

# Safe space for children to be heard

A volunteer-led centre in Limerick offers skilled support to children affected by loss. **Rowena Walsh** talks to a mum who says the service greatly helped her family cope with the 'tsunami' of grief they experienced when their father passed away at a young age

Anne Comerford's daughter Caoimhe did not want to go to the Children's Grief Centre in Limerick after her father died. She cried and was cross at the thought. But when the first-year student came out of her first session, she had already made plans to see Sr Helen again.

Today the 21 year old can't emphasise enough the sense of welcome, safety and ease she felt while she was at the Centre, which is the only one of its kind in the country and is free to attend.

Anne's husband had been diagnosed with a brain tumour and died 10 years later in 2011 at the age of 48. At the time, their children, Jack, Caoimhe and Peter were aged 13, 11 and five.

"Nothing can prepare you for the finality of when that person is gone," says Anne. "That this is now your life and you have to live with the loss of the person in that life. Whatever about the bombshell for me, it's an absolute tsunami for children."

In the aftermath of PJ's death, the family coped but, about a year and a half later, Anne got the feeling that there was something amiss. "I just felt that nothing was wrong and everything was wrong."

She had a chat with Sr Helen Culhane, who had set up the volunteer-led centre in Limerick in 2009. "I was very lucky, in 2013 there wasn't a huge waiting list so when I did reach

out for help, I didn't have to wait very long."

Her eldest boy Jack went for just one session, and Anne saw an immediate impact. "There was a subtle difference in Jack. I noticed he had relaxed."

### Teenagers need space to be themselves

For teenagers, the sessions are confidential, says Anne. If they want to share what was discussed, they can but they're under no obligation to do so.

"It's not a counselling service and it's not a therapy service, it's a safe space for the children to be listened to."

"As a parent, I would have given anything to know what they're saying. I kind of wanted vindication of how I was coping and whether they thought I was doing okay. I subsequently realised the value of it, teenagers need that space where they can just be themselves and they don't have to worry about how I feel."

Her youngest son, Peter, was six years old when he spoke to Sr Helen, a qualified play therapist. Anne stayed in the waiting room. Even now, years later, the sense of peace she experienced during that time still has an impact on her.

A parent is called in if the child wants to share something after a session. On one occasion, Peter showed Anne a picture of a smiley



**FAMILY RESOURCE:** Anne Comerford with her children Caoimhe and Peter who benefitted greatly from the support of the Children's Grief Centre in Limerick after their father PJ died aged 48. Picture: Don Moloney

face, and he said that he was happy because he had forgotten. "It has really stuck with me. He'll never forget his dad, but children need to be allowed to be in the now."

Anne, who is now on the board of directors of the centre, says that a child's grief will come and go. "They'll be happy and they'll be sad."

"You're trying to protect your children, but they're also trying to protect you. They don't want to see their mum upset."

Sr Helen echoes this, saying "we find with bereavement, children will model how the surviving adult behaves".

She cites the case of a young girl whose father had died in his sleep.

Mother and daughter were staying in a relative's house and Sr Helen told her mother that she needed to move back home, saying "she had lost her dad, she didn't need to lose her home and she doesn't need to lose you".

The tough love paid off. This past Christmas, Sr Helen bumped into the little girl's mother, who said that it was a lucky day when they went to the Children's Grief Centre. If they hadn't met Sr Helen, she said, they would still be staying in her sister's house, and now her daughter is coping really well.

**Passionate about helping children**  
Sr Helen was 24 years old when she joined the Sisters of Mercy. She

trained as a social worker and is also a qualified psychotherapist and counsellor. She has always been passionate about helping children, and the aim of the centre is to help children deal with grief as a result of bereavement and parental separation or divorce.

"We support children who have been affected by loss, we don't offer counselling, we don't offer therapy, and I wanted that because my life and professional experience has taught me that most children don't need counselling or therapy," says Sr Helen, who was named Limerick Person of the Year in 2017.

"It was one of my main aims that this would be a support and listening

service and that the referrals would come directly from the parents."

