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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

**Citation by Professor Áine Hyland at the Conferring of an Honorary Doctorate by UCC on Don O'Leary.**

**13th November 2021**

Don O'Leary was reared in Ballyphehane in Cork City, the eldest of 11 children. He has lived all his adult life in Fairhill on the north side of the city and has committed his life to helping the people of the northside – initially as a Cork city councillor, then as a youth worker and for the past fifteen years as Director of the Cork Life Centre.

Cork Life Centre is a voluntary provider of education for children outside the mainstream school system. Under Don O'Leary's leadership since 2006, it has developed a reputation as a unique, child-centred, developmentally focused model of education. Staffed largely by volunteers, the Life Centre is an extraordinary place where young people, out of formal education for complex, personal reasons, have been supported to develop, to learn and to thrive as individuals. They are made to feel safe and respected, made to feel they belong. Through a model that includes formal state exams but with a focus on holistic development and supports that know no limits, the Cork Life Centre has built an outstanding reputation as a unique and special place, where young people have fun, develop their talents and belong in ways they never thought possible. A word commonly used by the young people to describe the centre is "family" – the centre and its staff and learners are their positive and supportive family.

The Cork Life Centre was set up by the Christian Brothers in the year 2000. It was one of three such centres in Ireland. Its founder and first Director was Brother Gary O'Shea (who sadly died earlier this year) and the centre's ethos is based on three key ideas:

1. A philosophy of ignorance: one should never presumes to know what is best for any individual. That decision should be made by the person themself.
2. Attentive listening: The person's voice is the most important in their own development.
3. Respectful intervention: intervention must respect the individual and their consent and understanding is central.

In the fifteen years since Don became Director, the Cork Life Centre has performed miracles in the lives of hundreds of young people – boys and girls who had been rejected **by** or who **had** rejected mainstream schools for a variety of reasons. Some were natural rebels and could not conform; others suffered from school phobia; some had mental health issues and could not cope with mainstream school; others had special educational needs or had emotional or behavioural issues. Don was not concerned about the past or the why – he saw the potential in every young person and was determined to help them to achieve.

Don is a person who has shown that obstacles in life are there to be overcome. He is a shining example of someone who created his own opportunities. Like many of his generation he did not have the opportunity to avail of further or higher education when he left school. He turned what might have been a very negative experience – three years in Portlaoise Jail as a Republication prisoner in the 1980s – into an opportunity, and he embraced the learning opportunities which were available to him there. On his release, he enrolled in UCC and graduated a few years later with a degree in Youth and Community work. His firsthand experience as a prisoner brought home to him the issues and challenges faced by many of his fellow prisoners before, during and after their time in prison. Like many of them he initially had difficulty finding employment, but after he graduated from UCC, he got a job in the Cork Youth Encounter Project – St. Kevin's – and that got him thinking about how he could help young people who had been failed by the mainstream education system.

At times, Don's intervention and support for young people has literally saved lives. He is a passionate advocate for young people, their right to education and to equal treatment. Under his leadership, Cork Life Centre has forged links with a range of partners and professionals, including many colleagues in UCC with whom he has collaborated and continues to collaborate. He also has supporters and collaborators at national and international level. He has supported young people to present (as self-advocates) at the United Nations, at the European Union in Brussels and at multiple national events, including with law and policy makers in the Oireachtas as part of the campaign to seek formal recognition for the Centre and alternative education providers like it. It was very encouraging to read this week that research carried out by the UNESCO Child and Family Centre in NUIG showed that the success of centres such as the Cork Life Centre in terms of their learners' achievements and progression is comparable to that of students in mainstream schools. This is no surprise to us in UCC as many of the

Life Centre's learners have progressed and successfully completed degree courses in UCC. Some of them have returned as volunteers to the Cork Life Cnetre to help out and support the next generations of learners.

Don has been generous in sharing his experience and vision to help others to understand the vulnerabilities many children face and the transformative impact that education can have, where it meets their needs. As a member of the Board of Management of Oberstown Children Detention Campus between 2017 and 2021, Don was a tireless advocate for better quality care for children in detention, including through improved education and post placement care. While on the Board, he participated actively in both the Strategy Committee and the Young People Committee which facilitated the Board to meet young people and to hear directly about their experiences of detention.

Don is a person of exceptional integrity, a person with strong faith in young people, and a determination to ensure that their needs are met. He lives the values of children's rights advocacy, prioritising empathy, respect and decency in how children are accepted at face value regardless. He is hugely well regarded as a trail blazer in education and in working with young people. His is the 'go to' voice of children's rights in action, and Cork Life Centre the 'go to' organisation for participative youth advocacy. He is one of Cork's **good citizens,** an influencer, advocate and educator of and for our young people. The Children's Rights Alliance described him as "a passionate advocate for children's rights and the embodiment of a child-centred educationalist".

The award of this honorary doctorate to Don O'Leary, UCC is also an acknowledgement of the work of the Cork Life Centre – including its Deputy Director Rachel, "The Team" i.e. the many workers and volunteers who have supported the Centre since its inception and the learners themselves. It is also an acknowledgement of the generosity of the many donors and supporters who have provided financial and other assistance over the years, especially Tom and the late Marie Cavanagh of Tomar Trust and Leslie and Carmel Buckley. And of course it is also an acknowledgement of Don's family, particularly his wife Betty and his children Don and Eilis. I am delighted that they are here with us today together with his grandchildren and some friends and extended family. It is an honour and a privilege for me to present Don O'Leary for the award of a Doctorate in Education.