

FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER

If you don't come out of this quarantine with a new skill,
your side-hustle started, or more knowledge gained...

~~—then you never lacked time, you lacked discipline—~~

YOU ARE DOING JUST FINE.

We are going through a collective traumatic experience.

Not everyone has the privilege of turning a pandemic into something
fun or productive

MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT CEO

Dear families, friends and supporters of FirstLight,

It has been a very tough year and as we brace ourselves for continuing restrictions, I want to remind you that FirstLight is here to support you and to offer a safe space for you to grieve and to find support, whether you are a parent, sibling, grandparent, a friend or a frontline professional.

With the support of our Clinical Director, Georgia Howard, and team of dedicated psychotherapists and counsellors and through the generosity of so many, FirstLight supported 147 families across Ireland in 2020 who experienced the sudden loss of their child. This compares with 141 families supported in 2019 and 45 in 2015. Grieving in these difficult times has come with many additional stresses and challenges, and we are aware that feelings of isolation and loneliness have been compounded by the social distancing restrictions introduced to contain the Covid-19 virus, and are being felt acutely by bereaved families.

If you are struggling to understand funeral arrangements and not being able to remember your child in the way you had hoped whilst the current restrictions are in place; if the heartbreak of not having wider family and friends with you feels just too much; or if you find that not being able to meet face-to-face with other bereaved parents for support is very challenging, please do get in touch with us.

Our National Helpline (1850 391 391) is open 24/7; we are here to listen and to support you and your families and friends. We can also be contacted at info@firstlight.ie or you can send a private message via the FirstLight Facebook page. Our support services now include an online community and private, monitored Facebook Support Groups (one for bereaved Mums, one for Dads and a general one) where you can meet and chat with other bereaved parents. Our crisis intervention and counselling services continue to be available for families, couples and individuals. We have been undertaking home visits and providing face to face counselling when safe to do so, and have introduced tele and video service delivery options when not, or when preferred by clients.

In this Edition, we acknowledge that life as we knew it has changed, that it is hard to find balance in these times and that we shouldn't 'beat ourselves up' if some things seem to be slipping. There are many wellness ideas to keep ourselves together and, as Georgia says in her piece about A Time for Reflection inside, usually the one you are most resistant to is the one that will feel the best once you have tried it. It's in the doing that the relief is felt, not the thinking. Focus on doing one thing at a time without the pressure of its weight all at once, which is more achievable.

With best wishes to keep safe and well, Fionnuala Sheehan

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24/7 National Helpline
1850 391 391

FirstLight

Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families



A TIME FOR REFLECTION

Let's take a moment to acknowledge that as we approach a year of lockdowns and restrictions, life as we knew it has changed. Nerves are fraying as distractions are minimal and fun times, treat days, meeting friends, sharing hugs and friendly touches are things this year has starved us of in order to flatten the Covid-19 curve.

It has not been possible to perform the longstanding rituals around the funeral that often give comfort to those grieving; they have missed the opportunity to celebrate the life of their loved one in the hours after the funeral, where stories are shared, tears connect family and friends and defences are dropped. These rituals and contacts create an ability to send our loved one to the after-life with the communal support of everyone that loved the child that has passed. This sense of community has always eased our ability to get through this knowing we aren't alone. But, this last year, our families and communities have had to stand at a distance, watch online or release balloons and clap as the hearse passed by to show their support for the journey of the loved child to the church.

As social beings, it's proved that even in the most restricted of times, we adapt and find ways to let the ones we love know we care; embraces were replaced by elbow touches, and a squeeze of the arm or the holding of a hand was replaced by a nod. However, the loneliness and isolation felt by the bereaved have been compounded by the restrictions which have created a more profound sense of longing.

Parents who have other children aged four and above have always had a separate space for a few hours during the school day to think and to prepare to be available to their children when they return home from school. During the past year, there has been no space for parents to be how they are, to 'reset' and make themselves available for their children's emotional and physical needs. Homeschooling has added a new responsibility for parents, to be a teacher too. At the same time, working from home has created a multifunctional home as school, work and home life function from the one space. And parents are in a position where they have had to function in the course of the same hours as a parent, teacher and worker. Working out which role takes priority can be so challenging to manage. Balance has become something that is, at times, impossible to achieve. Where is the space to grieve, to reflect on resting and resetting?

