

My brother Bernard Fitzpatrick turned 40 years old on the 5th of August last. Bernard is an extremely happy, loving person, with the purity of an angel. Due to a brain injury at birth, and subsequent meningitis and seizures, Bernard is profoundly intellectually and physically disabled, requiring 24 hour support and care.

Until Bernard was 5 he could not sit up. He lay on his back or was rested against the couch. At 5, following a long arduous road, my parents managed to get Bernard a place in St Mary of the Angels. At this time it was highly subscribed to, with people coming there from all over Munster.

The improvement in Bernard was evident soon after. Through the love and care of the amazing staff, Bernard soon learned to sit up by himself, and later still learned how to manoeuvre his wheel chair at speed through the shiny corridors of St Mary of the Angels. Bernard also learned the skill of pulling my dolls from me, but that is entirely another story!

Bernard has since spent 35 very happy years in St Mary of the Angels, returning home at weekends and for holidays, and always smiling broadly on his return. No wonder he would! Nestled at the foot of the Killarney mountains, amongst the landscaped gardens lies the village, as I see it, of St Mary of the Angels. The peace and tranquillity of the place relaxes even the most tense of shoulders, the warmth and love of the special men and women who work there, and even more so, the warmth, purity and love of those that call it their home, shines through on every visit.

The village has a heated, private, hydrotherapy pool, a school, a chapel, sensory room, and so importantly for Bernard and many of his friends, it has the scope and safety they need to travel freely on their quad bikes, bicycles and wheelchairs. In a world that is too often far from safe, Bernard and his friends have a place they call home, that serves all their needs, and buses that take them regularly to local diners, coffee shops, concerts in the Glen Eagle, trips to see Fungi and much more besides.

Unfortunately for Bernard, his 77 friends, and us, their families, Bernard and his friends are due to be moved "into the community", into a mix of social and private landlord owned houses, on short term 5 year leases. Instead of the heated private pool that Bernard now enjoys at his home in St Mary of the Angels, Bernard's dignity, I am told, is better served by him being bused into Tralee to use the public pool. A hoist will be provided I'm assured, and after a while the funny looks will stop and people will get used to it. Bernard is 40, he wears nappies, he hates screaming children (who doesn't!) and he hates cold water. But Bernard's needs and dignity are to be decided by policy makers and Ministers for Disability that clearly know best.

I am not saying that the Time To Move on Policy that the HSE now use as the catalyst for moving my brother out of his home of 35 years, does not have its place in society. For those who can avail of, and enjoy the frills of "ordinary life" as the policy refers to, it is the absolutely perfect solution.

However, for my brother and his soon to be displaced 77 friends, this policy is rubbish. Its aspiration is to make Bernard and his friends be "ordinary people, living in ordinary places". I will tell you dear policy makers, my brother is Not an ordinary person living an ordinary life! He is an Extraordinary person living a full and fulfilling life in an Extraordinary place. And I'm not the only one who thinks this. Paddy Connelly of Inclusion Ireland is referred to in a December 4th, 2014 article in The Examiner, written by Victoria White, as agreeing that this policy is better worked out for less disabled adults and that Inclusion Ireland is currently focusing on a new policy for severe or profound cases.

We don't have time it seems to wait for this more suitable new policy. Evidently we must press ahead, "decongregate" into the 'community', Minister McGrath certainly thinks so, without ever meeting the residents or seeing the most beautiful home that they now love, comprised mainly of chalets built around acres of garden and trees.

I call on Minister McGrath, Minister Harris, and indeed, why not! all our ministers to pull up a quad bike, hop on a wheelchair and enjoy the tranquillity, safety and peace that is St Mary of the Angels. After all, they've two days done in the Dáil, they deserve the break!

Triona Casey
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