

FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER

“If someone lives in our shoes for a week, a month, even a day, to experience the pain, the loss, the fear, the anger... they’d get some insight into what it’s like to lose a child.”

Karen speaking about the death of her son, Zack, as part of the FirstLight video campaign.

MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT

Dear friends and supporters of FirstLight,

We have just passed Imbolc, an Irish festival that marks the beginning of spring. March has arrived with brighter days, daffodils, and crocuses blooming. These signs of new beginnings are welcome after the darkness of winter, but they can also be reminders of those who are no longer with us. Starting a new season without our loved ones can be difficult, so we remind you to be kind to yourself. Hopefully, you can enjoy the sun, the blossoming flowers and trees, and the returning birds and wildlife. However, it's okay if you're not ready for that yet, and we encourage you not to judge yourself if you're not.

Mother's Day is coming up this Sunday, and it can be particularly challenging for those who have lost their mother or mother figure. Parents who are grieving for their child may feel isolated during celebrations of maternal love. We hope the stories our parents share in this newsletter may help you feel less alone in your grief and that you may feel connected to all of us who are living with loss.

This edition also looks back at 2023. Demand for FirstLight's services was the highest in the organisation's 47-year history, with 268 families receiving free crisis intervention and professional psychotherapy. FirstLight was fortunate enough to receive funding from state agencies such as Tusla, Póbal, HSE, and Local Authorities across the country. We were also generously supported by individuals, families, and communities who organised fundraisers in support of FirstLight. In this edition, we spotlight some of those supporters. We are grateful to everyone who gave so generously in 2023. Without you, we couldn't do this work and support the people and families who need FirstLight.

REFERRALS SUBMITTED:

268

Referrals received in 2023

CRISIS INTERVENTION DELIVERED:

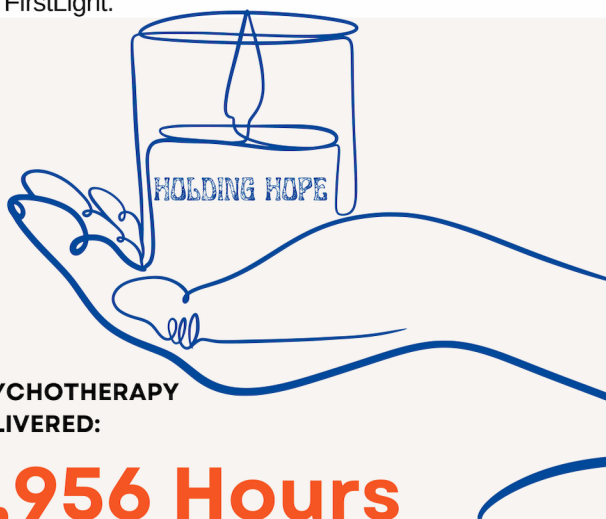
402 Hours

Nationwide by In-House clinical team

PSYCHOTHERAPY DELIVERED:

1,956 Hours

Nationwide by the clinical team and register of outsourced therapists



IN THIS ISSUE:

FIRSTLIGHT NEWS

FIRSTLIGHT VIDEO PROJECT

MOTHER'S DAY 2024

THANK YOU TO OUR 2023 FUNDRAISERS

UPCOMING FUNDRAISING EVENTS 2024

FirstLight

Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families

FIRSTLIGHT VIDEO AND PODCAST PROJECT

In late 2023, FirstLight created their first information video with the aim of giving a platform to bereaved parents and families to share their experiences. The purpose of the video was to help others who have gone through the same experience feel seen, understood, and less lonely in their grief.

We hope that by sharing the stories of these courageous parents, the public can gain insight into the lives and experiences of bereaved families. Those who have lost a child deserve empathy and compassion, and we believe that by raising awareness and promoting understanding of this devastating experience, we can create a society where grieving individuals feel supported.

Another goal for the video was to increase awareness of the services provided by FirstLight. We want bereaved families and frontline professionals to have an understanding of what it's like to engage with our service. We want everyone who needs us to know that we are here for them and what they can expect from us. We hope that this video will give families, individuals, and professionals the confidence to reach out to us and understand that they will be treated with empathy, compassion, patience, and respect.



