



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair



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TÚSLA
An Ghníomhaireacht um
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Child and Family Agency



KERRY RAPE &
SEXUAL ABUSE CENTRE
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

‘Through the Chair’ was a collaborative project, which couldn’t have happened without all these people to whom we are truly grateful:

The Clients:	Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre.
The Management & Staff:	Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre.
The Board:	Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre.
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INTRODUCTION

By: The Chair Project Group

In 2017 **The Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre** celebrated 25 years in Kerry.

In this ‘Chair Project’ we celebrate the Voice of all the Clients female & male who have come through our door over the last 25 years.

Eight of these clients volunteered to participate in this ‘Through the Chair’ project.

They speak to you through their chairs, they tell you their story. As you look through this book, see the chairs and read the very personal stories, please be aware that behind each chair is a real person and a real story.

Although the authors remain anonymous, these are their words:

“It is important to the group to remain anonymous. This is with deep regret. The world’s view of these situations is too hard to face. I am no victim nor am I stupid to have found myself in the situations leading up to these events. When the World’s attitude changes, I will no longer have to remain anonymous” **Group Participant**

*“It struck me when I saw all the pictures of the staff, that we, visually at least, are missing, although our work on the chairs gave some snapshot of our lives. The necessity of remaining anonymous for the members of this group has been an all important wish and consideration that I totally understand, respect and adhere to. However, my reaction to seeing the draft version of the book, the beautiful writings, the horror stories, the carefully reconstructed chairs, the smiling happy photographs of the counsellors and volunteers stood in stark relief to the fact, of the survival instinct in **HAVING** to remain anonymous as a participant. A shared solidarity.*

In an ideal world:

*I wish to shout it from the rooftops. Expose the perpetrators and their accomplices
Expose them and their sickness. Take away **THEIR** anonymity*

Having to remain anonymous is the effect of the shaming insidious nature of childhood sexual abuse and adult sexual violence. Inherent in that awfulness is secrecy and a sense of invisibility, of not being believed and not taken seriously.

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*It is the package of victimisation we are landed with as victims and survivors, carried as a life sentence. We may be anonymous here but our voices will surely be heard through the work. Anyone reading this who is personally effected, I would say, **REACH OUT FOR HELP**. You can’t do it alone, we couldn’t do it alone. I believe that we are a testament to this”* **Group Participant**

“I Would love to have the courage to stand behind my chair” **One Woman said.**

Reading these words from the group participants is a stark reminder to us all, of how we can easily take our visibility for granted, but unfortunately, in a society where sexual abuse and its wounds flourish in an atmosphere of secrecy, silence and myth, most survivors remain nameless and hidden.

Survivors maintain their anonymity, **not by choice**, but out of fear for their physical and emotional safety. They feel uncomfortable because they don’t know how people will respond. They fear that people would say negative things or not believe them at all. A negative response to a disclosure can often leave survivors feeling exposed and alone.

Its challenging to think that our attitude as a society could be contributing to this shaming and silencing of survivors of sexual abuse. Perhaps it is our own discomfort that we need to face. Hopefully this book will challenge us to change our thinking, open our minds, listen, and begin to create an atmosphere where these brave women are not afraid to be visible.

A world where: These Women would be able to proudly stand behind their chairs without fear of condemnation’

A Special ‘Thank You’ to all who pick up this book, who open their hearts and minds to the heartbreaking and inspirational stories of these women.



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CHAIR FOREWORD



*Annemarie Ní
Churreáin*

THE WRITER Joan Didion said:

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live”.

During my time as 2017-18 Kerry Writer In Residence, I have had the great pleasure of promoting storytelling as important to relationships and communities. When we don't tell our stories we create a world where change is impossible, where inequality and oppression can openly flourish.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I introduce the work of 8 courageous women from the Kerry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre whose project 'Through the Chair' explores the type of stories that too often remain invisible in society. Using the power of the authentic voice, these women honor us all by sharing with us stories that convey both the darkness and the light of human experience.

'Through the Chair' is an initiative of the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre. In 2017 a group of women gathered under the careful guidance of facilitator Alice Kavanagh and began to establish an atmosphere of trust and respect. Over 18 weeks, each woman was invited to identify an ordinary chair and to engage with this chair by changing its physical nature and using it as a canvas to explore their personal experience of sexual violence. In this way, the women became empowered to speak their truth, and the chair became a vehicle for expression.

As a device for the project, the chair itself is an apt one. An everyday item of furniture, the chair is at first glance functional and/or decorative. But the chair is primarily the holder of the body and its messages – providing at various times relief, comfort and structure. The chair is dually powerful, symbolising darkness and light: it is both the chosen tool of the hostage taker and of the therapist. The chair has the power to take hope and to restore hope.

In this booklet you will find original texts and images that give expression to the experience of hurt and the journey of hope. Each chair speaks for itself in ways more complex and truthful than I can possibly do here. In today's world, it has never been more possible to promote the human voice yet it remains difficult and frightening to say the things we know to be true about sexual violence.

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In 2017 the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre provided a range of services including counselling and group support to survivors of sexual violence. Read this booklet and know that you are bearing witness to some of the strongest, most vibrant voices in the community who speak to and for us all, who are determined to move forward out of the past and into the future.

On behalf of the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre, I thank the supporters and funders of the centre, I thank the community and of course I congratulate the women for doing justice to the story of human experience. At the end of the group engagement, each woman parted ways with her chair in a way that felt personally necessary. Some women dismantled their chair, other placed the chair into storage, some made the chair part of their home. But their individual stories of truth have, I believe, entered the world now and will stay with us forever.

I hope that this booklet gives you cause for reflection and above all the kind of hope that we all need every day in order to live.

Annemarie Ní Churreáin.

Annemarie Ní Churreáin,
Kerry Writer In Residence
2017-2018

*Annemarie Ní Churreáin is a poet from North West Donegal.
Ní Churreáin is the current 2018 Kerry Writer In Residence.*

In 2016 she was the recipient of a Next Generation Artists Award from the President of Ireland on behalf of the Arts Council. Her debut collection of poetry 'BLOODROOT' (Doire Press 2017) was shortlisted for the Shine Strong Award and the Julie Suk Award (U.S.). Ní Churreáin has also been awarded literary fellowships by Akademie Schloss Solitude, Jack Kerouac House and Hawthornden Castle. In 2018 she was presented with the inaugural John Broderick Residency Award. She is the 2018 Kerry Writer In Residence.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT



Alice Kavanagh

This collection of old salvaged chairs and their transformation into ‘works of art’ tell personal stories of suffering and pain, hope and healing. These Chairs illustrate the feelings, experiences and frustrations associated with childhood sexual abuse and adult sexual violence issues, and the journey to recovery.

Silence can be one of the biggest barriers to recovery. The participants of ‘*The Chair Project*’ know this from firsthand experience. The idea for the project was to explore and see, keeping in mind the aim of dispelling shame and secrecy in society. It was important with this project to give the participants a voice and to validate their experience of abuse.

The group started by searching for old secondhand chairs. Each chair already had its own history, and some of the participants incorporated that history into their own story. With limited space to work, we often spilled over into the kitchen and the back garden. The group worked both individually and collaboratively as they helped each other to complete their chairs. With lots of laughter, tears, several cups of tea and coffee, the project has taken many weeks to complete.

There was a lot of experimenting and exploration of materials. The chairs were carefully fixed, primed and prepared before being recreated and transformed. Many chairs were deconstructed and remodeled, the element of surprise was great when they proved to be resilient to their treatments and recover well. As personal stories emerged a great sense of ownership developed as ‘The Chair Project’ came together

The participants gained so much from the project in terms of staying true to the message that they wanted to convey in their work: that everyone’s efforts are different and that no two minds think alike on an emotional or creative level. The main outcome was that the participants learned that their thinking processes and personal experiences could be validated through creative expression.

The impact on participants was extremely positive. Their increased confidence in taking this opportunity to express themselves as ‘powerful women’ telling their story, and not just as ‘abuse victims’ was one such impact. I would like to think that after the project the participants realised that their abuse was just a part of who they are and not all of who they are.

