

FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER

*Sometimes you have to stay silent
because no words can explain what's
going on in your heart and mind*

MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT CEO

Dear families, friends and supporters of FirstLight,

As we all are painfully aware, it is more than a year since we entered the first Covid-19 Lockdown. But there is some brightness on the horizon as the vaccination rollout, while slower so far than we might have hoped for, is set to gain momentum in the weeks ahead.

We will soon be approaching the first anniversary of the launch of The Community Call, an initiative that was established following the onset of the pandemic to link local and national Government with community and voluntary sectors. This initiative has resulted in an unprecedented mobilisation of both State and voluntary resources to combat the effects of Covid-19 and has led to a deeper appreciation of the critical support services provided by community, voluntary and not for profit organisations, big and small, throughout the country to vulnerable and marginalised members of our society. Let us hope that these positive outcomes will continue post-Covid.

I want to acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Community and Rural Development which made available in May 2020 the Covid-19 Stability Fund following the collapse of fundraising by charities. This Fund was administered most efficiently by Pobal and helped FirstLight and many other charities to continue to provide their services over the last year.

I also want to acknowledge the Public Participation Networks (PPNs), overseen by the Department of Rural and Community Development. They provide a structure that allows local authorities (31 in all) to connect with community, voluntary and social inclusion groups. FirstLight was very pleased to be awarded grants by a number of PPNS in 2020. While the individual grants are relatively small, when combined they enabled us to distribute a suite of Newsletters in 2020 to our growing readership. In light of the positive response to the 2020 Newsletters, we plan to continue to issue a further suite in 2021, and look forward to the continued support of PPNS in this endeavour.

Inside you will find a piece by Ian Lawton, a bereaved father, whose second son Hank died when he was just a day old. Drawing from his own experience, Ian feels that bereaved fathers need to speak up about their grief and that the idea of having 'to man up' is harmful.

FirstLight has held its annual *Mile in Memory* remembrance walk on Father's Day in each of the last 2 years and will do so again this year, on Sunday, June 20th, which is Father's Day. Bereaved fathers are often the forgotten grievers, or perhaps, the disenfranchised grievers as a result of societal pressure that requires them to 'get on with it' and hold it together for the family.

Last year's *Mile in Memory* remembrance walks were undertaken in a virtual way. That will probably be necessary again this year. Please mark June 20th in your diary and let us find ways, in whatever restrictions or circumstances prevail at the time, to acknowledge the grief of the bereaved fathers in our lives. We will do all possible to support you in your efforts.

In the meantime, my very best wishes to you to keep safe and well,
Fionnuala Sheehan

IN THIS ISSUE:

NEW
FIRSTLIGHT
INFORMATION
PACK

PROFESSIONAL
CERTIFICATE IN
CHILDREN AND
LOSS COURSE

NEW RESEARCH
ON
BEREAVEMENT
SHOWS A
COUNTRY
STRUGGLING

ALL THE
SHINING IN THE
SPRING: THE
STORY OF A
BABY WHO DIED

BEREAVED
FATHER IAN
LAWTON URGES
MEN TO 'SPEAK
UP' ABOUT
GRIEF

FIRSTLIGHT
100,000 STEPS
CHALLENGE

24/7 National Helpline
1850 391 391

My Grandmother Once Gave Me a Tip:

In difficult times, you move forward in small steps.

Do what you have to do, but little by little.

Don't think about the future, or what may happen tomorrow.

Wash the dishes.

Remove the dust.

Write a letter.

Make a soup.

You see?

You are advancing step by step.

Take a step and stop.

Rest a little.

Praise yourself.

Take another step.

Then another.

You won't notice, but your steps will grow more and more.

And the time will come when you can think about the future without crying

By Sofo Archon of The Unbounded Spirit



FirstLight
Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families

The above poem was written by Sofo Archon for his website The Unbounded Spirit, FirstLight shared this poem online for Mother's Day on March 14th.

IHF Accepting Applications for Professional Certificate in Children and Loss Course

The Irish Hospice Foundation is now accepting applications for their 2021/2022 Professional Certificate in Children and Loss postgraduate course.

When a child experiences loss, either through death or parental separation, their needs are often misunderstood or overlooked. Because children may express their grief in ways that are different to adults, their reactions may go unrecognised.

This is a part-time blended course that seeks to equip practitioners with the necessary skills to understand and support children on their grief journey.

