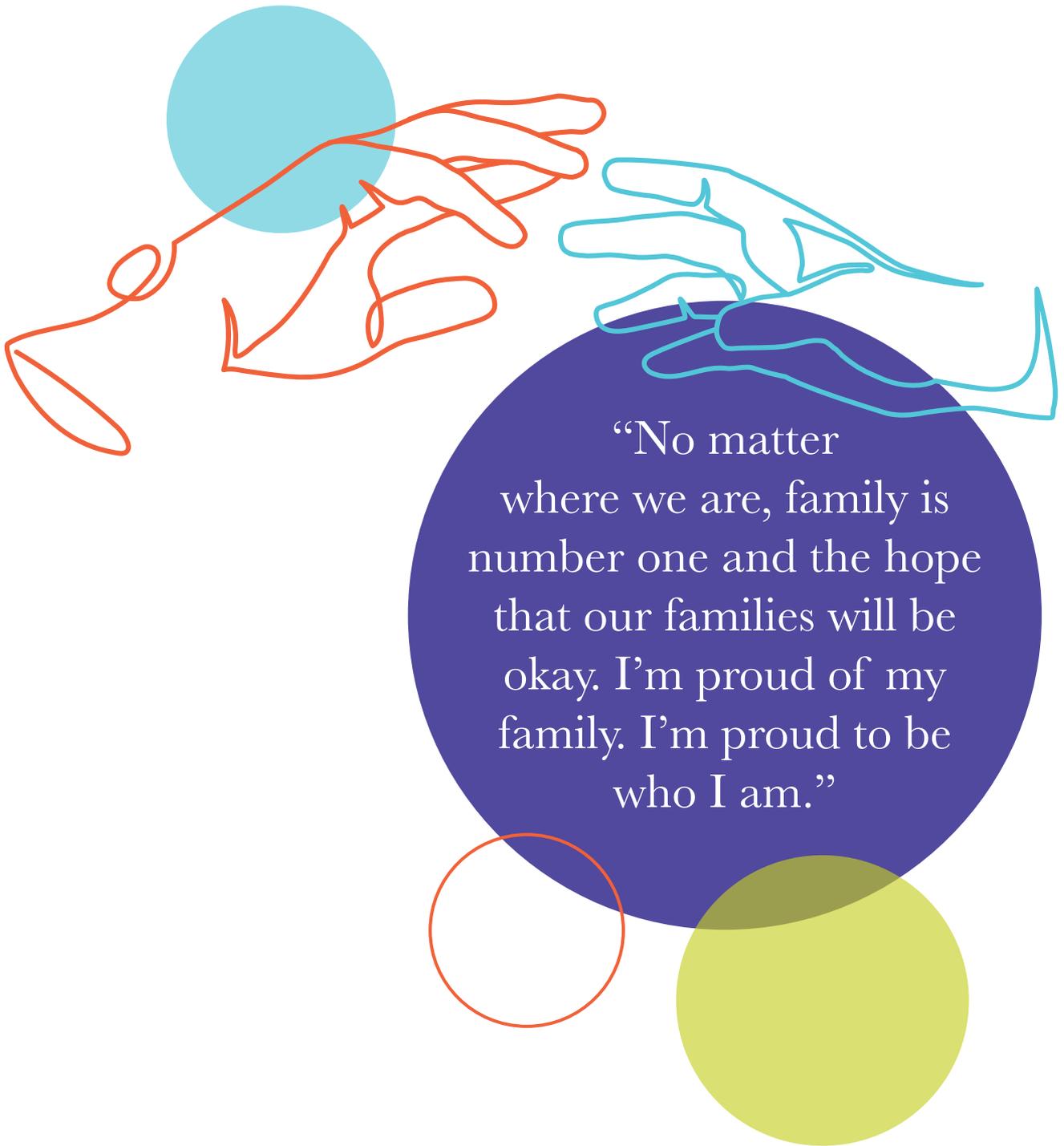


*“We keep going
for each other”:*
Family stories of
Travellers through
prison times

A collective
narrative document
by Traveller men in
prison and Traveller
women as family
members

Documented by
Siobhán Madden



“No matter where we are, family is number one and the hope that our families will be okay. I’m proud of my family. I’m proud to be who I am.”

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Jessica Reid for designing the document.

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October, 2021

About Us

The authors

The authors are twenty-eight Traveller men in Castlerea Prison and three Traveller women with experience of a family member in prison who contributed their stories as part of a collective narrative document project.

The Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) aims to embed changes in policy and practice that have a positive impact on Travellers in prison, their families and communities. The following five key action areas have been identified:

- To build a knowledge base about Travellers in prison
- To expand and improve access to services for Travellers
- To strengthen supports for families of Travellers in prison and post-release, using a multi-agency approach
- To mainstream a peer-support model to reinforce self-advocacy and create a supportive environment for Travellers to self-identify in prison
- Documenting and sharing the learning from the work

Galway Traveller Movement's (GTM's) work is rooted in an understanding of and respect for the distinct culture and ethnic identity of the Traveller community.

Our Vision

Full equality, social justice and human rights realised for members of the Traveller community, and meaningful participation of Travellers in social, economic, political and cultural life.

Mission

To challenge discrimination and racism experienced by the Traveller community in Galway city and county; to challenge the status quo and to empower members of the Traveller community to take action to realise Traveller rights.

Dr Siobhán Madden is a community educator, co-researcher and social justice activist based in Galway. As a narrative practitioner, she works collaboratively with the stories of people's lives to open up alternative knowledge for transformative action. She has a background in critical psychology and a PhD in Adult and Community Education from Maynooth University.

Dear Reader or Listener



When you open these pages, you may meet the unexpected.

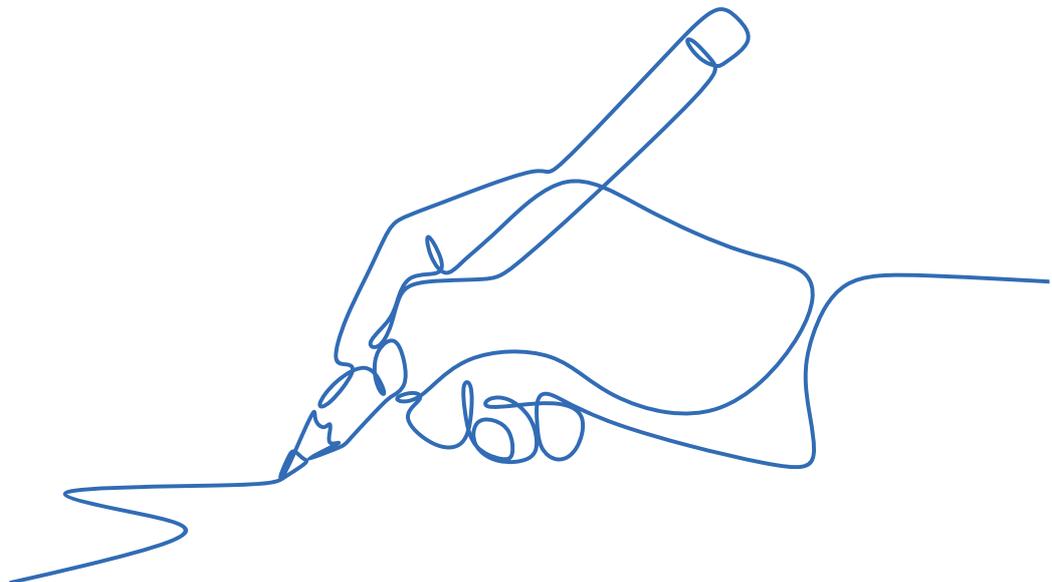
You will meet stories.

Through the stories, you will meet the people who told the stories. They are Traveller men in prison and Traveller women as family members.

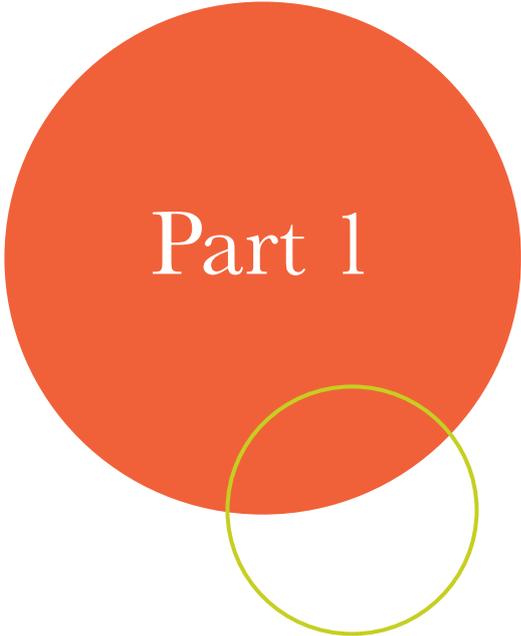
The following reflection questions¹ may support you in linking with the lives of the story-tellers:

1. What captured your attention as you read or listened? What are the particular words, phrases?
2. What did these expressions suggest to you about what was important to the person or people who spoke them?
3. How did this strike a chord with your own life experience?
4. Where has listening and responding to the story moved you to?

SM



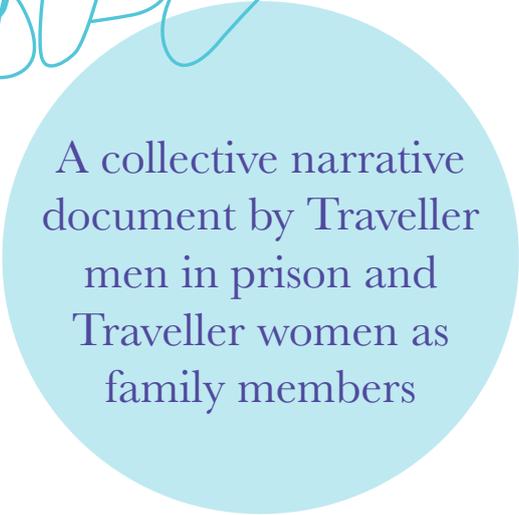
¹ These questions are adapted from White (2007)



Part 1

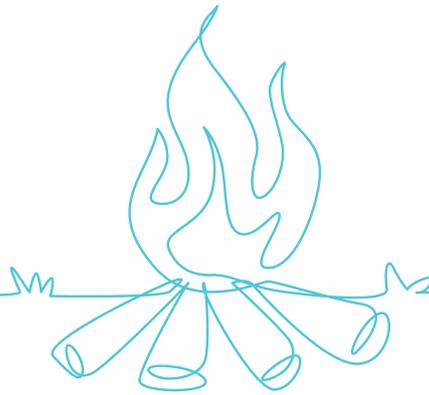


*“We keep going
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A collective narrative
document by Traveller
men in prison and
Traveller women as
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Introduction



In the evening times, when my mother's work was done, she might have a few women over. They'd sit at the camp fire and talk. I'd be one of the nosey ones. I'd sit beside her. That's why I learnt so much! I learnt about the culture. Then I remember the women talking about times changing. Some Travellers were taking houses and moving into towns. Things won't be the same, the women said. Some dreamed of getting a house. Others wanted to stay in the open fresh air. They spoke of wanting their children to get an education so they wouldn't need other people to do their reading and writing. For all the women talking around the fire, their dream was for their children to have a better life.

We are members of the Traveller community whose family lives have been affected by prison. We are mothers, fathers, partners, sons, daughters, sisters and brothers. This is a story from Pavees.

In this document, we share with you some of our knowledge and skills from our journeys in life. Chapter 1 is a short chapter about how we hold our family identities in our hearts. Chapter 2 is called "The system stinks!" It tells about our knowledge of racism and discrimination, grief and family separation

by prison. Chapter 3 is called "Digging deep: Stories of survival". It tells about how we keep going for each other and how we are finding our own roads to walk. Our conclusion is about the importance of listening to our stories.

Our stories are about no one being better than another. We hope that they will help somebody somewhere. We hope they will help other families that are going through similar hard times. We hope that our stories will help to make a change.

Chapter 1

Holding our identities in our hearts



Everyone is different and every family is different.

Some of us grew up on the side of the road. My family moved from place to place, following the work. You're seeing more when you're travelling, meeting cousins and selling horses at fairs.

When I was small, my parents refused houses. They preferred a caravan. As the family got bigger and we got older, they thought a house would give us all our own space. I was fourteen and excited about moving! But I found the house claustrophobic. I held onto my hopes and dreams of freedom, and moved back into a caravan on the side of the road when I married. Other Travellers were camped for years in a field behind us. Finally, the council turned the field into an official halting site. On this site, we like our privacy. I feel safe to leave my front door open, pottering in and out when the weather is good. I see trees and green grass. It's not a lot, but it brings me back to the fields I remember as a young girl.

Some of us love our houses. We're still Travellers. *"Oh, you're a settled Traveller"*, some settled people say. *"There's no such thing"*, I'd say, *"that's yer own made-up word"*.

Some of us were reared in a house but kept trailers out the back. I always stayed with my brother in the trailer. You get a great sleep when it's raining and the rain is hitting the window. I'm not one of these people for sitting in one place. Every summer, I'd move out of my house to travel in the camper. The freedom of it!

No matter where we are, family is number one and the hope that our families will be okay.

I'm proud of my family. I'm proud to be who I am. When I think of the importance of family in my life, I think of family get-togethers, at weddings or in the house, laughing and joking.

Our identity and pride in being a Traveller comes from our families. It's in our hearts. It's your life blood. It would be inside you, bred into you. You look around and you see, that's your name, your people, your pride.

Chapter 2

The system stinks!

Racism is a knock to our hopes and dreams

We've had a lot of racism in our times. When you're a Traveller, you're pushed away from things.

Pushed away from where you want to live

“Growing up on the side of the road, my family often got moved on by the guards or out of a fear of social workers. I remember my mother saying, “*Come in off the road, the Cruelty Man will take you*”.

“Some get low and depressed because of where we're made live. For some, any house can be like an anchor. You want to pump up the wheels and move on but there are no wheels. You're too confined. It's like a jail.

“Some feel closed in in terraced houses. There could be conflicts with other families. People in the estate may not want you. You wonder, how are they going to look at me today? You know you're not safe. Some pretend they're not Travellers just to fit in.

Pushed away from education

It was hard when settled people told their children not to go around with us Traveller children. It was hard being called names at school. A lot of us lost on learning because the time wasn't put into us in school.

I was ignored by teachers, left messing with my pens at the table. I was let away without doing homework. I was ashamed then because I couldn't read before the class. I wasn't able because I wasn't getting any help. I was very down in myself. I went through it when I was only a young lad.

I got a colouring book when the teacher was giving Geography and French books to the other kids. I thought I was great. When I look back now, it really hurts. I wasn't able to read the signs when I learnt to drive. I didn't know the history of my own country.

Pushed away from jobs

We won't get a job easy as Travellers.

Every time I went for a job interview, my father would say, “*What name did you give?*” I was married to a settled man at the time, but I always used my own name because I'm very

proud of my name. My father would put his hand to his forehead. *“Oh God help us”*, he’d say, *“She’s not going to get that job now - she gave the name”*.

I tried a lot to get a job labouring. I can’t with my surname. You’re depressed every day, waiting on the dole, feeling like shit because you can’t provide for your family. You have to think about some way to make a living. That’s why nearly every Traveller is self-employed.

Some of us see criminality as the only option – drugs, burglaries, stealing. Obviously, we would prefer to be doing something above the table.