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This has been a difficult journey for these women, who have put themselves ‘out there’ and told their stories after years of being silenced. They are a hope and an inspiration to other survivors of sexual violence and sending out a very powerful message that ‘you are not alone’

The publication of this ‘groundbreaking’ book is their effort to break the silence and to reach out to other survivors. Some of the women have also spoken publicly about the project and their own experience of abuse. They have described this as a very empowering experience. I hope they are all very proud of their achievement.

I would like to thank all the Women who took part in this Project, for placing their trust in the Centre and in the facilitators. For me personally it has been an amazing and inspirational journey, I feel privileged and honoured to have been a part of it.

Alice Kavanagh.

Alice Kavanagh,
Counsellor & Group Facilitator
Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre

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THE THERAPEUTIC WORK



Noelle O'Connell

Following the Creation and Launch of the 'Chair Project' the participants were invited to take part in an 8 week Therapy Group here at the Centre, where they could take time to process the memories, emotions and issues that may have arisen for them during this project.

Having been invited in to co facilitate in the group and witness each person introduce their chair, tell their story, explore how they felt now that the "Project" was complete, the reality dawned that it is an ongoing process – where each person took the opportunity to explore how the previous 18 weeks had impacted on them.

Witnessing the connection each person had with their chair, the impact doing the project had had on them, both positive and negative, and how many of them were empowered to make the decision on what they wanted to do with their chairs and their experiences. There was a mix of emotions but I believe all involved are stronger because of the experience.

We all learn from each other and my experience of these women leaves me in awe of them- their resilience and determination, their creativity and their ability to cope and support one another, and their zest for life.

Noelle O'Connell.

Noelle O'Connell,
Counsellor & Group Facilitator
Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre

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SPECIAL THANKS!



Rachel O'Donovan

*Chair Project
Co-facilitator
Kerry Rape & Sexual
Abuse Centre*

I would like to extend a special thanks to the project Co-Facilitator Rachel O'Donovan.

Rachel was our professional technical expert, she photographed the chairs as the work progressed, recorded the stories of the chairs as they unfolded, and being a natural organizer she kept the group motivated and on schedule through all stages of the project.

Not afraid of getting her hands dirty, she threw herself into the work with enthusiasm, helping each person with cleaning, sanding and painting their chairs. Rachel was often the go-to person for inspiration and support when some of the group were finding themselves stuck.

Rachel's warm personality and her caring way of relating in the group had a real positive effect on the women and their work. Her hand can be seen in each and every chair as she pitched-in, helped and encouraged the women at every stage of their creation. I know she holds a very special place in their hearts.

LAUNCH

The 'Chair Project' was launched by **Deirdre Walsh** of Radio Kerry on the 5th July 2017 at our Centre in Tralee. Over 100 people viewed the exhibition. We invited the public to add their own contribution to some blank chairs, which were filled with good wishes and messages of hope.



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Excerpt from article by Tadgh Evans, Journalist, Kerryman Newspaper.

*Other art exhibitions may showcase more pieces, but 'Through the Chair's substance is peerless. It's the centre's 25th birthday in 2017 and, in celebration of that milestone, KRSAC has invited well-wishers for coffee, cake, and a look at a thrustingly impactful art exhibition. **Tadgh Evans***

*The Kerryman has no sooner crossed the Kerry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre's doorway at 5 Greenview Terrace when counsellor Alice Kavanagh hurries through a chattering crowd to welcome us, guiding us through a pair of packed rooms to a sun-kissed back-garden holding the exhibition. "Each chair you see here is designed and made by a survivor, telling a story of pain, hope and healing," Alice says as we walk around the yard. "I'd seen a similar project elsewhere, and we pitched the idea to a few clients. From there, Rachel O'Donovan and I worked with eight volunteers every Wednesday night over the space of a few months, and this is the result." **Tadgh Evans***



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‘CHAIRS A SYMBOL OF HOPE FOR WOMEN GIVEN HELP TO REBUILD THEIR BROKEN LIVES’



Billy Keane

It was a sunny day and it was as if the chairs and the people who decorated the chairs were set free out there in the back yard at the rear of the, Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre, building.

For these people who suffered so much the exhibition was a step forward into the light from the darkness. There was a chair with fake, but very real looking sick, representing the physical revulsion and mental torture which had to be endured by the victim. Maybe survivor is a better word than victim. *“The puke I have carried all my*

life to date. I am 54 years of age” Yet she has *“muddled through”* and the bright colours are her hope for the future. Her reason for making the chair is to increase awareness *“kids haven’t the ability to put words on what is happening to them and we as adults aren’t listening”*

There was a chair covered in snakes and spiders with a doll underneath. Speaks for itself, like all real art. The beautifully slender wicker-back chair was fragile, like childhood. One woman wrote a poem: *“so so tormented seriously tormented, Secrets: guilty: shameful: disgusting”* But she, too, found healing through counselling.

Another woman wrote of how the abuser destroyed childhood years. Her chair came from a shed at the back of her house and was brought there by the abuser. *“I wanted to turn a negative into a positive. I painted the legs black and white. White represents the innocence of childhood which I should have had, but didn’t. Black represents the abuse of the child who was damaged.”*

A creative lady explained her story through *‘broken butterfly wings’* and the image of the whole butterfly to contrast the brokenness versus full flight of full life. The oak extensions to the seat were *“reclaiming Me”* and the oak, with all its ancient connotations and energy and solidness, was the perfect fit.

A woman speaks through her art. *“I was a lost child and I was sexually abused by many people. I was raped in my 20’s and married a man who was very abusive”* There’s a vivid chair before us with the words *‘darkness, timid, stuck’* written on the seat.

The common themes are of handmade dolls in disarray or thrown to one side, but the hope shines through.

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Another victim wrote: *“Nourishing myself is a joyful experience and I am worth the time spent in my healing.*

There’s anger too. The poetry is exquisite but heartbreaking. *“Sneering at the facts / they turned their backs / away from me united / signaling contempt / for my attempt / to expose the truth”*

There’s the horror story of a wonderful brave lady who was kidnapped and raped in Paris. The chair maker had to give in on that terrible night. Her choice was *“to live or die our plight / one minute, no a second to choose / I chose life”*.

The hand on another chair tell us there is help there for people who have suffered so much and a good measure of healing too, even if the horror is always there somewhere. The Rape Crisis Centres are always there for those who have suffered. The beginning of the best of the rest of your life is only a phone call away.

“I would love to have the courage to stand behind my chair” said the lady who made the baby chair that so moved me and still does. I tell her the courage she has shown in telling her story through the chair is courage enough for anyone.

Excerpt from: Article by **Billy Keane**, *Independent newspaper* on the Launch of *‘Through The Chair’* exhibition at the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre on 5th July 2017.

CONFUSED



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CONFUSED



When I first looked at my chair I felt confused. I grew up in a house where there was huge anger. From a very young age, I was very fearful. My mother's anger towards me throughout my life from my birth to her death left me alone isolated vulnerable and unsafe. Physical and mental abuse was the constant story towards me. I was a very frightened child and at a young age the Doctor said I needed a change of air as I had been sick for one full year. I believe now that I was depressed then and only for the love of my father I feel I would not have survived

I was a lost child and I was sexually abused by many people. This left me with no feeling in my body. I was raped in my twenties and then married a man who was very abusive.

Since then I have gone through a journey of self-discovery. Taking part in the chair project has been a big step on this journey. Because of my childhood experience

I find it very difficult to share, there was no-one to tell growing up, so I just shoved it down to the deepest recesses of my stomach. Being accepted and respected by the other group members was an amazing experience. Being with women who came from a similar experience of abuse in childhood, who understood my pain and confusion helped me to feel safe in this group.

The support and encouragement I received from everyone, especially from Rachel to do my chair meant so much to me. Only for Rachel there would



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be no chair I found it very hard to connect with my past but she helped me every step of the way and I will be forever grateful for that.

Whilst doing the chair I noticed how I moved from the darkest feelings expressed on the seat of the chair to more hopeful and positive feelings which I expressed all around the edge of the seat.

The Web represents the confusion all around me and not knowing what or why this was happening to me and the feeling that there was no way out and no-one to help me.

The vivid colours on the back of the chair is my spirituality which has survived, my spiritual self and the growth throughout this chair project.



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Looking at the dark negative words on the seat of my chair I have decided to turn them into positives!!