During one session, a boy who had been attending the Centre on and off for several years, drew a picture of a big judge with a speech bubble coming out of his mouth and the word 'guilty' written inside it. In a corner of the page, he had drawn a tiny blob, which he described as himself.

The boy told Sr Helen that the judge was sentencing him to 28 years in prison. "He looked at me and said don't tell me not to feel guilty because I do." His sibling had died a few years previously.

Sr Helen asked if he would like to share this picture with his mother. "His response - and I get this a lot from children whether it's bereavement or separation - was that 'she might be upset'. Children protect their parents."

**Open-door policy**  
The impact of parental separation on children can be very similar to bereavement, says Sr Helen. "We see a lot of children whose mums and dads have separated, and they grieve the very same. What's the most distressing is that they say it's not the end of the world that their parents have separated - they can cope with that - what they can't cope with is being used as a pawn."

One of the most important things is for children who attend the service is that the door is open for them to return at any stage up to 18 years of age, says Anne. Her daughter Caoimhe returned during her Leaving Cert year when her grandfather, who had been her "rock", was diagnosed with cancer.

Anne, who is a pre-school teacher, says many people underestimate the effect of grief on children. "If their grief is boxed off or they don't get to articulate it for themselves, it will resonate, maybe negatively, for the rest of their lives, whereas if the release is given in a positive way, they will remember that for the rest of their lives, it will set them up, it gives them the tools."

To date, the centre, which focuses on early intervention, has helped some 1,500 children. Sr Helen says that there are now 300 children on the waiting list. The centre has been gifted a building at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. Anne says that it has excellent potential, but they need donors to help fund the substantial renovation necessary to make it suitable for their needs.

Sr Helen believes that it's too soon to deal with Covid grief, but she has noticed a difference in the tone of the calls she receives from parents now.

"There's much more anxiety and panic in their voices. "When we're grieving first, we're in a fog and I can see it in about 12 months, there will be a massive need for services."

## Back to basics

Roz Crowley

As a summer primary school holidays fast approach, a useful form of entertainment for children is making pizza. Ideal for a family or party, with varied tastes, once the base is ready, toppings can be chopped and grated, swished and swirled. And then they can be eaten. A win, win.

This survey focuses on what pizza bases are available in supermarkets and Italian shops, but there are also good versions in farmers' markets. Volcano has a pizza kit at markets and at NeighbourFood, and a useful instruction on how to stretch the dough is online at volcano.ie. Arbutus Bread stalls in markets have good dough (you may need

to order it), and there is also good dough in Iago, Princes Street, Cork. All worth trying.

Use just a lick of pizza sauce or chopped tomatoes on the base. A lot of sauce will stop the pizza from crisping up. Pre-heat a very hot oven 220-250C, and ideally first heat the baking tray (it can be an upside-down roasting tin) or pizza stone and rub with a little olive oil.

My trick is to add the toppings when the base is on the baking tray so it's not heavy to move. Start in the centre with a dessert-spoon of pizza sauce, working outwards to leave a margin to create a rim. Finish with toppings of choice as we did for tasters.

### WORKING LIFE

**Brid Ni Laoire, dedicated spine nurse, Mater Private Hospital, Dublin**

**6.20am**

Morning routine goes like this: alarm, shower, decent breakfast, say goodbye to my husband Paddy, leave home in Glasnevin, head for work in the car, park up to walk the last leg along the Royal Canal to the hospital in Dorset St, where I make a beeline for the changing room to don my scrubs.

**7.15am**

In the changing room, I meet two health carers, Bernie and Caroline, stalwarts of Dorset St. I first met them when I was a student nurse in DCU and they were on the cleaning staff in the Mater. Now they're carers and a great asset to the nursing team.

**7.30am**

I head for theatre where I meet the surgical nursing team and Prof Joseph Butler, consultant spine surgeon, who specialises in complex robotic surgery. I fill him in on any patient updates, as he splits his time between the Mater Private and Mater public. It's very beneficial to be in theatre while he is operating because I'm better equipped to answer patient queries post-surgery. My main role is to provide pre-operative and post-operative spine care.

