

Church of the Holy Spirit,

Greenhills.

Friday 31<sup>st</sup> July 2009.

*Eulogy to Eileen Coen given by David Fitzgerald, chairperson of the board of Carelocal.*

As Chairman of CARELOCAL I am deeply humbled, and honoured, by the invitation of the Coen family to say these words at the conclusion of this celebration of Eileen Coen's life. I am humbled because I have only known Eileen for a few years as we soldiered together on the Board of CARELOCAL (and there are others far more qualified than I to speak about her), and honoured because it is a privilege to be asked to speak about a person as remarkable as she was.

For those among you who do not know of CARELOCAL, our mission is to organise volunteers – usually young adults – to visit the elderly who live alone in their homes for the purpose of providing them with simple companionship. Eileen together with her late husband Martin founded CARELOCAL in the 1970s. The two had met at a social club, and from this meeting both a marriage and CARELOCAL were born.

In the early days, the emphasis was on alleviating poverty among the elderly, and Eileen told many stories about abject poverty, and how she and Martin attempted to help where they could. As the years passed, and pensions and social welfare improved, and so the material requirements of the elderly reduced in importance but, in tandem with this another need grew. This was the non-material need for companionship. As Dublin changed in character, and extended families became much more physically extended than heretofore, many elderly found themselves in social isolation in the centre of the hustle and bustle of a busy city. Eileen recognised this change and the organisation adapted accordingly.

We now have almost 150 volunteers on our books, visiting an equivalent number of elderly people on a weekly basis, as well as organising various social outings. Eileen and Martin funded the CARELOCAL enterprise through carol singing in pubs at Christmas. Her good friend Theresa Talbot who is here today describes graphically how she was persuaded, a bit against her better judgement, to go into pubs singing carols. But the implication was – when Eileen got into persuasive mode, sometimes better judgement was set aside.

She maintained a huge interest in the affairs of CARELOCAL right up to the very end. Last Thursday I had a lengthy conversation with her regarding a proposal that

was coming up at a Board meeting. She debated energetically with the pro's and con's of the issue at hand and probed, as ever with penetrating questions. Whenever Eileen prefaced a question with the statement "I know this is a stupid question" you could rest assured that whatever else it was, it wasn't stupid. I can't confess to agreeing with her all the time but our respect for her was enormous.

As the environment in which CARELOCAL operated changed we have to spend a lot of our time as a Board on such issues as fundraising, budgets, rules and regulations around health and safety etc. While Eileen engaged in these discussions she sometimes became exasperated, declaring in utter frustration at one meeting – when are we going to start talking about the elderly? She had a knack of bringing us back to basics. Nobody will ever know how many elderly people in Dublin benefited directly or indirectly from her work. Countless hundreds received small amounts of material support at critical times, and countless hundreds also were the beneficiaries of the befriending service.

And it is not alone the elderly who benefited. The hundreds of volunteers, who, over the years have given of their time so their fellow man or woman's lot in life could be improved have also benefited as a result of their generosity. In fact, everybody whose path in life crossed with CARELOCAL has benefited. Eileen Coen was a true Christian – in the real sense of the word – a modern day good Samaritan.

When we finished our conversation last Thursday, I said "I'll see you on Tuesday". Her answer, as ever was "le cunamh De" – God willing. Only this time God wasn't willing and called Eileen home instead. She leaves behind her an extraordinary legacy. This legacy won't receive any public acclaim; there will be no big memorials to Eileen. But she will be remembered for her concern and practical kindness to her fellow human beings.

Those of us who serve on the Board of CARELOCAL are acutely aware that our responsibility is to preserve, protect and develop her legacy and to pass it safely on to the next generation. And this, I believe, is all that she would have wanted. On behalf of the Board and staff of CARELOCAL, on behalf of our volunteers, and on behalf of the elderly we serve I would like to sympathise with the Coen family. They can take comfort however in the fact that Eileen Coen's life was not wasted. I will conclude with an extract from a brief history of CARELOCAL she wrote not long ago

"The success of CARELOCAL is very much as a result of the dedication of its volunteers visiting the elderly in their homes. Home is where the older person's heart is; at home they are familiar with everything and they thrive best because they receive love and security that result from valuable volunteer quality time."

Go raibh suamhineas siorai ar a anam dhilis.

-David Fitzgerald.