We wish to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all those who took part in our video. We thank Karen for sharing her story of what it was like to experience the death of her smiley son, Zack. We thank Rebecca who shared how FirstLight helped her after the sudden death of her baby son, Finn. We thank Rob for telling us about the life and passing of his gorgeous daughter Emily. We thank Amie for sharing what it was like to give birth to and experience the passing of her beautiful baby Áine at just 23 weeks during Covid. We are so grateful for their generosity and courage in telling us their stories of love and loss of their children. Podcasts of each parent's full story of losing their child will be available on the FirstLight website from April 2024.

We also thank Clinical Midwife Specialist, Brenda Casey from the National Maternity Hospital, and Medical Social Worker, Jenny Buckley from CHI at Crumlin. They generously gave of their time to share their experiences of referring to FirstLight, explaining how our service has helped them and the families they support. We thank Clinical Services Director, Georgia Howard, and Clinical Services Manager, Elaine Masterson who carved out time in their busy schedules to interview the participants to help them in sharing their experiences, as well as speaking about the work that they do for FirstLight. Finally, we thank Shane and Josh of McKenna Creative in Wicklow who produced the video for us. Their patience and professionalism throughout the project was exceptional. We couldn't have asked for better partners in producing our videos and podcasts - thank you.

To watch the video in full, please visit: <https://youtu.be/MAHgsTkUm6Q>

MOTHER'S DAY 2024

Mother's Day falls on Sunday, March 10th this year. It's a time when shops are filled with displays of cards, flowers, and gifts, encouraging us to celebrate. However, for those who are grieving the death of a mother, stepmother, grandmother, or child, it can be a triggering time.

The day can evoke mixed emotions because we may have several different roles (mother, child, partner) and still be celebrating in some way. It's possible to feel happy, guilty, and terribly sad all at the same time. Coping with such complex feelings often requires time, space, and support. Everyone's situation is unique, and there is no right or wrong way to feel. But please remember, you're not alone, and your loved one's relationship with you lives on, even if they're no longer with you.

To mark the day, we're sharing a personal story of a mother's loss and how she has learned to cope with Mother's Day. We hope her experience will bring comfort to those who face similar difficulties.

6 Things I Learned From The First Mother's Day Without My Child *by Caroline Jefferson*

A few years ago, my therapist asked me what the hardest part of losing my son was, and my answer was simple: re-planning the rest of my life without him physically here. You see, by keeping my son cherished in my heart, all I can do is hold on to the loving memories from my pregnancy. That's what keeps me going on the days that I'd rather be with him in Heaven. I think back to him, kicking me every time he heard his daddy's voice, and squirming around when I sang (off-key) to him.

To my fellow mothers who grieve the loss of their precious babies and children, I love all of you. We have been placed in a club that we didn't ask to be in. I asked God so many times, why me? Why did I get stripped of the one thing I was so honoured and blessed to carry for 39 weeks? Then I was quickly reminded that God gives his hardest battles to his toughest soldiers.

As we quickly approach Mother's Day, I can undoubtedly say that watching the world celebrate mothers who have living children doesn't make me feel like a hardened soldier. Often, I just feel weak and depressed and isolated. On my first Mother's Day, I couldn't even get out the bed. This heartache of me longing for my son overpowered any urge I had to eat, shower, go out, or talk to people. I was smelly and miserable, crying all day long. My tribe was so worried about me, and even I didn't know if I'd come out of that emotional rut.

People warned that the first one would be hard. They failed to share any advice to help me get through the day. I had to figure that out on my own, and it wasn't fun at all. But now, at least, I have some thoughts I'd like to share with you which may make the day a tiny bit more bearable...



Here's what I learned after my first Mother's Day without my precious son:

The loss of my baby doesn't make me any less of a mother.

Your journey as a mother still counts. Your angel matters, and you deserve to be honored as a mother if you so choose. Everyone may not celebrate with you, and that's okay.

The world doesn't validate your motherhood.

I carried my son for 39 weeks, and no one can tell me that that doesn't make me a mother.

Think about what you need and communicate that with your support system.