STUCK --- UNSTUCK
FEAR --- FEARLESS
NO COURAGE --- NOW COURAGEOUS
LOST --- FOUND
TIMID --- BOLD
WITHDRAWN --- OUTGOING
DARKNESS --- CHINKS OF LIGHT



THE CHAIR OF HOPE



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THE CHAIR OF HOPE



When I first received the text from the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre to see if I was interested in being part of the ‘Chair Project’ I was a little unsure if I wanted to go back, mainly because I didn’t want to go back to that ‘4 year old’ again

But meeting up with one of the facilitators to discuss what was involved, changed my mind, and I wanted to do this Chair Project for me. The first night started with meeting some familiar faces and some new ones who are taking part in the project. The support that I have got in being part of different groups previously at the Centre has been a lifesaver for me.

The chair I brought with me, I didn’t like, so I was delighted to do an exchange for the chair I have now. We really had some laughs, times of quiet, times of chat, but most of all, times that you can rely on your group for ideas on doing my chair, and support when it gets so frustrating to do anything with my chair.



From starting out in the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre over twenty years ago, it has been a long, rough, tough road. A lot of tears, anger, feelings, hopeless and worthless doubt, regrets, self-hate, blaming myself, asking WHY ME??? But without my one to one counselling and being part of the groups, I would not be here today. The Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre saved my life, and this I can say with my heart.

Doing The Chair Project, Is now a closer step to me realising that all the work I have been doing with the centre’s help. I am now in a place where I can do my chair, which tells my story.

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Believing, accepting that I was sexually abused, raped, whatever words are used abuse is abuse. As a 4 year old little girl, my abuser was my grandfather who is supposed to love and mind you, but no this bastard decided to ruin my childhood. He raped me on my communion day that stays in my head all the time but with help I am able to cope with it ONE DAY AT A TIME. For years this went on weekly. I had no voice he knew how to keep me quiet, telling me it was my fault, nobody would believe me. How sick and evil he was. It stopped when I was 13 (HE DIED).

He took my childhood and most of my early years, I overdosed on tablets and alcohol, slept with men because I had no self-respect, I did not care if I lived or died, I did not care about me.

I am far from that now, I do have very bad days but can try and deal with them without self-harm. That was yesterday, today is a new one and this is where my chair of hope comes in. All I can do is hope it's all I can do for as long as I live, to live my as best I can for me and keeping saying (It was not my fault).

Doing my chair has been a work of healing. I chose colours, because I had them, but as the weeks went on I changed a lot on it. One of the ladies has a beautiful deep blue so I borrowed it to give strength to my chair. I changed the pink to lilac, left the green, added butterflies & hands.

My chosen colours & butterflies, hands, represent my thinking and where I now am in my life.

Blue: Is a colour of Trust, Responsibility, this colour promotes both physical & mental relaxation

Green: The whole chair was painted in green first by me it's an emotionally positive colour and gives balance, harmony & growth.

Lilac: I chose the lilac instead of pink as it can allow me to get in contact with my deepest thoughts. green can give energy and strength.



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Butterflies: The Butterfly on my chair are deep and powerful representations of my life with their beautiful colours and powerful wings. The butterfly can also give endurance, change, life & HOPE

And this is why my chair is called **‘HOPE’**



The number 4 on the chair is when the abuse started, the number 13 is when it stopped.

The hands in the centre of the chair represent the support, help, the guidance, encouragement and the skills to get through all the different times in life when I was so low, nowhere to turn and wanted to give up. These hands are the counsellors and the groups here in the centre that have held this little girl and embraced my

story, listened, no blame, no judgement. To each one of ye I say *‘Thank you all’* ye have been my support in creating the chair of hope.

Being part of the chair project has been at times, for me, trying, exhausting, sad, angry and rage. It is such a personal project and delves right down to the core of my child abuse.

But I have learned that the Hope I had in ever finding acceptance, and simple words like

‘I Believe You’, ‘I Love You’, ‘I am here for you,’

I will never get it from my family I want this chair gone from me. I want closure on it.

Being part of the Group has been the best thing I have ever done in my life, for me to be open, honest and accepted by each one is my life saver.

*To my facilitators, I thank you
To my group, I thank you*

I hope being part of the Groups is not the end but new found friendships, without the group I would be lost in life.



NO MORE SICK DAYS



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NO MORE SICK DAYS



I knew straight away what chair I wanted, I knew the exact colours it had to be (the colours in my memory from early days in school, our counting cubes had these colours!)

Feelings: I want this chair to be thought provoking. I want people to get an insight to what it is like for a small child, how it feels, how you can't put words on what's happening. How it manifests itself in being sick but that 'sick' hides so much that no one sees. I want people to think twice. That child hopes adults will think twice.

Doing this chair was, for me, easy. I knew from the outset everything I wanted from the chair, to the colours, to my Raggedy Ann. It was a no brainer. What I didn't anticipate was the difficulty I would have in putting into

words, my thoughts, memories, feelings . . . Excruciating for me. Someone who can talk for Ireland, I love words, books so how can I be so stuck.

You see in my head my chair represents me giving my two fingers to my past. I also want to insult the sensibilities of any decent human being that might look at it. I want to scream out for all the children past, present and future who have the misfortune of being violated. Its not nice its not pretty.



My colours represent all the wonderful new experiences that primary school held for me. The colours, smells, new books, new copies literally assaulted my senses. I had so much hope and expectations even for one so young. I never for a second expected that those we had been brought up to revere would so cruelly rob all those wonderful ideals.

My 'Raggedy Ann' represents the child who had those ideals but who ended up being left behind crumpled on the floor because I couldn't bring her with me to witness the degradation and



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horror of what was happening. She would never have survived.

The puke on the chair represents everything I felt but could never put words on, for it was too horrific and maybe if I said it, it might have made it real. That puke I have carried for my life to date. I am now 54 years old.

What happened to me as a child and into my teenage years left severe emotional torment. It robbed me of my dreams. It tears your soul out of your body.

It makes you feel disgusting, unworthy, a big pile of puke.

Despite all of this I have muddled through not totally knowing what I was doing, but my colours are bright and strong and still represent all my hopes, future, my dreams are just different now.

I feel my job in this project is to make you aware of history repeating itself every day in our country, town, street. I am heartbroken it still continues because kids haven't got the ability to put words on what is happening to them and we as adults aren't listening.



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“I WISH my chair was more realistic. If it had been possible, the vomit on the seat would be real vomit. I want everyone to see how these crimes impact children.”

“Mine was always going to be a primary school chair with frail blue legs, as my first memory of abuse comes from that point,” the survivor says. “I remember the colours of the building blocks, the smell of new books, the huge windows -- and then, bang; it was all snatched from me. The Raggedy Anne doll thrown on the ground between the chair legs represents the experience I fled away for 40 years until I first attended KRSAC.”

“I wanted my chair to offend sensibilities. I smeared fake vomit on the tiny wooden seat, and I make no apologies for that; the only thing I'd change about my piece is that I'd use real vomit if that had been possible. It's not pretty, but we need to show people the impact these crimes have on children. I want adults to be vigilant; it's not so much what children are saying, it's what they're not saying. I want everyone to see the effect of abuse.”

“If you can do group work, it's beautiful, cathartic. For years I asked ‘What put me in a position to be abused?’ Then I met this group of women and realised I wasn't alone and that I'd done nothing wrong. As for the art itself, it was as if I put my hands into my past and pulled all that feeling out for my chair.”

Describing KRSAC as the aid that helped her retrieve her self-esteem, one-to-one counselling and group work banished her previous belief that she was ‘an unworthy person.’

“You grow up almost telling yourself, ‘I deserved it,’ but all that changes once you come here. KRSAC doesn't turn away, and they don't look for anything in return.”

“My best friends don't know what's happened in my life, but I've told the counsellors here because they're so staunchly committed to confidentiality. I want people to know they'll be understood here. The hardest part of going for a walk is putting your shoes on, but you should look at visiting KRSAC as the first step to the rest of your life.”

Excerpts from interview with Tadgh Evans, Journalist, Kerryman Newspaper



VOICE CHAIR



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VOICE CHAIR



Remember how we used to jokingly claim:

‘IT STARTED ON THE LATE LATE SHOW’ ... WELL IT DIDN’T.

