

IN BRIEF

Named Lidl's Local Hero at the Pride of Ireland Awards, Sister Helen Culhane has helped over 600 children overcome debilitating grief, loneliness, fear and isolation by talking to them and listening to what they have to say. INSIGHT meets this truly remarkable person to learn her story.



## LIDL LOCAL HERO:

# Sister Helen Culhane

In less than five years, Sister Helen Culhane's Children's Grief Project has helped over 600 schoolchildren and young adults who have been affected by loss through death, separation or divorce.

Based in Limerick City, Helen's Children's Grief Project is a safe haven for those who need it most, a welcome sanctuary of support where children, young adults and their families can come together to overcome the deep sense of grief that is often a factor when a family is affected by death, separation or divorce.

'People frequently think that grief only occurs when there is a death,' explains Helen, 'but separation and divorce regularly result in

the same feelings, especially in children. Just as death changes everything so too does separation and divorce. Families are split and children are left trying to come to terms with the aftermath of living in this new world – a world where they feel a deep sense of loss, isolation and even despair.'

Through a process of open dialogue and listening, Helen is able to help even the most desperate of children overcome what she says can be 'a dangerous period of incapacitating grief'.

There are many indicators that help is needed, explains Helen. 'We see children here as young as four who are so very sad, you can see it in their

demeanour, in how they stand and walk and, most especially, in their eyes. We see children who have undergone a dramatic change in temperament, children who are suddenly either very removed or are very angry. Rage is a common factor; these children are angry at their parents and at the world around them yet they find it difficult to come to terms with these negative emotions. Many feel an unbearable sense of loneliness and confusion and nightmares are commonplace.' Without treatment, these feelings can result in 'lifelong pain', says Helen. 'As children grow to adulthood this pain will be buried deep down, but it will always be there, ready to inflict damage once again.'

### ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

To help children and young adults overcome their sense of loss and move on to a better future, Helen has devised a unique approach that is centred on the simplest form of human interaction – talking and listening.

'Children and young people need their own space to talk about death or about the feelings they have when their parents separate. The Children's Grief Project offers children a time-out from the world, a place where they know it is okay to speak about whatever is on their mind. There's no judgement here, there are no bad questions, no wrong answers, we offer a calm and welcoming environment where children receive one-to-one interaction and can simply talk about whatever is on their mind – when they're here, they know that we'll listen.' Working with children as young as four and up to 18 years old, Helen started the Children's Grief Project in late 2009. Moving from a successful career as a social worker and child play therapist, Helen explains that 'answering why I set-up the Children's Grief Project is a difficult question. It was certainly something I felt I needed to do. Limerick is the divorce capital of Ireland, as a social worker in Limerick I witnessed first-hand the deep effect separation has on children, the deep loss that they frequently feel. I also saw that there was nowhere for these children to go, no-one was trying to help them overcome their grief. I believed, with all my heart, that this was a




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calling and that I could help these children.' With the support of her order, the Sisters of Mercy, and with the assistance of local volunteers, Helen has certainly proven the value of her calling.

Today Helen helps 15 children every week and currently has a waiting list of over 40 children. 'Generally we can see a child within two months,' says Helen, 'this may sound like a long time to wait, but the national average waiting period for child psychology is two years.'

Such is the value of Helen's work that it has been widely recognised by her peers internationally and, whenever she has time, Helen gives both national and international lectures on the power of talk and listening as a means of healing children who are dealing with loss.

Yet, as she handles all the interactions herself, and much of the administration too, time is always a resource in high demand.

'I have wonderful support from my team of local volunteers, people who selflessly give their time whenever they can.' But Helen receives no official government support, 'our funding comes from the local parish and through donations.'

These donations are received primarily online and in the strictest of confidence – Helen does not know where they come from – 'there is no charge to families for the help we provide.'

### HEARTBREAKING HONESTY

Regardless of whether Helen is seeking to help a child or young adult overcome the effects of death, separation or divorce, the starting point is always the same. 'Commonly the relationship between parent and child has broken down, insofar as the child no longer feels able to communicate how they are feeling, instead they feel helpless, imagine being in a dark tunnel and being unable to see any way out.'

By talking to these children Helen is able to provide that much needed light. 'Children have a voice, that's something that parents, who are themselves under immense stress, can easily forget. When our children are ready and feel confident enough we involve their family, in the case of separation or divorce our aim is to help all members of the family begin communicating once again and come to a stage where the separated parents work together for the benefit of the child. In the case of death, we help the child come to terms with death and with their grief and, eventually, realise that it is possible to move on with life.' ●