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# BUILDING A MUSE

It became evident very quickly that our home, small to begin with, was entirely inadequate to meet the ever-growing demand for courses. Word had spread rapidly among women in the local community that there were opportunities to return to education with childcare provided and with no prohibitive fees, and there was avid interest in this possibility. While we heard some middle-class critiques about ‘taking women out of their communities to this house on the hill above Tallaght’, the participants themselves were clear – they loved getting on the minibus and taking the six-mile trip up the road into a calm environment. Some women, especially those parenting on their own, often arrived frazzled, perhaps having spent the previous evening plea-bargaining with bored youths who sat in menacing numbers on the little wall in front of their sitting-room windows threatening to throw the bricks they held through the glass. There was mixed opinion as to whether it was better to keep the curtains open and stare them down or close the drapes and hope for the best. Others lay awake listening to ‘joyriders’ screech past in stolen cars, praying that when the inevitable moment came for the vehicle to be burned out, it wouldn’t be in front of their house. Calls to the police proved pointless as ‘they had abandoned the area’; even bus drivers refused to come into this vicinity at night.

So many women remarked that as they walked up the path to our home, lined on both sides with herbaceous borders of seasonal blooms, a sense of peace descended, and this relativised the trauma of the

previous evening. This energy of stillness and tranquillity around The Shanty is something we inherited, and it continues to envelop the property to this day.

The search for suitable premises to locate the expanding project back in the local area, which was always our long-term objective, bore as little fruit at this time as it did when we had last tried some years previously. Apart from an effort by the local parish team to conduct a door-to-door weekly collection inviting each household to contribute a pound a week to fund the building of a community centre as a recreation space for youth, there remained no building to house any educational and training activities. As mentioned previously, when we bought The Shanty we saw the potential of converting the four-car garage there into an education space, but that idea now seemed a daunting task as we both had busy 'day jobs' and gave any spare time we had to the project in its current incarnation. However, the management team, by now expert at problem-solving, came up with a suggestion: they would ask the men in their lives to undertake the garage conversion. Within weeks, in February 1989, The Shanty Building Committee was formed. Fergus Roche led the volunteer building team; his wife, Maura, was chairperson of the management team at the time. Marie Moran's husband John was a professional builder and generously directed all the technical aspects of the building. It was clear early on that a large group of skilled volunteers was also needed if the tight deadlines set for an autumn opening were to be met. Fergus owned a hairdressing business, as did four of his brothers. Their approach to gathering the volunteers was novel: as men were in 'mid-shave' in the barber's chair they'd be reminded, 'By the way, you owe me one', and so the services of electricians, plumbers, bricklayers and painters were acquired, and on Saturdays and Sundays they'd arrive in droves. We'd cook, feed and encourage as we watched the walls go up from our kitchen window nine feet away.

From the beginning, every step of development in The Shanty Educational Project called for a new level of fund-raising. Initially we funded the courses by requesting that all fees accruing from our

weekend work, especially courses to religious communities on the topics of liberation, feminist and black theology, be contributed directly to the project. However, these sums quickly proved entirely inadequate to meet the growing costs of providing excellence in education. The management team assumed responsibility for running various fund-raising events around the Tallaght area. We often laugh as we recall together some of these adventures, like that day in the heart of winter when we stood for hours in the carpark of the Cuckoo's Nest, a pub in central Tallaght, holding a car-boot sale. While business was brisk, and we all sold everything from our attics and elsewhere, we almost died of the cold, and in the end made very little money, although we had great fun! We think back on those days, and we marvel at the generosity of the management team, giving time, even at weekends, to make this project work – among many others was Mary Sweeney, a widowed woman with six children who always brought a positive attitude and wisdom aplenty to the task at hand.