Pushed away from society

You might get dressed up and go out into a bar and be told, *“I’m not serving you”*, or just, *“Get out!”* Behind you, you know they’re all watching. It’s humiliating. It’s mortifying. It’s as if you’ve got two heads. You might be out with settled friends, and singled out and asked to leave. It’s not good for young fellows and young ones from the Traveller community growing up in Ireland today.

Racism makes you very low

Racism makes you not fit in from a young age. Travellers don’t feel safe in Ireland today. We don’t feel equal.

When people keep bringing you down, giving you knocks, it can make you feel very low. They say, *“You’re a knacker, you’re a tinker, you’re not good enough, go away”*. You might think, what am I doing this course for? I’m never going to be accepted. It can do great damage to your hopes and dreams for the future.

Anger as a response

When these knocks become a regular occurrence, many of us have expressed our upset and anger. Our anger is a response to being treated unfairly and with disrespect, and a way of holding on to our pride.

I got put out of school at fourteen for arguing with teachers and kids. When I went back, a teacher said to me, *“You got threw out of school and like a dog got dragged back”*. He was being racist to me in my mind. I got really angry, hit him with a chair, and got expelled. If I had my way back now, I would have stuck with school. If you fall out of school as a young person, what have you to do? The low you can feel.

When you regularly see your settled friends – maybe your best friends - let into a pub or nightclub and you’re refused, that causes anger and upset. You might break a glass or shout at the bouncer. Guards get called. They might arrest you and throw you into a cell. You get angry with society then, and your dreams and hopes for the future get lost.

Grief at the loss of family

Many of us have lost family members who gave our lives meaning, purpose and guidance.

I’ve lost three brothers, and life is never going to be the same for us again. But I wouldn’t change the brothers I lost for the world, or the time I spent with each one of them. I wouldn’t change the things I did for them and the laughter and joy they brought me.

I loved especially my mother. She always said to me, look, don’t go down a bad road son. And I never did. I never even smoked a cigarette until I lost my mother.

“Sometimes, your grief wraps you up and cuts you off. For a while, my grief for my father made me forget the grief of my children.”

“When I was a teenager, I lost four people in the space of three years: my aunt, my father, my uncle and then my grandfather. My grandfather understood me. I was always with him and never without him. There was no road too long for us. One day, he was gone. My whole family were wrapped in grief. It was up to me to deal with it in my own way, saying to everybody, “I’m fine”. When you get fed up, you’re thinking, how am I going to push it behind me? Bringing the dogs for a walk, I had that much going on in my head I’d be thinking, will I hang from a tree and let them find their own way home? Or will I go back to my family?”

In prison in your head

Pride can get you to hold it all in

Discrimination and grief, depression and suicide are major issues for our community.

A lot of Traveller men don’t open up. Pride can get you to hold in your pain. We’re not used to asking for help about problems, or saying to someone that we feel down today.

“You’re in prison in your head, tormented by your own thoughts, locking away tears, hurt, grief, sadness. That’s a dark state to be in. I’ve been there outside prison. I’ve been there inside prison. That is a dark, dark place.”

Drugs and alcohol: a response to the pain in life

For many of us, drink and drugs have become a way of trying to push the pain in life behind us, a way of trying to hold onto happiness.

Addiction can get you stealing for money to buy drugs, from family members or other people.”

“My addiction got me to steal for a drug dealer who didn’t give a rats about me. I didn’t rob old people, but the people I stole from might have needed that money to live, to feed their kids. It wasn’t me. It was my addiction.”

Addiction takes us away from what we want in life, especially by the hurt it brings to our families.

“I know my parents want the best for me. They hate to see the grey in my face, in my life. My father tells me my mother is hurting. I can feel it off him that he is hurting too. I can sense the pain in his voice, how his face looks at the ground.”

“The panic attacks I’d be feeling when my brother would go missing for a few days and we didn’t know if he was alive or dead.”

Addiction takes us away from our preferred ways of living, and lets moodiness and anger take over. It might have us shouting and roaring.

“For some of us, addiction has brought violence, including violence against women. The moment my son goes near the drink and the drugs, I’m guaranteed violence.”

Addiction brings judgements: oh look at your wan, look at him. They’re very wild now. They’re drug addicts, junkies, that horrible name.”

“The hard thing and the sad thing about addiction in our lives is no place to turn to. When the addiction was on top of my brother, it wasn’t just him that was lost. We were lost”

“and desperate as a family. There were times we got him into a psychiatric unit, but he’d be let away again onto the street. The times he was thrown into prison, he’d be put out again to find his own way.”

“Addiction has brought overdoses into many of our lives. My father always said he knew in his heart and his soul he’d get that knock on the door that told him my brother was dead. And our lives have never been the same since.”

“Addiction can tighten its hold when there’s nobody to put a hand out and say, “I’m reaching out for you. I’m here for you”.”

Effects of Prison on our Lives

Keeping safe can bring dilemmas of the heart

“Often, when people think of prison, they might think, oh they’re criminals, put into prison to keep society safe. But my family was forced into a terrible dilemma: we saw prison as the only place left to keep our beloved brother safe. Distraught as we were that he was locked up, we could breathe saying, we’ll have him alive for Christmas.”

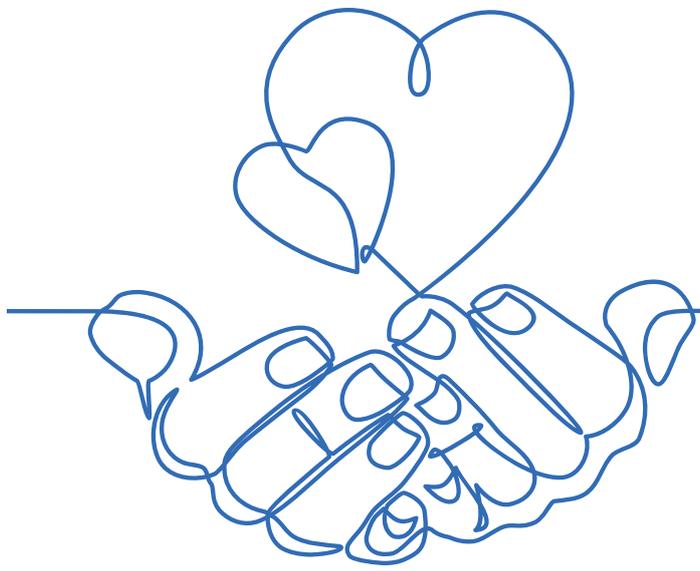
For some of us, a partner or son in prison meant we were safe from the fear and violence their words and actions brought into our lives. For years, my heart for my son got in the way of calling the guards. But every woman deserves a life of peace in her own home.”

Prison rips our lives apart

When the cell door closes with a big bang, it rips your life apart. Outside the prison, partners, children and parents are worried and stressed out. They are doing the sentence too.

Some of us don’t tell our children their father is in prison, especially if the sentence is short or the child very young. We worry about what supports are there if children are told. We worry they might be bullied if they talk about it in school. We don’t want our children burdened with worry, with fear or with shame.

I ask my teenage son on the phone, “*What are you at out there?*” But he’s not doing much talking about himself. He asks about me, “*What are you doing in there?*” I worry that thinking about me in prison is getting in the way of him having his own thoughts.”



Addiction can tighten its hold when there’s nobody to put out a hand and say, “I’m reaching out for you. I’m here for you.”

With a six-minute phone-call a day, you won't get a lot of talk in. It's hard for families that only get three phone-calls a week. It's hard especially when there are children.

“My son makes the phone-call from prison in the morning. By evening I'm sitting worrying, thinking is he alright? I worry until that next phone-call: *“Mammy, everything is fine.”*”

“I go to bed in my cell at night with the fear, will I get bad news from my family in the morning? You see the cold sweat on fellas queuing for the phone. No matter what happens outside, you're locked inside. Feelings of powerlessness can come on you.”

Our demons haunt us

“In the boredom of prison, your demons haunt you. There is the guilt for why you're here. I think about the people I hurt. I am paying the price in prison but it doesn't give them back what I took.”

There is the guilt for leaving family outside, for missing funerals, weddings and births. If you have children, prison is hell with the guilt of missing their lives.

Many of us have taken drugs to try and blank the feelings. At times, some of us have gone into ourselves, sitting in our cells and not seeing anybody.

“Some put on a face of “bad boy”, “messenger”, “big man”. You might prefer to walk away from trouble, but pride, a fear of being seen as weak, a fear of being bullied can get in the way. Little things that wouldn't mean anything outside can become big in jail. You can get spooked, even when you hear the key of the door.”

Stress for families

For partners outside, prison brings stresses of having and rearing children alone. I had my baby alone without my partner beside me. Having your baby is meant to be joyful, but every day I was crying and crying. What made me more lonesome was when he rang me from jail monged out, blanking everything with drugs.”

From seven in the morning until I go to bed at night, my time is not my own. I'm cooking, nappy-changing, doing school runs, hospital appointments, shopping, multi-tasking. Some mornings my eyes are burning for sleep. I watch the money to make sure there's food on the table. I worry about the rent.”

Getting to visits with my partner every week is a big part of the stress. In sun, wind or rain, visits mean long walks and standing in queues with your children. No prams, no toys. When the toddler is clingy, or running around, I carry her on one hip and the baby on the other. You queue for the metal detector, for the dogs, for the long walk to the visiting box for your fifty-minute visit. Sometimes you only get fifteen minutes. Once it was eight. When they transferred him to Portlaoise, we were the ones tortured with two hundred miles up and back again. I go through all that to keep our family bonds alive.”

Bonding is not easy

It's not easy on a visit to bond with your partner and children at the one time, trying to speak to your partner and also spend time with your kids. Small kids run around, crashing into each other. The visiting area isn't organised for them.

“When the officer says, ‘Folks, time’s up!’ sadness kicks in. You give them a hug. You see them walking away. I put on my happy face but it’s killing me deep down. You go back into your cell. Your mind races. Is she going to be alright? Is my child going to be alright?”

Life is too short for dark holes

Many of us worry that visits make prison normal for our children.

“My little girl was only a baby when she first visited her father. She screamed and screamed, her dada, her dada, her dada. She thinks now he lives in jail.

“Sometimes during a visit I hit a rock wall when my little girl asks me when I’m coming home. ‘I’m working packing the lorries for Santa’, I say, ‘and I was bould.’”

“My first time in a prison I was eight, visiting my father. I remember 7 Up, Lucozade, Taytos and biscuits. I asked him about the tattoos on his big mad hairy arms. I knew it was called jail because my grandfather said to my mother, ‘The children now, keep an eye on them in the jail.’ I was thinking, what’s jail? Grown-ups said he was working. He was a long time working. I knew something was wrong. I didn’t ask questions because I knew half the answers. I see my little girl looking around now. I wonder what’s going through the child’s head, walking into a totally different world, through massive steel gates, a small child looking at a big officer in uniform.

We don’t want our children to go down this road. Life is too short to be spent in dark holes and places you don’t want to be.

Good intentions and the revolving door

Leaving prison can be a time full of good intentions and plans. In my cell, I have a lovely positive going home plan: get social sorted, try to get somewhere to live in a low-crime place, exercise, eat healthy food, link in with my drugs counselor, do everything to stay off drugs, see my kids.

At first, you’re all excited. But if nothing is set up for you, a lot of us have found that the moment of freedom can be a dangerous time for your plans and purposes. You can feel bulletproof with your defences down. Eventually, you go flat, looking for that lift you had when you came out. Old habits might kick in. Drug dealers might be looking for debts to be paid. You get back with the old crowd who don’t support your plans for life.

The first time my partner was in prison, I waited for him for three long years. He wrote lovey dovey letters that promised the sun and the stars. But when he got out, his old friends were the ones in his ear. Opinions that a woman’s job is at home – cooking, cleaning, minding children - got in his way of listening to me. Now I’m in replay, up and down to the prison and rearing more children alone.

My family were so happy when my brother was released, but we were still terrified for him. All we were saying was, what are we going to do to keep him alive? Where are we going to go? He was only thrown in for a few weeks, and he’d get out with nowhere else to answer to. Prison wasn’t the answer. A few weeks after his last release, he died from an overdose.

Most of us are cycled back into prison again and again. For families, it can make the bond lessen when you see no light at the end of the tunnel. It can make families feel that they have failed. The revolving door makes it harder to imagine and hope for another life.

We are not bad people in prison. We are human beings who have made mistakes. But maybe we wouldn't make those mistakes if we got the respect and the help when we were younger. If society was alright to us, maybe we wouldn't be here.

What does it say about Ireland?

What does it say about Ireland that it allows so much pain of racism and inequality into the lives of the Traveller people?

What does it say about Ireland when you go to the courthouse and you're looking at a young one or a young fellow getting sentenced, with their heads down and in another world because of addictions, you know they're suffering somewhere, but they're just thrown into prison?

What does it say about Ireland when so many people and their families are lonely and in despair, lost with nowhere to turn?

What does it say about Ireland, when your family sees prison as the only safe place to keep your brother or sister alive for another few weeks?

What does it say about Ireland that it gets families thinking they're the ones who have failed?

What does it say about Ireland when your heart is breaking with the knowledge that so many other young people and their families are suffering out there because they haven't got the chance in Ireland?

It says that the system stinks! It's not doing its job to keep people safe and equal.

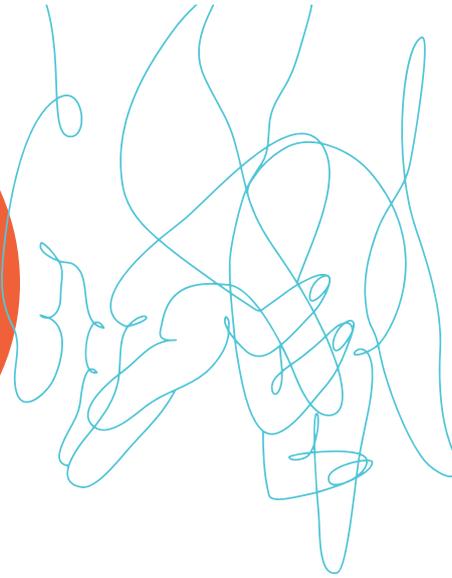
It says that it's time for change, so that no other family has to suffer the way our families have suffered.



We are not bad people in prison. We are human beings who have made mistakes. But maybe we wouldn't make those mistakes if we got the respect and the help when we were younger.

Chapter 3

Digging deep: stories of survival



Our grandparents' stories

One of us told this story he got from his grandmother. I asked her once if she remembered any talk of the famine from her parents and grandparents. She said, Travellers were always in the famine. It's just that we knew how to survive. The country people were that long settled in their ways that when the spuds didn't grow, they didn't know how to keep living. We were nomads. When we were starving of the hunger, we'd move on. We knew where there was a waterhole. We knew how to find food. We were always in the famine, I remember the old woman saying to me. We had to survive.

We learnt many stories of surviving hard times. My grandmother lost her husband at a young age and seen a lot of her children die before her. But she said she had to keep going for the rest of them. My father and mother said the same thing, long after my brother died in childhood, then two more brothers as young adults. I too have learnt these strengths because I'm the eldest of so many. I keep going for the rest of them.

Stories from our grandparents, our parents, aunts and uncles helped us to understand that there is racism in Ireland against Travellers.

