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106-108FM

WMB Social Entrepreneur 2013 –

Jane McKenna

LauraLynn House

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By finding strength in grief and turning it into giving, Jane McKenna created the LauraLynn Children's Hospice Foundation in 2001. Jane's story is one of tragedy but acts as inspiration to anyone who has lost a loved one. Jane lost her two daughters to serious illness. Her youngest daughter Laura was born with a hole in her heart, and having endured two serious operations, went on to have a few relatively good years, with the final repair operation to come. Sadly, Laura did not survive and died in 1999, aged just four years old. Jane describes Laura as "a very happy, funny, beautiful little girl. A real Shirley Temple with her mass of curls, she always had a smile and made us all laugh so much - she was so cute and so brave".

Her eldest daughter Lynn had 13 years of perfect health until she was diagnosed with Leukaemia on the very day her younger sister passed away. How she coped with her illness, her adored sister's sad death and her own impending death was an inspiration to her parents. Jane says: "Lynn had a wonderful three weeks in which she knew she was dying, wished it could be different, but accepted it with dignity, aged just 15 years old. She had great courage and huge acceptance. She lived every minute of those weeks to the full, which is how we should all live our lives. She taught us how to live and how to die. It is why we are where we are, and why we survive. While our own situation is very sad, there are many families coping with far worse. Our hope is to help those families out there, whose children have life-limiting and/or life-threatening conditions, and are coping at present with limited support."

Losing both daughters within a year and eight months apart was heart rendering but it was through these tragedies that Jane became all too aware that Ireland had no children's hospice. Since



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L-R: Garrett Harte, Newstalk and Jane McKenna, LauraLynn House.



then she has worked tirelessly towards fulfilling her dream of building a home that would provide a peaceful, private environment in which children are able to die with dignity. On her strength to carry on, Jane is diplomatic: "You either get up or you don't."

Unaware of the enormity of the task she was going to take on, it was only after 9/11 and a letter to Pat Kenny that Jane properly embarked on the idea to set up the LauraLynn Foundation. Despite her own tragedy she was struck by the devastation that the terrorist act had left on so many and it inspired her to do something. From one newspaper article cheques started coming in the door and Jane says: "it started itself. I either had to send those cheques back or go for it. I was amazed then and I still am amazed today at how generous and how kind people are. Really it's the thousands of people who have built the LauraLynn Children's Hospice."

For the first five years Jane was very much a one-woman-operation. She cites the support of friends and family also but says "It was tough at times, my whole life was taken up, 24 hours a day for five years. I often look back now thinking how did I do it, maybe it was what kept me going." Once she embarked on the journey of the foundation

however, Jane had no doubts or reservations: "On my own I would have raised about a million a year."

Jane set about her research, even visiting Little Bridge House, a children's hospice in Devon. Then in 2006 having met with the Chairman and CEO of The Children's Sunshine Home, the LauraLynn Children's Hospice made the decision to merge. By 2011 Jane's dream became a reality and Ireland's first hospice for children, the LauraLynn House opened. Two years on the hospice has six staff between full-time and part-time, eight children's rooms and to date it has cared for 180 families. Jane says: "I've tried to pull back simply because I think it's the time to do so. I'm trying to write a book about the girls also. But I'm not good at saying no and I don't think there will ever be a time when I can really step back as my heart wouldn't let it."

The aim she says for the hospice is to put life into a child's day, not days into a child's life. "While it's sad, you can't change the ending, so that's what I always try to get across. It's really about making the best of the life, however tough, however long or short it is and some will live longer than others. A lot won't live very long lives but it's mostly about the respite for the family.

"Lynn had 13 years of good health and Laura had

pretty good health for a child with a heart condition, a few reasonably good years. We were very lucky in that but a lot of children with these various conditions are physically and mentally disabled and it is 24 hour care, so the hospice is for the parents and the other siblings who are well too. It's giving them those breaks and choices. The other family, as I call our nurses, can do the caring so the family can have more quality time. We have the little butterfly suite; some parents don't want the memory of their child dying in their home so it's very much about all of that as well."

Turning of the sod on LauraLynn House in September 2009 remains Jane's proudest moment since starting on this journey. Two years later President Mary McAleese officially opened its doors. Thinking about how far she's come Jane says that she hopes her girls have been with her every step of the way: "There's always that little doubt, is there anywhere else out there? But I have to believe and I think they've somehow in spirit been with me. It's all gone in a lot of ways pretty smoothly. I would have worried especially when I was on my own about the money - I was always worried that anything would happen, if a cent went astray, you still worry to this day that anybody would say something. That's the

thing that all charities have to worry about. It would only take one thing, even if it wasn't true."

Jane has never taken a penny from the LauraLynn House, she has invested herself wholeheartedly on a voluntary basis. So on her book Jane says: "I started it years ago and I suppose it was about Laura originally and my anger and confusion. Then when the LauraLynn House opened I thought well maybe now is the time, so it was January before last that I decided I would start a book about my girls and how they dealt with life and death, Lynn more so because of her age and then LauraLynn House. I hope it sells, some money will go to LauraLynn House and some money might go to myself as my little treat, but it mightn't sell much, it mightn't make much money, but I want to do it whatever happens."

LauraLynn House receives no state funding to date so donations remain key. On her greatest wish Jane says, "that we didn't need any children's hospices at all but we know we do. So we try to help everyone we can in whatever way we can help them. But of course we need at least one in every province. I'm sure in time that will happen. That's my vision." To make a donation to the LauraLynn House visit:

www.lauralynn.ie