

# The early days of Rialto Community Drug Team

## A Brief History

**As told by the people involved around 1992, the year it was established.**

**(Compiled early 2024)**

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### Reflection on the early years by Tony MacCarthaigh

The RCDT, was initially set up 30 years ago as a partnership between the Rialto Youth Project, and the then EHB. I was fortunate to be seconded from an addiction counsellor role in Ballymun to being involved in helping to set up and develop the RCDT. I was there until I retired at the end of 2010. The following are some thoughts that spring to mind: The initial chaotic scenes of a community that was decimated by whole scale drug dealing; paucity of treatment; incredible numbers of drug-related deaths, very bad housing conditions, high unemployment, and other indicators of poverty and structural injustice. The RCDT started in one room - Wally Bowden and me -in the original church building in St. Andrews Community Centre. Our original focus was to build relationships and to consult and work with community interests and groups.

With the setting up the Canal Communities Local Drugs Task Force, which I was centrally involved with until my retirement, we were able to build on the number of HSE funded workers, empowering us to provide a more holistic response. The RCDT was centrally involved in helping to set-up community involved methadone treatment centres. I well remember the Community Welcome Committees in Fatima Mansions and Dolphin House. A central feature was of community ownership and involvement while maintaining client confidentiality and safety. The financial crash led to severe difficulties. Workers whose posts were funded directly by the HSE were not replaced on leaving. Sessional work carried out by alternative therapies ceased. A very hard time indeed that has left a legacy.

30 years celebration is a time for me to be grateful to having been part of the RCDT story. I salute the incredible commitment of the workers and management committee members over the years. Much good has been done. Great trusting relationships have been formed. Their lasting benefits are deep and hard to measure and count! I well remember the banter and sense of community in the 'Drop-In'. There was the chaos of the early days when we had to call an ambulance almost daily because of an over-dose! And then there was the tension and unease experienced when people in the community felt that they needed to take measures to protect themselves! Proof indeed of chaos theory

The RCDT has made a difference. I hold that it has contributed a big difference to the community. But time now has brought fresh challenges. I write now as a community activist. It seems to me that

the all-embracing meta-narrative of neoliberalism has encroached negatively on community-based projects. The community dimension of work is less honoured in a culture and atmosphere that stresses that it is basically up to the individual to save himself or herself. Competition and profit are what really matters. The bottom line is 'value for money' and that people are commodities. Counting the number of individual interventions is what matters. The type of society that requires this is unquestioned and indeed unquestionable. Community workers strive for change – one surely that is about real change - personal, interpersonal, and structural. That is why I started with the above sayings. My hope for The RCDT along with other community projects is that they will work for that deep change into the future. I would like to end with a quote and a wish for the RCDT as it moves ahead. The RCDT started with a vision. Over time it has revisited its vision. "The success of a vision cannot be gauged by the numbers supporting it. Nor can its failures be measured by the numbers rejecting it. Visions can only be assessed in terms of the quality of love generated in their promotion." Towards Beloved Community- (C. Courtney)

Beir bua!, Tony MacCárthaigh

*"Reflecting on The Rialto Community Drug Team, two phrases come to mind. One is in Irish – 'Ní neart go cur le chéile' (We are strong when we come together) - and the other, an African saying called Ubuntu. It says that 'a person is a person through other persons.'" Tony MacCárthaigh*

## **The early days by Jim Lawlor**

Rialto Youth Project was established in 1981 to work with the most marginalised young people in the Rialto area. One of the biggest issues the Youth Project faced was the emergence of the drug issue that arrived in the late nineteen seventies. The Youth Project had little or no expertise in this area and relied heavily on the State to respond to this issue.

In the mid-90's the Youth Project Management Committee, a group of local volunteers and the two full time community youth workers went to the Summerhill hotel in Enniskerry to reflect and develop a plan of work for the following three years. Having completed a social analysis on the Friday evening we evaluated and completed a needs assessment on the Saturday morning. It was very clear that unemployment and the drugs issue were the dominant needs to emerge. It was also clear that we did not have the necessary skills to tackle or respond in a meaningful way. We did however have strong views about what a response might look like.

We made a strategic decision at that weekend that a small amount of the workers time would be spent campaigning for drug services at community level.

After a certain amount of research and consultation we discovered that the Health Board were looking at developing Community Drug Teams as a response to this issue. This was in keeping with the then emerging government policy.