When we were called "knacker" in school and asked why, our grandparents told us stories to explain what we are about and how we are different.

We have our own stories. It's a mad, mad world we're living in. You have to dig deep, to hold your head up and not go down. These are some of our stories of how we keep going for each other through prison times.

Keeping family bonds strong

Keeping family bonds connects us with hope

Keeping family bonds can help us to stay connected with our hopes for the future.

Hope is a big thing to family members. I go through the stress of going to visit my partner in jail for the love that's still there, the hope for him to get out soon, and for my life to get back on track. I go for my children. I find notes my daughter leaves around the house: I love my daddy. I can't wait to see my daddy. I hope that my daddy gets out soon.

Hope is a big thing when you're in prison. Keeping in contact with family, hearing about people asking for you, having someone to go home to, knowing love is still standing strong. It's your family who keeps you going in these places.

Making visits and phone-calls precious

Visits are precious for showing our love and care. On a visit, you can hug and kiss.

“One of the ways I show my family that their connection with me is strong is this: when the officers are saying, *“Finish up now folks!”* I make sure that I do not move. I keep speaking or just messing with the children. I let my family walk away from me first. When they get to the door, I hear, *“I love you Daddy”*. I hear my partner saying she loves me too. I won’t leave that visiting box for no one until they are gone.

Holding family bonds in a six minute phone-call takes special care.

“A six minute phone-call is not a lot of life. But it’s a big thing to me, knowing that my partner will pick up the phone, knowing that she’s okay and the kids are okay. The worry we feel for each other shows that we are keeping the bonds of love strong in our hearts.

“In those six minutes, I make sure I talk to all my children. They want to hear the sound of their daddy’s voice. I let each child know that I’m thinking about them and that I love them.

“Some of us prepare for our phone-calls to make the conversation more enjoyable. I watch things I’m completely not interested in so I’m able to talk to my children about what they like. I’m not a great football lover, but my young fellow loves football. I check the scores, who scored a goal, who’s the best player. For my daughter, I’ll watch Exposé or check the entertainment news so I can talk about, say, Justin Bieber. It’s for them to know that I’m still part of their life outside. When you’re able to have a normal conversation, you’re reassuring them that you’re okay.

Keeping the heart up with laughter

One of the ways we keep the heart up for each other is through fun and laughter.

I try to be joyful on the phone for my children, to put in a laugh and joke. It can help them to be happy for the rest of the evening. When someone laughs, that’s a good phone-call and it puts you in a good out mood.

When the stress of parenting my children alone comes on me, I try not to let it take over my body. I’ll walk outside for two minutes, light an E-cigarette and take drag after drag. I tell myself that they’re just children and that they’re going through it as much as me. Then I’ll go back to have fun with them. There’s a game we enjoy called Riddles!

Some days, when I ring my partner from prison, she’ll tell me, *“I’m not having the best of a day”*. I’d say, *“Is there anything I can say or do?”* I might say something funny to make her laugh.

Guided by the dead people belonging to us

Keeping the bonds with the dead people belonging to us can help some of us to keep going.

Many of us believe that if you are upset, talking to the dead people belonging to you would help because they will listen to you and guide you. My grandmother believed that and I believe it too.

I often remembers the words of my dead father during times of struggle. When the bad days try to stick me to the bed with dark thoughts, I remember his voice saying, *“Keep carrying on. It won’t last forever”*.

“You can see yourself differently when you see yourself through the eyes of someone who loved you. If my mother was alive now, she’d be upset that I’m in jail. She’d say, “Look son, you’ve learnt your lesson now. Try not to go down that road again.”

“If my grandfather was alive now, he’d be angry that I’m here in prison because he understood me and loved everything about me. When my oul fella was in prison, my grandfather showed me what to do and what not to do. I’d walk the dogs for him, cut the timber, split logs and clean his car all over - he loved the silver beading. When he passed away, I got a portrait of him tattooed on my chest. It came out beautiful. My mother and my aunty were happy because they knew what it meant to me. I put him right on top of my heart where he couldn’t get any closer. That bond with him is unbreakable.

Skills of coping with prison life

Trying not to do prison rough, trying not to do it hard, is important for our own mental health and for our families’ mental health. Some of our skills of coping with prison life are: avoiding trouble, having a routine, building friendships, music and song, painting, asking for help, and going to the prison school.

Skills of avoiding trouble

Many of us have learnt skills of keeping our heads down and avoiding trouble. You take a deep breath, bite your tongue, take a step back, and walk away. It can be heart-breaking to keep listening to abuse. You bite your tongue that many times you think you’ll have no tongue left. But you do it to survive. You are vulnerable if you’re on your own.

Some of us learned these skills from our families. When other children fought with us in school, my parents encouraged us in the understanding, I’m not going to bring myself down to your level. I’m going to walk away from it.

My grandfather taught me how to assess a situation. If he seen two people arguing, he’d say, stand back there a minute, there’s something going on, leave it between them. He’d get you by the hand and walk you the other way. I learnt a lot very quickly. I was very old-fashioned growing up. I could visualise a situation in seconds and know what was happening. It’s like snooker. You have to assess the outcome within a split second and know your next move. The eye is a good judge.

Having a routine

Many of us have found that getting into a routine helps us to cope and to move away from dossing, drugs or acting the bollix. It helps to occupy the mind and to take things day by day.

My routine is school in the morning, the gym at two o’clock and into the yard at half past five - the same routine nearly every-day like clockwork.

Building up friendships

Building close friendships with other prisoners is important when you’re missing family. Knowing you have friends also helps to reassure the family. You try to get on with everybody but you’d have your certain few.

It’s priceless to have a mate to talk to on days you’re not feeling the best, or days you’re dealing with the emotions after a visit. I can call them and they’ll do a few laps with me in the yard. They might be Travellers or settled but I’d back them up and they’d do the same for me.

The best thing about being a Traveller in Castlereagh Prison is that we are a large minority. In another prison, you're a "knacker". Here, you hear the bit of Cant. You recognise your own kind. You speak with that person. You feel relaxed and safe with people who know the culture.

Music and song can help to keep the head ticking over

In our culture, music and song are important for relaxing.

“We had a sing-song for Traveller Pride. It done my heart good. When I seen other fellas going up singing, I conquered the voice in my head that said, “Don't make an eejit of yourself”. I went up and sang a song. It was like a buzz without drink or drugs, a natural high. The day let us know that Travellers were not forgotten. It reminded me of ‘Walk the Line’. *I keep a close watch on this heart of mine, I keep my eyes wide open all the time, I keep the ends out for the tie that binds, because you're mine, I walk the line.*”

“Some of us find music helps to keep the head ticking over. You're in a different world, a different mood, when you listen to different kinds of music. A bit of reggae, a bit of country and western. If I'm in a good mood, I get into the music by listening to the beat. The beat makes me feel like dancing! On other days, the words have meaning. One day, I was listening to songs I heard often before. Suddenly, on that day, the words came to life.”

For some, music and song-writing is a way of releasing the demons in your head.

Painting is a breath of fresh air

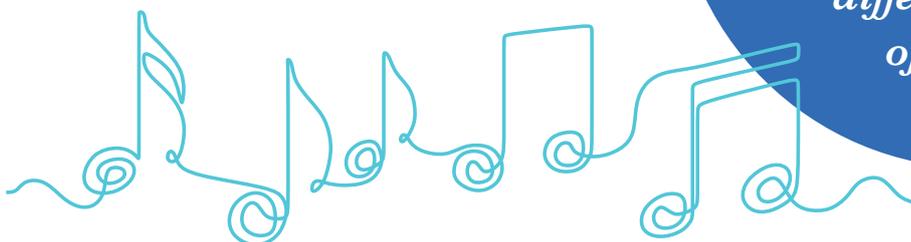
One person tells of how his painting is his cure when a depression comes over him. When I start back painting, it's a breath of fresh air. It brings the good out of me. I turn something bad into something good.

I first picked up a brush at six years old, coming into the last days of summer. My father and uncles were building a wagon for the childer, the *goblyas*. Then they started painting it. I seen all these amazing colours! I asked my step-uncle if I could do it. I took it up from there.

Painting brings me back to my childhood. I'm doing it from my tribe that I belong to. Grapes from the holy altar, roses, horses. Any caravan you'll ever see, you'll always see a horseshoe. I can paint our Celtic art as well. I learnt it from my uncles.

When I paint, I put my own twist, my own style into it. Painting caravans is like doing a portrait. No two caravans when painted look the same. I paint with a passion. I put one hundred per cent in. When I'm painting, I'm a master of my own fate.

Some of us find music helps to keep the head ticking over. You're in a different world, a different mood, when you listen to different kinds of music.



Asking for help

Some of us have learned to ask for help when we feel down. It means learning to identify who you can trust to respect you as a person and who is genuinely there to help. Some will help. Some won't. You find out by being willing to drop your guard and give people a chance. Then you can make a judgement if you can trust them.

When I went into prison, the fear of losing my partner and children was like a car sat on me, pressing down on my chest. I was stuck and couldn't breathe. Drugs and self-harming didn't help.

I reached out for help. I did that for my partner. I spoke to my medic and he linked me with an addiction counsellor. I laid it all on the table to her and the weight lifted off my chest. Now I go to her every second week. She supports me to stay connected with all I have to live for – my partner and my children.

Saying "I feel down" is not a weakness. It doesn't hurt your pride or your family. It gives me more honour and strength to be there for my children. It's simple to be a father, but being a parent is something different.

If my son sees me asking for help, he might start from a younger age. I always speak to my children in a way that lets them know that it's okay to talk about things.

When I was taking drugs outside, there was many a time part of me was crying out for somebody to listen. The last time I was out, my drug counsellor called out of the blue and filled me with pure positivity. I picked three reasons why I take drugs: the company, to hear stories, and to feel wanted. When she read it back to me, when I saw it on paper, it was like it wasn't going around my head anymore.

Going to the prison school helps to occupy the mind

Having a good owl chat

In the prison school, you can have a good owl chat. You're not just a number. Teachers sit down with you and listen to what you have to say. Out in the yard, it's often the same old conversations about prison. In the classroom, you can have different conversations. The more people you talk to, the more stories you hear about different life experiences. That's how some of us educated ourselves growing up, getting to know different people when we were travelling around.

Keeping options open

We were reared to always look for other opportunities. Travellers survived by being able to put their hand to anything: horses, dogs, collecting scrap, sewing, blacksmithing, fortune telling, making paper flowers, wagons, making and mending buckets, cooking, hunting, roofing, building, fixing engines, generators, selling at markets.

Many of us got involved in the prison school by keeping our minds open to other options: Music, Cooking, Art, Computers, Woodwork, Parenting Classes, Soft Skills, learning to read and write, and more.

I'm trying to get a Safe Pass to be able to do something else when I get out.

Since I've come to jail, I'm a step ahead in my learning. Before, I had to get someone to read my letters. Now I can read the headlines of a newspaper. When you read something, it sticks in your head for longer.

We want to be able to give our children opportunities we didn't have in life. They will be full blown Travellers but educated Travellers.

“Some of us continued our education outside prison. I did some Level 4 modules in a place probation ran: Computers, English, Art, Cooking, Food Nutrition, Childcare. I put Childcare above everything else because I wanted to be a better father to my children. I could identify things like going down to their eye level and the importance of the sense of touch.

Showing your talent

“You can show some of your talent in the school. Doing something you like relaxes you and takes your mind away from prison.

I am making two lanterns out of wood. For me, woodwork and art are better than all the psychiatry going.

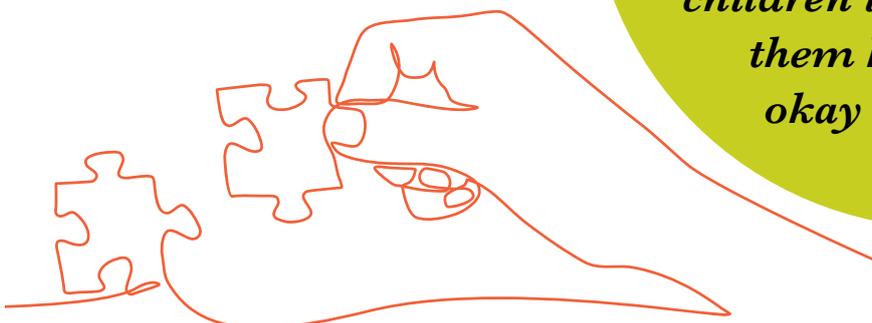
“Most of us don't remember the times when Travellers made buckets. But we know the stories. Every Traveller making a bucket would leave their own mark on that bucket. For me, the importance of that mark is they were leaving their own stamp on life.

Listening to other prisoners

Recognition of our knowledge and skills from life experience is important in the school. Prisoners will often listen better to another prisoner. A lot of peer to peer programs are run by ourselves: Conflict Awareness, Harm Reduction, Mediation, Mentoring. I am a mentor, helping my mate to read.

Deciding to go to the prison school was not easy for some. If you have a hard man image, you might think, sure I don't need school. You might make a laugh of a “school-boy”. It was my cousin who encouraged me to go to the school. I met him going around the yard getting names to go to courses. When another prisoner explains it to you, you listen. I seen that he was doing very well. He was getting on with his time, taking on different courses, and taking time out to help you. When you see other prisoners showing respect for the school and getting involved in things, you want to get involved yourself.

It's simple to be a father, but being a parent is something different. If my son sees me asking for help, he might start from a younger age. I always speak to my children in a way that lets them know that it's okay to talk about things.



We believe education for settled people is also important because too many country people are settled in their ways. Too many feel they have the power and automatic right to look down on us.

Education for settled people

We believe education for settled people is also important because too many country people are settled in their ways. Too many feel they have the power and automatic right to look down on us. That's very wrong. In twenty years time, let the country people's children have a better understanding of Traveller culture. Let them recognise that we are Irish people too but we have a different culture. Because our culture is not going away.

Remembering our grandparents' stories

We are strong in our culture because we loved to learn from our grandparents' stories. If we are just with people our own age, we don't learn many new things about our past culture.

“Here in the prison school, I found some old photos of Travellers around a tent. I hung them on the wall of the literacy room. They make the place homely. The picture that went through me is of a woman with the grub box. Everything is in that box – her livelihood, her life. The pictures remind me of my grandparents, and of my father's and mother's time. It reminds me of who I am, and the culture I was reared in. We still love to hear the stories.

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Family members' special knowledge and skills

Not judging anyone unless I know the story

Many of us have developed skills of not judging others by our experiences of having a family member in prison.

I often saw my brother very vulnerable when he was going through a hard time, high on drugs so he could cope, maybe with guards chasing him. I said to myself, *“Never ever will I judge anyone unless I know their story”*.

When I hear people judging, it makes me sad. Often, they don't know what that person and their family may be going through. I'm not saying it's right for someone to rob. I believe that if that person got the right help going through hard times, they can change the direction of their life. Then more people, and not just their family, could see the goodness they have to offer.

”

Skills of receiving help

Sometimes, deciding to accept the help of social workers requires skills of asking questions, and allowing time to develop trust. Many Travellers have learned not to trust social workers. This might be because of hearing stories about children taken from Travellers, negative experiences of cultural difference, or associating social workers with the guards.

A social worker came to me in the hospital after I had my baby and my partner was in jail. I was shocked. I told her I thought social workers were for taking my children off me. She said, *“We're not for that.”* I questioned her: *“What are you for then?”*

”

She said, *“I’ll help you in any way I can.”*
The two social workers I met have been a great help to me. They come around only when I ring them. They don’t judge me. They don’t haunt me.