A more successful event was the fashion show held in Jobstown, organised and planned by a group of local women partnered by Julie Kiernan and Cora Marshall from our management team; this event brought in a profit of £500. The profit resulted from the huge support by local women, as they each paid £2 into the event, a substantial contribution for those living on a social-welfare budget. Not enough has been written about bottom-up fund-raising, where people living with the injustice of poverty give so that, in this case, the 'education poverty' in their communities could be transformed. As Seamus Heaney correctly states: 'The future lies with what's affirmed from under.' Sr Ruth Harnett, writing about this event in *The Shanty Times* (1988) stated:

One of the great features of The Shanty is that these women are now part of a wider community of women associated with The Shanty and they had recently been involved in a fund-raising fashion show for the project. It was marvellous to see them on the night – their ability, poise and confidence was remarkable. It was obvious that they had really begun to believe in their own ability and resources in a way that would have been unthinkable a year ago.

A major factor in all of this has been the atmosphere of trust, love and genuine friendship created by Ann Louise and Katherine for the women who come to their home. The ongoing contact and opportunity for growth created by association with The Shanty community is such a support for the women and it opens up new avenues all the time.

Fund-raising for building materials was a different task, and as the building commenced it was democratically decided that Ann Louise and Katherine should go to the suppliers to secure the necessary items, from concrete to tiles, from building blocks to toilets! Initially, we undertook this task hesitantly, as neither of us had ever before asked anyone for anything. However, a seasoned fund-raiser, offering us no sympathy, simply snapped: 'Always remember you're not asking for yourselves.' This was a salient lesson, and we got on with the task. Our confidence grew with every success, to the point that we were visibly taken aback when we didn't get everything we asked for. The phrase, 'Only the best will do', had become a cant for all involved in the building enterprise, and it influenced our approach. On one occasion we were bartering with a supplier for a large quantity of bricks, as it had been decided to surround a beautiful, purpose-built, copper canopy over the fireplace with an interior brick wall. Having listened to our fund-raising pitch, the manager of the firm kicked for touch asking us first to walk around and choose the brick we'd like before he'd negotiate. Pointing out the one we wanted, he burst out laughing: 'Well,' he said, 'all I can say is that you've good taste – that's the most expensive brick we sell; and Bono was here yesterday and chose that one for his new home.' Completely disarmed, he gave us the lot free.

By the end of these endeavours we had everything but the roof. We even had a larger minibus to transport the growing numbers of women back and forth. Family and government brought us to the finish line. Ann Louise's sister, June, and a team from Tallaght West, spent months selling raffle tickets in every shopping centre available for a car she had extracted from a car dealer and raised a huge amount of money. Katherine's dad, Bob, devised and carried out an ingenious plan to get

everyone to buy a tile for the roof. Finally, Minister Michael Woods, a close friend of Ann Louise's mentor Fr Pat Wallace, under the scheme of grants to voluntary bodies in the social-services area, contributed some monies made available to him from the National Lottery.

One of the lessons from engaging in the task of fund-raising was the innate goodness of people. Once the issues of social and economic injustice in our country were understood, it was our experience that people were spontaneously generous. However, another realisation was that due to the segregation of the social classes and the ghettoisation of those who live in poverty, the culpable ignorance of the privileged in this society was appalling.

The building took seven months to complete, an unrivalled record, for, not only was The Shanty Educational Project left with a fully furnished, beautiful space at The Muse in order to grow and expand our work, but there was no snag-list, nor any post-building problems to be sorted. Our belief that an aesthetically pleasing educational space is integral to the emotional well-being and needs of learners was confirmed by the enthusiasm that greeted the opening of The Muse by the new participants in October 1989. To capture in words the spirit that went into creating this living space is difficult, suffice to say that hundreds of people contributed in large and small ways. Throughout the period of the build everyone had seemed inebriated with a common sense of empowerment that their engagement with the work was, indeed, making a difference. Many commented that they were really glad to find a way to give something back to society and to share their resources.

With the opening of The Muse, the first phase of our burgeoning 'career' in fund-raising ended, only to be rapidly reignited as soon as we started planning for the next development phase. But with the building complete, we were relieved and deeply happy that this stage of the dream had been realised due to a large group of people from many diverse backgrounds joining together in solidarity to break the cycle of poverty.