It started in THE EARLY YEARS and remained lodged there as secret stories for years. Finally those secrets went from story form in my head, to poetic form and now to chair form.

Having agonised initially on what I had to offer the “Through the Chair” Project, I realised that since I had already written a poem: *“Deeper than Chocolate”* in 2013; perhaps this was an opportunity to extend my poem and explore my experiences and their effects through other art forms. So finally I committed. I ended up with two donated chairs and the next challenge was to combine these two seemingly different chairs, along with my poem! Remembering from school that *‘two into one won’t go’*, I knew I had my work cut out for me!!!

I was blessed to have two very talented guys in the allotment shed that took an interest and volunteered to do the carpentry work. Having fused our ideas and the chairs we ended up with a ghost like form; so I couldn’t

wait to get the now melded chair all one colour and was glad to find a huge can of red paint amongst the art materials. Weeks later I discovered, when asked what shade of red it was, that it is signal red shade. As they say ... You couldn’t make it up!!!



With signal red as the main colour, I settled on dark brown to represent melting chocolate and lo and behold a neat espresso [tin of dark brown paint] was promptly offered. I could visualize the finished chair upright, but I was keen also to work on the underside to represent the subordination and silencing of women and girls - abused women and girls in particular.



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

Next came the sourcing of materials to represent aspects of the stories. With the emphasis on fake news etc. in the media at the time I was triggered; [as we often are] hence the use of newsprint underneath the seat and the question:



“Any News?”

There's only one kind of news in my vocabulary and experience of course and that is real news. Real news being the focus of most people usually in ascertaining what is going on locally, and as we know for some of us that news is so real it leaves one reeling, often for life. Real news, arising from true stories finally has weaved its way 'through the chair' and 'true' the chair. The Question: “Any News?” echoed in the enquiring voice behind those words resonates at another level also, as it was so often asked as a greeting by a neighbour [who was a niece of one abuser and wife

of another]. Whilst it may have been asked in a general routine neighbourly way, I used to feel so frustrated and upset that I couldn't answer the question honestly.

I chose authentic vintage sewing reels to confirm and convey the ‘real-ness’ of my experiences. The sewing reel colours are significant and two fold as they represent ‘a wealth of colours to mind my life’ and chair. The colours of the Chakra energy wheels of the body. I choose a zip/zipper [the strongest one I could find] to represent the silence and secrecy we were induced into by society at the time i.e. the Seventies. YEAH I was reared with the “Shush” or the “Dún do bhéil” and I suffered for it.

I got a number of insights as I went along [not only was I working on the chair, but the chair was working on me]. One insight was around the terror I felt [and sometimes still feel] as I raced home on one occasion at Master McGrath speed. I really lost the run of myself that day and it is as if my legs still remember. I chose a necktie with a scarecrow pattern as I realised that in some way I had convinced myself that one particular abuser was a scarecrow, sure it couldn't be a person or human being I used to think over and over again; at least not with an awful mop of black hair like that!!!!

No wonder I was glad to have the chair legs reinforced, but at the same time I was keen to cover up the splits on them where the joining's were, so I started knitting leg warmers to cover them up. Later I realized the splits represented me being split from my body as a result of trauma, but I had the leg warmers knit at that stage and being ‘críochnúil’ and ‘ana críochnúil altogether’ I kept them on the chair legs as they weren't going to go to waste !!!!!



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I used a spring to represent tension or being tensed up all the time, further exasperating and perpetuating being in a state of no voice; versus all the advice in the world to and the many efforts made to let go. The spring is more exaggerated in design than I had earlier intended, but I realise now it's perfect, as it represents how we are often judged as or accused of exaggerating our experience or experiences.

I was playing around with the remaining bits of the chairs one evening when I realized, that when combined in a certain way those bits looked like a bookstand. Once the stand came together and grew into how tall it is now it solved the dilemma of how to include my poem and this biography with the chair. Having now made a physical stand it is a visual reminder to me that I can ‘make a stand’ in more ways than one.

AND I INTEND TO ...

I choose a butterfly with broken wings and the image of a whole butterfly to contrast the brokenness versus full flight in life. I choose buttons and broken bits of jewellery to represent a calming and fun side of my life. A bit of copper made it in there too as I was keen to bring in as many elements and recycled materials as possible. Oh and the oak extensions to the seat – It was like a gift to me when reclaimed Oak was suggested as I could see that underpinning all my efforts and in over-coming any challenges, I was and I am reclaiming ME and the Oak with all its ancient connotations and energy and solidness is a perfect fit.

The final act was to layer on a liberal application of natural beeswax polish to embalm and to calm. Thanks to all who supported me, those who donated chairs, arts materials, advice, solutions etc., our project managers, centre staff, my chair buddies and my chocolate buddies.

Thanks to everyone who handled me with care and with chair!

I told you it was **DEEPER THAN CHOCOLATE !!!**



THE TIES THAT BIND



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

THE TIES THAT BIND



Losing my beautiful, unique, loving Mother to cancer at ten & a half years of age, thoroughly broke my heart which has never mended. To have love and tenderness snatched away so cruelly without any explanation of how or why was devastating. My siblings and I were left with a father whom I never understood why I neither liked or loved. But at age 12 a teacher gave the class a 5 minute sex education which shocked me into the knowledge that what my father had been doing to me all my life was not a normal thing a father does to his child, he was in fact sexually abusing me. My dislike of this man was now apparent, the sense of fear and confusion was immense. I was so afraid to tell anybody so my “dirty little secret” has been that all my life. This is the living hell of child sex abuse.

This man does not deserve the luxury or privilege of being called my father because he murdered my spirit. The real me has never lived or achieved my full potential. Instead the ability to feel worthy of anybody’s acceptance or love never developed. Self-loathing, body repulsion, anxiety, disturbing nightmares and massive feelings of shame are just part of the horrific legacy from this B...d. Never knowing when certain smells, sounds or a news item can trigger extreme depression, is very disturbing because it is very frightening to get into that deep dark hole and very hard to climb out. I do not think this deep unexplainable inner sadness and loneliness will ever leave me. All my life I have accused myself of being the guilty one, that I was responsible maybe a willing participant but god I was only a child. Knowing my Mother had not long to live he still abused me during this time, something I struggle to comprehend and I have extreme guilt that I degraded my Mother, this I find so upsetting.

Sadly I have during my life made very bad choices, have allowed degrading, nasty things to be done to me and I have done same in the hope of being loved!! I have lived my life looking for something but not knowing what I’m looking for.



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I very much bless the day I took the courage to walk through the Red Door of the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre. The warmth, non-judgemental, loving atmosphere is outstanding. I am forever thankful to the most wonderful inspiring counsellor “Anna” for her extreme patience, kindness and skill in helping me connect the jigsaw of my life.

It is an honour to be part of the Chair Project, many thanks to a special friend in the group who offered me a chair. I decided not to have the unhappiness and blackness of my life in my chair, so the ‘multi-colour’ is dedicated to a group of people who have shown me unconditional love and joy, and brought colour to my life. There is a separate colour

for each person and although it is a happy chair I shed a lot of tears as I worked on it, as some of the people have passed away but are still in my heart:

Thus: **The Ties That Bind.**

Matilda - My beautiful, elegant, loving Mother
- I know I was loved very much

May - An inspirational, fun loving enchanting Aunt

Chris - The best Brother-in-law, always made me feel top-class

Tess - My fascinating, fun loving friend (so much laughter)

Pat - Angelic, adorable kindhearted friend (filled magic nights)

Theresa & Mary - My wonderful, inspirational, immensely loving big sisters always and ever there for me

Niamh - my crazy, elegant fun loving niece and best friend

Céire - MY REASON FOR LIVING my unique inspirational fascinating stunningly beautiful, inside and out, daughter. I knew the moment she was born I had unconditional love in my life. She is the Sunflower in my Life.

The purple heart is for the courage shown by all those who have walked through the Red Door of The Tralee Rape Crisis Centre especially for the wonderful true friends I



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have made. Thank you for the most enjoyable Wednesday evenings it was a blast and an absolute pleasure to share your chair journeys. Finally a very heart felt thank you to all the fantastic counsellors, we are very fortunate.