Remembering our own actions of support

As family members, it is important for us to remember our own actions of support for our loved ones. It is not us who have failed. It is the system that has failed.

“My family often felt powerless against my brother’s addiction because we hadn’t enough support. During these times we tried to keep him safe so that he would be able to do the things he wanted to do in the future. We often worried that he would self-harm when he was locked up. Some of us would go down to the garda station and beg them to get a doctor. We also supported my brother through times when he was challenging the addiction. I’d ring him to ask if he was okay. When he went into rehab, he rang me for family members to meet with counsellors. We did. It meant a lot that he rang me. It showed that he trusted me to turn up for him.

Even when sadness and despair get me thinking I didn’t do enough, I’d know deep down my family and I did everything we could. I know that’s what my brother would say. And he’d say, *“I want you to hang in there and keep going to help somebody else if you can.”*

Connecting with our strong hearts as women

Some of us speak of connecting with our own strength and independence as women, and our knowledge of what we don’t want and what we do want from life.

My heart is getting stronger after years of gathering hope and years of hopes dashed. I love my son’s soft and generous heart. He would throw his last fiver into the cup of a homeless person. His kind heart shows that he still holds onto some values that I taught him. I do not love the hard exterior, the sudden tempers and the bullyboy tactics. I know my heart is getting stronger because I am learning to put boundaries in place. I refuse to allow violence into my home. I wasn’t put on this earth to be a doormat to my kids. I am a person and a human being. When my son comes out of prison, I want to support him on the sidelines. But he was released from prison into the open so many times, without any supports, that I am nervous about my boundaries and my safety. It is one hundred percent important that there are other people to support him when he comes out.

Another woman tells about a moment when “reality hit”. When I had my baby alone by caesarean section and my partner rang me from prison high on drugs, my blood boiled and reality hit. I love my partner and want



him in my life. But I've proved I don't *need* him. I don't need any man. I've proved I can rear my children by myself. I was reared up to be independent. I could make a dinner since I was eight. I knew I didn't want a life of him looking down on me, not listening to me, on drink and drugs, in and out of jail. I knew I didn't want my children watching a life like this as normal. My little girls will never be looked down on by no man. My little boy will not live his life in and out of jail, or giving his partner a hard life.

But I knew on a prison visit, the words wouldn't get out. There was many a time I wanted to scream the house out and say what I wanted, but the words wouldn't get out to stand up to him. So I wrote to him for a week, in between sleep and feeding the baby. I wrote thirty-eight pages of what I went through the first time he was in prison and what I'm not going through again. It was the first time I stood up to him and it felt great! I gave him a choice: drugs, or me and the children. He made up his mind to pick us. I'm free to speak to him now. He knows I'm independent. We're fifty:fifty.

What used to be little things now mean big things

Sometimes I sit back and think, how am I rearing my children by myself? The help I get from my parents, brothers, sisters, in-laws is a

big relief. They might bring children to school, to dancing, to boxing. They might do the shopping when I can't go to the shop. What used to be little things now mean big things, like the nappies and baby wipes my sister buys for me every week.

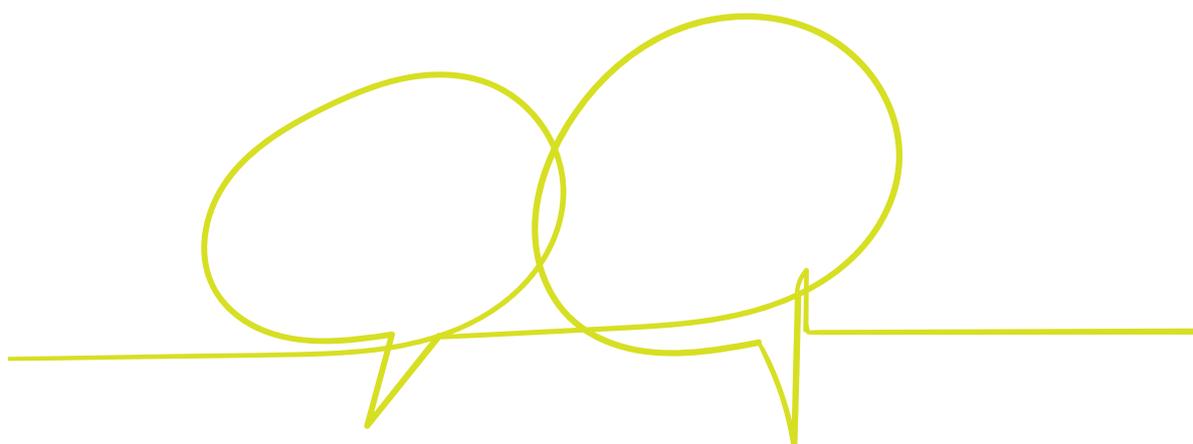
Time with people who treat you well

Spending time with people who treat you with respect helps to show that you deserve a life of your own as a woman. My current partner treats me very well. Our partnership is like a battery. He calls himself the negative while I'm the positive. I have also reconnected with a good friend. When I go out for an evening with my partner, I am learning to wipe my mind clear of worry. I think of a saying of my mother. "You worry. You die. You don't worry. You die. So what's the point in worry?" I talk to myself. You can't control what's going to happen, I tell myself. This is our time.

Taking memories back from addiction

For families who have lost loved ones to overdoses, it is very important to take their memory back from the addiction.

My family still laugh at things my brother used to say. He'd have the craic with my mother by tossing her hair. She'd be saying, stop it! He'd slag her - sure I'm fixing your hair!



My sister and my daughter remember how he'd get the ingredients for an apple tart and say to them, we'll make apple tarts together!

I remember the time he went into rehab and came out like a new penny. Probation officers were behind him, so was his girlfriend, and he wanted to go in for the child who was after being born.

I remember days, sometimes weeks, sometimes months, when my brother got the better of his addiction with no services to turn to. I'd say, how are you able to do this? He told me it was hard but he had to try. There's no more of that messing for me. He'd be straight home, cleaning and cooking. He'd lift up the baby: My girlie, Daddy's going to do this for you.

His funeral was one of the biggest the town ever had. So many Travellers showed their support for us, but all his settled friends came too. A lot of them said how they loved him. That helped us through our sadness. We loved to know that he was loved.

We have the hard-won knowledge to make a difference

Many of us believe that we have the hard-won knowledge from experience to make a difference in the lives of other people.

Many Travellers get the knowhow of getting through worry, despair and heartbreak at a very young age. Most Travellers survived many hard times by helping each other.

I was fourteen when my little brother got very sick. My parents had to be with him in the hospital every day. I left school because I wanted to take care of the others. I didn't want them moved to other relations. My

parents worried about me but were proud out of me for managing. I was proud of myself. I'm sure other people have done the same thing around the world.

Caring for my family and other people has been important to me since I was able. I believe helping others is something human beings should do. A little help goes a long way and makes life easier.

Some of us volunteer to be Samaritans in the prison. We're trained to be Listeners. I might be in someone's cell for a casual chat. All of a sudden, I'm listening. When another man knows I'm a Listener, he knows he can tell me things that will not be said back. When you know a person is going through something, you can try to see things from where they're coming from. If you can tap into that, you'll be a better person for it in yourself.

One man spoke about his hope of educating other people when he gets out that prison is no place for anyone. I hope especially to give back what I've experienced to any young lads growing up.

One woman spoke about how her love for her brother connects her with the suffering of other families. Deep in my heart, it makes me passionate for a safe house to support young people with addictions coming out of prison - a community of people with the passion and the know-how to support these young people and their families, both Travellers and settled people.

Another woman spoke of the question she often asks herself now, what is my purpose in life? As I'm going along, I'm thinking that my purpose now is to support other women. I've the life skills of it. I've went through it and endured it. I know that there is more to life.

Conclusion: Listening to our stories

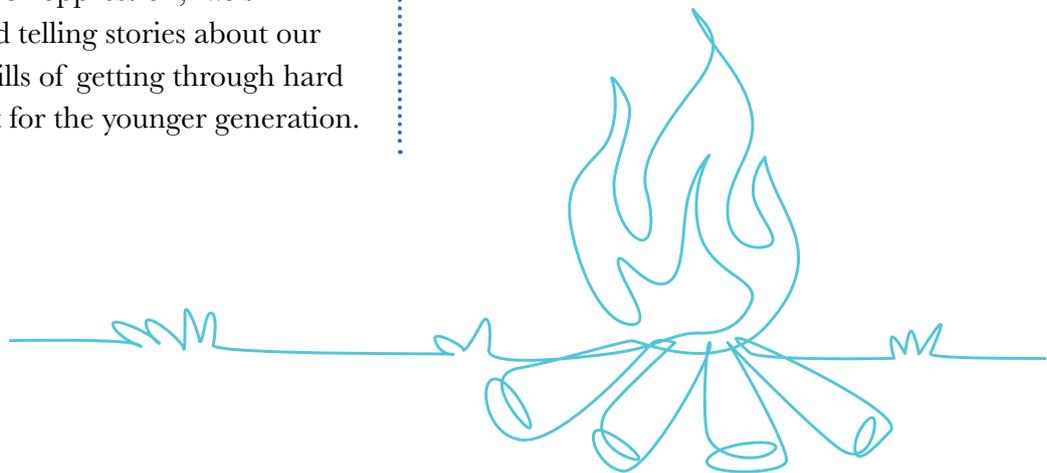
Around the fireplace is where all our stories began. A lot of people tells the story of Travellers one way. But when you're out there in that wide world you have your own stories to tell and your own road to walk.

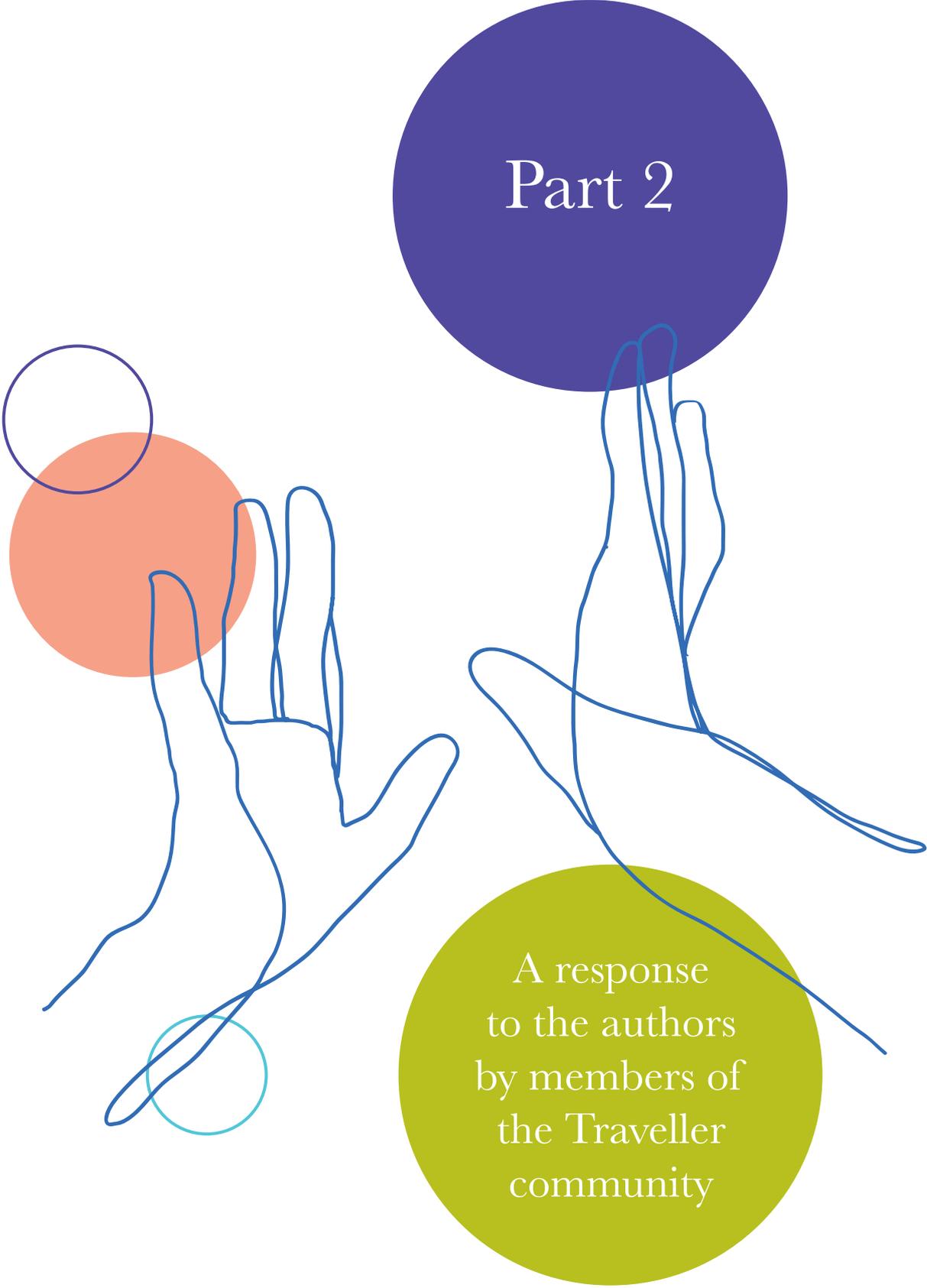
We are Travellers of the 21st century. We're the ones who have experienced it, so we know how it feels. It is impossible for a country man or a country woman to tell me my life story. The knowledge of our culture comes from our community. Every Traveller has their own particular take on it. It is important to listen to the stories of people in prison and to their families to know anything about them. There is always a history and a reason for everything.

Peer to peer information is important. Telling the stories of oppression, racism and exclusion, and telling stories about our knowledge and skills of getting through hard times is important for the younger generation.

Everyone of us has their own definition of what has to be heard, so it helps for everyone to speak up and for Travellers voices to be heard! It's about a wider point of view instead of tunnel vision blindsight.

You don't always know its importance in the moment when you're saying things. You don't always know that it can bring about change. But when it's written down and then when it's read back to you it sounds powerful. Because it's the truth.





Part 2

A response
to the authors
by members of
the Traveller
community

Dear members of the Traveller community who told your stories in the document, *“We keep going for each other”*: *Family stories through prison times*.

We are ten women and men from the Traveller community who listened to your stories over two days. We come from many different perspectives. Some of us work with Travellers’ rights organisations. Some of us are students. Some of us have personal experience of a family member in prison. One of us has been in prison ourselves. Our different experiences in life brought a lot of rich flavour to our conversation. We are all sending you this response in appreciation of your document.

Openness helps empathy to grow

We were all moved by your openness in sharing your lived experience. It showed that you have *“walked the walk and lived the life”*. Just because we are Travellers does not mean that we know everything about Travellers. One person said, *“I have respect for all who contributed to the document. You are educating me. You took time out from your lives to invest in us as a people.”*

One of us connected with your openness because of its importance in her family when her mother was in prison. My family talked everything through. Our openness supported my empathy towards my mother. It kept resentment away. Being on the same page kept our connection strong. Until I heard your stories, I had knowledge from my own perspective outside prison. I didn’t see behind the issues for other Traveller families. I was oblivious to issues inside prison like mental health. You opened my eyes to the rawness of the real human experience. Your openness has

helped my understanding and empathy for other Travellers in prison and their families to develop and grow.