For further details visit www.hospicefoundation.ie

New FirstLight Information Pack Distributed to all 86 Hospitals Nationwide



On March 10th FirstLight launched its brand new information pack which includes an 8-page booklet, A3 full-colour poster, Referral form, and an introduction letter from FirstLight CEO Fionnuala Sheehan. The information pack was distributed in quantities of 10+ to all 86 hospitals across Ireland. Those receiving the packs included Directors of Nursing, Bereavement Midwives, Social Workers, Clinical Nurse Managers, End-of-life Care Co-ordinators and Public Health Nurses. The packs were also distributed to all 19 Tusla regional offices.

FirstLight is currently in contact with Garda Headquarters on the distribution of information packs to all 564 Garda stations nationwide. The packs will be distributed in the coming months to Primary Care and Community Health Centres across Ireland.

The production of this new information pack was made possible by the RTÉ Does Comic Relief Fund via the Community Foundation for Ireland. FirstLight would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank RTÉ Does Comic Relief and the Community Foundation for Ireland for their support.

A Country Struggling With Bereavement



70% of men and 85% of women
feel that as a nation the grief we've felt during the pandemic will be long lasting and impactful.

The Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) has conducted new research which shows that Ireland has struggled over the last year with bereavement and how our grieving rituals have been changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought huge changes to how we mourn, how we offer support to one another and highlighted the need for increased supports for bereaved families and individuals across the country.

The IHF undertook the research between February 18th and March 1st 2021, sampling over 1,000 adults nationwide to give a clear insight into how Ireland is dealing with death and dying during lockdown. The majority surveyed feel that the grief impact on the nation will be long lasting. However, with respect to bereavement supports less than one in five people believe bereavement care is sufficient in Ireland and a large proportion, 43%, say it is not sufficient.

The research shows that the vast majority of the population have had to deal with bereavement in some form over the past year and that those experiences have been drastically changed by the pandemic. Speaking about the research, Orla Keegan, Head of Bereavement & Education at the IHF said: "There are much brighter days ahead for us all but in the meantime, I would encourage people to make that call to someone who is grieving. If you don't know what to say, have a look at the *Irish Hospice Foundation Bereavement Support Hub* on our website. But human contact is central to how the Irish deal with grief and we can help you."

Other findings of the Irish Hospice Foundation research show:

- Nearly 3/4 of the population (73%) struggled to know how to support family, friends who have been bereaved
- 77% feel that as a nation the grief we've felt during this pandemic will be long lasting and impactful.
- 87% feel being together is a key part of the grieving process which has not been possible during the pandemic.
- 62% found it difficult to show respect in the absence of attending a funeral.
- Over half the population feel they know what to say but younger people need more support and information on how to do this.
- 80% of the population feel there needs to be more support and advice on bereavement for families and friends of loved ones who have passed away.
- 85% of the adult population have offered some level of support to family, friends, colleagues, or neighbours who have been bereaved.

If you would like additional information on the research or the IHF Bereavement Hub please visit www.hospicefounadtion.ie

All the Shining in The Spring: The Story of a Baby Who Died



Illustrations by Donald Teskey

Thirty years ago, the awful loss, at birth, of her baby, Daniel, prompted Siobhán Parkinson to seek out a book to explain to her young son Matthew what had happened. But to no avail.

Siobhán recalls that difficult time: 'My first instinct when I knew I had to explain all this to my small son was to look for a book to help me open up this painful subject with him. It never struck me that there wouldn't be such a book ... There were books about pets dying and books about the sad passing of a beloved granddad. But the premise of such books was that death comes in due course at the end of a life lived – and for most children that is of course how they first experience loss. But that was not what I was looking for.'

So Siobhán wrote *All Shining in the Spring* for Matthew. This was her first book on what has become a long and acclaimed career as a children's writer. And now, three decades later, this April 3rd – on what would be Daniel's 30th birthday – her son Matthew, now the publisher at Little Island Books, publishes a new edition of the book that was written for him all those years ago.

About the book:

Matthew is excited about the new baby. But then, one day, something very sad happens. The doctor tells Matthew's mother that her baby isn't growing properly and it won't be strong enough to live outside her body. Matthew and his mother and father will always remember their baby. But as time goes by, they will not feel sad so often.

This child-centred book is intended to help children and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth, perinatal death or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

***All Shining in the Spring* is available online at www.littleislandbooks.ie or from April 1st in bookstores nationwide.**



About the author: Siobhán Parkinson

Siobhán Parkinson was Ireland's first-ever Laureate Na Óg (Children's Laureate). She has published more than 30 books for children and adults, in English and Irish, with publishers including Puffin, Hodder, The O'Brien Press and Little Island Books. In 2010 she founded Little Island Books. She has won many awards and been nominated for the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Astrid Lingrin Memorial Award.