The Youth Project workers with the guidance of Tony MacCarthaigh negotiated the establishment of the Rialto Community Drug Team. It was established as a partnership between Rialto Youth Project and the South Western Area Health Board. Tony was seconded to the drug team from his position in Ballymun as an addiction counsellor.

Tony spent a lot of time in the early days negotiating with the Health Board and taking the community of Rialto through a very comprehensive consultation process. Dr Joe Barry was also centrally involved in the early days in moving the process forward. Tony developed the philosophy

that addiction is not simply an issue for the person using drugs in their family but it is an issue for the community and society at large. He also thought that the most useful way to respond was to use a community development approach. He and the Project believed that this framework and approach was best suited to responding to such a complex and challenging situation. The original Management Committee was made up of Dr Mary Scully and Gerry MacAllenan from the Health Board and Barry Cullen and Jim Lawlor from Rialto Youth Project.

The first members of staff were Tony MacCarthaigh as Manager and Siobhan Power as Community Development worker.

## **Rialto – A welcome place for drug services**

### **By Barry Cullen**

In the early 1990s, along with Jim Lawlor, I was asked to represent the Rialto Development Association (RDA) on the partnership management group for the Rialto Community Drug Team (RCDT). There were also two representatives from the Eastern Health Board (now HSE): social worker Eibhlín Ní Loingsigh, and Gerry Mc Aleenan, who was involved in establishing Soilse and later a founding member of the Recovery Academy.

At the time, community-based drug services were few in number, about 4 for the whole city, and they lacked personnel, resources and recognition. It is instructive that thirty years later there are now in excess of 100 such services throughout Ireland and that many of these have followed through on some of the ideas that were modeled by the RCDT at the time. In reflecting on that period a few key developments and issues come to mind.

First, was the effort that went into reinforcing the importance of a community based drug service. This was before the publication of the so-called Rabbitte Report (1996), following which local drug task forces were established. In some areas plans for developing drug services had met opposition. The RCDT was determined that it would bring the community with it in developing its programme. It established a regular forum involving other community groups, health officials and interested persons to discuss the community response to drugs. These were usually lunchtime meetings and they helped build a strong relationship between participants and a common understanding around drug issues, as well as a determination that Rialto would be a welcome place for drug services.

At one stage it was decided to organise a social event bringing together participants in the RCDT, the youth project, the day care centre and other community groups. It was very successful and helped to demonstrate that community groups can come together in solidarity around complex issues, a lesson indeed that could be learned from in relation to other issues, especially migration.

Second, is that the period was at the height of the HIV / AIDS crisis and that many young people caught up in the heroin scene had succumbed to the illness and early deaths. There was a lot of individual and family trauma. Through the RCDT they endeavoured to have this trauma shared as a community issue, and so was born the Friends Remembering Friends annual event and ceremony. Again, this approach had influence elsewhere and such ceremonies are now commonplace in communities that were most affected by the heroin crisis. At this juncture, 2024, it is timely to recall just how devastating this impact was and that a huge cohort of mainly young people were lost as a result of the drug problem, and people should determine that this should not happen again.

My third reflection of the period is the role we played in the RCDT – staff and management – in other community developments, including the Rialto Area Action Plan, which led to the Rialto Network, and our involvement in establishing the Canal Communities Partnership and Canal Communities Drugs Task Force. The two latter developments led directly to new community investments into the area, especially as meanwhile other community groups in Fatima and Dolphin House initiated their own independent projects around family support, community development and regeneration.

Overall, the 1990s was hugely exciting from a community development perspective; the RCDT was central to several important ventures and it certainly was able to demonstrate to other communities that they could make the drug problem the central focus to community mobilisation and development. Thirty years later it's a good opportunity to reflect on the future, to consider the impact of community drug problems as currently presented and to explore new ways for mitigating their impact. Undoubtedly, these new challenges will provide the RCDT with the opportunity to look forward with new energies and determination to tackle drug problems at a community level.

*Barry Cullen, now retired, is a former social worker and third-level lecturer and researcher. He has worked with drug services for over four decades and is author of the book, 'The Harm Done – Community and Drugs in Dublin'.*

## **'My real passion' Phyllis Corish**

I found out about the RCDT through Tony McCarthy and after having 4 family bereavements within 12 weeks I reached out to the service in 1994. I walked in, it was packed and everyone was smoking, and at the end of the room people were making a memorial quilt so I started chatting them while waiting for Tony. Within 3 weeks I gave my notice in to my good paying job and I just knew this work with people in addiction was my real passion. All we had was a room, a kitchen which we also used for groups, and a tiny room used as Tony's office and also a counselling room. Back then the drugs particularly heroin were really bad and there was a huge waiting list for treatment unless you were HIV positive. I am from this area and I've seen the devastation the drugs had caused. There wasn't a family that wasn't affected by it. People are under the illusion that drugs ruined the area but actually unemployment hit the area big time when all the major local factories closed down in the 80s which provided the main source of employments in this area. These mostly produced clothing and footwear and one company alone, Jack Toohey's, employed 700 people.