We are all in this together

Your stories of your struggles with discrimination, of how it can make you feel *“not safe,”* connected with all of us. Some of us spoke about how you never know when the racist challenge will come: *“It will wind you out of the blue,”* *“It can set off a bomb inside me”*. Like many of you, we have had responses of anger, especially when it comes to our families and our name. Sometimes, these were times of *“standing my ground”*.

We stand with you in speaking out about how wrong it is that our community is being pushed to the margins of society. We know that many external things happen outside of the control of individuals and families. They often bring suffering, pain, depression, and despair. Addiction is a response to trauma and not a solution. However, addiction can often be viewed as the only coping mechanism or means of survival for individuals overwhelmed by trauma, particularly individuals with extremely limited resources and choices.

One woman found a strong connection with the phrase in your document, *“What does it say about Ireland when prison is the only safe place?”* My family also had that fear that my mother would be found dead. We also had the thought that if we could get her into prison, we could keep her alive. When I heard your story, I realised it wasn’t only my family that felt that way. All this tells me about the lack of supports out there in the system.

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One man wants you to know that, *“Your stories told my story. I didn’t feel that I belonged in society. I felt my family were the ones not succeeding in life. There was an acceptance in my family that to go to prison was part of life. Your stories showed that it wasn’t just me that experienced that. A lot of families in the Traveller community don’t have opportunities. These understandings give me a new appreciation of myself and my family. I’m as good as anyone else if I have the opportunities to put my mind to something. I can have more compassion for my family now. My family was trying to adapt to the situation we were in where there were no openings or options. Now, I see this as an issue for the whole community: we are all in this together.”*

Valuing the cultural knowledge and life-skills we learned from our families

Many of us identified with your stories of life-skills learnt from parents and grandparents. Like you, we still hold onto the stories of the old people. A lot of us were drawn to the grandmother’s story about how Travellers survived the famine. Some of us were reminded about how Travellers had to survive the recession. The story reminded us about our resilience as a community and our abilities to adapt to circumstance. It also told us how we live in a society where Travellers have to have skills of survival.

One of us told about how her family adapted to economic circumstances by moving from scrap to markets. We travelled all over Ireland setting up markets. When nomadism was taken away, we still kept the traditional routes. We stayed overnight in B+B’s. The Traveller economy was and still is very real and versatile for us. It enriched our lives as children. My granddad would get us buns and soup in a bakery. We got to see our aunts, uncles and cousins as well. We learnt a vast amount of entrepreneurial skills. Our learning wasn’t structured or forced. We learnt in an enjoyable, natural way through our family bonds. It built our confidence and self-esteem.

But society puts no value on our knowledge and skills. Your document got us talking about how wrong it is that our culture is being taken away from us. Young Travellers of today have challenges which previous generations did not have, especially through social media. One man gave the example of horses and

sulky racing: *“If anything goes up about that on social media, the comments that come under it are ridiculous. It’s hard for our young people to live their own culture and to be proud of their own culture without being seen as being different and being wrong for it”.*

Your stories, such as the story of learning from the women around the campfire, showed the importance of valuing different kinds of knowledge and different ways of learning. Phrases in your document got some of us remembering phrases our own parents and grandparents used to say:

“I often remember my father saying, the eye is a good judge. He’d say it when buying a car or a van, looking at the person selling it to see if they were genuine or not. He’d say it to me when I was arguing with someone. I’d say, Daddy, he’s making a laugh out of me. He’d say how do you know? He’d tell me to look at the man and not the people around him.”

“My mother had a great saying: if you have salt and spuds, you can get through anything.”

“My grandmother would always say, nobody knows whose shoes are cutting only the one who’s wearing them.”

Your stories put a value on our own knowledge as Travellers and our own education in life skills. Your stories remind us of the people in our lives who took the time to pass on their knowledge. Your stories strengthen our pride in our own identity that is going to bring us forward.

Holding our family bonds builds us up

Your statement that *“Family is number one”* was a huge statement for us about the importance of family and culture. As a Traveller, my family and my family name is my identity.

We could identify with the message in your document that nobody does jail as an individual. The whole family is doing jail. When we are forced to move away from our family, that weakens our resilience as a community. When services only deal with us as individuals rather than families, they do not recognise the importance of our family connections in building us up.

For all of us, your commitment to holding family bonds through difficult times shone through. Stories such as asking for advice from family members, even when they had died, showed the strength of the bond.

One of us connected with the story in the document of writing letters with hopes for the future. I loved the big long letters my mother wrote for the whole time she was inside. She expressed feelings. She wrote prayers. She wrote about what she hoped for in life when she came out. She was humorous and creative. She drew little pictures of us. She loved making canvasses with pictures of angels. We all knew we were loved by her and we still do. She was still the mammy. She helped to keep our family network strong. My elder sister and two older brothers were adults and held us all together on the outside. They supported each of us in our own aspirations. They supported me through my Leaving Cert. No matter what other people said inside or outside the community, our family came together. I have so much to be thankful for in my family because there are other kids that have no one.

Connecting with our independence, strength, hopes and pride as Traveller women

Some of us felt a strong connection as women with the women's voices in your document. We identified with your stories of the worry and pressure prison puts on women in our community, often for many years. In many Traveller families and in the wider society, the caring role is still left to women as partners, mothers, sisters, daughters. As Traveller women, we carry the double burden of sexism and racism. Going into any institution, we are always conscious of being treated with racial discrimination. Our thoughts are also with Traveller women in prison. Many are still expected to fulfil responsibilities as a mother and as a partner, often regardless of what else comes up for them. One of us asked: Who is supporting the women?

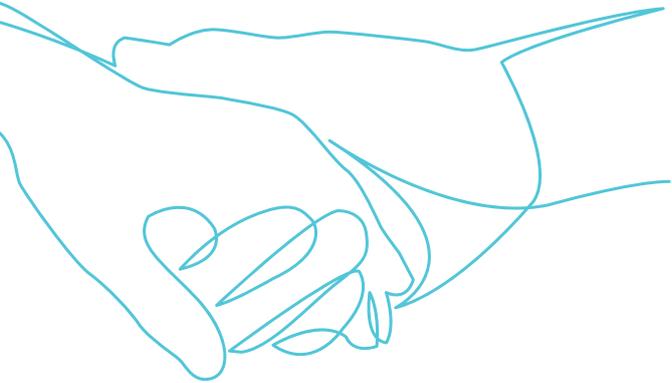
We also identified with your stories of independence and strength. Some of us remembered the strength of our own mothers. *"My mother stayed behind when my father had to go to England. She too had to be both man and woman, looking after a young family, the fire, the tents and the horses."*

Many of us draw our strength from Traveller women supporting Traveller women. Our close networks are a strength of our community. One of us spoke of Traveller women sharing transport with each other when going to the prison services. Another woman spoke of how her aunts held her mother's hand when she was in prison and then when she was out.

Hope took a hold for one of us with the words in the document, 'there is more to life'. Those words told me that this woman has some kind of resilience and skills to get through the obstacles she has. They remind me of my own hopes as a community worker that change will happen: change for the Traveller community and change for Traveller women. They connect me with my knowledge that norms can be changed. I grew up with the norm that I would get married and have a family at a young age. I changed the norms for my own children. Education is the priority and not marriage. Getting involved in a local organisation opened my eyes to women's rights.

For another one of us, the woman who didn't want to hide her Traveller identity by changing her name for a job struck a chord.

Another woman spoke of how her aunts held her mother's hand when she was in prison and then when she was out.



I know giving her name was exposing herself and making her vulnerable to racism. It showed that she trusted people to respect her identity. It showed her dignity and strength and how she valued herself as a whole person. I am also a full person. I am a Traveller, a woman, working class, a student. I am very proud of all that has shaped me.

School-going education means bravery and power

We were all interested in your talk about the importance of school-going education. Like many of you, we believe that if Travellers got more educated we are not losing our culture. We believe there will be more education about our own culture. One of us was inspired by the man who put up the pictures of Travellers on the wall of a prison classroom. It showed that the people in prison were able to take ownership and to have their rightful place within that classroom which is very powerful. We were all inspired by how you have overcome obstacles to go back to school. One person said, *“You are brave and powerful people and we need more of you”*.

A lot of us identified with the obstacles you describe in your document. We spoke about racist practices in schools in years gone by, such as the segregation of Traveller children. We spoke about the racism of today which is often hidden. On paper, our children are marked as present. But unofficial timetables mean many Traveller children finish school early at 1.00. Hidden racism can make it difficult for us to prepare our children and build their resilience. We spoke of low expectations from teachers. All this can cut deep for a child. One of us remembers that there were only a few lines in her history book

about Travellers. They were about “the poor Travellers with nowhere to live” and not *our beautiful, rich culture*. I could see the representations of my settled grandparents, but not my Traveller grandparents. I had a hunger to know more.

Some of us connected with your stories of the stigma attached to school-going education in our culture. One man said, “For myself going back as an adult, there was the danger of being called a school boy, a college boy, a soft boy by my own family. Breaking that image can be hard because you’re seen to be different. You’re different from the class that you’re in, but you’re also different from your family because you’re seen to be educating yourself now”.

Your stories of going back to education remind us that every culture changes and adapts. That’s life and that happens within every community. We have to allow space for growth within the culture for our generation, for our children and for future generations.

We have many different stories of changing and adapting to make space for school or college education.

One of us left school at thirteen and could barely read and write. When I wanted to go back to school as an adult, a lot of people told me I couldn’t do it. The Traveller came out in me then because as soon as I was told I couldn’t do it, I was determined to do it! I was encouraged by another Traveller man. He said to me, an educated Traveller is a dangerous Traveller.

One of us always loved school. I knew I wanted to go to college. My family didn’t understand it or value it because they thought it was not useful to me. I was sending out CVs and could never get a job. But my mother saw

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how hard I was studying. It spoke volumes to her about how important college was to me. She helped me to get through my six years of college by giving me the space of the bedroom in our small apartment. She slept in the kitchen on a chair.

For some of us, going back to school ourselves was a way of breaking the stigma of education for our children. My mother always said to us, the better educated I am, the better educated my kids will be. I believed that if I wanted my daughters to finish secondary school and go to third level, I had to have an education myself.

As Traveller parents, supporting our children through their education requires special skills and a lot of unseen hard work. If my children come home with no homework, it's up to me to question that to make sure they are getting their education. Celebrating achievements is also important. My father threw a party when I got my Leaving Cert!

The belief that education is power can help you to stay true to yourself in the educational

system. One person said, *“My education strengthened my pride in who I was as an Irish Traveller. I believe that education is one of the greatest weapons that Travellers will have in their life.”*

The knowledge of needing people to listen

One of us identified with the story in the document about how someone listening to him had a good impact on him. A nice empowering feeling went through me when I heard his story because I had the same experience. For me, the experience of being listened to supported my knowledge that I needed people to listen to me.

For many years, I didn't know I needed people to listen to me or to understand me. I was very frustrated, especially when I was younger. I was in a lot of pain, traumatized and very anxious. For nearly twenty years I took too much drugs and was in and out of prison.

My first experience of being listened to was in rehab doing group counselling. I was only there to get a letter for court, hoping for a shorter sentence. At first, I'd be in a world of my own. The others were all country fellows and I didn't really feel we had a connection.

One day, I took a big chance. I dropped my guard and dropped the image. I said to myself, I'll just say this to see what'll happen. If I make a show of myself, I'll never see these people again. I'd find it harder to talk about something very personal in my life to Travellers that I know.

As I spoke, I knew they were genuinely listening by their concentration and body-language. There were no smirks or rolling of eyes. I was so surprised with the feedback and understanding they gave me. I knew that it wasn't fake because they kept asking me questions about it. When I was walking home, I felt I was floating! I came to the conclusion then that my frustration was because I needed people to listen to me.

It was then I said I'm going to take this program seriously now. I can't live like that anymore. My decision was life-changing for me and my family. I'm doing something now I never thought I'd ever do. I'm going to college.

Having conversations that are real

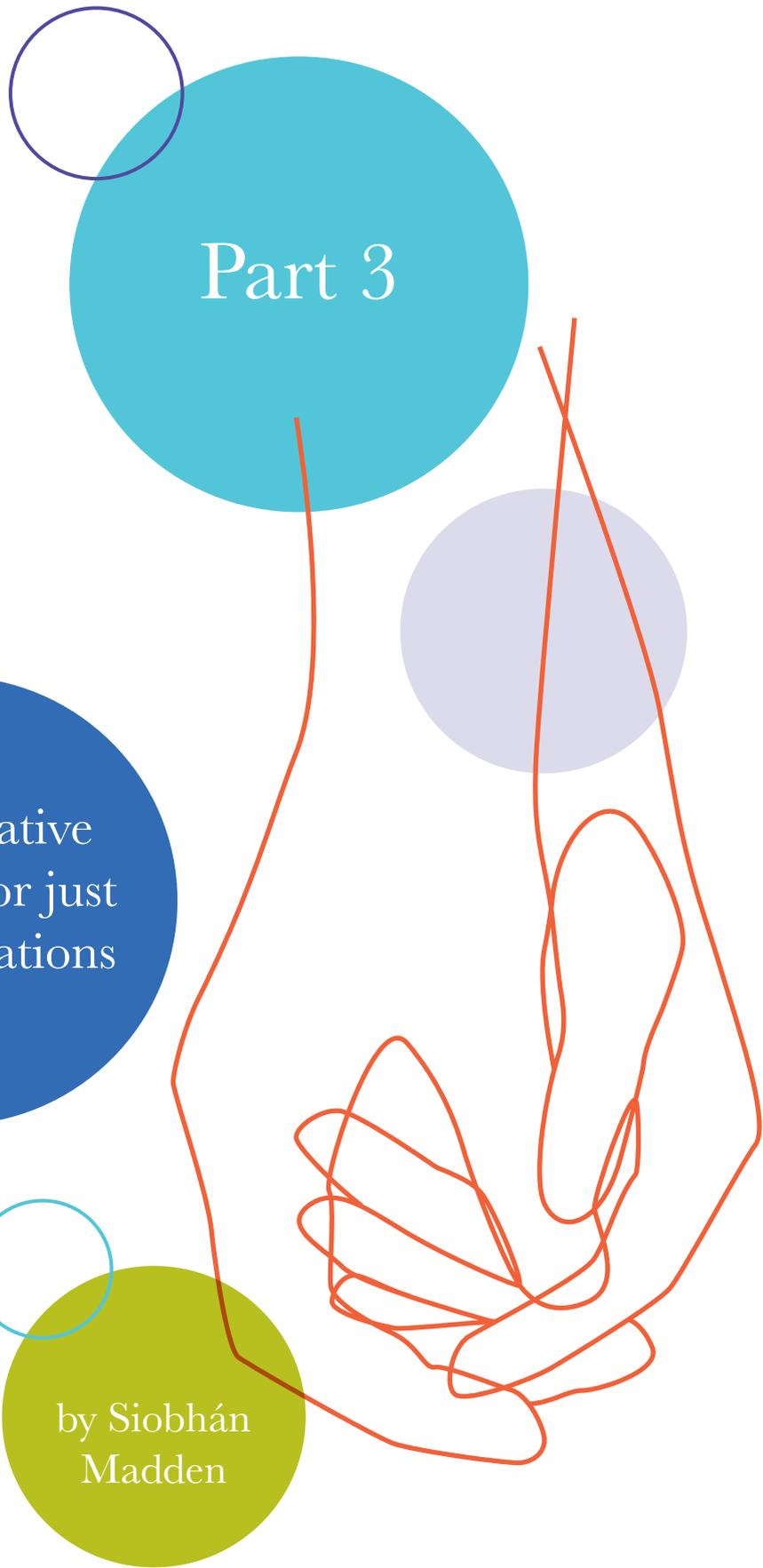
The message in your document of *"keeping going"* is one that inspired us all. One woman said, *"When you hear and know that these people are surviving, it tells me that you yourself can dig deep. If they can do that through prison, then I can do that in myself."*

Listening to your stories created the opportunity for us to have a conversation that was *"real"* and to link with our own knowledge from life:

- Openness helps empathy to grow
- We are all in this together
- Valuing the cultural knowledge and life-skills we learned from our families
- Holding our family bonds builds us up
- Connecting with our independence, strength, hopes and pride as Traveller women
- School-going education means bravery and power
- The knowledge of needing people to listen
- Having conversations that are real

We spoke of a history of not asking Travellers for our knowledge, skills and experience. Going back to the 1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy, the assumption by settled people in power was that *"we know best"*. One of us often says to people in decision-making: *"You're always talking **about** Travellers. You're always talking **at** Travellers. Try talking **to** Travellers."*

For all of us as Travellers, it is very important to include your voices and the voices of all the people and families in our community that are impacted by prison. This is about all of us collectively. We do not want to leave any Traveller behind. We have to watch out for each other and support each other. Together, we will create the change.



