

IT WASN'T PERFECT BUT IT CHANGED OUR LIVES

Having dodged sniper bullets aged just three and witnessed the violence of the Troubles her entire childhood, this writer says the GFA should never be underestimated

IF YOU were to ask me about my childhood, my automatic response would be to tell you that it was nothing out of the ordinary.

We had a happy family and a comfortable life, a sentiment that probably most of my friends would repeat. But on reflection, we weren't like other children. We were of the generation who were born during the Troubles.

One of my earliest memories is being at the top of a road in Strabane, where my mother grew up. My elder sister and brother were 10 and almost nine, I was three and we were staying with my granda due to the unexpected and slightly early arrival of our youngest sibling, who was making his entrance in a hospital 20 minutes down the road.

On this warm and overcast August day we were out for a walk when shooting broke out — a sniper was firing at the army and the army was returning fire. Granda shouted at us to lie on the pavement, which we did, but it started to rain and, not being me, I stood up and demanded a hat.

Soldiers started shouting and my poor granda hauled me down to the ground again, lying almost on top of me as the firing continued and I seethed, face down on the pavement. I can remember the dark spots of heavy rain and my rage at a lack of suitable attire, not really understanding what was going on over my head.

I can only imagine the sheer terror my poor granda was feeling, caught up in sniper fire with three young children. Growing up, it became a story that went into my family lore, that I was teased about by siblings and cousins.

Later on we used to giggle about the way Granda also called balaclavas 'ballyclabbers'. It really wasn't something to laugh at, given the story he was telling.

One night Granda opened the door to a gang of men in 'ballyclabbers'. These men, supposedly his own kind, beat him and tied him to a chair — no one is too sure if he was gagged or blindfolded — and kept him like that in his own kitchen all night. He was in his early 70s and after that he sat in the dark at night, scared to turn on the lights in case the men in the ballyclabbers came back.

It was a case of mistaken identity, with the intended target possibly a local SDLP councillor who lived nearby. But he didn't deserve to be beaten either, his crime



by Maeve Quigley

probably condemning an act of terrorism that had been meted out by the same crew. Granda's heart gave way a few years later when he was sitting in his chair in the dark. Those are just a couple of the stories from my own family — and we were the lucky ones. There are so many more from my 'normal' childhood, when we walked the streets of Derry talking about boys and bands while men — in most cases just a few years older than us — pointed their loaded rifles at us. Violence and terrifying incidents of some kind were an everyday

“THERE WERE LITTLE TESTS AND THERE WAS A 50% CHANCE YOU'D GET IT WRONG”

occurrence. Clearing out my family home a few years ago, I found a letter from the boys' secondary school where my father taught (pictured above right).

Sent to the parents of the children who went there, it detailed an event in which soldiers had struck and badly injured a teacher who was protecting his pupils on the school grounds.

Part of it reads: 'It is not simply a case of two individuals, who happen to be teachers and members of our staff being assaulted by a soldier, and one of them gravely injured having a head wound requiring eight stitches, a

fractured skull and other symptoms the seriousness of which are not known yet.

"The central issue is very much larger and very much more serious than this. It is, when your child is in our care and a soldier or someone else comes along and orders us away do we abandon your child to the intruder? Whoever he is?"

I can only imagine what those times were like for parents who were trying to bring up their children and allow them to lead ordinary lives amid the chaos of the regular bomb scares, explosions and murders.

They let us dander round shops, take our pocket money up to buy the latest singles, huddle over one coffee in the local cafe chatting for hours and do the things that teenagers do, while every second there was the chance that we might not come back from an innocent Saturday afternoon.

But then, what choice did people have other than to live their lives as best they could while chaos, death and violence surrounded them?

My aunt still tells a story of a bomb that went off as she was parking her car in the city centre one evening, the blast so powerful that it blew the car to the opposite side of the road.

In the momentary stillness that follows an explosion, she realised that she wasn't hurt, turned the key in the ignition and drove off. It wasn't until later that she started shaking.

Derry became a segregated city by circumstance, rather than by design, as one by one our Protestant neighbours moved to the other side of the river where they would feel safer.