People came to the center because they felt safe, it was a place to congregate and would often would stay all day. There was real stigma (and shame) with mothers if their children were using and difficult to get them to engage with us. The Quilt group was a real draw for these women. Even then it took a long time for them to open up to others even though they were all there for the same reason.

I was a very introverted person, had very little confidence and in a bad space. Helping and supporting others helped me in my healing process. There were bad and good days here. One of the worst was when HIV came to our door. There was very little information on it and it literally wiped out a whole generation in this area and across the city. There was little in terms of treatment then and some of that was experimental. Growing up in the area was a real benefit because they knew me and know that I had also lost family members and would often open up to me. However this also added to the hurt seeing people I knew so well and the ones I grew up with coming through that door looking for help and a lot of these passed away.

The methadone was eventually introduced as a short term solution to try control the sharing of needles and stop the spread of HIV and Hep C. It did help stabilise many lives with clinics in Dolphin and Fatima with community and Health board involvement. With the regeneration of Fatima the clinics were moved here which allowed us open the service to the wider community. In addition to drugs alcohol was a big problem. Just being able to offer help was good. Some would just come to sit and chat over a cup of tea.

My motto is 'everyone who comes through that door is equal, no one knows what has been going on behind that face'. Mind you so were also coming in to avoid the police. Despite the difficulties some days were like a comedy show we laughed that much. Over time we started making, sandwiches in the evenings and then dinners once a week in the afternoons with 30-40 every day.

I can honestly say that this place has helped me more than people realise. I wouldn't change my time here for anything. The good days always override the bad days!

"As long as there is money to be made from people's addictions through dealing etc. there will always be a need for groups like the Rialto Community Drug Team to provide services to people to address those addictions. Provided there is adequate funding available RCDT will have an important role to play in assisting people with addictions as well as their families for the next thirty years and beyond. On a personal note I found RCDT to be of great help as an outlet for my concerns due to my personal experience with addiction. The weekends away which RCDT provided were a very welcome and enjoyable distraction from the worries of having a family member who is in addiction. I found the holistic nights and acupuncture therapy to be very enjoyable and a very effective way to deal with the stresses of addiction. The support that I also receive from other people who attend RCDT cannot be understated. Knowing that there are people who are in the same situation as me and understand what I am going through is a great source of comfort to me. The burden of addiction becomes much easier to bear when it is shared with others."

### **Janet's story (Service user)**

"I didn't understand like a lot of the mothers and fathers, I didn't understand what the drugs were doing to our kids. A lot of people saw the kids doing wrong, there was no understanding there. Some of my kids came here and a couple of them might drop in now and again but it helped them. I didn't know at the time but since I started coming it has taught me a lot about myself and the things that they do here for you is brilliant... maybe at the time I wasn't ready to come to a place like this, but it has given me an understanding of what my kids and other kids were going through... they were going through hell and we didn't understand it. But they always say it's never too late to learn. I love this place, I love coming here, we have a laugh and sometimes we might get a bit upset with our emotions coming up but that's helping us and we would all be lost without here."

### **Rialto Community and politics by Dr. Joe Barry**

From 1991 to 1997 my post was "AIDS/Drugs coordinator" in the Eastern Health Board, reporting directly to the CEO Kieran Hickey. The post was established to provide a public health approach to reduce the prevalence of HIV in Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare. It was a highly political position and the make-up of the health board was itself very political.

I spent the first couple of months meeting a very wide range of people living and working in communities with a high prevalence of HIV infection and Clinical AIDS. The link between HIV and injecting drug use was very strong and many communities were devastated by the impacts on their families, neighbours and friends.

Having spent over a year meeting and talking with hundreds of people and attending almost weekly public meetings to work with people to agree what would be the best approach and to build trust with the people most affected specific plans were developed to meet each community's needs.

The public health approach at the time was to go through the different options and see what was acceptable to people. Two controversial measures were opiate substitution through methadone and the provision of needle exchange programmes. A number of community drug teams were established to facilitate a strong voice for people living in the communities with high prevalence of drug use.