“Look outside here, you can see horses.” The two Traveller men were leaning against a window on the landing in quiet conversation. With familiar kindness, they included me in their conversation as I arrived again in this alien place full of the sounds of jangling keys and heavy metal door thuds. Together, we waited for an officer to open the door of the Castlereagh Prison school.

The story of how the places and sounds of prison remain “alien” to some and become all too familiar to others is a deeply disturbing one of power, privilege, injustice and silence. The over-representation of Travellers within the prison system is one marker of these inequalities. Although only 0.7% of the population in the Republic of Ireland¹, it is estimated that Travellers account for an estimated 10% of the general prison population and 15% of the female prison population². A fifth of young people in custody in Oberstown Children Detention Campus are Travellers³.

“*We keep going for each other*”: *Stories of Travellers through prison times* is an intervention in these power relationships. Its authors are a group of Traveller men in Castlereagh Prison and Traveller women with experience of a family member in prison. Their diverse voices and knowledges are woven into a collective narrative, based on the recognition that people are experts in their own lived experience.

Turning towards Travellers in prison and their families as the experts and the story-tellers of their own experiences marks a turning away from the dominant paradigm of both knowers and knowledge currently privileged by the Criminal Justice System. Our alternative paradigm is based on listening to Travellers in prison and family members. It is about acknowledging, naming and challenging social contexts of anti-Traveller racism and discrimination. It is about respecting and honouring Travellers’ diverse expressions of family and cultural connections which they continue to cherish and hold precious in the face of attempts to invalidate them. It is about building relationships, connection, inclusion, collaboration and social justice.

In this section: I describe some of the collaborative collective narrative practices which informed the creation of the document; I engage with the authors’ invitation to embrace “*a wider point of view instead of tunnel vision blindsight*” (p. 25) by interrogating the systems that stink; I locate collective narrative documentation as a response to the collective trauma produced by institutionalised anti-Traveller racism; I sketch possibilities for how *We Keep Going For Each Other* can help to place the voices and knowledge of Travellers in prison and family members at the centre of a transformative network of allies connected to what Reynolds (2019) calls, “*the Zone of Fabulousness*”.

¹ Census of Population, 2016

² Irish Prison Service, 2018 (cited in TPI, 2019).

³ In the first three months of 2019, the Oberstown campus housed 72 individuals. Of these, 14 (19 per cent) were Travellers or from a Traveller background. There was a similar rate in 2018 and 2017 (Irish Prison Service, 2019, cited in Pavee Point, 2020).

“The Turn of the Word”

And of course, she knew that my father liked a good story and would tell a good story and that Ellen was a queen amongst storytellers. I suppose that you could say – instead of the turn of the hand that was the turn of the tongue. The turn of the word! – And that is a special skill, a skill that was always prized in the older Irish culture of the past. It was a craft in itself! The Turn of the Word!

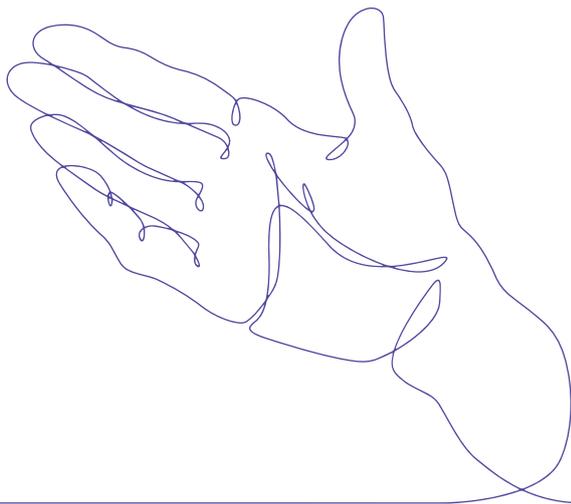
(Warde, 2009, p. 23).

We Keep Going for Each Other draws on the living oral culture of story-telling in the Traveller community which Mary Warde, a Traveller from Tuam, calls “The Turn of the Word”. With this beautiful resonant phrase, she brings forward a rich Traveller cultural heritage by creatively adapting the saying, “the turn of the hand”. The turn of the hand refers to Travellers’ range of skills in adapting to changing circumstances, a flexibility facilitated by nomadism. Similarly, “The Turn of the

Word” is suggestive of how stories turn into other stories as we move within them and between them. Story-telling does not fix meanings. It is nomadic and “on the move”.

A good story will move us through sparking interest, curiosity and imagination. Stories are responsive and in relationship – they require a listener to be told. Stories are a way of holding and sharing knowledge. Stories help to keep us in the world of real people of flesh and blood, in the turn of the tongue.

Twenty-eight Traveller men in Castlereagh Prison⁴ and three Traveller women with experience of a family member in prison were the real people who told their stories for this narrative project over a period of two years. The process was informed by core ethical principles of confidentiality, collaboration, consent and ethical representation (see Appendix 1).



⁴ The project would not have been possible without the support of Castlereagh Prison staff. Of central importance was the Governor’s and the Chief’s permission for us to meet with the men in the prison school and to record our conversations, subject to ethical and security conditions (see Appendix 1). The school staff welcomed us warmly into their space. The School Principal and Staff actively facilitated our visits. In addition to the Principal, two teachers were our key liaison persons at different times. They displayed the flyer, informed Traveller students of our sessions, met us at the door of the prison and accompanied us to the school following security clearance. They arranged a room, set up the recording equipment, and provided me with the recordings after a security check.

The stories were told to me in my role as a narrative practitioner⁵ contracted by Galway Traveller Movement (GTM). In the prison setting, I was usually accompanied by Anne Costello of the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) as a co-facilitator. We are both settled, white, middle-class women who have never been incarcerated or experienced a family member in prison. However, we are also two people who have worked alongside members of the Traveller community for many years. We have been informed and also transformed by this work. Our work comes from a stance of anti-oppression and social justice, and a deep commitment to an ethic of collaboration.

Our first connection with Traveller men in Castlerea Prison for this project was through a flyer circulated in the school by a designated liaison teacher (Appendix 2). The words “Traveller Family Supports” were in large bold font, with pictures of a wagon wheel and a group of horse. Along with the details of date and time, our names and organisations, was the invitation:

*Want to talk about being a father/husband/
partner/son in prison?*

*How can your knowledge help to improve family
supports?*

After a few exploratory meetings with Traveller men, the story-telling gatherings began in earnest in a classroom in the prison school. The nature of prison meant these were fluid gatherings – sometimes we met a group of men, sometimes one person. Some people dropped in once, some on a number of occasions. A core group of six were “regulars”.

They played a central role in spreading the word and encouraging others to join. Insofar as the conditions of imprisonment afforded, some people often assumed the role of hospitable hosts e.g. by offering to get a glass of water. In group and pair settings, the men’s respectful listening and insightful questions and responses to each other, as well as their injections of laughter and fun, were of special importance in supporting rich story-telling.

TPI and GTM also decided that it would be important to include stories from women with experience of a family member in prison. Two women we knew through our organisational contacts, and a third woman suggested by a family member in prison, were invited to join their knowledge to the project. All three women agreed out of a determination to help other women and families in similar situations. From our perspective, the logistics of organising meetings with the women were obviously more straightforward than those of the prison sessions - I contacted each woman directly and organised a time and place that suited her. From the perspectives of all the women however, their participation involved some skilful juggling or ‘multi-tasking’, and making time in contexts of care responsibilities and often great stress. My conversations with one woman were over the phone. I met another woman in the GTM premises - we also had many check-in chats over the phone. I spoke with the third woman over cups of tea in the sitting room of her home while a friend looked after her children.

⁵ My methodology for this project was based on the collective narrative practice of collective documentation (Denborough, 2008, Chapter 2).

An ethic of collaboration

As a narrative practitioner, the ethic of collaboration was linked to my concern to facilitate conditions of agency and ownership of the process for participants. I tried to adopt what White (2004) calls a “decentred but influential” approach. My attempt to “decentre” myself was about putting the person sharing their story at the centre. I did not arrive, for instance, with a pre-designed set of questions based on what I wanted to talk about, or what I thought the other person or people would be interested in. I tried to be guided by listening to what the person or people wanted to talk about. Sometimes, for example, this was suggested by people’s responses and questions in the opening discussion about purpose and ethics. In this way, I tried to establish a friendly, informal context for the conversations to emerge organically.

However, stories are deeply embedded in wider social and cultural meanings. They can reproduce the dominant culture and the status quo, or they can open onto alternative stories which are less often heard. I tried to be influential by opening space for these alternative stories. I did this through a sense of curiosity about what people valued in life, and about their special knowledge and skills in getting through hard times. My questions arose in response to people’s own expressions, statements or stories, opening up stories inside stories and between stories:

Stories. Listen. Listen. Stories go around in circles, they don’t go in straight lines, so it helps if you listen in circles. Because there are stories inside stories, stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you get lost, you really start to look around and listen.

(Travelling Jewish Theatre, quoted in Myerhoff, 2007. p. 17)

In the title of her autobiography, *The Turn of the Hand: A Memoir from the Irish Margins*, Mary Warde (2009) recognises experiences of both skill and marginality. She evokes the kind of “double-storied account” (Denborough, 2008; White, 2004) which guided my own questions. One of my concerns was to create conditions for a rich acknowledgement of the effects of discrimination, racism, imprisonment, and trauma on people’s lives. However, since people are never passive in their experiences of trauma, I was particularly concerned to inquire about people’s responses and their own initiatives and skills in getting through these difficult times:

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties, they will be taking whatever action is possible, in their own ways, based on particular skills and knowledges, to try to address the effects of the problem(s) on their lives and the lives of those they love and care about.

(Denborough, 2008, p.3)

For the people who told their stories, one expression of this love and care for family members was in responding to our invitation to share their knowledge as part of a “Traveller family support” initiative.

Through the narrative inquiry, we collaborated in developing this into stories which showed the importance of their families in their lives. Following David Denborough (2008), this included conversations that traced the history of people's skills and knowledges in ways that linked them to their family and cultural traditions.

In creating the collective narrative document, I wrote people's words and stories into a blend of collective and individual voices i.e. "We", "some of us", "I" (Denborough, 2008). The purpose was to create room for a diversity of voices and experiences, and to challenge homogenising accounts of a Traveller "monocultural" experience (Mc Donagh, 2000, p. 244). Following Denborough (2008), I also tried to document with careful attention to people's agency in actively responding to events in their lives based on what they valued and held precious, as well as to the evocative use of language. All this was organised into richly storied themes, and an overall "double-storied" structure.

From the first prison sessions, a series of successive draft documents were prepared to bring the tone and possibilities of the final document to life. One of my intentions in this was to foster a sense of collective ownership and to support people in identifying their own independent purposes for the document. In my oral readings of the document, I spoke with gravitas and nuance in order to convey my own appreciation of the poetic beauty of people's spoken words and the importance of what they had to say. These turnings of the spoken words into written words, and their return again to the spoken word, allowed for a way of connecting people who were contributing at different times in the process. They also allowed for checking with

people about the nuances and content of the document, as well as sparking the telling of new stories.

The women's individual stories too were documented and read back, checked and rechecked, and woven into the collective document. Two of the women were centrally involved in the process of document completion and look forward to joining with others in moving the process forward. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic meant that we were not able to consult directly with Travellers in prison for finalising the document. However, two Traveller men recently released from prison acted as expert consultants with this insider knowledge, as well as Traveller members of GTM staff. The document was sent to a contact in the prison to be made available for Traveller men who had contributed, along with an audio recording performed by volunteers from the Traveller community. Three members of the core group were facilitated in listening to the document, and a positive reception was reported back. With the lifting of Covid restrictions, plans are underway to more richly re-engage with Traveller men in prison.

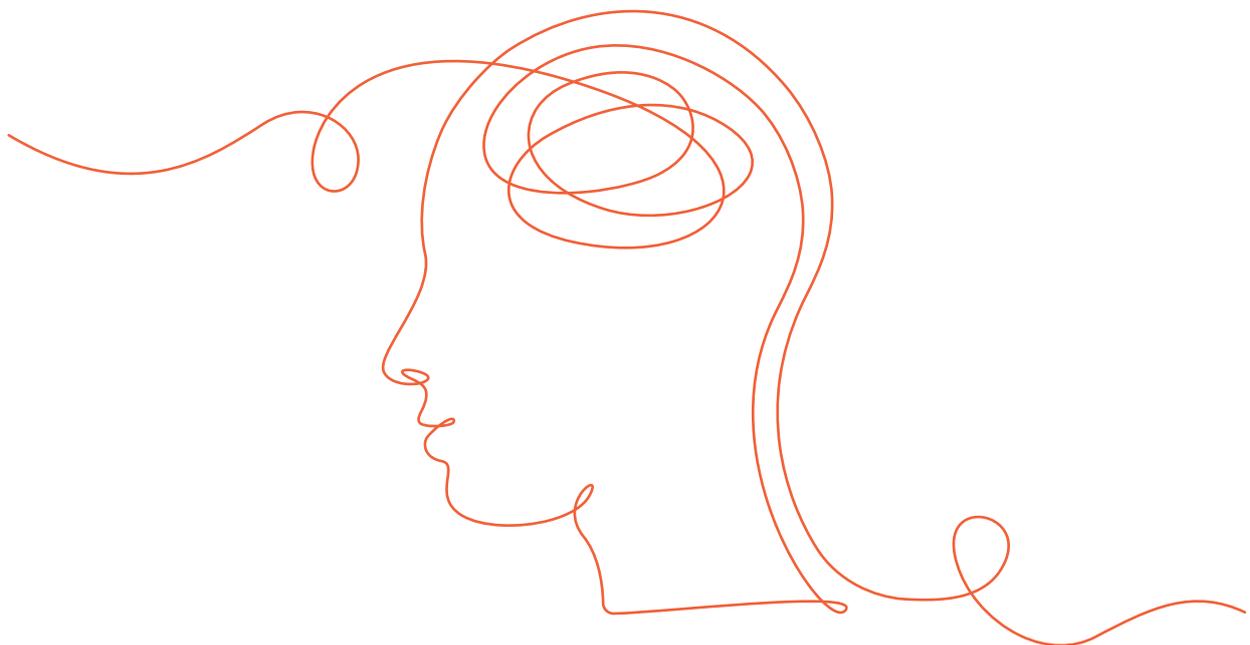
Interrogating systems that stink

We keep going for each other is a very different kind of document to the ever-growing piles of reports that follow and envelop Travellers in prison as they are passed between gardaí, courts, prison authorities, and probation services. The depersonalising nature of much of this scrutiny is reflected in the quiet protest by contributors that, "You're just a number". Through the eyes of often impersonal authorities, the supposed character of each person is labelled, judged and their future

behavior predicted. The very notion of a “prison record” testifies to the long enduring shadow these documents cast on a person’s life and identity. The gross overrepresentation of Travellers in prison testifies to the oppressive shadow which the criminal justice system casts over the community.

