

Derry Journal

'I can still see Mickey Devine laying there'



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OK

striker had died.

Having grown up in a strong republican family in Derry, the sound of banging bin lids - a traditional sign that houses were to be raided by the RUC and British army - was nothing new to Mrs Moore, but by 1981 it had taken on a new significance.

At that time, the Derry woman was heavily involved in campaigning for the rights and welfare of republican prisoners.

Over the turbulent period of the hunger strikes, which saw ten republicans die in Long Kesh prison, her campaign activities would take her all over the world, raising awareness of the prison struggle.

They also brought her to the prison hospital in Long Kesh where she watched Derry hunger striker Mickey Devine, die an agonising death after 62 days on hunger strike.

Being an republican, the tradition of hunger striking was something Mrs Moore was aware of while growing up, but she said she never thought she would see it at first hand.

“Both my parents were very dedicated republicans in Derry and growing up I was always knew about Irish history, including the hunger strikes of Terence MacSweeney and others. I remember when Michael Gaughan and Frank Stagg died on hunger strikes in English prisons in 1974 and 1976. I thought it was a terrible way to die, all alone in English prisons. They did not have the support the 1981 hunger strikers had here a few years later. Their deaths had a big impact on me but I had no idea that it would come to my door just a short time later,” she said.

When Bobby Sands began his hunger strike on May 1 1981, Mrs Moore, like many republicans, got involved in street protests and demonstrations in support of the prisoners. “Protests were happening every day. Black flags were flying from houses and we all got involved, My mother would not have missed a march or a protest,” she explained.

“I remember laying in bed when I heard the bin lids and I knew that Bobby Sands had died and I just sat and cried. We had all hoped that he wouldn't have to die,” she said.

Following his death, the Derry woman threw herself into the H Block campaign and formed a close connection to Mickey Devine. "Mickey didn't have much of a family left so I was asked to act as his 'aunt.' I went to meetings with the other hunger strikers relatives and, eventually as the weeks wore on, went to Long Kesh to the prison hospital," she said.

Mrs Moore said of all the campaign events she attended, one in particular stands out. "We went to Dublin to see the Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, in Leinster House. Thomas McElwee was close to death at the time and his mother, May, was with us.

"I spoke to Fitzgerald and told him I was not asking him to save the life of Thomas McElwee, and then pushed a chair out of the way and got down on my knees in front of him and said I was begging him to save his life. He said there was nothing he could do and he walked out of the room.

"His secretary, Liam Hurrigan, was there and I told him we would be taking over the building. He asked us not to damage anything, which we were not going to do anyway, and then he brought us in tea on a silver tray. We were eventually carted out of the building by the Gardai," she said.

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As the summer wore on and Mickey Devine's condition deteriorated, Mrs Moore moved her attentions to Belfast and Long Kesh.

"I started going up to Long Kesh with Mickey's sister, Margaret, and I stayed with republicans in west Belfast. I went into the prison hospital every day from 8am to 8pm and my husband, Patsy, went in from 8pm to 8am. As soon as I came out of the prison I was out speaking about the hunger strike around west Belfast.

"I remember the first day I went in to the prison hospital to see Mickey and someone had packed a lunch for us. We sat in the corridor outside where he was, eating sandwiches and I thought of him laying there starving himself to death and I couldn't eat a bite. That was the last time I brought any food in.

“The screws brought food into the room every day and the smell of it was hard to take. They brought a tray with breakfast and then lunch and then dinner. It smelled better than the ordinary prison food and I think they were just doing it to taunt him,” she said.

She also said she was impressed by the determination of the Derry hunger striker. “He used to squeeze my hand and tell me that he did not want to be taken off the strike. He was so committed. As he got worse I used to try to wet his lips with water but he shut them tight because he didn’t even want that,” she remembered.

Mrs Moore said one poignant memory from her time with Mickey Devine stands out above others. “A screw always sat in the room with us and I decided that I was not going to entertain them so I started to say the Rosary. I remember Mickey squeezing my hand and telling me to keep going as a single tear trickled down his cheek. I wiped the tear away.”

The Derry woman also recalled Mickey Devine asking for his children from his hospital bed. “It was his son’s birthday and he asked me to get a card. I put a few pounds in it and told Mickey that he can’t die now because he owes me money.”

She also said she still pictures the hunger striker when she closes her eyes. “He is still with me. I can see him laying there with the tears running down his face squeezing my hand. Even after all these years that is a clear memory,” she said.

Mrs Moore, who is currently receiving treatment for cancer, said she thought of the hunger strikers while she was in hospital. “I just kept thinking of Mickey laying there. It was such a terrible experience to see him starving and thirsting to death; to watch him die before my eyes. I was closest to him but I also couldn’t stop thinking of Thomas McElwee as well. He was so lightly made up,” she recalled.

The mother of five also said the experience evoked her maternal instincts. “All the time I was there with Mickey I kept imagining ‘what if it was one of my sons?’ I think many women across the county would have had the same thought, regardless of whether they were republican or not and agreed with what the hunger strikers were doing. They could see the humanity of it. Any mother could picture their son there.

“Even though I was and am a dedicated republican and understood and supported what the men were doing, I

don't think I could have sat and watched my son on it. I would have signed him off. But Mickey had faith in me and I could not let him down," she said.

Mrs Moore said she was broken hearted when Mickey Devine died on August 21st. "I was not there when he died. Patsy phoned me as I was getting ready to go to Long Kesh and simply said, 'Mickey's dead.' It broke my heart. Even still I get emotional thinking about it," she said.

A major rally has been planned in Derry on Sunday May 1st and Mrs Moore encouraged as many people as possible to attend. "They should never be forgotten. I may not be able to take part in the march but I will be there. I wouldn't feel right if I missed it."

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