Little Island Books

Bereaved Father and Filmmaker Ian Lawton Urges Men to 'Speak Up' About Grief



My name is Ian Lawton, and I am a bereaved father living in the midlands of Ireland. On February 1st 2011, my youngest son, Hank, was born. He died the day after his birthday. Somehow 10 years have passed, and like any parent, the desire to acknowledge a landmark in your child's life is very real. It's a big deal whether they are with us or not, and to mark the occasion, I ran 10 marathons in 10 days finishing on what would have been Hank's 10th birthday. It was cathartic.

The English language has words for those who have lost parents or a spouse. There are orphans or widows and widowers. But we don't exist. We don't have an identity. It's easy to forget us. As many of you reading may be aware, the time leading up to an anniversary can be a dark time. And for the past decade, it has been torturous.

After Hank died, I ate my grief and ballooned up to 350lb (25+ stone), making me morbidly obese, pre-diabetic, high blood pressure and in danger of stroke. I spent seven years trapped in a body that was slowly killing me simply because I felt alone. I felt I was the only dad to have ever lost his son. Then, in 2018 I met with a group of bereaved fathers at a meeting in Dublin* and connected with other dads. I no longer felt alone. Within 10 months, I had shed almost half my body weight of life-threatening fat and now run ultra-marathon distances at age 49.

I ran the ten marathons around a 400-meter running track. Over the 10 days, I practically ran the length of my country, in circles, every day, over and over again. I was waking up and doing the same thing all over again. Like that hamster wheel of monotony, bereavement, depression and grief. How it can feel like it goes on forever. It never gets easier, nor would we want it to. Each marathon represented the perpetual pain bereaved parents endure every day—especially the days leading up to a milestone. We do so in silence as society is not ready to talk about dead babies.

But, when you run silly distances, people pay attention. I used that attention not only to encourage men to speak but to show that our vulnerability is a source of strength and not a weakness.

In recent years I have been working on a documentary film on the subject of infant loss, told from the dad's perspective. I feel it is important to break the taboo of infant loss and reach the dads out there who are perhaps repressing their grief due to the societal commands of masculinity. The completed film will be a love letter to all those suffering in silence. I'm compelled to make this statement to reach other fathers who, like I was, suffering unnecessarily. It's time to speak up, not man up.

If you would like further details about Ian Lawton and his documentary please visit www.runningforhank.com

***The Dublin Group Ian attended is hosted by A Little Lifetime. Further details are available at www.alittlelifetime.ie**

FirstLight Daddies Support Group

FirstLight provides suddenly bereaved fathers with a Private Members group on Facebook titled *FirstLight Daddies Support Group*.

Join the FirstLight 100,000 Steps Challenge



In February families, friends and communities around Ireland walked over 10,000km in support of suddenly bereaved parents and families. They achieved 10,000km while adhering to the 5km, Level 5 COVID-19 restrictions and raised over €10,000 in donations in aid of FirstLight.

In April, FirstLight is challenging other families, friends and communities across Ireland to walk 100,000 steps in support of suddenly bereaved parents and families. The *FirstLight 100,000 Steps Challenge* runs from Thursday, April 1st to Friday, April 30th and is open to everyone. Like our *80Km February Challenge*, this too can and should be completed in manageable stages to accommodate your fitness levels and while adhering to the COVID-19 restrictions.

How to join the *FirstLight 100,000 Steps Challenge* in just 2 simple steps

- Join the FirstLight 100,000 Steps Challenge Facebook group to log your daily 10,000 Steps and support others undertaking the challenge <https://www.facebook.com/groups/firstlight100000stepschallenge/>
- Create your 100,000 Steps Challenge Facebook fundraising page <https://www.facebook.com/fundraisers/> and select FirstLight as your designated charity

Do I have to post my 100,000 Steps on Facebook?

- Please post them to your Facebook Fundraiser page and for additional motivation, on the FirstLight 100,000 Steps Challenge Facebook group.
- Please ensure to always adhere to the COVID-19 restrictions relating to distance and social contacts
- FirstLight will be posting all 100,000 Steps Challenge participants an official certificate of completion signed by the FirstLight CEO and Chairperson along with a FirstLight pin and candle.

Is there another online platform I can use to raise funds?

- If you prefer to raise money via a different platform, you can set up an online fundraising page at www.GoFundMe.com or www.iDonate.ie. both of which list FirstLight as a charity.

Please ensure to always adhere to COVID-19 restrictions relating to distance and social contacts throughout the challenge. If you have additional queries, email info@firstlight.ie or phone 01-8732711.



Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families

National 24-Hour 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 info@firstlight.ie