The insistence by the contributors that, “*Outside the prison, partners, children and parents are worried and stressed out. They are doing the sentence too*” (p. 11) exposes the scale of human suffering involved. The prison experience spills beyond the prison walls to children, partners, parents, grandparents, sisters, and brothers. These effects of prison on Traveller families cannot be considered culturally neutral. This is not only because of the sheer numbers involved, but because of the special importance of family bonds for Traveller cultural identity which the authors movingly evoke. Family bonds are not gender neutral either. The women’s stories in this document illuminate how the imprisonment of a family member greatly increases Traveller women’s burden of care.

In order to fully understand Travellers’ experiences of the criminal justice system, we are encouraged by the authors to take “*a wider point of view instead of tunnel vision blindsight*” (p. 25). Their cumulative and interlocking stories of discrimination highlight prison as one dimension of a system that stinks. Stories of being pushed away from where they want to live, from education, from jobs, from society, from appropriate mental health supports, bring narrative immediacy to well-established indicators which show that Travellers rank significantly worse than settled people in all areas of life, including life expectancy (see All Ireland Traveller Health Study, 2010). A wider point of view is also supported by the recognition that Travellers’ overrepresentation in prison is a pattern all too familiar to indigenous and ethnic minority peoples in other countries who similarly experience racism and cultural dispossession, including the Maori community in New Zealand and Aboriginal people in Australia (Irish Prisoner Reform Trust (IPRT), 2014; TPI, 2019; Doyle, 2017).



In an Irish context, a still sparse but compelling literature is gathering which makes visible the central role played by the criminal justice system in Travellers' institutionalised experiences of marginalisation and racism⁶. The contentious relationship between Travellers and the Garda Síochána has been described as one of “over-policing and under-protection” (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 321). Mulcahy's research highlights as Travellers' “most basic complaint” (p. 319) that gardaí either do not respond to their requests for help when they are the victims of crime or intervene inappropriately. Over-policing includes heavy police surveillance of young Travellers' use of public and commercial urban space (Joyce, 2018) as well as evidence of ethnic profiling (Pavee Point, 2014, 2020)⁷. Young Travellers interviewed by Joyce (2018) highlight how advances made by Community Gardaí are not mirrored by the Gardaí on the streets of Galway city⁸:

Willie (late-teens)

“The ones that do be at Travellers events and stuff are alright because they know more about us and have a better understanding, like at least they would talk to ya in a civil manner, you can even have a joke with some of them”

(from Joyce, 2018, p. 120).

Sara (late-teens)

“They are not like the other guards are they, they are more friendly but you rarely see them, it's the other lads that give us hassle, the ones on the streets and stuff, like, you only meet the nice ones at something like Traveller pride, or something”

(from Joyce, 2018, p. 120).

An “over-policed” community will inevitably be over-represented in the courts and prisons. Tellingly, Bracken's (2014) research identified the discomfort which some Probation Officers had about identifying Travellers and their culture in court reports “as possibly increasing the possibility for discrimination” (p. 61). In prison, discrimination against Travellers documented by the IPRT (2014) included offensive name-calling - commonly from other prisoners but also from some prison officers⁹. It also included, in one prison, the widespread dispersal of Travellers throughout the prison system following a conflict between Travellers and settled prisoners. Fear of discrimination prevents some Travellers from acknowledging their ethnicity, and others from engaging in education and training (p. 17).

⁶ Drummond (2015) states, “It is evident that until very recently little was known as to the situation of Travellers with criminal justice agencies. Certainly there was a dearth of statistics” (p. 23). Lalor (2017) notes that the Irish Prison Service is one of a relatively small number of state agencies and organisations which have introduced ethnic identifiers (p. 9).

⁷ This evidence of ethnic profiling includes the recording of two children aged 4 and 5, and a 16 days old baby on the PULSE system.

⁸ Pavee Point (2020) highlights how inadequate human and financial resources undermine the work of the Garda National Diversity and Integration Unit (GNDIU) and Ethnic Liaison Officers.

⁹ Offensive name-calling from prison officers was “much more difficult to bear... because of the unequal power relations between prison officers and prisoners” (IPRT, 2014, p. 17).

The over-policing and under-protection of Travellers by the criminal justice system is marked by the intersection of racism and gender inequality. That Traveller women comprise 22% of women in prison is a particularly shocking indictment of the system. The IPRT (2014) highlights the profound impact on women and their families of even short-term imprisonment. This is borne out by Doyle’s (2017) research with Traveller women in prison. For the majority of women interviewed, children were being cared for by the extended family who had little direct support in doing so. For women with children in foster care, issues of cultural identity and safety were a source of fear and concern (p. 65). It is noteworthy that while most of the women interviewed by Doyle had experienced violence from a current or previous partner, many had also had negative experiences with the Gardaí including, for some, “abusive, discriminatory and racist language and violence” (p. 54). Discrimination, actual and feared, is a major barrier for Traveller women in seeking protection from the Gardaí from domestic and sexual violence (Pavee Point, 2011; Galway Traveller Movement, 2016).

A wider point of view of the over-policing and under-protection of Travellers requires

recognising the terrible history of anti-Traveller racism upon which the criminal justice system was founded i.e. controlling Travellers’ nomadism to ensure they would not cause concern for settled people (see Drummond, 2007)¹⁰. The Commission on Itinerancy (1963) established as official policy the elimination of the nomadic aspect of Traveller life altogether through assimilation, or severely restricting where Travellers could stay (halting sites). As *We Keep Going for Each Other* shows, Traveller family stories of sitting around the campfire intertwine with stories of being “moved on”. The experience of eviction and garda involvement in this is embedded in Traveller culture (Helleiner, 2000). It is a relationship which remains “largely unchanged to the present day” (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 309). However, Mulcahy argues that “a key dimension to the problematic relationship between Travellers and the police” (p. 323) is the accommodation crisis facing Travellers and the role of local authorities in this¹¹.

An historical perspective on the over-representation of Travellers in prison also requires recognising the particularly “mean-spirited politics” (Reynolds, 2019, p. 38) of recent decades ushered in by neoliberalism¹².

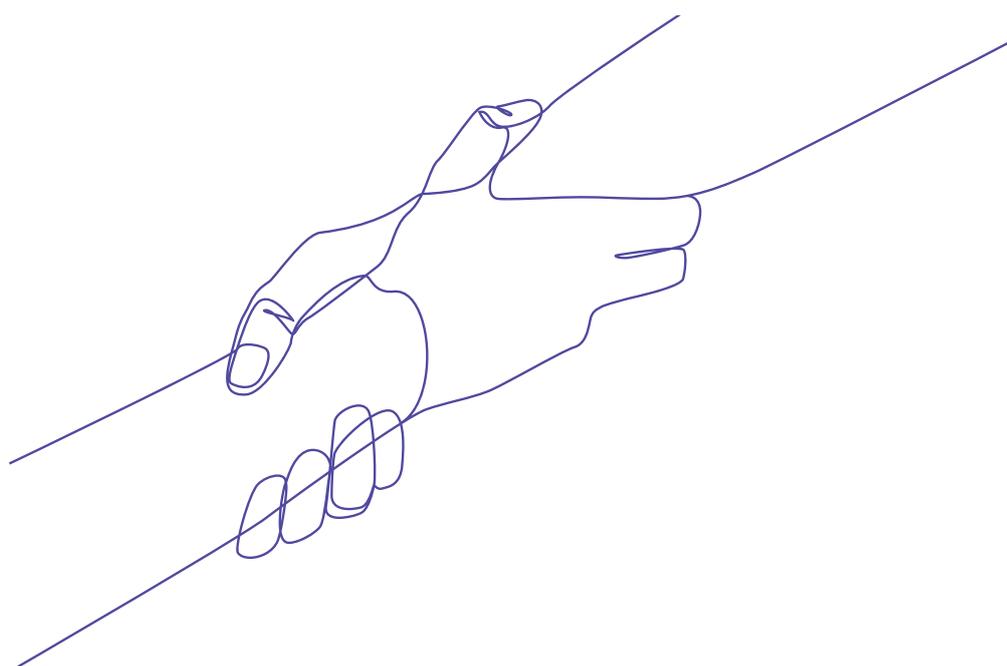
¹⁰ Such responses are not unique to Ireland. Mayall (2009) describes how nomads’ engagement with criminal justice systems more broadly involved efforts to control their mobility.

¹¹ Following decades of vigorous campaigning by Traveller activists and organisations, a landmark equality review by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2021) identified repeated failures by local authorities to spend Traveller accommodation budgets, to accurately count how many Travellers live in their areas and to recognise Traveller ethnicity, including “little evidence of assessment of need in relation to Traveller nomadism within and through counties or the nature of such nomadism currently pursued” (n.p.). In 2016, the European Committee of Social Rights found that Irish law and practice breaches human rights on the following grounds: that many Traveller sites are in an inadequate condition; that there is insufficient provision of accommodation for Travellers; that Irish law provides inadequate safeguards for Travellers threatened with eviction; that evictions are carried out in practice without necessary safeguards (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2016).

¹² The term “neoliberalism” is generally associated with the transformation of the state from a provider of public welfare to a promoter of markets and competition. It is linked to the policies established by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

The emphasis on “free” markets was accompanied by an increased emphasis on security and control which targeted those at the “lowest rung of the social ladder” (Wacquant, 2009, cited in Garrett, 2016, p. 94; see also Muncie, 2005). New prisons were built and more people imprisoned, even as crime rates were falling (O’Donnell & O’Sullivan, 2003). O’Donnell & O’Sullivan describe the 1997 general election as “a frenzied bidding war” with politicians “promising more Gardaí, more prisons and less tolerance” (p. 49). It is perhaps inevitable that this “politics of intolerance” would find Travellers an easy target given an already pervasive anti-Traveller racism. What Mulcahy (2011) calls the “public hysteria surrounding Travellers” (p. 313) saw a shift in media stereotypes of Travellers “from ‘petty’ to ‘predatory’ criminals” (p. 312, citing Dillon, 2002). The increased security emphasis also targeted family members visiting prison e.g. the introduction of airport-type screening at prison entrances was one aspect of “enhanced security” measures initiated in 2008 (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (JCFJ), 2012, p. 33).

This “mean-spirited politics” has brought cut-backs in crucial services for people in prison and their families, even as their numbers have increased. It has also radically transformed the work contexts of those supporting them. Severe cut-backs in prison education (JCFJ, 2012; Ryan, 2014; O’Brien, 2018) have been described as “a scandal” by one former Prison Education Coordinator (in Ryan, 2014). While additional prison officers were drafted into security roles, posts for prison officers working with prisoners in vocational training workshops were left vacant (JCFJ, 2012). In 2006, the government tellingly renamed the “Probation and Welfare Service” to simply the “Probation Service” (PS). Probation Officers’s work in prison would no longer attend to the “routine welfare needs of prisoners” (JCFJ, 2012, p. 80) but would be mainly with those perceived as “high risk offenders” (p. 82). Austerity measures have also led to a shortage of social workers and eroded opportunities for social workers to form relationships with those who use their services (Garrett & Bertotti, 2017). This has particularly negative consequences for working



with Traveller families of those in prison given a historical legacy of distrust. A recent report by the Mental Health Commission highlights fundamental breaches of human rights in regard to the imprisonment of people who have “severe mental illness” and whose access to appropriate mental health services is “woefully inadequate” (Finnerty, 2021, p. 10). The IPRT states in response:

Any focus on improving mental healthcare in the criminal justice system must begin keeping people out of the system in the first place. This can prevent causing further trauma and may even save lives. However, this will require a fundamental shift in our approach to mental health at all points of contact with the criminal justice system. (IPRT, 2021, n.p).

The “tunnel vision” of the criminal justice system perhaps finds its ultimate expression in the spurious notion that the problem of crime is linked to something internal to the person - part of their character that must be “fixed”. As Denborough (1996) notes, this understanding is encouraged by our culture, by psychology, and most especially within prison. Those incarcerated “constantly evaluate their lives, motivations and weaknesses” and are encouraged “to identify as a criminal, as an inmate, as an offender prone to committing another crime” (p. 132). He argues that such an understanding is often self-perpetuating and limits possibilities for action. For Travellers in prison, understanding problems as internal to the person makes that person – and often their family and the wider Traveller community too - unjustly responsible for problems created by a system that stinks.

Collective documentation as a response to collective trauma

Collective trauma is an effect of the systemic and institutionalised oppression of the Traveller community and is produced with impunity by the Irish state. The systemic nature of these traumatic experiences faced by Travellers means that they are common experiences for members of the community. However, one of the effects of being routinely subjected to trauma is a profound sense of isolation from others (Denborough, 2008). As one contributor describes it, “You’re in prison in your head, tormented by your own thoughts” (p. 10.)

Thomas McCann, Traveller activist and founder of the Traveller Counselling Service, has consistently highlighted how state policies of assimilation give permission to all state institutions to exclude Traveller culture and identity. This structural exclusion has consequences for Travellers’ mental health as it “erodes their identity and eats away at their self-esteem and their confidence” (Seanad Public Consultation Committee, 2019, p. 48). It is reflected in increasingly high levels of drug and alcohol use and a suicide rate which is six times higher than in the settled community (All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010; Van Hout and Hearne, 2017). Rather than respond with care and accountability for its own role as a perpetrator of state violence, the institutional response includes the routine incarceration of many members of the Traveller community – thus further compounding the trauma.

Collective narrative documentation is a response to collective trauma. It addresses the isolating effects of trauma by linking people around shared themes (Denborough, 2008).

To counter a system which tries to locate problems “inside” the person, the document works to place these problems *outside* the person. Chapter 2, “The system stinks!” is a detailed exposé of the systemic effects of discrimination, racism, and the lack of appropriate supports in areas such as addiction which can leave individuals and their families with a sense of what one person describes as “lost”. Understanding the over-representation of Travellers in prison through this critical lens broadens and subverts how we think about “wrong-doing” and “offending” behaviour. More specifically, it underlines the need for holding the state up for interrogation and accountability to the Traveller community.