“Always look ahead there are no regrets in that direction”

(Wilbur Smith)

Feedback on group experience

There is a safety net feeling in one to one counselling, pouring out details of the saddest, shameful, horrific abuses done to you is a very difficult experience, but having complete trust and confidence in your counsellor is a blessing.

The Chair project took us out of that comfort zone, totally exposing our intimate stories to the general public not knowing what reactions would be. Personally the quality part of the chair project was the group of total strangers who met for two hours every Wednesday evening. The unique comradery and friendships developed over such vile histories is a testimony to the honesty, gentleness, suffering and courage of these ladies whom I consider true heroes as I am truly in total admiration. Sadly, one or two occasions caused me deep upset and hurt but I am, with great help, dealing with my feelings.

Alice, this project could not have succeeded if not for your total faith and confidence in each one of us. Every week you gave personal time to every single person. You know for those two hours you made me feel a person worthy of value. “Thank you so much” I truly believe you have not received the proper accolade and acknowledgement you so deserve.

Finally, my hope for the chair project is that if only one person seeks help from this emotional cancer of child sexual abuse our chair project will have been worthwhile.



A LOST CHILD



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Survivors tell their story through their chair

A LOST CHILD



When I was asked to do the chair project I was excited to be involved with another group. I first attended the centre about four years ago. I did one to one counselling for about a year in total and have had the honour of being involved in two groups. Through these experiences I have learned a lot and met amazing ladies along the way, the life stories and experiences we have shared will stay with me forever. To be in a room with people that have been through similar experiences to you as a child is so powerful, you feel for once you are understood and believed. You can talk about anything, you can disclose your darkest thoughts, your hopes and dreams, it is both overwhelming and powerful.

I am not artistic at all so I wanted to keep my chair as simple as possible, but I also wanted it to tell a powerful story. Through therapy I had the strength to confront my abuser, I had no choice as I felt, by reliving my childhood, it was effecting my present life as a wife and mother, and I could not let that happen again as it had a

big part to play in the breakdown of my first marriage, I was not going to let that happen again.

Even though there is nothing he could say or do to make up for what he did, no excuse or explanation. But by me having the courage to have it out with him has given me power and lifted a very dark fog I had in my head. Unfortunately, no matter how much work I do on myself it will never go away I will live with it for the rest of my life. He destroyed my childhood, teenage years and some of my twenties, I blamed myself but with help and support I am taking back control. I was a child I had no say the fear they instil in you is overwhelming you feel you have nowhere to turn you believe their threats are real that is all you know.

I wanted the chair to tell my story from a child's point of view as I did not have a voice back then.

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I got the chair in a shed in my family home and I found out it was from my abuser, my brother. At the time it impacted with me in a bad way. I know I could have got a chair somewhere else but I decided to turn a negative into a positive and use it as a challenge as he does not have that power over me anymore.

White represents the innocence of childhood which I should have had but didn't.

Black represents the abuse the child that was destroyed and damaged. I continued the black up the back of the chair as no matter how hard you try to forget and get on with your life, raise a family, get therapy it never goes away.

I used **pink** paint on the edging of my chair seat this colour represents caring, compassion and love, all the things I should have had from my abuser but didn't.



I used **purple** glitter which represents imagination and dreams. I picked this because as a child I spent a lot of time dreaming of not being me and wishing I was someone else.

I wanted to put photo frames on because as a teenager and adult, I hated looking at pictures of me as a child especially if my abuser was in them. Because of what was happening I didn't feel I belonged anywhere. I just wanted to switch off, I was a withdrawn, quiet child with no confidence this has followed me a lot through my life. Even now I hate looking at pictures of my childhood. By completing this chair it is another part of my journey and even though it was painful to relive, I have also had good times and learned a lot. Thank you for this opportunity.



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After completing the chair and taking a break for a few months, coming back I felt I had no connection with my chair. This continued for a few weeks, I realised one of the main reasons was the chair belonged to my abuser. I did not want all the physical and emotional turmoil be for nothing so I had to turn a negative into a positive and that is where my journey began.

Through the chair project, I feel that I have grown more as a person. I have dealt with issues that were bothering me and I have found peace within. Unfortunately, the scars from the abuse is never going to leave me, it will always be there in the background. I now have tools to deal with issues as they happen. For the first time in my life I can say **I truly forgive myself. It was not my fault. I was only a child.** I will hate my abuser which was my brother until the day I die and that is ok, he does not deserve my forgiveness and never will.



I forgive my Mother and brothers who found out years later but we never talk about it. The usual, swept under the carpet but if they ever do want to talk, I am here and there will always be a part of me that hopes they will.

I am excited for the future, I have an amazing supportive husband, beautiful children and a new career. I will always have bumps along the way but I know I will get through them. I have made amazing lifelong friends from the group which I will cherish. I had no control over what happened to me as a child but I do as an adult and I have taken back my power.

When I am feeling low, I will draw from the strength of amazing ladies that was brought into my life for a purpose.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

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I would like this message from my Partner to be beside my story and after thoughts of the group I want people to be able to see my journey but also my

‘Partner’s point of view’

‘Wow’ that’s the woman I know, your right, if anyone takes the hump then they want to give themselves a good talking to. It amazes me that anyone in your family even speaks to him. I would have told him to leave town years ago or had him fucking arrested. At the end of the day your brother is a paedophile, I know nobody wants to say it but it is what it is. Your brother had a duty to inform his wife about the risks in having kids around him anyway. You did say you are fed up with people pussyfooting around it so I’m being brutally honest about my feelings on it.

It’s no difference from old priests getting outed and then saying I’m an old man that was years ago, ‘so what’ you did what you did and you should be paying for it. That’s my truthful view on it and I’m not ashamed to say it. I would quite happily take a baseball bat to him and let him feel some of the pain for what he did, saying he was a teenager is no excuse. He’s a pervert ‘end of’ and your whole family have allowed him to get off Scott free. Because of what! Embarrassment? Fuck the public it’s our daughter/sister that’s what’s important here. That’s what should have been said in the first place. Your whole family all copped out and left you high and dry and to this day chose to say nothing to spare themselves discomfort not you!!! They should be telling him to fuck off out of Kerry and never return.

*I’m sorry for Rant but it’s how I feel. I want to kill the fat bastard for what he did to you. Riles me to even be in his company. I stand there listening to his shite and I just want to attack him and punch his lights out. Horrible excuse for a human being! Anyway ‘good for you’ I know you will come through the other end and I’m here for you always”
Love you xxxx*

PS. I was thinking about our discussion the other night and as I think back to when I was a kid, I had some hiding protecting my brothers and sisters from bullies, that’s what big brothers are there for, protecting the other kids. You have been so let down as a wee sister, that you have made it your mission for our kids to have us as parents, but you are also like a big sister, nobody will ever mess with our kids and that’s all every kid deserves. I know it is your last night at the centre but you have the attitude now to show you are brave, I am so proud of you.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

I would like to leave my brother named as the abuser as I want people to know it was something I had to live with throughout my childhood there was nowhere I could go to escape, I was trapped. I feel that’s so important for people to understand. And more importantly if anyone confides in you about being abused, especially if you have asked them, if you are not able to handle it, please sent a message to make sure they are ok. For as hard as it is for you to understand, it’s impossible for us ‘the victims’



BACK UP



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

BACK UP



I got this chair from a friend of mine. She told me she had bought it many years ago in a furniture shop and strange as life is sometimes it transpired that the ‘shop’ was once a dance hall owned and run by my parents back in the day. Serendipity or coincidence?

When I began really looking at the chair, I knew pretty much straight off what I wanted to do with it and I felt it was structurally strong enough to tolerate my ideas.

I knew that the original back support had to go as I felt that was an area that I was drawn to.

I saw it as:

My back = my past

My back = my courage

My back = my journey

My back = my story

My back = my family not at my back

Taking the back off was literally a return to my childhood in a symbolic way and building it ‘back up’ is my attempt at showing the process of rebuilding me.

The base signifies grounding and the cleansing of the therapeutic process, therefore I felt very strongly the need to strip back all the layers of varnish to its original state.

The sense of shame which resulted from the abuse I suffered silenced me, as I felt responsible for not being able to stop the abuse and the abuser. This is evident from the poems that began to emerge through working with the chair.