Funding the growing number of courses remained an ongoing struggle. There was neither recognition of, nor funding for, adult community education. This designation was to differentiate it from 'adult education', where the middle classes attended and paid for evening courses in their hobby of choice in their local Vocational Education Committee (VEC). While a philosophy of lifelong learning is to be promoted in every situation, our work had a very different agenda. It is interesting to note that during this period the Government invested 0.4 percent of its overall education budget in adult education, but the category that we named as 'adult community education' didn't have a budget line and therefore didn't exist in their terms. An AONTAS (Irish National Adult Learning Organisation) report in 1988 stated: 'As course fees increase for adult education courses throughout the country the poor and generally disadvantaged members of our society are being excluded from adult education.'

It became clear that we needed a development committee, a group committed to the ongoing development of our work, with a special focus on fund-raising. A volunteer group of seventeen women, all of whom came from middle-class backgrounds, quickly formed. They all knew of and believed in the work of The Shanty. Betty Hegarty, who had worked for years as a tutor in the project, became the first chairperson of this group. Most of these women also took up a volunteer engagement with the daily workings of The Shanty – for example, Nuala Wallace, Managing Director of a large cash and carry business, gave a morning a week, taking charge of hospitality and sharing the recipes for her delicious home baking. Maureen McGuinness drove the minibus on another day. As they formed friendships with women in Tallaght West, they described how their own lives and perspectives were being changed. These cross-class relationships enabled mutually supportive encounters. Maureen, whose husband was a director in Dunnes Stores, arranged that the women and children would be the models for the promotion of Dunnes' autumn collection. The advantage to the participants was that they got to keep the clothes. Once a month over a

meal in The Shanty, the development committee would meet, and, amidst howls of laughter, we'd plot and plan a way forward. Many of these women admitted that they had never been part of an all-woman group, and they simply loved it. Meriel Kilroy, another member of the group, offered that she and her husband Howard, a leader in the corporate sector, would do a jazz lunch in their home to kick-start this new phase of fund-raising; it was a fun-filled, family event, with as many in attendance from West Tallaght as from Dublin 4.

The growth spurt in our own educational endeavours with working-class women called us to step back and articulate a theory that reflected the practice of what we called 'women's community education'. Listening to the women's stories of prior negative experiences of education at school, one could only deduce that their return to learning required an environment and a pedagogy that would be markedly different from that earlier experience. As Albert Einstein correctly reminds us: 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.' In our writing from this period we highlighted a set of principles that should inform the theory and practice of a feminist pedagogy.

This pedagogy resulted from critically reflecting on our work in different Shanty courses, observing what enhanced and what hindered women's learning, but above all the results drawn from engagement with our imaginations. Ann Louise has written frequently on the importance of engaging the imagination – first to try to imagine something new, then to create it. Hearing the story of Nuala Wood, for example, allows one to realise just how new and imaginative women's community education needs to be, if, together, we are to recreate a belief that education has a positive contribution to make.

Nuala is about the same age as Ann Louise. They started school on the same day in September 1950 – Nuala in a primary school in Drimnagh, Ann Louise, as already mentioned, in Loreto, Foxrock. Nuala lived in a corporation house in Drimnagh and was the third daughter in a large family. Growing up, her father repeatedly told her that she was

‘nothing but trouble’ and her mother, with equal frequency, told her of her father’s disappointment when she was born because she wasn’t a boy. In her published story, Nuala describes vivid memories of her primary-school years. Early on, she sensed that the poverty of her home influenced teachers’ negative attitudes towards her. This was never confirmed until she reached sixth class. During the summer prior to this final year at school it dawned on her that her only way out of poverty was to get a scholarship to secondary school and so continue her education. So, on the opening morning of the school year, she got in early and made her way to the top of the line as her class queued in the yard before entering the school. Upon reaching the classroom, she sat in a desk in the front row. This was part of her plan – to do well she wanted to be close to the teacher, the blackboard and away from distractions. Suddenly the door opened, and the nun entered. She fixed her glare on Nuala and shouted: ‘What are you doing in that desk? Don’t you know children from the corporation houses sit in their proper place at the back of the room? These desks are for the girls in the bought houses!’ To this day, Nuala weeps as she recalls that long, humiliating walk to the back of the room. That was the day her education ended, and it laid the foundation for a life of hardship. Along with the other ‘corporation girls’, she spent the final year at school running errands, selling raffle tickets and making holy pictures for the nuns to hang in the prams of new-born babies! The one skill she remembers learning was to darn the heel of a sock so that in the future she could mend her husband’s socks, a skill she has never used to this day.