Except for a couple of older women who stayed put, and the ones I met during my brief period

Groundbreaking moment: John Hume, Bono and David Trimble celebrate at the Yes concert. Inset right, the letter from the school where Maeve's father taught



in the Brownies at the Church of Ireland hall closest to our house, I didn't really know many Protestants but I was brought up to respect people of all communities and all faiths. Meetings with other schools did come very much in the style of one particular Derry Girls episode so it's no wonder the blackboard from it now has pride of place in the Ulster Museum.

When I left Derry for university in Belfast, all of that changed. My groups became mixed, my friends were people from all sides and shades.

Leaving wasn't that easy as there was no direct bus route between the two biggest cities in the North, meaning the choice was a private coach that only operated on weekends, a 2.5-hour train journey or a four-hour bus trip.

When we arrived in Belfast, we'd share a black taxi from the bus station — these were like minibuses and collected the first six people waiting so you'd often be sharing with strangers.

These taxis were generally run by one side of the community or the other and you were never too sure whose car you were getting

into. So if we were asked what bus we'd come off, we always said Coleraine. Or Limavady. Or another area which didn't distinguish you, as our own town was a giveaway. Depending on whether you said Derry or Londonderry, people knew immediately who you were.

There were other little tests used too by those involved in random sectarian beatings and it was always a 50 per cent chance that what you would say would be wrong.

Like the time masked men held a group of students who were leaving the technical college at the tip of East Belfast, close to a Catholic interface and demanded that they say the letter H.

'Haich' was a giveaway that you were brought up in the Catholic education system. 'Aich' meant you were not. If you knew the words of the Hail Mary, that was another giveaway.

Student politics back then was like a mini version of what was going on in the outside world. I wanted to do something to try and change the way we lived so I got myself on to the student council, on which some of today's

Assembly members were my peers. A couple of years ago, one of my friends, also involved in the intricacies of student politics back then, said of some of those with the more extreme views, 'Who handed them the keys when we weren't looking?'

But daily, no matter how much you tried, the murdering and violence would creep into your life, sometimes in small ways and at other times in the worst ways possible, the daily news a picture of horror. I do remember at times despairing after hearing the latest headlines.

I remember worrying about the safety of my family, and my blood still freezes if a firework happens to go off or a car backfires.

I regularly wondered why no one seemed to be doing anything to try and fix it as life after life was taken.

Lost Lives is a big thick book, detailing the people who died during the Troubles, or at least most of them, as every now and then something pops up from the sewers as a reminder that there's still plenty of work to do.

It doesn't give any details about

the 50,000 or more people who were maimed and injured, whose lives were changed forever, the victims who fell forgotten about in the Good Friday Agreement and who have only been recognised in the last couple of years.

Beyond them there's another circle of people whose lives were taken from them by the insidious

those who couldn't live with it and decided it was easier to leave the world.

It wasn't an even spread either — I'd say there are few who will argue that working class areas on both sides of the community were dealt the worst hand and it continues to be thus as the current lack of an Assembly allows rot to set in.

The North has always had real champions too, people who never wanted violence, people who never identified with one side or another, people who stood up to the bullies and led by example.

I found my tribe among the music lovers, who cared little for the colours of politics and less for the violence that dogged our every move.

At the time the Good Friday Agreement was signed, I was in London interviewing a rock band who were big news then. It felt alien to be watching from a distance as the speeches were made at Stormont.

I was working at the time for the Belfast Telegraph and also a magazine called Blank, which had been set up by Colin Murray —

creep of constant anxiety, the people who cry behind the closed doors of their GPs' surgeries, those who have spiralled into addiction due to the stress that living in a violent society caused,

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sprouts of sectarianism, sowed by a minority but boosted by social media and watered by criminal elements hiding behind various flags.

Peace is a fragile thing and it needs to be minded by compromise and respect.

Which is why the actions of people on both sides of the border matter.

