

Projects Undertaken For The Community

The Provision of Education for the Disadvantaged

In the 1960's, the parish of Ballina initiated Traveller education. Traveller children were picked up from the bogs and lane-ways, and they were taken to evening classes in the Town hall, later in the Boys' School. The Sisters were invited to get involved in this work, which they did for years. When more Travellers enrolled in the two local primary schools in Ballina run by the Marist Brothers and the Mercy Sisters, this programme discontinued.

The Cara Club

In 1978 Sr. Margaret McHale responded to a request from parents who felt that they needed something outside of school for their children. The Cara Club was formed. That developed into 'Involve Youth Project' in Ballina.

Family Centre in Collins Close

While working as a Social Worker in the HSE (1975 – 1984), Sr. Margaret and a team of other social workers secured a house from Mayo County Council in Collins Close Ballina as it was then known, now St. Patrick's Estate, and they set up a Community Centre for disadvantaged families. Later on, this project became known as the Parkside Community Development Project.

St. Paul's Junior Training Centre

Some teenagers, especially those from the Traveller Community, struggled with mainstream education. Sr. Margaret recognised this gap and was given permission to leave her position as Social worker in the HSE to address this. She secured a house from Sr. Aquinas in Shanaghy Heights Ballina, and she managed St Paul's Junior Training Centre from 1984 – 1990.

St. Catherine's Workshop

In the early 1980's, the Convent decided to close its long established farming business. The farmyard buildings showed promise of re-purposing. A safe recreational facility where the opportunity to provide valuable life-skills for early school leavers was seen as worth exploring.

Sr. Mary Gallagher contacted ANCO and VEC for advice and support. ANCO agreed to undertake the renovation and refurbishment of the buildings. The Department of Labour grant-aided the project to the tune of €25,000. The VEC was open to a monetary contribution for heat and light, as well as some teaching hours for a part-time staff.

Sr. Colette Dwyer, National Co-Ordinator of Traveller Services, was contacted. An application for a 24 place Training Centre was submitted to the Department of Education and it was approved: Trainees would receive a weekly allowance; ANCO would fund the raw materials; VEC would fund 100 teaching hours per week, and pay for light, heat and general maintenance. A board of Management, representative of all the interested bodies was set up. Sr. Mary was appointed Director and six part-time teachers were appointed.

St. Catherine's opened its doors to 12 trainees on December 4th 1984. 12 more came in January 1985. Sr. Mary left there in 1994 and Kevin Feerick was appointed Director. He too, started on December 4th 1984. For 23 years, scores of trainees and many teachers, enjoyed the experience that was St. Catherine's!

The Community Centre

Sister M. Aquinas was one of the founding members of the Community Centre in Ballina in 1970. Here people were welcome to call in, rest and relax, play cards and enjoy food. The Community Centre is still in operation and Sisters of Mercy volunteer various services. Sr. M. Kevin Gaughan – now Sr. Eva Gaughan, spent one academic year 1974 – 1975, in Social Services, Limerick, before replacing Sr. M. Aquinas in Community Centre Ballina. As well as continuing Meals on Wheels Services, Sr. Eva attended Social Gatherings for the Elderly. She provided a laundry service to some. Visitation of the elderly and housebound was mutually beneficial and enjoyable.

A Wheelchair Hostel

With the assistance of a local committee, Sr. Aquinas helped establish a wheelchair Hostel in Cowleyville, Ballina. When the accommodation there was no longer adequate, she and the committee purchased a site and in 1982, they built a magnificent residence for wheelchair users on the outskirts of the town off Killala Road, known as Emmanuel House. Later, they added a few semi-

detached houses for seniors on the same grounds. The hostel was run jointly by the committee and the Cheshire Foundation. The Ballina Cheshire Foundation was formed in December 2011, when the last 5 people transferred from Emmanuel House to 2 newly-built bungalows, fully wheelchair accessible, in Belleek wood near Ballina town.