Moments of fun, laughter, craic with peers, letting the hair down and entering into a different atmosphere is something that builds our resilience. Cinemas, museums, pubs, restaurants, concerts, nights with friends in their home, dinners with family, retail therapy, birthday celebrations and events, getting the hair done, a bit of pampering and gym and sport – they all take us out of our norm and offer us something else - moments of peace, release and escape. Most of these have been social remedies to help us weather all storms. This last year, we have replaced these with video calls, home projects, walking, exercise, TV, books, and music, through necessity. They have worked to a degree, but they don't replace human contact and connection.

Amazingly, we have adapted in some shape or form; it highlights the resilience we as humans possess. Slowing down has allowed us to reassess what will be sustainable in the future for our own lives. We can evaluate what we want to leave and bring into the era of lifted restrictions. Hours of a day spent commuting, picking up and dropping off family members from one place or event to another has stopped, yet there doesn't seem to be more hours in the day for some of us. How did it all fit in a year ago? If it's hard to find balance right now, if you can't get to the workout or walk, if washing is piling up and floors aren't done, or a project seems impossible to finish, don't beat yourself up or talk yourself into doing better.

A TIME FOR REFLECTION

You're doing enough, you've got through this far, and that's no mean feat despite all that has come in the last year. You are managing, whatever that looks like to you. If you find yourself saying "I should be doing...", question, why? Aren't you doing enough managing all that is going on! Just remember that self-care isn't easy, and it's usually the thing that is good for us that is the hardest thing to do. There are many wellness ideas to keep yourself together and usually, the one you are most resistant to is the one that will feel the best once you have tried it. It's in the doing that the relief is felt, not the thinking.

Focus on doing one thing at a time without the pressure of its weight all at once, which is more achievable. The "New Normal" isn't normal, and your reaction to it is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

NEWS



Second Supporting Children Campaign Launched

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman T.D., has launched the second Supporting Children campaign aimed at encouraging everyone to be mindful of vulnerable children and young people in these challenging times.

The campaign provides easy-to-access information on services available to children and families throughout the period of Covid-19 restrictions. Advertisements will be rolled out across radio and social media, with the Supporting Children website providing an information hub and practical supports to anyone who may need them.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Tusla have a robust infrastructure of services providing assistance to children, young people and families throughout Ireland, involving over six thousand funded organisations and services, including child protection, youth work, and youth, community, and family services. This existing system of structures and supports was mobilised during the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that vulnerable children and their families could still access the services they needed.

Following the move to Level 5 restrictions in December, Tusla has put in place supports for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, including additional funding for 24-hour helplines. Tusla continues with its essential work in child protection. Anyone with a concern about a child’s safety or welfare should contact their local duty social work office using details on the Tusla website.

Launching the campaign, Minister O’Gorman said: “This has been a difficult time for so many people around Ireland, and we need to make every effort to make supports are easily accessible to anyone who might need them. The ‘Supporting Children’ website provides practical supports, as well as targeted information for vulnerable children and young people.” It shows the breadth of services and supports for children provided by the State and Community and Voluntary sectors and outlines the actions and innovations taken by services in responding to the challenges of COVID-19. The website also includes links and contact details to organisations such as Parentline, Childline, and Barnardos as well as how to find local Family Resource Centres and Children and Young People’s Services Committees.

You will find additional information on the Supporting Children Campaign on www.gov.ie



MEET OUR NEW AMBASSADOR GERARD, ALL IN MEMORY OF HIS BROTHER NOEL HENEGHAN

Since ISIDA, now FirstLight was established in 1976, the list of persons who have gone above and beyond to fundraise for the organisation is simply enormous. All have been FirstLight Champions and worked towards a common goal, to ensure that free professional counselling is available to all families in Ireland requiring such support following the sudden loss of their child. Throughout 2021, we will profile some of these *FirstLightChampions*, commencing with our new Ambassador, 19-year-old Gerard Heneghan from Clonberne, County Galway.

Gerard is a first-year student at Dublin City University, studying primary school teaching while working part-time at his local service station. He lives in Clonberne with his parents Paddy and Bernie and 17-year old brother Seán. Gerard's second brother Noel, born prematurely at 32 weeks on Christmas Eve, 2000, died at home of SIDS on January 27th, 2001. Following contact from University Hospital Galway, Gerard's family received support from the Irish Sudden Infant Death Association (now FirstLight).

Gerard has been a *FirstLight Champion* since he was 13 years old, raising in total over €18,500 in donations. In 2021, Gerard joined the *FirstLight Fundraising Committee* and was appointed a *FirstLight Ambassador* alongside Irish actress Una Crawford O' Brien. I asked Gerard some questions in relation to his motivation to fundraise and his fundraising activities:

Gerard, could you tell us how you became involved with FirstLight?

