

New AOH Pres Stood Beside Victims of State Violence for Three Decades and More

Following is a story by Andrée Murphy in the Andersonstown News, a Belfast paper, reacting to the election of Sean Pender as National President of the AOH. Shared with the permission of the AOH.

Our past is not a tourist attraction. It is, however, definitely there for us to learn from, explore and share. It is certainly something that resides beside us, asking questions, demanding truth, justice and accountability. Painful, unresolved pasts are not postcards from the edge.

30 years after the IRA ceasefires, our community finds itself still having to assert its own narrative and battle for acknowledgement. There are scores of families seeking the common decency of the rule of law regarding the killings of their loved ones.

There are those living with the scars of torture and inhuman treatment and injury. It sometimes feels incongruous that this unresolved experience finds itself on a tourist map.

That is in no way to suggest that visitors who come to understand and express solidarity are few. Far from it. Peace makers, trade unionists, students from across the globe, come, learn, exchange and build lasting, valued relationships.

Of the latter, New Jersey man Sean Pender is a regular visitor, but no tourist. This week he was inaugurated President of the American Ancient Order of Hibernians. Seán is not your average visitor. He came to bear witness over 20 years ago. He walked into places of censorship, silences and horror.

He came to bear witness to victims of state violence. When the Ballymurphy families first came together to tell the story of the days of horror when their relatives were murdered with impunity and the campaign had barely begun,

Seán stood like a sentinel at the back of the hall, listening. When Eamon Hughes sat telling how his father, Frank, had been abducted by loyalists and burned in his taxi, Seán was at his side respecting this sacred space.

When the family of Pat Finucane remembered the human rights lawyer's murder and the impunity of the British state, Seán bore witness. He came to inquest courts, to the Police Ombudsman with families and spoke with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice and Reparations in London. He can speak with authority on legacy better than many born and bred here.

His commitment to families over the past 25 years is second to none. He was central to the first US Congressional hearing on the matter of collusion. He has brought families affected by state and non-state violence to Capitol Hill for the US to remember their commitment to guaranteeing the

human rights of all of us who live here post-Good Friday Agreement. He is central to the reason why the United States got involved in rejecting the Legacy Act and defending the rights of victims and survivors.

His humility, good grace, unending patience and capacity to understand, marks him out as one of the strongest, and most important leaders of Irish America, and he is a true son of Ireland.

He understood that coming here is not a tourist trip. We live in a site of conscience. Where those who choose to stand beside and listen to those harmed will understand the history of this nation, and the work that remains to be done.

Bearing witness creates a moral obligation for those who step into that space to act. Seán Pender not only acts, he moves mountains. That he cites Clara Reilly, Belfast's First Lady of Human Rights, as one of his heroes is testament to what motivates and drives him. He is truly worthy of his new office.

Comhghairdeas, ár anam-cara. Andrée Murphy •

Andrée Murphy hails from Dublin but has lived in Belfast since 1994. She is the Deputy Director of Relatives for Justice, a national victim support NGO which provides advocacy and therapeutic support for the bereaved and injured of the conflict. Holding a Masters Degree in international human rights law, Andrée's particular expertise and research on women affected by conflict trauma has seen her provide evidence to the United Nations in Geneva and to Congressional hearings in the US. She's a columnist for Belfast Media Group and is a regular contributor to broadcast media, providing political analysis and commentary.

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