I remember thinking as a child, I must be a bad person because this awful frightening thing is happening to me. This realisation effected how I began to see myself as a child/ person in a very negative way.

At that time I felt I had no one to turn to, I felt alone, scared, degraded and dirty.

In the process of growing up and moving abroad, I felt I had the space and time to deal with these debilitating feelings and beliefs about myself. I had to revisit those awful memories. Essentially I had to forgive the child in me for trying and failing to stop the abuser.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

I saw written once *‘Our past is not our potential’*.
This is how I try to live my life now.
My chair tries to speak to this.

.....

SHE KNEW IT!

NIGHTTIME IS ALWAYS THE WORST
COLD FEAR PARALYSING ME ALMOST FAINT
I WISHED I WAS A GIANT
ONLY MYSELF TO BLAME
I THOUGHT THEN I WAS 10
I FELT ALONE AND ASHAMED
I COULDN'T STOP THIS..
MY POOR FRAME
WITH MY BELL BOTTOMED TROUSERS
AND MY HAIR IN A FRINGE
MY MARC BOLAN TEE-SHIRT
ALARM BELLS RINGING
SHE KNEW IT SHE KNEW IT AND WHY DIDN'T SHE DO SOMETHING?????????

.....

THE FACTS

SNEERING AT THE FACTS
THEY TURNED THEIR BACKS AWAY FROM ME UNITED
SIGNALLING CONTEMPT AT MY ATTEMPT TO
EXPOSE THE TRUTH

SNEERING AT THE FACTS
THEIR COWARDLY STANCE
IS NO MATCH FOR MY DIGNITY
I ALWAYS CHOOSE CHANGE AND TRUTH

SNEERING AT THE FACTS
GLARING LACK OF HUMANITY FROM YOU
I LEAVE THIS FAMILY TO THEIR RACK AND RUIN

.....



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

INDIFFERENCE

INDIFFERENT TO THE SUFFERING INFLICTED
ROBBED MY PEACE STOLE MY INNOCENCE
I TOOK IT UPON MYSELF TO TAKE THE BLAME
WHICH GOUGED A LARGE PART OF MY SELF ESTEEM
AND LOCKED IT TO
SHAME SHAME SHAME
I WORE IT LIKE A CLOAK
ALL OF THESE YEARS
SUFFOCATING MY INITIATIVE TO CHANGE
BUT FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE
AND I DID CHANGE
TOOK MY POWER BACK
MY INNER CHILD NOW SAFE

.....

PREDATORS PROTECTED

PREDATORS PROTECTED
PROPOGATE VICTIMS
THE HIDDEN SCOURGE OF THE ABUSED

PREDATORS PROTECTED
ROAM FREELY
CORNERING THEIR PREY
UNHINDERED BUT VIEWED

PREDATORS PROTECTED
PROWL
AND WE LIKE BAIT
THEIR SICK AMUSEMENT

PREDATORS PROTECTED
PROPOGATE VICTIMS

.....



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

WITNESS

THERE WAS A WITNESS
THERE WAS A WITNESS
THERE WAS A WITNESS TO THAT CRIME
THE WITNESS SAW BUT DID NOT TELL
AS THAT CHILD NAVIGATED CONSTANT HELL.
SHE COULD HAVE STOPPED THE SICK INTENT
EVIL BENT,
UNREPENT
SHE COULD HAVE STOPPED THAT COWARDLY CREEP
SEEKING VICTIMS,
CHILDHOOD BEAT
THERE WAS A WITNESS TO THAT CRIME
AND IT WASN'T ONLY ME



What the chair project has meant to me.

I have benefitted so much from this project. I have discovered the supportive power of my peers, the deep understanding between us, the shared stories and light bulb moments and the feeling of solidarity. I feel I've gained a better understanding of the insidious nature of child abuse and the silencing burden that it automatically inflicts on victims and survivors. All this through listening to the horror stories told by the members of this amazing group of women. Dealing with the trauma of sexual violence through the medium of Art Therapy is an eye opener for me. It enables me as a survivor to work through these serious issues helped by the conscious memories and even deeper subconscious trauma in a creative way.

And in some ways the fact of working physically with the chair engages different parts of the psyche and the body that may be difficult to access through regular talk therapy, however I still think that talking through these issues is still vitally important.

Working with the chair was fun! We had a great laugh interspersed with many tears. Having an object like the chair to work on gave me the freedom to experiment with the art of it almost like a 'third platform' to express part of my journey at least. The authenticity I have met in each and every member of this pioneering project, shows me that there is still genuine human kindness to be found in this world.

I want to sincerely thank my fellow sisters and survivors for all their trust, support and encouragement and many many thanks to our fab facilitators Alice, Rachel and Noelle, who have been so present, professional and supportive.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair



I would like to include a special mention to my sister who bravely and with determination negotiated a similar but even more traumatic and challenging road in her healing journey. Oceans may divide us sis but we have travelled and fought together to reveal this heinous and extremely disturbing truth.. toward partial justice at least. As our mom said '*the truth will out*'

BUTTERFLY



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

BUTTERFLY



Me, My Chair and I

I went home to find a chair.

My partner said there is one in the loft and one in the shed. Either could be used. I search the shed and found an old chair. Immediately it felt right. I did not bother to look for the other one.

The chair is brown in colour like shit, except it was too tall? I need to cut the four legs off and make it smaller. I have no idea of the significance of this, but it feels right to cut them.

Although, the color of the chair is brown and represents shit, I paint over it with black for shadow, secrets, dark places, disgust and fear, the negative side of myself and experiences, white for innocence, naiveté, purity and peace.

The feeling I have in my stomach, when I allow myself to think about that night, is like a lump of cement, a heavy load a hard heavy weight that I cannot get rid of, a deep black hole. To represent this I cut a hole in the seat of the chair.

It feels these colours, although part of me, are part of how one-minute things are normal and happy and the next things are in chaos terrifying and scary.

I decide that these colours do not represent the whole of me. I have a very loving side to me, so I put red in the middle with the black and white weaving in and out, on either side.

I am always afraid of the dark, which came from early childhood. I don't know why, but bugs and things coming up from the deep, are really scary for me. I decide to use them in some way on the chair.

When I think of being raped I feel as if I all the creepy crawlies are all over me. I decide to place them under the seat. Behind my back, hidden from my view. Where, they



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

are visible to others, and I can feel they are there. I put the black on the white side and the white on the black side again showing that things can change from one minute to the next. (Later on I put some on top of the chair seat for extra visibility.)

To show confusion, and give a two-sided effect to the viewer, of how the present reality changes. I need something to turn around continuously. I place a turn disc over the “heavy” hole.

I put two faces on top of the turn disc. One shows beauty with many faces, and the other a ghost face, which was white. I feel the white one needs something to show thoughts, which are running through my head, as I work.

For this, I took some wrapping paper I had made. (I made this from some silhouettes I took from the net, which I placed on red wallpaper and photographed. I had the photos developed into wrapping paper. This was part of my final art exhibition)

I stuck some of it onto the forehead of the white mask. I feel as if I have “Abuse me” on my forehead and the images on the paper show this.

The other mask has many faces on it and they are all beautiful. I believe these show me where I now want to be. I use a hand for these faces as a hand holds and controls and speaks it’s own language. I want to show that we can regain our control of the beautiful things in life.

I want to show there is love between the two masks as these replicate two sides of me, but do not know how to show this. After some thought, I take a spherical glass and line it on the inside with red crepe paper. I light a light bulb within the glass sphere, which gives the effect of a red glow shining out.

I place the sphere and the masks on top on the turn disc. As the turn disc turns it replicates how emotions change from second to second.

As I do the chair I make two snakes, coming up through the ground entwining throughout my being. It is only when I stand back and take a look at what I am doing, startled I realise these snakes represent two of my very



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

close friends. The betrayal and shock I feel when I think of the two of them is almost worse than the actual rape. I feel sick my stomach turns inside out. The shock and disbelief how, my two most trusted people in the world can use and abuse that trust in such an evil way, is totally incomprehensible.

