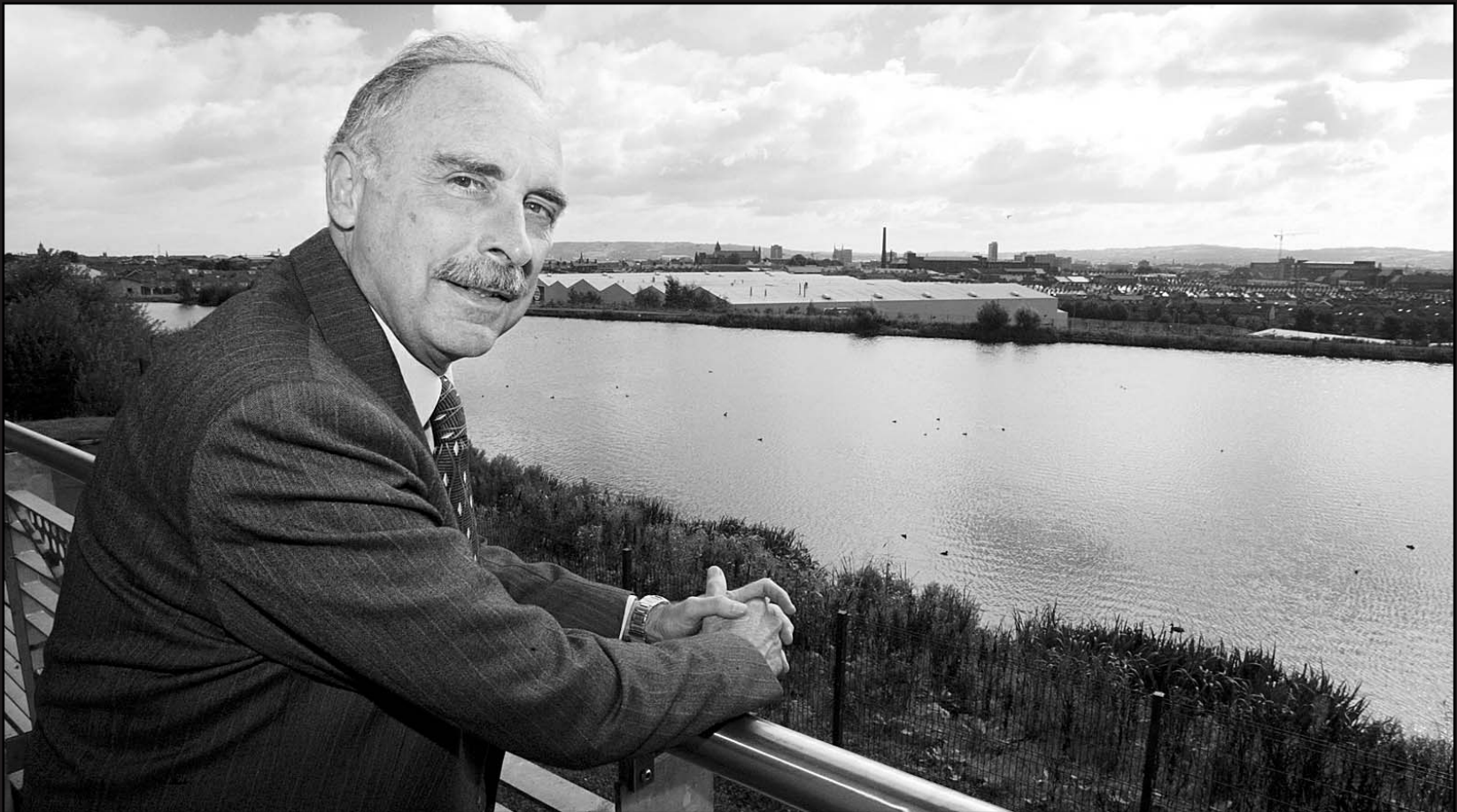


# SUICIDE EPIDEMIC IS NOT BEING EFFECTIVELY HANDLED

**Ciara McGuigan speaks to The Children of Ireland President Terry Ryan about moves being implemented in the US to prevent youth suicides here**



**HOPING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE:** Terry Ryan voices his disappointment at the poor provision of support for at-risk children here during his visit

**Saddened by the ongoing suicide crisis in Belfast, Terry Ryan, founder and president of the Children of Ireland Group, condemned the Northern Ireland health system during his visit here last week, saying that it had "let down the children tremendously" as he called for a revamp of a mental health system that he said was being strangled by bureaucracy.**

Terry's group funded a visit by two leading mental health experts from the United States in May this year – a move which was welcomed by the Department of Health. The non-profit Children of Ireland Group also funded an assessment of the issue of youth suicide in the North and West Belfast areas, making recommendations on how to prevent these deaths including the implementation of a series of properly-funded, substantive prevention programmes, a comprehensive youth mentoring programme with peers and community leaders aimed at helping young people, and the setting up of cross-community dialogue to tackle, specifically, the issue of youth suicides and the sectarian issues that are linked to this.

Speaking after his meeting with the Department of Health and the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust at which the question of the implementation of the recommendations was discussed, Mr Ryan said, "We have held some positive discussions and I sincerely hope the recommendations come to fruition, other-

wise the incidence of completed youth suicide will continue to be at a high rate in the months and years to come."