The singing of a sectarian song by a football squad not born when the GFA was signed; the rhetoric of a hardline unionist who was eight in 1998; a supposed quip by a Dublin-born leader of a political party who didn't grow up the way I did; the constant yammering on about an All-Ireland referendum — all of these tiny things said by people who have no idea how our lives were stalked by terror could chip away and shatter what has been life-changing for so many.

I've seen varying opinions about the Good Friday Agreement over the past few days among my friends — some saying it handed power to the wrong people, others saying that at first they thought it was a sell-out but seeing how their child has had a different life has made them soften their opinion.

Another holds a similar view to myself. 'I really didn't care about the detail as long as people weren't dying.'

It wasn't a perfect document and the North is far from perfect. The trauma people suffered, the poverty that sections of society live in, the segregation of communities and the education system — all of these things still need to be addressed and the list goes on.

Many of the architects of this peace have since passed away but their bravery in moving forward will forever be remembered by the people of my generation who value what they did.

Twenty five years on, this fragile peace is still a work in progress but the fact that it exists is still, to me, nothing short of miraculous. The most important thing is, like that rock band, it keeps going. Because if people disregard what was set out 25 years ago, it won't be long before everyone loses.

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The most beautiful friendship

EVERY week Aoibhinn Breslin heads off to see her best friend. When she arrives, Fred will seek her out and put his head next to hers and the two pals will spend some quality time together.

During that time, Aoibhinn might touch Fred's face or feed him a carrot, she'll get on his back and he'll help her get what she needs as she puts her cheek on his brown back and holds on to his mane. For Fred is a very special horse, the best friend of a very special girl.

Aoibhinn was born with a rare metabolic syndrome called MTHFR deficiency. It means she is visually impaired, non-verbal, she has developmental issues and epilepsy, and needs assistance with much of her everyday life. Fred is her horse for the equine therapy she receives in Dublin's Child-Vision, where she goes to school.

'As a result of her condition, Aoibhinn has plenty of challenges,' says her mum Caitriona, who lives in Clondalkin with her husband Simon, Aoibhinn and her sister Soirse, 11. 'But in the face of all of these challenges, Aoibhinn is the most incredible determined little person that you could ever meet.'

For Aoibhinn, Fred's input into her week has been absolutely life-changing. 'She has been having equine therapy since she was six,' says Caitriona. 'When she gets up on Fred for their therapy, she just lights up, she comes alive. You'd want to see her face, it transforms her world in an instant. She is a happy little girl anyway but her whole existence lights up when she goes out with Fred.'

'Fred is her friend and in Aoibhinn's world she doesn't really have many friends. She has family members and friends but she doesn't have special friends and best friends like a typical 13-year-old, someone who is looking forward to seeing her and waiting for her to come by. So Fred is delighted to see her. He is excited, he can't wait and she can't wait. She loves him and he loves her.'

It's hard for Caitriona to put what she sees happening between the powerful beast, who is around 15 hands high, and her little girl,

Due to a very rare syndrome Aoibhinn Breslin has many challenges in her life but her connection with Fred the horse transforms the little girl's world

by Maeve Quigley

who has battled all her life. 'It's incredible,' she says of the interaction. 'It's a pure experience of deep connection between this powerful animal and this child. She connects with all the horses out there but Fred is her main guy, who she is with every week.'

'That whole experience of what happens when an animal and a human connect on a deep level is hard to put into words. It's brought tears to my eyes many a time, just being in that presence and that exchange happening between the two of them.'

'When Aoibhinn is with Fred she just has complete autonomy over her experience with him and he just sees her in her wholeness. It's pure love and acceptance. She communicates with him and is understood. She tells him what she wants and he knows what she wants without needing the language that would normally be required. It makes her

really happy and he's happy — it is such a beautiful experience.'

Fred and his work colleagues will be part of the Positive Strides area at this year's Dublin Horse Show, where people can learn about the benefits that horses can bring, from providing equine therapy solutions, access to riding for those with additional needs or to those from marginalised communities.

The Dublin Horse Show will run from August 18-21 at the RDS and alongside the show ponies and the glossy jumpers will be hard workers like Fred, whose kindness and consideration is making life better for so many families.