One of the biggest mistakes I made in the past was setting high expectations for how I wanted a milestone day (like Mother's Day or his birthday) to play out but didn't tell anyone what I needed. I just expected them to read my mind and know what I wanted because that's exactly how life works, right?

Tell your tribe what you want or need, even if it doesn't include them.

Do you want to be left alone for the day? Do you prefer breakfast in bed, followed by dinner at your favourite restaurant? Do you think it's better to wait until the day and see how you feel? Whatever you choose, however you want to acknowledge Mother's Day, communicate that with the people that care about you.

You are not grieving alone, even though it might feel like it.

The loss of a baby can be hard for those around you – your parents, your spouse, your closest friends. One year on my son's birthday, I found my mum reading her devotional bible before breakfast. I asked her what she was reading, and she replied, "a prayer of comfort," with tears falling from her beautiful face. At that very moment, I realised that I wasn't the only one still living with the pain of losing my son. I shared that story to say – don't hesitate to talk to people who may be hurting with you. It's comforting to know that you aren't alone in your pain, and for me, sometimes simply talking about my son and my memories with him gives me the comfort I need.

Know your grief triggers and avoid them at all costs.

Confession: I stopped going out to eat on Mother's Day because when the waiter asks, "Who's celebrating Mother's Day today?" I'm overtaken by this awkward feeling when I want to proudly announce myself as a mother even though the rest of the table doesn't instinctively consider me one. I understand that everyone doesn't think about me when they think about motherhood because I don't have a living child, and that's okay. What's not okay is knowing how that situation makes me feel but still forcing myself to endure it just to be in the company of others.

Going shopping around this time of year is another trigger for me. There's just something about me seeing children with their mums, or watching men shop for their wives or girlfriends, or co-parenting partners. It's beautiful, don't get me wrong, but it's also a brutal reminder that my son isn't here with me, or with his dad picking out a card for me.

Final thoughts...

Honestly, finding the best way to handle your first Mother's Day and the ones to follow will truly come from trial and error; you just have to find the right things for you that year. I don't believe in the saying, "time heals all wounds," but I do believe that over time, you learn the best ways to cope with that pain.



In 2023, FirstLight received numerous generous donations for which we are immensely grateful. We extend our heartfelt thanks to each and every person who supported us in continuing our vital work of providing free crisis intervention and professional psychotherapy to bereaved families. While there are too many of you to name, we would like to spotlight some of the amazing individuals, families and communities who contributed to our cause in 2023.



Atlantic Br-oing Worlds Toughest Row

Brave Wicklow brothers Eamon and Andrew Breen took on an extraordinary voyage in aid of FirstLight and Make-A-Wish Ireland in December 2023. They rowed over 3,000 miles across the Atlantic from La Gomera, Spain to Antigua. They made this incredible journey in their two-man boat 'Rory', named after their brother Rory who died tragically from SIDS at just 10 weeks old. An almost unimaginable amount of effort went in to this campaign.

The brothers trained for three years in preparation for the row, alongside all the organisation required for such an unusual event. They did this while also organising and taking part in fundraising events and promoting their campaign and FirstLight in the press and on social media. The brothers have also been chosen as Grand Marshalls of the St. Patrick's Day parade this year in recognition of their achievement - an incredible honour. Their iDonate page will remain open until the 31st of March. If you are impressed by what the brothers have achieved, and you would like to help them to reach their fundraising target while supporting FirstLight, please visit: www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/AtlanticChallenge2023

Gerard Heneghan

Gerard Heneghan is 22 years of age from Clonberne, County Galway. Gerard is a final-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 his 20-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 supporting FirstLight since he was 13 years old, and has raised over €50,000 in donations via various fundraisers including the Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance. In 2023, organised the annual Baby Noel Heneghan Barn Dance raising almost €30,000. He was also instrumental in FirstLight's nomination to the Joyce Country Truck Run which



Soul Swims

In December 2023, bereaved mum, Erin, and her sea swimming group 'Soul Swims' undertook a Sunrise Swim to in memory of her daughter, Córa Rose, who died suddenly as a baby. At 8am 2nd of December, on what would have been Córa Rose's 2nd birthday, the Soul Swimmers, along with FirstLight CEO, Jennifer, bravely entered the freezing cold waters of the Forty Foot, Dublin, to celebrate Córa Rose's life, as well as to raise funds for FirstLight. It was a beautiful morning, and the group managed to raise an amazing €3,000. Soul Swims was founded by new mum Aoife, to help her and other mums enhance their mental health and wellbeing through cold water swimming. The group has now become a fixture at the Forty Foot and continues to promote community, conversation and connection. Erin says she found sea swimming beneficial in helping her through her grief and to help her feel ready to tackle the day ahead. To find out more about Soul Swim, follow @soul_swims on Instagram.