She left school on her fourteenth birthday, the permitted legal age at the time, with a minimum grasp of basic English, and began working the following day in a tailoring firm ‘picking threads’. She was quickly promoted to machinist and worked from 8.00am to 5.00pm earning £2 9s 3d per week, £2 of which she willingly handed over to her mother.

At forty, following two unhappy marriages, she got a house in Jobstown, having decided she’d be better off on her own. Her one desire was to rear her children to become ‘four first-class citizens’, and if this

entailed resolving her deep anger at the education system and returning to learning she was willing to give it a try. Sr Francis, a nun living in the local community, persuaded her and her neighbours, Jodi, Brigid and Margaret, to come along. She wrote:

Coming to The Shanty has helped me. I had always felt that I missed out a lot, feeling handicapped by this in many ways. I made sure that my children got a good education and as they learnt it bounced back on me. But as they grew up I found myself feeling left behind. I used to get depressed and wouldn't go out or be bothered with friends. But coming here over the past few years has shown me my own importance as my own person. My classes mean everything to me. They have made me much more confident. I realise that I have rights, that I too am entitled to have a good life. I'm positive in my thinking now, am more at ease in my own mind and I'm sure I'm easier to live with. (1990)

It would be convenient to dismiss Nuala's story of educational classism as an exception rather than the rule, but our experience of twenty-two years of listening to the tales from school of working-class women who lived in similar circumstances allows us to conclude that unfortunately they were the rule for that generation. Nuala's story and other similar accounts left us in no doubt that the pedagogy employed in our various courses had to take account of these experiences.

Reflecting on the teaching at The Shanty, Ann Louise developed, in dialogue with the participants, and published what we called a feminist imaginative pedagogy, a five-step process, outlined below, and trained tutors to use it, where applicable, in their courses. This methodology was strongly affirmed by authors Brid Connolly and Anne Bridget Ryan in their book *Women and Education in Ireland*, (1998).

### **1 An Opening Circle**

Each session, usually three hours with a break in the middle for a half-hour of tea, scones and a chat, commenced with an Opening Circle. We will elaborate on this practice later; however, it grew from our

conviction of the need to integrate spirituality into our educational work. In their evaluations of our courses, women stated that they deeply valued these times of quiet and named them as essential for their learning.

## **2 Naming of Presuppositions**

No knowledge is ever neutral or interest-free. It has been our experience that negative feelings and thoughts that we bring to a topic can block our receptiveness to new learning. On the other hand, the opportunity to pause and reflect on prior understandings of a given issue can bring to consciousness previous, positive understandings of the issue under consideration. The study of Travellers in our Social Studies Diploma (one of a number of courses we've run with university status) is a good example.

Many participants knew Traveller women and, indeed, had stood with us protesting for Travellers' rights on the Tallaght by-pass. Others were filled with negative bias, as they had accepted without question much of the stereotyping and maligning of this ethnic minority. Other topics, such as female prostitution, abortion and homosexuality, often unveil opinions peppered with prejudice and bias which must surface and be dealt with gently within the group before any real learning can take place.