Caitriona had heard about equine therapy before Aoibhinn was diagnosed. She had read Rupert Isaacson's book *The Horse Boy*, about how horses had helped his autistic son communicate with the world. She followed Isaacson's story, hearing him on the Late Show but had no idea her own child would later benefit from a similar therapy.

'Aoibhinn wasn't diagnosed until she was two years old,' Caitriona, a yoga teacher, explains. 'We were told she would be quadriplegic and would never walk but she walked at the age of four. We were told that she probably would have

a major malformation on the brain so we were expecting the worst.'

'For a child with so many challenges and so many obstacles to overcome, who has proved doctors wrong and has been able to walk, thinking about the future and education for your child is really daunting. We had no experience of the world of special needs. We didn't know how that would look.'

'So to have somewhere like Child-Vision and the school she goes to on the grounds, St Joseph's School for the Visually Impaired, providing the right amount of therapeutic intervention is fantastic. Aoibhinn at home needs assistance with all areas of her life, feeding, toileting, she has epilepsy and she has quite a lot of medical intervention also.'

'For us, getting to Child Vision and knowing that we have the right support and we are getting the best and most appropriate help for her is a relief. When she is in school and when she is accessing therapies she is having an absolute ball and she is being so well looked after. We couldn't send Aoibhinn to school unless there was a team of

Optimistic: Occupational therapist Audrey Darby



'She comes alive, her whole existence lights up'

'The animals sense when the child has a good or bad day'

'There is no disability when she is with Fred'



Magical: Aoibhinn with her pal Fred Pictures: JULIEN BEHAL

and benign around them. 'They give us signals all the time that they enjoy their work, which is lovely.'

Aoibhinn will sometimes sit up on Fred, or she will lie on her back with her face to his tail, she might lie across him on her tummy. Therapists work with her and Fred so that she can feel normal movement and so her brain learns to give her more control over her own body.

'Her walking has become better over time and she is more stable which is really important,' says Audrey. 'For her to be able to manoeuvre and walk in her environment is very valuable to her carer for the longer term and also for her own sensory input.'

'Fred allows all of that. He allows her to lie down, he allows us to bend her legs against resistance to hold them across his neck. No matter how many blankets you put on him, she will move them all — the hand is under every blanket so she can touch him. That's what she likes. She will wiggle around and lie draped over Fred all relaxed, listening to his breathing.'

'It's just really lovely for her because there is nowhere else in her life that she can get that level of movement and gentle sensory input on her own terms.'

Caitriona agrees but also says communicating with Fred through sounds means Aoibhinn is more communicative afterwards at home and she's also more emotionally settled.

'For a 13-year-old girl with special needs who isn't doing the typical world of discos and clubs and GAA and all of the other things that a child her age has going on in life, it's given her a thing,' says Caitriona. 'Aoibhinn doesn't have anywhere like that, where she can go but when she is rocking out to see

Fred every week, she has her thing and it's horses. The horse world makes her happy and makes us happy. She loves it and it is magical.'

'It is helping her reach her potential and live a full and happy life. There is a deep connection with this powerful animal that he meets her where she is at and in her wholeness. It's a fantastic, joyful environment where Aoibhinn can express herself and she is understood.'

'It creates a space for her to be and her world opens up. There is no disability when she is with Fred, it's just pure ability and pure connection. It is a life beyond her disability really, a life of potential and happiness and joy.'

Child-Vision is part of the Positive Strides at the Dublin Horse Show in an effort to raise awareness about the work they do and the work the horses do.

'They are hoping to raise €1.6 million for a covered arena, where they can help more children, but the main thing for the Horse Show is getting recognition for their unsung heroes with hooves.'

'In the equine industry it is really important that the therapeutic side is acknowledged,' says Audrey. 'We have a fabulous tradition of horsemanship in Ireland and this needs to be acknowledged alongside it. Our horses are doing an incredible job.'

'There are horses who are wonderful for racing or show jumping, for dressage and all of those other disciplines. But there is a whole body of horses doing incredible work making life-changing differences for children and I think it is important that they are acknowledged among all the wonderful things that the equine industry is doing in Ireland.'