Kitty Moss Christmas Cards

Children's book illustrator and bereaved mum, Kitty Moss, raised funds for FirstLight in 2022 by donating to us all profits from her Christmas card sales. For Christmas 2023, Kitty Moss graciously agreed to collaborate with us to create a set of FirstLight Christmas cards using her beautiful illustrations. Our Christmas card sales in 2023 were a record breaker for us, and we had to re-order additional stock twice from our printers to keep up! In all, thanks to Kitty Moss and all those who purchased her stunning cards, we raised a total of €2,000.

Kitty Moss lives in the wild woods of Wicklow with her husband Stevie and daughter Willow. They lost their little boy Jude on May 28th 2022, and the Christmas card collection is in his memory and to celebrate the amazing work of FirstLight. Her latest picture book, The Christmas Book Flood, has sold out worldwide, showcasing her exceptional talent. To find our more about Kitty Moss and her work, visit www.kittymoss.com



UPCOMING FUNDRAISERS IN 2024

2024 is shaping up to be a big fundraising year for FirstLight, with many individuals, families and groups already dedicating their time and effort to plan events to raise funds to support bereaved parents and families through our free psychotherapy services. Below we have highlighted some of the events coming up - please support them if you can.



Oliver Blackwell's Mt. Aconcagua Challenge

Our amazing chairperson Oliver Blackwell summited Mt. Aconcagua on the 14th of February this year. This was an incredible achievement as Mt. Aconcagua stands at 6,962m tall, and is the second highest of the Seven Summits, the tallest peak in the world outside the Himalaya and the apex of both the Southern and Western Hemispheres. It was an extremely challenging climb, but Oliver made it, and we are thankful to have him safely back down the mountain. We are so grateful to Oliver, who undertook this arduous expedition to raise vital funds for FirstLight. Oliver also made this incredible challenge in memory of his son David, who died unexpectedly at just 14 months old. Oliver is still accepting donations via his iDonate page, so please continue to support and congratulate him using the link below: <https://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/FirstLightMtAconcagua>



Go Blue for JJ

In February this year, Ballboughal Boxing Club hosted their annual 'Go Blue for JJ' Fundraiser in aid of FirstLight, and in memory of Baby JJ Harford. Our sincere thanks to JJ's family and the Ballyboughal community for their continued support of FirstLight. Their annual fundraising efforts have enabled us to provide free crisis intervention and free psychotherapy to those who need us.



Skerries Rowing Club

On the 9th of March, Skerries Rowing Club is hosting a multiple marathon event where six of their rowers will race to complete the marathon distance of 42.195km solo and other club members will replay the race as teams so we can complete an overall distance of 400km combined. Please support them by visiting: <https://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/SkerriesRowingClub>



Conor Ryan Strong to Endure 24 Hour Challenge

On the 25th of May, Conor Ryan will be undertaking a Strong to Endure 24 Hour Fitness Challenge in aid of FirstLight. The fundraiser entails an eye-watering number of fitness challenges including running, pull-ups, push ups, rowing, cycling and sandbag walks. Please support Conor by visiting this link: <https://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/ConorRyan4x4x48>



Portmarnock Tri Club Memorial Swim 2024

Each year, Portmarnock Tri Club organises an annual swim and fundraiser to remember members and people close to the club who have died. This year, their member Sarah Bannan Keegan has chosen FirstLight to be the beneficiary of their fundraising efforts, in honour of her son Ruairí Keegan, who died suddenly last year, at just 5 years old. Ruairí was a brilliant, bright and brave child of five and a half. He loved rainbows, puppies, roadsters and playing with his big sister Niamh. The swim will be taking place on the 18th of March. Please support Portmarnock Tri Club and Ruairí's family and friends in their fundraising efforts in aid of FirstLight by donating via this link: <https://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/PTCMemorialSwim>