## **3 Articulating Women's Experience**

This pedagogy is grounded in giving voice to women's experience and giving authority to the power of women's knowledge. The exploration of female experience is a highly imaginative act. It opens up a space where we can break the silence about our feelings of oppression induced so often by male imagery of who we are or ought to be. Through creative exercises – combining storytelling, music and art – false imagery, which objectifies us, can be critically examined, exposed and rejected. Irony and humour are key in cracking open encrusted false consciousness, allowing women to tell the truth about their own lives. We always recall the intervention of Carmel Habington (a wonderful member of our management team) when she heard that popular song 'You Are the Wind Beneath My Wings': 'I have no desire to be the wind

under anyone's wings,' she commented, 'I want to fly myself.' From our work, we realise that there is no doubt that the female imagination is the site for the birth of women's subjectivity. A further illustration of this stage in the pedagogical process is the reflections on the theme of motherhood as expressed by women in the creative-writing class. Bernie Cahill, a participant from Jobstown, compiled a list of the ideas different women shared on this theme:

'Motherhood is not idyllic – it is a struggle from beginning to end. Especially for low-income families who often do not have sufficient funds for the bare necessities of life.'

'Worry and anxiety of the impending birth with its consequent bills, in addition to rent and other basic commitments, began to put a strain on our marriage. In desperation, my husband took to drink and this additional problem precipitated the breakdown of our relationship.'

'Guilt lies heavy when one cannot afford things needed by a family. "I want" – how often do we hear these words and feel powerless to respond positively to them?'

'The mother feels inadequate to cope with the struggle and becomes resentful, and this resentment often festers like an open wound when the mother feels she cannot speak to anyone about it because of shame.'

Bernie concludes: 'Poverty can cause pain, and the torment can tear one apart. No one understands the worry of a mother for her children, from the cradle to the grave, and this causes emotional and physical problems, and yet no mother can afford the luxury of being ill.'

As women broke the silence about their experience of motherhood, one by one, they shattered the mythology that romanticises this role. (Bernie herself died of breast cancer shortly after penning this piece.)

#### **4 Critical and Imaginative Social Analysis**

The movement from reflecting on one's own experience of oppression to engaging in an analysis of its causes encourages a shift away from any residual feelings of guilt or victimhood. Here we encourage thinking that

sees the foundations of oppression as clearly located within the systems, the structures and the institutions of society. It had been our experience that teaching the skill of critical thinking is extremely difficult, especially when we live in a society where the victim is blamed and the protester is dismissed as a crank and easily silenced. Women such as Nuala Wood often come to The Shanty willing to blame their own lack of intelligence, some even describe themselves as 'stupid', instead of questioning the system of education that never gave them a chance to succeed. Some of the finest moments in those early years occurred during the basic English courses taught by Toni Ryan, an empathetic educator and literacy expert. As women mastered literacy skills, they wrote to their local politicians, naming the educational handicap they had lived with and demanding a change in the education system so that the acute personal and social disadvantages they had lived with would not be repeated in the lives of their children. This awareness that society is socially constructed and therefore can change is a real moment of liberation in any educational journey and includes the education of the social imagination.

### **5 Theoretical Reflection**

Although no one will argue the need to link theory and practice in a feminist pedagogy, little is written about the challenge of providing a sound theoretical base as the foundation for reflection and social action. In the early years of constructing a method of education in dialogue with the needs of women, many of whom had left school at fourteen, there were many resistances and challenges. Some women could see no need to reflect on different theoretical perspectives, they were in a rush to gain the skills that up to now had been denied them. Others spoke about what they perceived as a gap in their conceptual ability. While highly intelligent, they had never been trained or given time to think strategically. Wrestling with ideas, taking time to ponder and think about different ways of understanding the world, these were luxuries not afforded in lives lived managing poverty. It is our belief that literacy in the fullest sense entails understanding the prevailing patriarchal

ideology (accepted set of ideas that presumes male dominance) and to do so we must understand the nature of ideology, so that we can begin to articulate an alternative set of radically new ideas. The need to read, to think and to write cannot be overstated, but the space and time to do so causes continuous hassle. One woman in the Women's Studies Diploma course shared with us the information that her haven in her home was the toilet – she'd hide the books in there and for those minutes was left undisturbed, especially by her husband who was extremely jealous of these 'new-fangled ideas' she was acquiring up in The Shanty.