**11am**

I talk to a patient who is recovering following a lumbar discectomy, which is the removal of herniated disc material that is causing nerve compression. It's one of the more common procedures that we do.

**1pm**

Between surgeries, I pop up to the ward to see how post-operative patients are faring and to organise tea and toast if they feel like eating. I have my own lunch in between, in a small tearoom, socially distanced from colleagues.

**2pm**

On non-surgical days, we run a clinic, where patients are assessed by Prof Butler. We have a new facility in Cherrywood where we do a lot of imaging - MRIs, X-rays, scans. Patients who attend Cherrywood can see a consultant on the same day, so it's a more streamlined service. We also do wound reviews.

**7.30pm**

I throw on a podcast while walking back along the canal to my car. My job doesn't involve shift work which means I have been able to resume my passion - playing camogie with Na Fianna, my local club in Glasnevin. Dinner may or may not be ready when I get home. My mum Aine is a great woman for homemade dinners and I reap the benefits.



**My main role is to provide pre-operative and post-operative spine care**

## TOP PIZZA BASES



**The Boot Italian supermarket and Delitaly 200g ball of dough €1.90**  
Enough here for a 10-inch pizza, this worked best of all bases, giving a crisp and tasty finish. We topped it with a third of a drained can of chopped tomatoes with a little salt, thin slices of salami, buffalo mozzarella. All finished with a fine grating of parmesan. Perfectly delicious. Bake at 220C for 10 minutes. From The Boot, South Link Business Park and Delitaly, Marlboro St, Cork. **Score: 9.5**



**Da Piero 280g €3.99**  
Two stonebaked pizza bases are made by The Artisan Pizza Company in Dublin. Flour, water, salt, yeast and olive oil are added to soya flour which Piero says adds flavour and acts as 'a conditioner in relaxing the dough'. It comes with a recipe for Pizza Margherita. A good, crisp base works well when cooked at 250C for 5-7 mins. Easy to use, a good result. Widely available. **Score: 8.75**



**Marks & Spencer Woodfired 215g €2.70**  
A longer than expected list of ingredients has flour, water, olive oil, wholemeal wheatflour, salt, yeast, malted wheatflour, dried yeast, potato starch, sunflower oil. It delivers a substantial bite which has a satisfying, tastily wholesome flour without being weighty. Made in Britain with flour from Italy. Salt is high enough at 1.33%. One only in the pack. **Score: 8.25**



**Dunnes Stonebaked Thin & Crispy 200g €1.89**  
One base here has flour, yeast, some emulsifiers, soya lecithin, flour treatment agents, semolina, salt, rapeseed oil and wholemeal spelt. It looks quite thick, but when baked seems to compress and crisps up quite well. Enjoyed by tasters, but not a favourite. No indication of where made, but packed in Co Fermagh. **Score: 7**



**Dolce e Salato 200g ball of dough €2**  
Olives, cheese, tomato sat well on this thin 10-inch base which crisped up well. A good buy which, like other forms of bread dough, freezes well. Good ready-made pizza here too. From the Amberly Dolce & Salato shop and bakery at Farmers Cross, near Cork airport. Bake at 220C for 8 minutes. **Score: 9**



**Fitzgeralds Family Bakery 4 skinny Italian 360g €2.69**  
These four were the thinnest of our selection and very light, but strong enough for toppings. A comfortably short list of ingredients too - flour, water, olive oil, salt, yeast. Bake at 200C for 8 minutes. 1.7% salt is high compared to others. Tasty, though. Made in Italy for this fourth generation Cork bakery. **Score: 8.25**



**Sorrento Sourdough 360g €2.99**  
Two bases are made from flour, water, salt with no mention of yeast, salt quite high at 1.24%. Tasters found this chewy instead of crisp. Made in Ireland. We bought in Aldi, but we also found elsewhere for €3.99. **Score: 7**



**SuperValu Own brand. Stonebaked Thin & Crispy 440g €2.99**  
Two bases are made from wheat flour, water, durum wheat semolina, salt, yeast, wholemeal spelt flour, olive oil salt 0.83%. Tasters liked the crispness, but would have liked more flavour. Pack and website do not specify where produced. **Score: 7**