FirstLight Fundraising Guide: Help Support Bereaved Families across Ireland

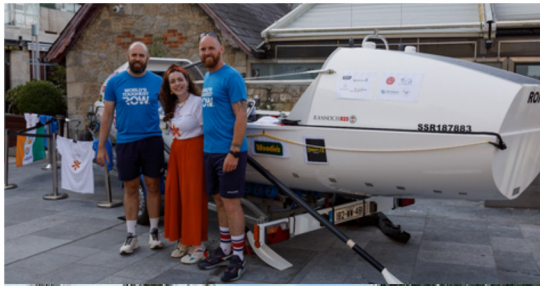


2023 saw the highest-ever demand for FirstLight's services, with a total of 268 families supported. Donations and fundraising events, now more than ever, are a vital source of income to FirstLight so that we can continue to provide free crisis intervention and free psychotherapy to bereaved parents and families whose child has died.

You will have seen on the previous pages of this newsletter just some of the unusual and creative ideas that our amazing supporters have come up with to raise funds for FirstLight. If you too would like to help, but you're not sure where to start, we have put together a fundraising guide on our website: <https://firstlight.ie/how-you-can-help/>

And remember, FirstLight is here to help every step of the way if you need it. We can supply fundraising materials such as flyers, collection buckets, posters, and t-shirts.





The Great Limerick Run, Sunday 5th of May 2024

- The Great Limerick Run is back on Sunday, 5th of May 2024, with a distance for everybody. It is the biggest mass participation sporting event outside Dublin. Choose from a marathon, a marathon relay, a half marathon or a 6-mile event. For further details: www.greatlimerickrun.com

Cork City Marathon, Sunday 2nd of June 2024

- The Cork City Marathon is back on Sunday, 2nd of June 2024, with a Marathon, Half Marathon, and 10k event. The course takes you through the beautiful and unique streetscapes of Cork City and its suburbs. For further details: www.corkcitymarathon.ie

VHI Women's Mini Marathon, Sunday 2nd of June 2024

- The VHI Women's Mini Marathon, an annual 10k charity road race, occurs each June bank holiday weekend in Dublin and is the largest women's event of its kind in the world. For further details: www.vhiwomensminimarathon.ie

Mile in Memory Walk 2024, Father's Day Sunday 16th of June 2024

- FirstLight's annual Mile in Memory Remembrance Walk will take place on Father's Day Sunday, June 16th, nationwide. If you would like to host a walk in your area [please email andrew@firstlight.ie](mailto:andrew@firstlight.ie) or [phone 01-8732711](tel:01-8732711)

Baby Loss Awareness Week, 9th to 15th October 2024

- An annual collaboration between more than 60 charities across the UK and Ireland, Baby Loss Awareness Week aims to raise awareness about the key issues affecting those who have experienced a sudden loss of a child. For further details: www.babyloss-awareness.org

Global Wave of Light, October 15th 2024, 7:00 pm

- Please join FirstLight for the Global Wave of Light Tuesday, October 15th at 7pm. Baby Loss Awareness Week finishes each year on October 15th with the Global Wave of Light'. October 15th is also International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day and is recognised across the world we would like to invite you to join with other families across the world and take part in the Global Wave of Light'. For further details: www.babyloss-awareness.org

Irish Life Dublin Marathon, Sunday, October 27th 2024

- The Irish Life Dublin Marathon is the fourth-largest marathon in Europe. More than 20,000 runners from over 60 countries will take to Dublin city centre course on October 27th 2024. The race takes in many of Dublin's historic landmarks and finishes in the heart of the city. For further details visit: www.irishlifedublinmarathon.ie

Bereaved Children's Awareness Week, 11th - 15th November 2024

- Bereaved Children's Awareness Week takes place each year in November to highlight bereaved children's needs and to provide a voice for them to be heard. For further details: www.childhoodbereavement.ie

Submit Referrals @ www.firstlight.ie

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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