I need to write out all the venom I feel towards them. So I write to each of them telling everything I feel and want to say, omitting nothing. I then crush the paper, stick it together with paste and make a Papier Mache heads. As I crush, I squeeze very hard, as if I am squashing their faces. When I focus on their heads I decide to seal all those words with paint to lock in my own venom.

I use brown and black paint and fixed the eyes in a way I feel they are watching all the time. It feels good and vindictive and healing.

When I place them onto the chair I make sure they came up from underneath me, as I believe they grew up from the earth. I make the snakes long so they touch the ground. They need to twist over my body (in this instance, the chair) as they twist in my life.

The chair needs a presence an actual living ticking depicting time and seconds. I place a clock on a board at the back of the chair so the ticking is heard and gives a continuous tick tock noise. How emotions change from one second to the next. Beauty

to ugliness and turmoil, happiness to terror, suspension to disbelief, rage to defeat, fear to escape back to terror and self preservation, aggression to repulsion, anger to submissiveness, life to death, laughter to breathlessness, survival to helplessness, Shame and blame to criticizing oneself, “Why and if Only” to courage power and recovery

When I sit and look at my chair I see that vacant face as if it is dead, just like I feel and felt for all those years after the rape

The need to connect the hole on the seat, with my legs becomes important. I buy tights, but I am unsure about the age and settle on nine years. I don’t know why.



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

I stuff the tights, which represent my legs, with stuffing and wire to enforce the shape and put black patent shoes on the feet. I attach the top on the tights to the underneath of the hole under the chair.

I dress the seat of the chair with lace in colors of white, red and black and put diamantes around the edge. (“Pretty good little girl” syndrome)

I sew the lace in place.

Once again I look at the chair it comes to me that, at that age, I slept with and aunt of mine when she was babysitting us.

She masturbated in the bed beside me. I remember staying so still so she wouldn’t know I was awake. This is a new revelation to me. I have only just put these two pieces together. It is why I had to cut the legs of the chair.

I never thought much of it but I do remember how scared and rigid I was. I still don’t know if her actions are normal or if it is abnormal. I did not know what she was doing then, but it felt uncomfortable.

Other instances have come up through the creation of my chair, of which I was unaware when starting the project. I am at present deconstructing all of these instances, freeing myself of the inbuilt thoughts of:

**“It is all my fault”, “I asked for it”,
“I should have known better” “Why me”.**

In order to erase all of these memories I want to have something to turn the event into a positive. The bugs I have placed on the chair have beautiful colours underneath the black. It is my hope that people scratch the black off and turn them into the beautiful colours. Thus lifting the hidden blackness I feel inside.

I have placed small plastic sticks under the turn disc to help people to do this. Then the colours that are hidden in me will be visible.

I write a poem to describe this event and place it on the clock surface. I cut the paper I have written it on into the form of feet. By doing this I give the notion of my own feet taking steps to recovery.



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

Me, My Chair and I

My chair and I met
In a lonely shed
Worn, dented and tired,
Brown her exterior

Beautifully resilient.
It resembled someone....
Someone familiar....
It’s me, me in the corner!

Like ghosts of the past,
We gel together,
Interiors match, red, white
And black.

Beauty, innocence, shadow
Core, sheath, crust,
Strength, naiveté, power
Our Oak.

Yearly rings a darker hue
Knots entwined,
Each shock
Endured.

At nine boogie man
Fear, hysterical ran,
Aunt in bed, silent,
Cringe, motionless.

Fourteen, a tenner offered
Outside the Garda station
“Come with me”,
He muttered...

Sixteen a flasher
On way home from school
Terrified raced passed,
To own driveway

There he stood
Neighbors’ door...? Release?
No one there...
Where to escape

Climbed own wall
To garden space,
Breadth held tight,
Pain in chest.

Each shock,
Another notch
Tormented innocence
Became hate.

Men in our book
See us as easy game
Must have “Abuse us”
Written on our face.

Trust in life
Out with the wind
Courtship life,
Out of sink.

Manipulative emotions
Love creates
Twenty-one rings
Marriage took place.

Thirty-five rings
A time to celebrate,
They said,
All dressed up and
ready to go,

Full of life and Craic.
Enjoyed dinner one night
Normal goodbyes
But wait....

(Tu rest ici en place
En essayant d’échapper,
Il nous a frappe,
Dans nos figures,

Une clague de force...
Sur nos genous,
Nous nous a trouvée,
Ecrouvée)

Door slammed on our face
You stay here,
He said.
NO... tried to escape.

Locked door,
Slap on the face
Fell to the floor....
Battered, terrified, wiped.

Second to choose
Numbness envelops,
Life or death?
Chose life....

Dragged to bedroom
“You know what I want”...
Deep knots twist,
Stomach aches,

Unconscious,
Dead space,
Abused, terrified,
Raped.

Pain. No, sheer agony,
Disgust vomit,
Took place
He started it all again...

At three he’d had enough,
Took us to a place
Unconscious I move,
Recognise nothing

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

Thoughts after the Chair Project.

Recently, I began a new relationship. I want to give it a real chance to survive. I have some issues that will not go away. I have had years of doubt frustration and wishing I did things differently. I knew I needed help. I had heard, at the Centre, one is listened to without judgment and that in itself encouraged me to inquire to see if I would be able to help myself to iron out some of these issues. The rest is history.

After a few weeks, when asked, if I would like to participate in creating a chair. My counselor explained that the chair would represent my journey through my sexual experiences that happened in France all those years ago. I agreed to do something but did not know what...

When the project started I was unsure of what was in store.

The many artists who have found themselves in a similar position helped my influences and my ability to agree to take this project. They expressed their journeys through art as I did in my final degree art exhibition. Their paintings, writings and poems all have had a bearing on my own work. I was not alone anymore. For my own final BA in Visual art I created a homely Victorian room in which I created nine panels with explicit drawings of abuse. These were drawn in ultraviolet light so they could not be seen in ordinary light only in black light. I wanted to show how the present, can quickly change from normality to chaos. I wanted to further this notion with my chair. My vision of my chair dates back to that time where no one was allowed to talk and everything was hidden behind closed doors. Little girls were seen and not heard. I received much encouragement from our facilitators, the women in the group and the reading material within the Centre.

We at first only had eight weeks to complete the creating of the chair, after which we would have an exhibition. I found it easy to do but didn't appreciate

Arrive,
To be told,
He had had an 18-year-old,
Last week, it was said...

Stomach twisted in disbelief
Uncaring cold,
We were left
In that place?

Creeping snakes,
Entwines our cores,
Insides cramp,
Betrayal emanates,

Lumps of concrete,
Rest in stomach
At thoughts
Of this event.

Sixty-five rings,
Our inner core
Release,
Twisted knots

Beauty and the Beast
Turn in seconds
One moment
To the next.

As we look at us here
Love overwhelms,
Our strength
At the sight.

This journey taken
To re-awaken
This innocent Oak's tales of
Me, my chair and I.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

the depth it went to.

How working, creating a chair could uncover so much. How it could relieve me of some of the anger and self hate has been mind blowing.

So, after the Exhibition, I was somewhat raw. We told our facilitators this and they gave us a further 8-week to examine where we found ourselves. For me, it was a huge bonus and has found a new depth to myself in sharing where I am at having finished the project I got the courage to go to the guards to report what had happened. Here I found compassion, encouragement and help.

However, through examination of the facts and the time frame, I discovered my assailants were dead.

Having completed the sixteen weeks now looking back, I found it to be very insightful, cathartic and releasing. I am still learning about me, how I react in different situations. I was once told by one of my tutors that it continues till we are twenty minutes underground!!!

I have been given a further opportunity to go on examining my chair with the view of dismantling it. This is an ongoing project and it frees me further to become alive and present to whom I really am.

The group we formed became very close, one that will remain. The women are so strong and loving and it will be difficult to imagine life without that bond. It was the first time I was listened to without any judgment, that I was believed and heard. Our weekly sessions were close with a lot of fun. I would encourage anyone in similar circumstances to seriously consider sharing their experiences with the expertise of the counselors at the centre.

I would like to thank the facilitators for their warmth, insight ease at which they were able to recognise how we needed to move forward. Through their supervision and openness to change the things that would have caused us more difficulties in the long run. They are to be acknowledged for their expertise, truth and most of all for their love and caring attitude, without judgment.