We found that the theoretical dimension of any theme can be presented imaginatively, creatively using video or audio tapes, pre-read articles and books or simply teaching in a dialogical style using the flip chart as a vehicle to illustrate with diagram, art or cartoons the ideas under consideration. There is no idea too complicated that cannot be communicated by a good teacher. Sr Bernadette Flannigan, who taught a number of women 'the higher realms of mathematics' when they expressed a desire to do Leaving Certificate maths, proved that point.

## **6 Engaging Praxis**

No one who has ever attended a course at The Shanty is in any doubt about the link between theory and practice. Furthermore, while the imagination is central to the different movements of a feminist pedagogy, nowhere is this more true than at this stage – envisioning the future. To envisage the future creatively is to stand in the present and see reality other than it is. Because the creative imagination is the place of seeing what should be, then a feminist pedagogy educates for a new order – a world beyond patriarchy, beyond the rule of the fathers. This stage allows us to hold the 'is' and the 'ought' together in a new way that rekindles the belief that dreams can come true: this is how it is, this is perhaps how it ought to be. Such pedagogy can provide a space to heal the hopelessness and despair that can take over the lives of women who live with too much hardship and too little privilege. Such hope-filled

imaging and social action is seldom accomplished alone.

At several courses, having reflected on the women participants' own experiences of motherhood, the group ultimately studied recent feminist theories that offered new insights. For example, their study of the French philosopher Julia Kristeva allowed greater clarity that motherhood is but one role that a woman chooses in her life. Kristeva reminds us that 'We need a new discourse on motherhood, one that liberates the logic of the maternal body and that in so doing is creative of new and more mobile subjective and cultural identities'; becoming woman is a more exciting prospect than simply reducing oneself to being a 'mother for others'. Another feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, states that in the end the failure of the mother to be a self enrages the daughter: 'I received from you only your obliviousness of yourself.' As illustrated in the work of both philosophers, motherhood is one, albeit a very important, role in any woman's life; furthermore, the freedom and choice to become a mother rests with the individual woman.

The chosen praxis by the group reflection on women's role in society was to form a local group called 'Jobstown Women's Own'. Ann Kiely writes about this development:

Wednesday 22 February 1989 saw the launch of Jobstown Women's Own, a group which was set up to bring women together in positive way to enjoy each others' company and to provide a space in women's lives which they could call exclusively their own. Ann Louise and Katherine were the two invited guests to this launch of the first women's group in Tallaght West. A national newspaper published an article about the group.

'Isolation is a major problem facing the women of Tallaght. Now a new women's group has been set up in Jobstown to combat this and bring women together. Five women set up the group, all of them have completed a number of courses at The Shanty Educational Project. Mrs Kiely commented: "We wanted to put something into the community, and do something for the women of the area after we did the courses as there isn't anything in the area for them at the moment."' (*Evening Herald*, 6 March 1989)

(It should be mentioned that all submissions to Government for the ongoing development of this locally led group failed, and so Jobstown Women's Own folded shortly after its formation. Even more poignant was the sudden death of Ann Cuddihy, Secretary to the group and an untiring community leader and social activist, who had taken courses at The Shanty since the beginning. One of the women commented at the time, 'Sometimes it's all just too much to try to keep going; her heart gave up in the end.')

With The Muse up and running, over seventy women attending eight different courses and even two groups of men now settled into their own programmes, we both felt exhausted and agreed that we needed more leisure. Although we have always walked about three miles each day with our dogs in the woods behind our home, we needed a new hobby. A new riding stables had opened close by so we decided to take up horse riding. The owner and instructor never quite grasped that we were new to this sport and within weeks we were on 'hacks', galloping like lunatics, clearly out of control, through the aforementioned woods. Though fearless and risk-takers by nature, this stretched us to the limit, but we trusted and loved the horses we rode. Katherine would climb up onto Bianca, a huge, sixteen-hand former racehorse, while Ann Louise rode Bess, a darling animal who would jump anything we encountered *en route*. We'd return home each Saturday exhilarated, refreshed – and so relieved that we had survived another day!