It is estimated that there are 19 suicides per 100,000 people in North and West Belfast – one of the highest rates in the world. This compares to 13 per 100,000 for the whole of Britain and Northern Ireland. And with a worrying 35 youth suicides (those aged 24 or below) estimated in the Belfast area in the first quarter of 2004, Mr Ryan says that more should be done.

"When we sent the doctors over – Dr Fred Bemak of the George Mason University in Washington DC and Dr Robert Conyne of the University of Cincinnati, Ohio – we were shocked by their findings and realised that that the problem has been getting worse, the rates of suicide are growing, punishment beatings are on the up, and it's all connected.

"We made recommendations but the wheels of bureaucracy move very slowly, and we are continuing to see the clusters of suicides building, and my disappointment is that this has always been happening so why have reaction teams not been established to deal with this very serious, very sad issue?"

The Children of Ireland Group, which has helped provide recreational and educational equipment for over 75 community centres, catering for a staggering 16,000 at-risk children across the North, was founded in 1999 after Terry Ryan's trip as an international observer to the North during the Drumcree marches in Co. Armagh and his shock at learn-

ing of the number of suicides and cluster suicides of young people in the North and West areas of Belfast.

"I have a very Irish background. I'm a Ryan and I do a lot of genealogy work, and as a result have learned a lot about the history of Ireland. So back in the winter of 1999 a friend of mine came to me and asked would I like to go to Northern Ireland and be an observer to the marching season.

"And I didn't know anything about it. I mean, we don't hear about that in the States, so he explained that we would go over to make observations, with an international group, to observe what was happening, both on the Catholic side and the Protestant side, and then report back to international bodies in the United States and many other countries, so I came over and, quite bluntly, I was very, very astounded.

"I was amazed that this type of thing was going on. I grew up in the deep south, in Memphis, Tennessee, in the fifties and sixties Civil Rights unrest, and I saw the Northern Ireland situation as a blatant Civil Rights problem.

"And at the same time I was talking to people on both sides, community centres and religious groups, and trying to understand what was going on and time and time again all I kept hearing was, 'we need help for the children, we need help for the children', and having raised two boys I could relate to the problems these people were having with the children," said Terry.

"There were a lot of commu-

nity groups here and I found out about more problems that the children were facing, increasing drug usage rates, one of the highest teen pregnancy rates and so on, and we were asked for assistance, and ways to attract the children off the streets so that the community service workers could then work with the children.

"The groups indicated that they really needed recreation equipment and education equipment to do that, so we went back and formed an organisation that could help. And the first musical event we had we were able to purchase karaoke equipment for about three community centres, and that one thing takes hundreds of children off the streets on a Friday and Saturday night, which helps reduce the crime rate.

"When we started I thought, 'what am I getting myself into? I'll get requests for thousands of dollars' but that wasn't the case, there are hundreds of community centres round the North just needing the basics.

"Our website has an application for funding, so the community groups fill that out and they fill out their non-profit registration number, because we require them to be non-profit, and they tell us all about their programmes and I started getting these in, for five hundred dollars, a thousand dollars. It's usually the smaller amounts that they're looking for, for the basics that make a huge difference.

"It's just a few hundred dollars here and there but it does so much good," says Terry.

The Florida-based Children of Ireland Group is a non-profit organisation and is generously sponsored by a voluntary list of approximately 1,000 members from all over the world.

"We've helped provide an array of anything you can think of," continued Terry, "from tables and chairs and things for educational centres and crèches, to books, conflict resolution material and sports equipment, football, soccer, canoes and kayaks, anything to do with outdoors.

"This, along with other initiatives such as the collecting and shipping of personal computers, with help from Federal Express, and collecting baseball equipment to help form little league baseball teams in Coleraine, Portstewart and Belfast, hopes Terry, will be a way of supporting the youth of the North in helping them have a hopeful outlook on life and move them away from the desperation that leads to suicide.

"We also got involved with the adolescent psychiatric bed problem here. They had six and they needed 25, so we've been working on that, and I understand this week that we're up to sixteen so we're making progress," says Terry.

"Then this year we heard about the terrible number of cluster suicides in this area and we contacted the relevant people and have expressed, quite bluntly, outrage at why this happened?

"In my town in Florida, if we have one suicide, councillors from all over just descend on the school to help the kids that were related, so that we don't

have this cluster situation."

Voicing his concern at the ever-growing suicide rate in North and West Belfast, Terry said he feels "there's a lack of services here. The Children of Ireland Group, and the doctors that came over in May, feel that the system is not working, it has failed the youth in Northern Ireland and it has failed to implement systems to adequately prevent attempted suicides.

"The main cause," he continued, "according to these mental health doctors is, on both sides of the conflict, the failure to address sectarian issues as they relate to preventing youth suicides and work needs to be done to address this.

"Back in March there was the Heads Away Programme, and that was a neat programme.

"It was a beginning, and the doctors who looked at it said it needed more substance, but it was a beginning and it's starting to address things.

"I looked at some material with the North and West Belfast Trust this week, and they have a pamphlet on how to deal with trauma issues but I urged the Trust to take that and consider a separate programme as well.

"The powers-that-be need to listen to the people on the ground," concluded Terry. "We have some wonderful grassroots organisations and they realise that the conflict has done tremendous harm to the youth of Northern Ireland, and that needs to be brought into the equation to help stop these youth suicides."