I am really happy now that we are putting our stories into a book. I hope that some of our words will encourage others to speak out and stand up for their rights, as women. This subject I feel is still in its infancy the more is explored the less women may suffer.

Lastly, many, many thanks for giving me the opportunity to delve into what was one of my most difficult and challenging areas of my life.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

As I Look Through You

As I see my chair
I want to vomit,
Thoughts race,
Insides churn.

Why was I?
The victim?
Of you're sordid
Sex exploits?

Your porn,
You're uncouth
Excitement,
Your filth?

You stood
And watched
As you made us
Play your game.

Your fantasies,
You're slimy
Bulging, garish
Evil mind.

Your constant threat
Of abandonment
Tortures,
Jeers and smiles.

You thought,
You'd teach me
Extra delights,
Perverse insights

For your libertine
Exploits,
By setting me up
For rape?

How low could you both go?
Throwing a so called friend
To the violence,
The betrayal,

Sheer stripping of dignity,
The naked exploits
Of that vile,
Inhuman human!

So your Ego stayed intact
You covered it up
With platitudes of help,
Help that led nowhere...

Your smug smile
Fooled those around,
Platitudes
Dutiful signs of kindness?!

You played on my hope,
My deep-seated beliefs,
Of belonging,
Being true, at all costs.

The tug of
Togetherness,
Stabs at my heart
Like swords of fire,

Feelings of failure,
Fear and ridicule
Proving I was
Not good enough.

Don't mind her
Drama queen at it's best.
You are all better
With higher stances,

She is the bottom
Invisible,
Useless,
Garbage.

None knew the turmoil
None understood
The blackness
None had any idea,

No one was there
Nor wanted to know,
Who I was
Or am...

A dream of love,
Support and peace?
Happy ever after,
It doesn't exist...

I am human
It's time to let go
Time to prove,
I am.

Just believe
Forget the rest,
They have forgotten you...
I am no victim,

I am a survivor
From crushed expectations
Normally given,
Dually deserved,

Of love.

“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

Turmoil

Unconscious currents
Tug of emotion,
Underneath the surface
Of the human mind.
Borne to a group,
Not chosen,
Survival,
Paramount
For life.

“Life of what”, I ask?
Like tides turn
We bow to circumstance.
Discovering,
Un-discovering,
Right from wrong,
That tug
Still remains,
A bind.

Endless torments,
Trusted people,
Incarcerate
Souls of growth,
Forceful control
Abates decisions,
Escape?
Impossible,
I crumble.

Timid,
Torn
Mind in a heap,
Praise to another
My gut leaps,
Why not me?
Am I not as good?
Do I not deserve praise?
Like “He”?

“Go with the flow”,
They say
“Mind yourself”,
They say
Anger mounts,
Throat
Closes.
Silenced,
Numbness encloses.

What do they know?
How it feels
Lashed to the mast
Without help?
Pushed aside,
Down I go,
My grave looms
Sides so steep
Do I jump? Or let go?

Unknown,
Blackness
Engulphs,
My being,
It takes me down,
Down to oblivion,
Is it worth the fight?
The endless
Scramble?

Body aches,
Fingers torn asunder,
Air needed,
Fog obliterates,
Breathing labors
In my chest.
No one there,
NO one listens,
I'm over the top.

Hassle to family
Passed to the Psycho,
Drive like hell,
To St. Pats.
Tablets,
Useless,
Make no change
To the pit,
In my stomach.

With all their
Intelligence,
Don't they understand?
This sickness inside,
This endless battle
To survive?
That I just want
SOMEONE,
To LISTEN?

Alone, aloneness.
No words describe,
A deep-seated lump
Remains.
Scared for life,
Like dimples
On my chin,
Invisible,
To the naked eye.



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

“Trusted Friend”

Trusted Friend
passes me onto others,
Trusted friend betrays me,
Trusted friend knows what I need,
Trusted friend has me raped,
Trusted friend remain
the other person's friend?
Trusted friend crushes my trust,

Trusted friend I'm no friend of yours,
Trusted friend
you are untrustworthy,
Trusted friend you are at the end,
Trusted friend you'll see me
Swirling up to heights
You wished you stayed,
my trusted friend.
There is a price!



Debris

A weary
Tiredness
Descends

As I
Strip my chair
To pieces

My body limps
Shoulders sag
Energy depletes.

So much pain
As I discover
The disarray

Sexual predators
In my life
Made.



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

Why open my mouth when I could loose all that is dear to me?

How can I tell my story without hurting someone in the process?

Is it better that my truth is heard or buried?

*Do I hurt myself, by keeping quiet and hiding a secret,
or expose those who abused me?*

After All, nothing can revert to being the way it was once the
can of worms has been opened?

It is so difficult to put myself out into the open.

I feel like I need to draw in my breath and hold it all in.....

By using my story and images in this book, I hope to help others who find themselves
in the same or similar position as myself. Even after years of silence I helped clarify and
relieve myself of the shame, guilt and self-loathing for “allowing” this happen to me. I
hope also show the benefit of vomiting out the hurt, disgust and shame and how much
relief this process can bring, allowing, a new respect for myself emerge.

As this project was coming together I felt as if I was exposing myself again but in a different
way. This book would mean that my story would be out in the open. The fear that some
of my children see what I had written, even though it was written anonymously, began
to unsettle me. I wanted to protect them from discovering what happened because I did
not want any of their memories tarnished. I had a conversation with one of my children
and I became more unsettled. I feel as if I have lost some of the close connection we
shared.



Although I have been encouraged to stand up for
myself, when I do it can bring consequences that
change the nature of relationships. It is as if I am not
being believed again.... I am back where I started.
The raw gut feelings that twist in my stomach are
back.

*Why open my mouth when I could loose all that is
dear to me?*



“THROUGH THE CHAIR”

Survivors tell their story through their chair

How can I write the truth, my truth when it changes how others see their special relationship with a loved one or their view of me??

Where is the compassion for them and myself in all of this?

Deep down I know that silence will only cover up and protect my abusers as well as protect my children, but I need to show I am not afraid of telling my truth. It is **My Truth**. I don't want to dismiss me. I have to believe that I am strong enough not to listen to all the doubts that may happen and come back and hit me in the face once more. I have to allow others to assimilate what they read, give them time to process their own thoughts, even if it means they look differently at me.

My experiences will never go away. It will always be a scar but I believe I can move on from this and create a happier person within me. If I can make a difference in someone else's life because I write my truth then I have done something invaluable.

I continue to allow my story be read and stand up for myself, in my truth and have compassion for those around me to understand their reactions to what I am saying. It is through compassion that I will be able to accept their reactions honoring the scar that was given, through no fault of my own.



TUSLA
An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leannal agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

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*I saw written once 'Our past is not our potential'.
This is how I try to live my life now. My chair tries to speak to this.*

'Backbone' Chair

"I very much bless the day I took the courage to walk through the Red Door of the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre. The warmth, non-judgemental, loving atmosphere is outstanding"

'The Ties That Bind' Chair

"It started in THE EARLY YEARS and remained lodged there as secret stories for years. Finally those secrets went from story form in my head, to poetic form and now to chair form"

'Voice' Chair

I wanted the chair to tell my story from a child's point of view as I did not have a voice back then. I am not artistic at all so I wanted to keep my chair as simple as possible, but I also wanted it to tell a powerful story.

'A Lost Child' Chair

What happened to me as a child and into my teenage years left severe emotional torment. It robbed me of my dreams. It tears your soul out of your body.

'No More Sick Day's Chair

Because of my childhood experience I find it very difficult to share, there was no-one to tell growing up, so I just shoved it down to the deepest recesses of my stomach.

'Confused' Chair

From starting out in the Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre over twenty years ago, it has been a long, rough, tough road. A lot of tears, anger, feelings, hopeless and worthless doubt, regrets, self-hate, blaming myself, asking WHY ME??? But without my one to one counselling and being part of the groups, I would not be here today. The Kerry Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre saved my life, and this I can say with my heart.

'Hope' Chair

"The Group we formed became a very close one. The Women are so strong and loving and it will be difficult to imagine life without that bond"

'Butterfly' Chair



"THROUGH THE CHAIR"

Survivors tell their story through their chair