There was growing concern at our management-team meetings about the quality of childcare we were offering as part of the project. While we always offered 'sessional care' for participants' children, which now was run in the new community centre by trained childcare staff, the time had come to establish an early education and childcare facility for the children themselves. At this time, 25 percent of Ireland's entire child population lived in poverty, and the percentage was much higher in West Tallaght. In *The Shanty Times* of winter 1991, we wrote an editorial that reflected on the recently published 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' published by the United Nations (UN). It had taken ten years to

produce the final document, which was adopted by the UN in November 1989. However, to become law, it required twenty of the then 166 nations to sign up to the fifty-four articles that dealt with the basic civil, economic, social, cultural and religious rights of children. The good news at the time of our editorial was that eighty countries had already signed. Much to our chagrin, Ireland was not among them. Our own analysis proved accurate: in order to sign up to the Convention, our government would have to tackle the growing levels of child poverty and the rapid deterioration of child welfare in our land.

Our editorial concluded: 'To tackle the injustice of child poverty, we have a dream. Our dream is rooted in a belief that good childcare and pre-school education are rights for all children and are a pro-family measure. The Government has no programmes in West Tallaght to meet this end. Our dream is to construct a "Rainbow House". We will acquire two houses in the West Tallaght area and create them as a children's space: a space of beauty, colour, joy, play and fun. Although this dream is in its infancy, we strongly believe that educational care for children is care for the future.' Before we published this newsletter, we went to St Thomas's senior primary school in Jobstown and told the children about our idea. Following a discussion about their ideas, the children were invited to draw their images of what the Rainbow House would look like – Brian O'Reilly's drawing was published in that edition of our newsletter. Many of the other drawings were saved and now hang on the walls of An Cosán, which illustrates that dreams come true and images become reality. In fact, what happened in this instance illustrates that there are moments in life when reality surpasses our dreams and images of what could be achieved.

All our courses had now moved to The Muse, and, with a broad range on offer, the question always remained: are we reaching the women who are most isolated in Tallaght West and least inclined to return to education? Reflecting on Nuala's story and the stories of many women like her in West Tallaght – women who had worked in their youth as machinists in factories – we decided to put on another set of courses in

creative traditional handcrafts, starting with the art of quilting. Here we joined with an established group of quilters in the nearby rural town of Blessington. We knew these women, who were members of the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), as they ran the country market at weekends in Blessington, which we attended with religious fervour, and there they often displayed beautiful quilts that their group had made. These courses were an immediate success, allowing women to return to education via a route in which their own skills and background could be affirmed. Apart from learning the ancient and complex craft of quilting, many of the participants quickly saw the economic opportunities that came with acquiring this skill. As Katherine's fortieth birthday was approaching, Ann Louise commissioned a king-sized quilt for our bed, in Katherine's favourite colour, blue. On the day itself, the women who had created this magnificent piece of art, along with their tutor Ann Coe, carried it up to our dormer bedroom and 'dressed the bed'. Consonant with the tradition of quilting, each woman had embroidered her name on the back of the quilt. Reflecting back, this is one of many occasions when, though we didn't speak publicly about our relationship we did not hide it. When Katherine arrived, she was simply overcome – not only had she received an heirloom that would always be with us, but it had been created by a group of women who one year previously had been living their lives in isolation behind closed doors. This 'micro-enterprise' continued under the stewardship of one of our management team, Julie Kiernan. The women made wedding gifts and presents for their own families and sold personalised quilts as christening gifts.

The second handcraft training programme also began as a course in The Muse. It then developed into a large community enterprise that over a ten-year period sold on the national and international markets and was represented at all the craft fairs during those years. But the full details of that development come later. It began when we heard that the artist Mary O'Rourke had a workshop as part of her family farm up in Glenasmole, a few miles away. We set off to see her work and explore the opportunity of developing further local women's interests in ancient

Irish crafts. Mary's studio itself was a work of art. Inside the large stone cottage, fleeces from her Jacob's sheep – a type renowned for excellent wool – were piled high in one area. The smell of oil from the wool filled the air. Carded and spun wool hung in skeins from the rafters in a magnificent array of colours, all from natural dyes. One woman worker stood rhythmically feeding wool through a carding machine and receiving the flat combed product from the other side. This she passed to another worker, who sat at a spinning wheel quietly spinning the carded wool in the traditional manner. It was like stepping back in time, although, observing the finished products that Mary was creating, it was clear that she was developing items for the top end of the current craft industry. She agreed to run a weekend course – and was surprised by the huge turnout.

