

‘From a tiny seed planted 50 years ago, a great tree gives shade to many’

- Irish Examiner, online version:

<https://pressreader.com/@SMOA Parents and Relatives Association/csb VRw9FkQGizBReTz7q9uTt 9GtdaA2afqGEAlxwHLGLiw>

- 18 Jul 2018
- Anne Lucey



Micheal O’Muircheartaigh, Sr Mary Rose Doyle, and resident Robert McCarron at the St Mary of the Angels / St John of God Services 50th golden jubilee in Beaufort, Co Kerry.

St Mary of the Angels, Kerry’s first residential centre for profoundly disabled children on a family farm in the foothills of the MacGillycuddy’s Reeks, has marked its 50th anniversary. A threat to the future of the centre, which brought hundreds out to protest at public meetings across Kerry last year, was lifted yesterday with the news that health watchdog Hiqa is giving the centre its approval.

At day-long ceremonies, families told of how despair had turned to hope when their children — some severely brain damaged — had been taught tasks that seemed impossible.

Jack Fitzpatrick, whose eldest and only son Bernard was severely brain damaged at birth, told how he and his wife had been devastated with his prognosis. They were advised by their GP to bring him at the age of five to the centre so he could realise his full potential.

“Bernard could not sit up. He is now 41 and he not alone can sit up but he can fly around in his wheelchair,” Mr Fitzpatrick said.

Other parents spoke of the great excitement among the sisters and staff when their disabled child managed to hold a spoon and feed themselves for the first time.

Sr Marie Rose Doyle returned to her former home and planted a tree. Her parents donated the farm to the Franciscan Sisters of Divine Motherhood after Marie Rose, their only child, joined the order. In 1968 the sisters opened it up as a residential dormitory-style centre caring for 60 profoundly disabled children from across Kerry.

Now run by St John of God, it caters to 300 people, including 70 adult residents who live in their own homes on the 17-acre campus. Aged up to 60 years, some the residents have been at St Mary's since it opened.

There is a special school run by the Department of Education catering for 57 children; a hydrotherapy centre; a gym; an autism sensory centre; and the Oaktree day service centre teaching basic life and social skills for persons with from mild to severe disability.

Since last year, buildings have been upgraded and repainted and bedrooms and sitting rooms are being added to the residents' homes to allow more privacy. "From a tiny seed planted 50 years ago, a great tree has now grown that gives shade to many," said Sr Marie Rose.

Among the more than 400 people who attended the ceremonies on the grounds were residents and their families, Kerry football greats Aidan O'Mahony and Marc Ó'Sé and broadcaster Micheal O'Muircheartaigh, Tourism Minister Brendan Griffin, mayor of Kerry Cllr Norma Foley, TDs and councillors. The Bishop of Kerry Ray Browne led the concelebrated Mass with contributions from the Reach for the Stars special choir.

Messages of congratulations were sent by former presidents Mary McAleese and Mary Robinson.

Ms McAleese revealed she and her husband Martin had spent an entire day of their honeymoon at the centre in March 1976 visiting a friend who worked there. It is impossible to quantify the debt Ireland owed the centre, Ms McAleese said.

Claire O'Dywer, general manager of St Mary of the Angels, reminded people of the philosophy underlying the approach of St John of God service — the person with a disability has the same needs and the same aspirations as the rest of us, but simply needs more support. Operations manager Liam Healy said while the newer model for persons with disability is to place them in the community, Hiqa had now agreed to register St Marys in its entirety.