■ THE Dublin Horse Show takes place at the RDS from August 18-21. See dublinhorshow.com for tickets and more details.

requires medication for her epilepsy and she needs that medical team behind her. ChildVision also has a multidisciplinary team for speech and language, physiotherapy and services like orientational mobility as well as the transformational intervention we have had through equine therapy.'

'It has changed her life. She is having so much fun — the engagement, the connection and all the huge benefits she is getting that she is not even aware of.'

'It is incredible how much she has developed and how she has grown as a person. She is able to express herself through all of the intervention that she has had.'

'It's something Audrey Darby, the occupational therapy manager and equine assisted occupational therapist with ChildVision loves to see. For a child like Aoibhinn, Fred not only offers love and connection but a physical input into the muscles and tone of the child on his back as Audrey and the horse handlers use specialist techniques to improve sensory and physical stability. Hippotherapy, to give its correct term, is complicated but can help with development issues.'

It was Audrey who decided to try horses at ChildVision after learning about the therapy by chance almost 20 years ago.

'I started from not having had an equine background and came at it from a therapeutic medium,' she explains. 'Since then we have developed the service and I have

studied a lot with other OTs and with other physios who are using horses as a therapeutic tool. We can see the children in the gym on a ball or we can see them in school or we can put them on a horse and use the movement to facilitate the gain of goals.'

'It's not just about learning to ride a horse, it's more about the movement of the horse and the way it walks, connecting to the child who may well be lying on its back.'

'It affects your muscle tone,' Audrey says. 'If you can get the child to relax with the movement then it happens in their body in a normal way. If they have high tone or low tone it causes that movement to happen normally. What this does is it sends signals to their brain about normal movement and the brain then registers it because 90 per cent of what happens in our bodies is subconscious. The brain is open and acceptable to recognising things that are good for us and will help development. So those pathways in the child start to be trained and that has a lasting effect over time.'

'If you can work with that person on a horse and give their brain so many opportunities to learn normal movement and normal tone

then the brain learns it and carries it on.'

There are no saddles. Children lie or sit on the horses' backs supported by therapists and handlers. It deals with the child's proprioceptive and vestibular senses.

'Proprioceptive sense is the awareness of your body in space without having to see it so that you are aware of the way your body is moving and it allows you to do things like get up steps and not bump into things and negotiate your environment,' says Audrey.

'You understand where your body is in relation to things around you. If your proprioceptive sense is not good you won't easily achieve a calm alert state, something that comes naturally to most of us.'

Then there is the vestibular sense. That's the sense of movement, knowing that a lift with no windows is moving or not, whether it's going fast or slow, up or down, it's that awareness of movement. It is a very powerful one to stimulate us and make us more alert and more engaged.'

'If there is not enough stimulation of this sense in children they basically won't develop because the job of a child is to go to a playground and to run and jump and stimulate that sense so that it matures so they can be

more regulated and learn to engage with the world.'

'If you stayed in for two or three days in a row you would feel like a caged animal so you need to get out and you need to move. Children with sensory processing difficulties may be averse to vestibular input and the way they get it on a horse is very gentle so they are able to accept it. It helps them develop.'

'The horses know how to help a child, they have emotions absolutely,' says Audrey.

'Fred is incredible because if a child is upset or unbalanced, he will just go stoic and quiet,' she says. 'He knows we will sort it out and that this will be ok. He will go over to children, seek them out and look to connect with them. Aoibhinn will stick her fingers up his nose and he will let her because he enjoys her.'

'He will stand and wait for her to come over and he will be there with her in that moment. She gives him a carrot and she delights in the sounds and the little drooly bit.'

'The animals are highly trained and they are by nature very calm around children with needs and yes they definitely sense when the child is having a good day or a bad day. They are incredible. Each of them has their own connection with people and they enjoy the work that they do, which is most important.'

'They are happy coming up to sessions they are happy to see the children and be with the children

Mechanic who raped his 'friend' gets 7 years

By Declan Brennan and Isabel Hayes

A MECHANIC who raped a woman at her house in a 'flagrant abuse of their friendship' has been jailed for seven years.

