

Women's Forum Northern Ireland

Report 2022

With life now slowly returning to 'normal', at the Annual General Meeting in February 2022 it was unanimously agreed that due to the exceptional circumstances of the past few years, the office bearers and committee would remain in post until the next AGM in 2023.

The guest speaker at the AGM was Justice Teresa Doherty CBE. Teresa was the 2018 Overall Winner of the Iris Colvin Lifetime Achievement Award.

Teresa was the first woman to be appointed a provincial legal officer, a Principal Magistrate, and a Judge in the South Pacific region. She used her position to promote women's rights also to ensure prisoners were held in humane conditions. Teresa has made an enormous contribution to society, locally and internationally.

For the April meeting, we were fortunate to secure a speaker from the charity Hearing Dogs. Sue Benham accompanied by her dog Kristo gave an inspirational talk on auditory impairment. Sue had hearing (although limited) as a child but was diagnosed as being profoundly deaf at the age of 28 years. Describing hearing loss as virtually a hidden disability, Sue recalled how frightened she had felt when, during 'the troubles' while working in an office in Belfast city centre there was a bomb scare, the office was evacuated but no one knew to alert Sue as she hadn't heard the warning alarm. Sue emphasised the fact that hearing/loss of hearing doesn't just affect the one person BUT the family as a whole. Sue demonstrated a range of aids designed to enhance the quality of life for a person living with hearing loss. Kristo (the dog) wears a uniform, a smart burgundy coat with the charity name Hearing Dogs embroidered on it and he knows he's working once he gets his 'uniform'on. Kristo, I think, stole the show!

With the days getting longer and somewhat warmer and the restrictions enforced on everyone as a result the pandemic slowly easing, our guest speaker at the June meeting of Women's Forum NI, Evelyn Hoy attracted a good audience.

Evelyn Hoy was appointed Chief Executive of COPNI (Commissioner for Older People Northern Ireland) in September 2013 after joining the office in June 2012 as Head of Operations. Formerly a civil servant, Evelyn headed up the Good Relations Policy Unit in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister after previously having worked with the Victims and Survivors Commission and the Gender and Equality Unit.

Evelyn told us that COPNI was established by law in 2011. Its task was to ensure the adequacy and effectiveness of legislation for older people and to give an independent voice to people over the age of 60 years.

Evelyn gave a detailed account of the work of the office of COPNI – they conduct formal investigations into nursing homes where concerns have been raised; guidance and intervention on behalf of individuals in areas of social care, housing and pension rights; the many challenges people have faced/are facing as a result of Coronavirus; ageist discrimination and scammers. COPNI have been working very closely with the Scamming Partnership to publicise the many scams both romantic and financial that have escalated during the pandemic.

Each year a new work plan for the year is published. In the new plan for government, older people are classed in the high priority category.

One of the objectives of Women's Forum states that through fund-raising and the effective management of finances this will enable action to be taken to further the aims of Women's Forum; it was unanimously agreed that we should hold a Car Boot Sale. Saturday 30th July 2022 was the date best suited to the majority of members. We were so fortunate not just with the weather but also with the generosity of family and friends. The amount of hard work that had gone on behind the scenes was reflected in the takings when at 'closing time' we were able to bank a handsome sum of £305. It was anticipated that some of the remaining unsold stock may sell at a later stage, pushing up the final total. A great day was enjoyed by all!

A further £90.24 was able to be banked a couple of months later making the whole event so

worthwhile.

At our meeting in September 2022 we were delighted to welcome as our guest speaker Joanne Bunting MLA. Joanne is a Unionist politician representing the DUP and has been an MLA for East Belfast since 2016/Assembly Chief Whip/Member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Joanne gave us some insight into the broad spectrum of her work on a day to day basis working for ALL residents within East Belfast. Joanne then 'opened' the floor for a question and answer session on whatever topic anyone had issues with/concerns about. This proved very popular as the range of topics included hospital waiting times; integrated education; roads policing; the facing back of trees in public areas; crime statistics.

Joanne then shared with us the most recent public event to which she'd been invited – the honour of attending the arrival of Her Late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth 11's Funeral Cortège at Westminster Hall. Joanne said "It was a beautiful and moving ceremony in the presence of the King and the Royal Family. I will never forget this day as long as I live".

The final meeting of this year was 24 November 2022 when the guest speaker was Ms Betty Brown, Past President of Royal Ulster Academy

When the pandemic hit at the start of 2020, Betty found herself working full-time as the Director of RUA.

Betty is a very gifted and talented artist and sculptor. Betty's artistic talents have been to the fore from a very early age. She has been a practising visual artist since 1976 beginning as a painter followed by a significant change in direction to making large sculpture works in the mid 1980's.

Betty gave a power point presentation of some of her paintings and sculptures from over the years. A recurring theme in Betty's work has been the exploration of the human/animal relationship in sculptural form, using animals to convey characteristics from predatory and violent to vulnerable and fragile.

Not only has Betty had works exhibited at many exhibitions throughout Ireland and mainland Britain since early 1980's but she has lifted several prestigious awards and prizes and also has had work exhibited in public collections. Such a talent!

Betty currently has work exhibited in the Ulster Museum Belfast.

As the Biennial Luncheon and Presentation of the Iris Colvin Lifetime Achievement Award planned for 2022 had to be deferred – this event will now be held on Saturday 22 April 2023.

Carolyn Forster

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