One such community drug team was in Rialto. The health board employed addiction counsellors throughout the region and Tony McCarthy, a Culchie from Cork like myself, was based in Rialto. Tony brought me around Rialto and introduced me to lots of members of the community. He also introduced me to Jim Lawlor who worked for the Rialto Youth Project and also the full committee. I learnt a huge amount from the people of Rialto; know your position and stick to it, hold out for a satisfactory outcome. Most of all I realised that it is essential for the community to be involved and part of the decision making process.

Ultimately funding became available for the refurbishment of a church so that the community drug team had decent office and social space and we are all gathered in that space this evening.

## **'Life in the midst of chaos' by Joanie Whyte**

My first memory of starting the role as drop-in worker is that Tony Mc Carthaigh handed me the keys to open up the drop-in as he had to go to a funeral. Tony left and in came the people. What is now the toilet was originally Tony's office. We had a small waiting room. The drop-in had no sinks just a kettle, tea bags, sugar and two buckets for the tea. The tea spoons constantly went 'missing'. There was no toilet then. Everyone was smoking and having their cups of teas in the drop-in. There was a constant cloud of smoke in the room and burn holes in the lino. It was very busy with people streaming in and out and it was hard trying to maintain some order as it was very chaotic most of the time.

On that day I only became aware of the art room (now the group room) when people started leaving and weren't going out the front door. I realized then that service users were helping themselves to the art material, toilet rolls and air fresheners. I couldn't believe it. After all the chaos I ended up throwing everyone out and locked the doors. Walked straight up to the church, found Tony in the middle of the funeral mass, handed him my keys and gave up the job. He laughed and that night came down to my flat and persuaded me to come back. Upon reflection and because of Tony's charisma he had me back the next day. At that time there was only Tony, Siobhan and myself. Eventually I got used to the way the building worked. I also found it very shocking given the amount of people looking for treatment and support coupled with the lack of services and amenities.

Because we were a community service we ended up dealing with mothers in particular because of the level of poverty in the community coupled with the poor conditions in the building. Dr. Anjam

Mandani would come to meetings with us around people's care plans and we would refer people to his clinic in Leonard's Corner. At the time he was the main person who understood the addiction and the wider issues. We became aware that we had no outreach especially as many couldn't access the service because of the HIV virus and people's inability to attend the service coupled with stigma. We realized we needed to meet much broader needs, housing, budgets, policing, and fear of social workers. We were trying to develop a community based model. We were part of setting up networks in the community like Rialto Community Network, Dolphin House and FGU along with the support of Rialto Youth Project.

It took 31 years to develop insight and strategies towards some of the community needs and responses. So all the aspects of our service came from this approach that everyone was impacted by addiction including the children. From my experience of the drug team there was a lot of love, care and support given to the staff and service and I'm very proud to have been part of all of that. From all this chaos and drama to where it is today I'm very proud to say I have been part of that process and grateful for all the people I have worked with along the way. I would like to thank Barry Cullen, Tony Mc Carthaigh, Jim Lawlor, and Joe Barry, (and others... too many to mention), for the vision insight and determination to make it happen. And of course a big thank you to all the RCDT staff for continuing this work.

## **L. (service user)**

Heroin was rampant and very easily accessible. The drugs seemed much stronger then. I grew up in Dolphin and in some ways what's happening today seems worse than the early days. The crack is also killing people. The drug team was initially over in the rent office in Dolphin. It was also shocking to hear that I was HIV positive as were so many others. Gangs and others would come from all parts of the city to get their drugs. People would use the stairs in the flats to hang out and use.

There were meetings and marches by residents which became violent at times. Vigilantes were going around talking down to drug users. The only place we would feel safe at times was the dry canal. There were some people who would be kind and help you if they knew you were sick or on drugs. We were trying to hide our drug use but it was difficult when your body was bruised and showed the scars of drug use.

Tony MacCarthaigh was here when RCDT first opened. The space in the building was much smaller then. The place was packed and people came to see doctor Harkin at the time to get their methadone prescription. Maggie and Mike were a good help at the start.

RCDT helped by talking to my mother when I hit rock bottom. They also helped me get off the heroin and I'm so happy about that. So many others never made it. I still don't know why I started using. A lot of difficult things happened and then I tried taking heroin as others were doing it and I got hooked on it.

I'm still on 'the crack' now. I got a lot of help from RCDT. Being able to talk and also using the drop-in regularly. They also helped me get my stable accommodation that I have now.

Many thanks to all who participated in this reflective document.

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