"When I was younger, I never fully understood the circumstances or story surrounding Noel's death. In 2015, when I was 13 years of age, I began understanding the importance of the support FirstLight had given my family through some of our darkest days. I decided it was time to give something back to this fantastic group of people. Upon reaching out to FirstLight, I was introduced to a Louise O'Sullivan, FirstLight's then Fundraising Manager. A bond was created with the organisation which has carried through the last six years."

Can you tell us about the Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance and its tremendous success?

"After holding my first fundraiser for FirstLight in 2015 - a 5K Walk/Jog/Run, I decided it was time to up my game. Being from such a rural area here in East County Galway, country music is in high demand. That's where the idea of a country music concert came from. A Barn Dance's idea didn't come to light until we chose our first venue - an outbuilding beside our local pub, the perfect barn!

Although we changed venue the following year, the name proved popular, so we left it the way it was. I have held a Barn Dance in 2016, 2018 and 2019, and each year it has gone from strength to strength. With the help of my amazing friends and family and the support of our communities in Clonberne, Glenamaddy and the surrounding areas, we have raised the roof off Brehon Park and Raftery's Oakland at every Barn Dance. Every year, the atmosphere has been electric with the dance floor packed all night while our various talented performers provide faultless entertainment for hours on end."

What has been your greatest fundraising challenge, and what advice would you give to a young person looking to get into fundraising or advocacy?

"Every year, the main challenge is obtaining sponsorship from businesses to cover costs in the lead up to the events, e.g., advertising and entertainment. In terms of advice, I would strongly recommend you start planning early and always keep on top of your plans! Over the years, I have quickly realised how easily everything can pile up and become too overwhelming. However, it is so worth it at the end of it all!"

FIRSTLIGHT CHAMPIONS



The Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance signage at the entrance to Glenamaddy in 2019



In 2019 Gerard was a finalist in the Pramerica Spirit of Community Awards



Irish actors Una Crawford O'Brien and Byran Murray who were the VIP guests for the Baby Noel Barn Dance in 2019



L-R: Gerard and his family presenting Fionnuala Sheehan with the proceeds of the Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance 2018,



Gerard attends his first radio interview in 2019 on the Tommy Marren Show on Midwest Radio



Country music singers Jason Travers and Jenna Sloane who were part of the line-up for 2019 Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance.



Gerard's exercise bike for his 176Km Marathon in 2020 the distance from his home in Glenamaddy to the FirstLight head office in the Carmichael Centre Dublin



In 2018 Gerard had a signed Irish jersey donated by the IRFU for his Baby Noel Heneghan Raffle.



Gerard with Sandra Ganley of the Jive Juniors Dance School who provided free dance classes as part of the Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance in 2018/19/20

DECIDE ON A PLAN TO HELP YOU

KEEP WELL



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

DELIVERING

Sláintecare.

The Keep Well Campaign is a call to action to everyone across our society to find ways to support everyone to discover new activities and routines that will do us good.

It is aimed at showing people of all ages, in communities across Ireland, how we can mind our own physical and mental health and wellbeing by adding healthy and helpful habits to our daily and weekly routines.

The campaign provides guidelines, information, and tips on things that will help us keep well through the coming months. The campaign is focused on five main themes:

1. Keeping Active

Keeping active and being outdoors, even during the winter, is important to help physical and mental health and wellbeing.

2. Staying Connected

Staying connected with people, addressing isolation, supporting volunteerism and initiatives that support person-to-person connection is important to our wellbeing.

3. Switching Off and Being Creative

Switching off and being creative or learning something new, getting back to nature and finding ways to relax can help our general wellbeing.

4. Eating Well

By nourishing our bodies and minds, we can develop a better connection between the food we eat and how we feel and positively impact our physical and mental wellbeing.

5. Minding your Mood

Equipping people with information on where to go if they need support. This will also be linked with the local community helpline to ensure that people can access the support they need.

You will find additional information on the Keep Well Campaign on www.gov.ie

FirstLight

Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families

**24/7 National Helpline
1850 391 391**

Carmichael Centre, 4 North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Phone: 01-8732711: Website: www.firstlight.ie: Charity No. CHY7716

If you have a newsletter query or a story for inclusion in the newsletter please email
Andrew Mernagh at info@firstlight.ie