Driving the bus around the estates in West Tallaght, and sometimes assisting women negotiating on the doorsteps with reluctant husbands and partners for this day out, gave further insight into the challenge for women with no income to get any time for themselves. Once we arrived in Mary's studio, the tension fell away, and we all became absorbed in learning the various skills. We sat enveloped in wool at every stage of its transformation from fleece to felt. There was no sense of unease or estrangement among the women, although they never had been in such an environment. Mary, as well as being a gifted artist, has a huge heart and embraced us women in all our differences. The sounds of country life filled the studio that nestled in the Dublin hills about eight miles from the raw suburb we had left behind some hours earlier. Towards the end of the day, each one of us had made a small gift to bring home. As this opening weekend came to a close, the women pleaded with Mary to allow them to come back. She agreed, and so on one Sunday per month for the following year we began a triangular relationship between Glenaraneen, Glenasmole and West Tallaght, all locations equidistant from each other. Ann Louise willingly became the bus driver for these outings. She loved the setting, the day of chat with the women and the opportunity to learn this craft. We got some spinning wheels delivered to

the women's homes in West Tallaght so that 'homework' could be accomplished, and we also purchased one for our own home. Coincidentally, we had four Jacob's sheep in our paddock (all called after mystics), so, as we were producing our own raw material, the prospects were endless!

These simple beginnings in the winter of 1991 formed the foundation for our community enterprise. We were always aware that although income is but one factor among many that influence the opportunities that people enjoy, in order to reverse women's poverty, women's economic dependence must be addressed. Along with providing educational opportunities for women and children, we needed to find a way to enable women to get back to work. This would be the central theme that we addressed at the celebration of our fifth anniversary, when we welcomed an exceptional woman.

There are few in this country, certainly in our age range, that won't recall vividly the day that Mary Robinson became Ireland's first woman president. In May 1990, we attended a fund-raiser for her in the home of a mutual friend, and over the following eight months supported her campaign in any way we could, like every other feminist in the land. When word broke on that dull December day that she had won, unrestrained joy was unleashed. We rang our friends and quickly gathered our feminist spirituality group. We drank champagne, danced and sang. Some hours later we listened to her victory speech, when she said: 'I don't know whether to dance or sing, so I have done both.' We understood. She correctly praised 'Mná na hÉireann' that evening, 'who, instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system'. Quoting the poet Eavan Boland, she said: 'As a woman, I want women who have felt themselves outside history, to be written back into history.' This was, indeed, a moment of success, and the women of Ireland, certainly our circle of friends, sensed a common achievement on that evening.

Some months later, our mutual friend, Barbara Fitzgerald, godmother to Mary Robinson's daughter Tessa and a member of our development team, requested the President to visit The Muse to celebrate the fifth

anniversary of The Shanty Educational Project. On 4 December 1991, one year after her inauguration, she honoured us with her presence. As the Special Branch scoured the property and hid in the bushes for the duration of her visit, we all crammed into The Muse and savoured every moment of this special celebration. Women from the community welcomed her and spoke of the enormous sense of pride and appreciation they felt that she had come to share in the festivities. The Chairperson of the management team, Marie Moran, reflected in her speech: 'Since I joined The Shanty my life has been enriched and I know that we will continue to fill this place with love and hope and turn even more of our dreams into reality.' Clearly informed about the work of the previous five years, the President in her response was rich in her praise: 'We have – in women, in their organisational abilities, in their creative approach – a major resource.' She honoured our work as a model of locally based women's community education and asked that we continue the dialogue with the structures of the established order which could clearly learn from such a creative response to endemic poverty.