However, the document also does more than this by attending to the contributors’ active responses to trauma and their knowledge and skills in getting through hard times. When we appreciate that these responses to trauma are based on what people hold precious in life, then new understandings become available as described by White (2004):

The title of the document, *We keep going for each other*, reflects how these Traveller men in prison and these Traveller women as family members have stayed connected with the sustaining importance of their families and culture. This is despite all attempts to violate and dishonour those connections¹³. An alternative history emerges which cannot be silenced by its racist counter-part in the Commission on Itinerancy (1963). Through their stories of the diverse family and cultural histories in which their knowledge and skills of surviving prison times are rooted, the contributors to *We keep going for each other* help to support the production of a “social’ memory of resistance and sustenance” (Denborough, 2008, p. 42). This is further enriched and enlarged by the members of the Traveller community who responded to the authors in Part 2.

Of course, such initiatives are not in themselves enough to overcome all that is facing the community. To flourish and thrive - rather than just survive - as “Travellers of the 21st century” (p. 25) requires deep social

“[A] person’s expression of pain can be considered a testimony to what it is that the person gives value to that was violated or dishonoured in the context of trauma ... And the experience of day-to-day distress as an outcome of trauma can be considered a reflection of the extent to which a person is committed to maintaining a relationship with what they give value to, of the extent to which a person has refused to become resigned to aspects of their experiences of life, of their situation, and of their circumstance. Ongoing day-to-day distress as an outcome of trauma can be understood to be a tribute to the maintenance of an ongoing relationship with what a person holds precious, and a refusal to surrender this.” (White, 2004, p. 56)

¹³ The prison ideology of discipline may be regarded as contributing to this dishonouring of family connections. The sanctions in place under the Prisons Act, 2007 (the P19 System) can include sanctions of reduced visits and phone-calls for those deemed to have breached prison rules (see <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/questions/2018-06-12/517/>). Such a system clearly affects the families and family bonds of all those in prison. However, given the cultural importance of family connections for Travellers, such disciplinary sanctions cannot be considered culturally neutral in their effects.

and political transformation. It requires members of the settled community to listen to and become allies with Travellers, and to resist and challenge those systems that try to keep them/us “settled in their ways” (p. 21). Although the legacy of institutionalized racism is enormous, transformation is possible. The transformed context of the pandemic provides one important example of how seemingly entrenched ways can become unsettled:

Pavee Point and other Traveller organizations across the country have welcomed the shift towards community policing style and many new emerging examples of positive and respectful treatment of Travellers as part of policing measures and style during the pandemic. (Pavee Point, 2020, p. 6).

Entering the “Zone of Fabulousness”

Our stories are about no one being better than another. We hope that they will help somebody somewhere. We hope they will help other families that are going through similar hard times. We hope that our stories will help to make a change.

The hopes expressed by the contributors as they send their stories out into the unknown are statements of radical import. They are radical in being spoken by Traveller men in prison and Traveller women with a family member in prison. They are radical in their insistence on the equality of all persons.

They are radical in the knowledge of having a contribution to make in the lives of other people. They are radical in moving the storytellers from the margins to the centre as agents of social change.

The challenge then is to respond to these radical hopes in ways that unravel the Stinking System which bolsters racism and isolation, and which centre the authors’ purposes, and the family and cultural connections which they hold precious.

One way of understanding this challenge is through what Vikki Reynolds (2019) calls, “The Zone of Fabulousness”:

The Zone of Fabulousness is a frame to consider how we are centring persons, enacting collective ethics and fostering collective sustainability while working in contexts of social injustice, mean-spirited politics and oppression. How are we centring persons? How are we enacting connection; being collaborative, creative, messy and imperfect? How are we connected to our bodies, emotions, the sacred, justice-doing, each other and communities of struggle? (Reynolds, 2019, p. 38)

The process of enacting connection with contributors to the document has already begun. Over a series of zoom meetings, a group of people from the Traveller community and another group of people from the settled community listened and responded to a recording of the document.

The responses from the Traveller activists were documented as a direct collective

response to the original contributors, included here following *We keep going for each other*. These beautiful responses show how the original stories can spark new stories that thicken and extend the stories of the original through a connected listening. People listened and responded to the narrative document through the four reflection questions introduced at the beginning of this publication (see p. 6) by identifying phrases or words that resonated with them, and linking these resonances with their own life. The overall effect is a linking of lives through “conversations that are real” (p. 33) which nurture a sense of community belonging and solidarity, and enrich and expand the historical narrative of Traveller cultural resistance.

Although differently positioned in these power relationships, the group of settled people were professionals who were invited to listen to the document as long-time friends and allies of the Traveller community. Some of their responses were:

“The stories are very powerful. They triggered light bulb moments about how the system and society put up hurdles at every step of the way for Traveller prisoners and their families. But also about how easy it could be to dismantle some of those hurdles if we got our act together.”

“There is a ‘call to action’ feel about it. It is a good challenge to hear how the system stinks when you’re part of the system that stinks. But it’s not up to me to go into action to solve the problem as I see it. I have to listen to Travellers about what the problem is and what’s the best solution.”

“I felt I knew the speakers, and wanted to know more about their lives.”

“The issues raised are ones that unite most people: worrying about the welfare of families, parents, children; hoping for a safe life, acceptance, friendship and the freedom to be who we are without having to hide or fear rejection.”

Already then, an open and dynamic network has sprung to life with allies from diverse social locations: the people from the Traveller community and those from the settled community who listened and responded to the document; the members of the Traveller community who, through their recorded voices, breathed new life into the written words of the document; the enabling actions of staff in Castlereagh Prison, including the School, the Governor and the Chief. At the centre of this network are the voices of the men and women who contributed to *We keep going for each other*.

Indeed, through the imaginations of these actors, new audience possibilities have also come to life in some way. As suggested by the contributors above, the document may have a special resonance for other people going through similar hard times. This could include other Travellers in prison, including Traveller women in prison. It could include women with a family member in prison. It could include young Travellers struggling with the effects of racism, discrimination and addiction. Some themes may resonate with settled people in prison and their families. Support workers could create forums for listening and perhaps responding to the document. Such listenings could help to address the isolating effects of trauma. For some people, this might involve a move from silence into storying their own experiences. Crucially, the document affords possibilities for bringing forward people’s

own knowledges and practices of responding to trauma and the histories that support these. Collective documentation and the sharing of messages also open possibilities for connecting people as witnesses to each others’ struggles, connecting people within prisons, between prisons and people inside and outside prison (see Smith & Gibson, 2006; Whyte, 2012). These connections can foster what Reynolds (2016) calls “communities of struggle” (p. 38).

Some of the suggestions of the people who listened to the document were that it would be an invaluable resource for influencing policy, practice and training within the Irish Prison Service, the Probation Service, the wider Criminal Justice System, as well as family support agencies such as Tusla. It could support a new appreciation of the cultural importance of Traveller family connections. It could provide a framework for engaging with and supporting the voices of women and children and inform models of support for Traveller women and their families. More broadly, it was suggested that the document provides the possibility for people in the wider Traveller and settled communities to move away from preconceived notions of people in prison and of Travellers. It could be listened to in Traveller organisations, community organisations, schools and workplaces. All these practices could strengthen the creation of a transformative network of allies.

Denborough’s (2008) question captures the possibilities at stake: “*How can we enable people to find links and work together towards a broader good, while also enabling an ever increasing diversity of memory, imagination and contribution?*” (p. 143).

This appreciation of diversity is vital: “Everyone is different and every family is different” is the opening statement of Chapter 1 of the document (p. 7). In writing about the emergence of Traveller feminism, Rosaleen McDonagh also highlights diversity:

We are struggling like all communities to recognise diversity among our own. New realities such as divorce, second relationships, older single status, women with no children, women who are married to non-Travellers, women who are gay or non-binary, single parents, deaf and disabled bring a rich texture to our ethnicity. The gendered aspect of suicide, addiction, prison and homelessness are part of contemporary Traveller female narratives.
(McDonagh, 2020)

To fully move into the Zone of Fabulousness calls upon us to make sure that Travellers in prison and their families – that is, the very real, particular and diverse people we work with – are at the centre of our engagements. Ultimately, it is to be hoped that the resulting “collaborative, creative, messy and imperfect” Reynolds, 2019, p. 38) connections would create the basis for new questions, new realisations, and new responses. This must surely include urgent critical debate about the inappropriateness of prison as a response to the trauma of social injustice. Fundamentally, it is to be hoped that the document can play a role in activating the social and political conditions

for replacing “criminal justice” responses to the Traveller community with social justice responses.

The questions included at the very beginning of this document, based on the “outsider witness” reflections developed by White (2007), allow for ways of listening and responding that can help us to un-settle ourselves and to have conversations that are real (see p. 33). Such unsettling affords possibilities for centring the people who tell their stories. They allow for linking our lives with the lives of Travellers in prison and their families in ways that can move us to new understandings with new possibilities for action.

- 1. What captured your attention as you listened? What are the particular words, phrases?*
- 2. What did these expressions suggest to you about what was important to the person or people who spoke them? Describe any image that comes to your mind.*
- 3. How did this strike a chord with your own experience?*
- 4. Where has listening and responding to the story moved you to?*

(adapted from White, 2007)



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Appendix 1

Ethics

The narrative process was informed by core ethical principles of confidentiality, collaboration, consent and ethical representation.

Time was taken at the beginning of each conversation, before turning on the recorder, to outline in as much detail as possible the purpose, process and ethical issues of the research, and to engage with comments and questions.

Confidentiality

Research participants were informed that all information provided would be kept strictly confidential (subject to the qualification outlined below), the names of participants would not be disclosed in any published material, and the taped conversations would not be used for any purpose other than the written document. These were also the ethical conditions under which permission was granted by the prison.

There were also additional security conditions: 1) The conversations could only be taped on recording equipment in the prison itself. 2) The recordings would be listened to by a delegated officer before being released to me on a USB stick. All prison participants were informed of this qualified confidentiality before agreeing to the recording of the conversation.

Collaboration

The principle of collaboration was based on supporting respectful relationships of equality and facilitating agency (see pp. 37-38). A collaborative approach underpinned all ethical commitments.

Consent

While preliminary consent was obtained on the basis of initial information, the open nature of the narrative inquiry meant that it was not possible to know in advance how the process would unfold. “Informed consent” then was not based on information given as a once-off event, but was an ongoing process (Etherington, 2007, p. 603). It involved frequent check-ins, especially at the end of each conversation to check what a person might be happy to include in the document itself. Participants were asked for permission to record and to take notes once satisfied of the purpose and conditions. There was a clear statement of the right to withdraw from the project at any time and of the right not to engage with any specific questions.

Ethical representation

The documentation of people’s stories involved attention to representing people as agents in their lives, and showing a diversity of Traveller cultural and family experiences and values, including diverse gendered experiences.

Appendix 2: Flyer for visit to Castlerea Prison



Want to talk about being a father/husband/partner/son in prison?

When?

Tuesday, 12th of December
10.00am - 12.00 pm

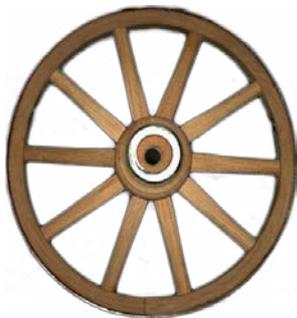
How can **your** knowledge help to improve family supports?

Where?

Who will be there?

Anne Costello, Travellers in Prison Initiative
Siobhán Madden, Galway Traveller Movement

Traveller Family Supports

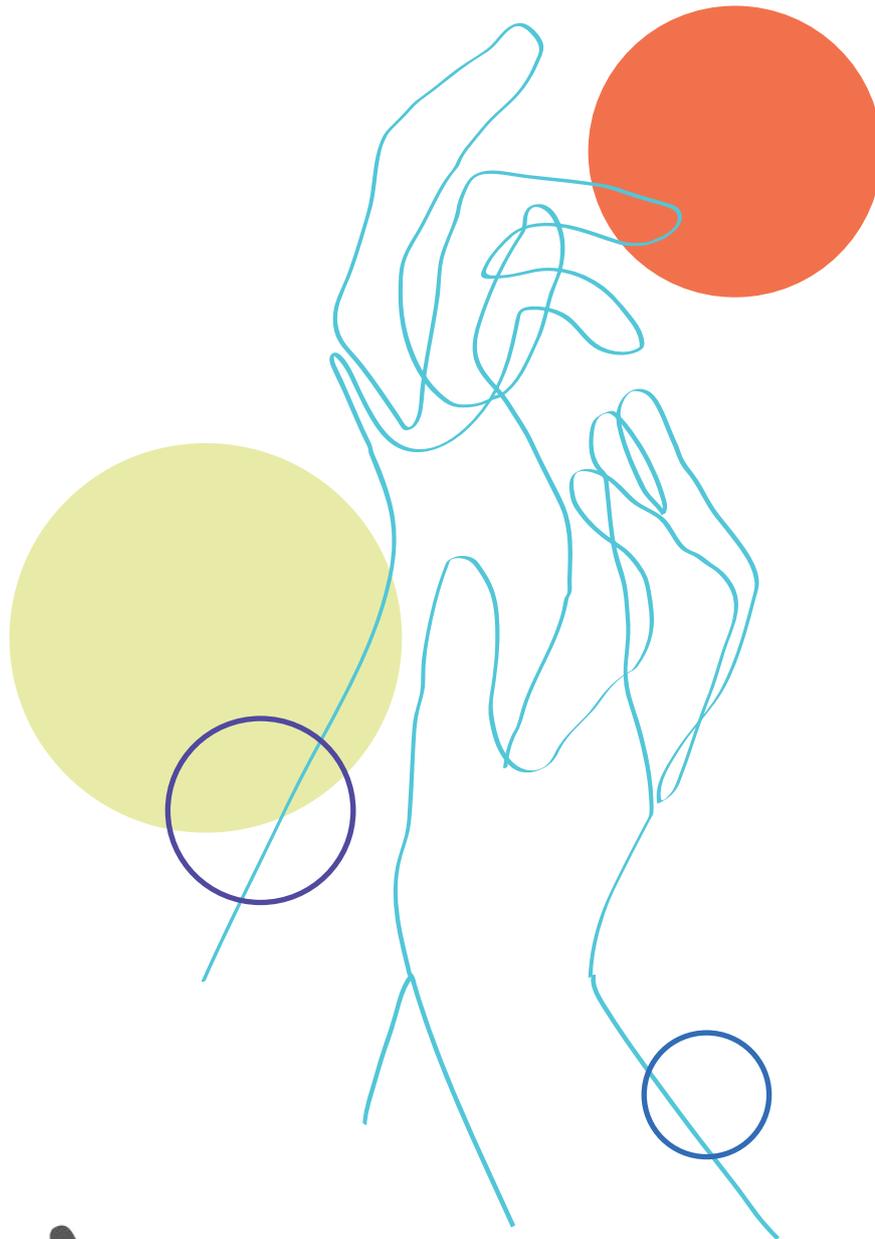


Come along on
Tues 12th to
find out more!



st stephen's green trust





Galway Traveller Movement

Galway Traveller Movement

No. 1 The Plaza,
Headford Road,
Galway City
tel: (091)765390
email: info@gtmtrav.ie
website: www.gtmtrav.ie

**Travellers
in Prison Initiative**

ssgt

**st.stephen's
green trust**

Travellers in Prison Initiative

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