Mutlu Dalar, 42, was convicted by a Central Criminal Court jury in January of anally raping the woman at her home on June 8, 2019. Dalar, of Dublin Street, Ballyjamesduff, Co. Cavan, had pleaded not guilty to the offence.

At a previous sentence hearing, defence counsel John Byrne told Judge Tony Hunt that Dalar accepts the verdict 'but does not agree with it'.

The court heard that the woman in the case wanted Dalar to be named but wished to retain her own anonymity.

On the date of the offence, Dalar, who worked as a mechanic, telephoned the woman who was a friend and she invited him to her house for tea. When he was there he tried to kiss her, but she told him no as she was with someone else.

After they had tea together, the woman was walking Dalar out when he grabbed her in the hallway and pinned her against the banisters. He then anally raped her. After the rape, he left and the woman contacted a friend in a distressed state, the court heard.

Dalar was arrested in July 2019 and claimed that the sexual activity was consensual. He was charged and remanded in custody but later released on

'I feel I just cannot live in my house any longer'

High Court bail. In her victim impact report, the woman stated that before the rape she was 'a bubbly friendly person' who never saw any wrong in anyone.

'I was raped in my home by someone who I thought was my friend', she said. Since the attack she had to take medication to deal with the effects and with panic attacks. 'I feel I just cannot live in my house any longer,' she said.

She said that being questioned about the rape in court made her feel like she was one who did something wrong and she got physically sick on her way home from court.

Sentencing Dalar yesterday, Judge Hunt said his actions were a 'flagrant abuse of the sanctity of [the woman's] dwelling, a flagrant abuse of their friendship and a flagrant abuse of the hospitality she extended to him on this occasion'.

He noted the pain and humiliation suffered by the woman and that she found the trial difficult.

Judge Hunt handed down an eight-year sentence and suspended the final year on several conditions, including that Dalar remain under post-release supervision for three years and have no contact with the woman without her permission.

Criminals sent back to Poland

TEN Polish criminals operating a drug ring across Dublin have been deported to face charges in their native country.

Gardaí from the Garda Extradition Unit surrendered nine men and one woman to the Polish National Police at Baldonnel Aerodrome in Co. Dublin yesterday.

Sources have told the Irish Daily Mail that those deported included 'serious criminal elements' in the drug scene in pockets of inner-city Dublin. While the 10 deportations represent a success for gardaí, officers believe that there is still a cohort of associates operating in areas of the capital.

All ten people were detained on foot of European arrest warrants either yesterday or on Thursday. The warrants were issued by Polish authorities for offences including assault, drug trafficking, theft, fraud, and inciting prostitution in Poland.

As long as Una is around I'll be fine

That's the claim from Fair City star Bryan Murray, who says his partner on and off-screen is the reason he's coping so well with an Alzheimer's diagnosis

by Maeve Quigley



who had written Halcyon Days, the reason why he was pulling out. At that stage, Bryan hadn't said publicly that he had Alzheimer's so Deirdre was one of the first people to hear officially, outside of the family circle. Her first reaction was, "I'll write a play for him". I kind of thought, did she not hear what I said? He can't learn the lines. But she did and she has written this play and it is fantastic.'

For An Old Song, Half Forgotten, Bryan won't have to learn lines, he will be reading the part of James O'Brien, a man in a nursing home who has Alzheimer's. When a string quartet comes to visit the nursing home, the music ignites something in him.

'It's fantastic,' says Una. 'It's a play that Bryan won't have to learn, he'll be reading it. There's a young man, Matthew, who will be playing Bryan's character as the young man and he's also kind of a guide in the play as well as being his younger self. It's fascinating. There'll be a string quartet there as well, with music specially written, so it's very exciting.'

The play begins on April 14 and runs until May 4. For Bryan, it feels like a return to his spiritual home. 'I was a member of the Abbey Theatre Company from my 21st birthday, and most of the jobs I did at the very beginning of my career were in the Peacock Theatre where this play will be,' he says. 'It is one of the best venues in the whole of the city of Dublin because of the closeness that the audience has to the stage. Dee's great, she's a terrific writer. She's very emotional and she's great to work with, so it's exciting.'

Bryan, of course, is a stalwart of both stage and screen in Ireland and the UK, best remembered for his roles as lovable rogue Florrie Knox in The Irish RM and one of soap's most iconic villains, the absolutely sinister Trevor Jordache in Brookside, who ended his days under the patio of his family home.

It's some achievement for a working-class boy from Inchicore, who always wanted to be an actor but didn't know how until one of his electrician pals told him about an Abbey Theatre open day in a community centre nearby. It was the height of the 1960s but so serious was he that he cut off his hippie hair, went to the auditions and the rest is history.

Bryan is full of fun and stories about his life as an actor, being coached by the late, great Cyril Cusack, his friend and supporter from his early days at the Abbey. 'I adore the job,' says Bryan. 'I love being a different character because you can find things inside yourself, every part has a new opening and a new door to go through. So you're actually kind of stepping outside of yourself. It's a glorious achievement. It's kind of spiritual and spooky.'

The thought of all that being taken away was one of the things that persuaded Bryan to talk about his diagnosis publicly. It took a couple of years, Una says, for him to come to terms with it, but it was Ediel Carey, a specialist Alzheimer's nurse from the



Working relationship: Una and Bryan as Renee and Bob on Fair City

LivDem course, who encouraged him to tell people. 'The more Bryan thought about it, the more he thought, well, if I can come out and say to people, "I have dementia", and they see me working, they'll realise it's not the end of the world,' says Una. 'Which it's not. It will be four years in May since he was diagnosed. He's still working. He's still in Fair City, he's doing this play and we're doing another later this year.'

Bryan is endlessly positive. It's always been in his nature, he says, to be upbeat and look on the bright side and he felt it was his duty to

reveal what was happening to him. He will also be the ambassador for this year's Alzheimer's Society Tea Day on May 5.

'Life became a little bit easier when people knew about it, because it wasn't something that you were hiding, or covering up,' Una says. 'We know things change all the time — Bryan is changing as well — but we're going forward. That's important, making the most of what we have.'

As a couple onscreen as well as off, they are both integral to the Fair City team, who have been phenomenal in helping Bryan. 'People

Solid support: Una and Bryan are dealing with his diagnosis



in constant contact. 'I worry all the time,' Una admits. 'I worry for the future. My mother had dementia, my grandmother had dementia. I'm worried I'll get it and what happens then? So I can't think too far ahead. I try to live in the moment, because there is no point in thinking about what the future will bring.'

She has received help from the Alzheimer's Society and Ediel Carey, who also saw the need for support for carers and family members who had little to help on an ongoing basis.

'She started this group and we go every second week,' says Una. 'It's one and a half, two hours but it helps you realise that you are not on your own. It's wonderful to have that support. I'm not a good person for asking for help. I find it very difficult. So sometimes you just feel very much on your own.'

Sure, she says, there are moments when she feels down but it is important to make sure everything is as good as it can be. Around 32 years ago, Una lost her only daughter Sorcha to a cot death at just 17 weeks and though there were times she felt like giving up, she had to keep going for her son, Tim, then four, and baby Fionn, who followed later.

It's something she and Bryan have often talked about. When they first met, they talked and talked and talked, she says. Romance came a lot later.

'When you are faced with serious things like that, you realise you could give up, you could fold but you keep going and find a way out of it and around it

and that's what I am doing again. I realise that I am stronger than I thought in the face of things so I just keep going.'

For a couple who clearly mean so much to each other, there's no other choice than to make every day as good as it can be.

'This woman is a dynamo,' Bryan says. 'The whole business with Alzheimer's, her support of me, is beyond belief. I mean, truly beyond belief. If it wasn't for Una being around, I wouldn't be like the way I am now. I love her to bits. She's fantastic.'

It has been four years since his diagnosis but Bryan only wants to show the positive side of what is happening. He's not afraid.

'At 73, you know, you're not only in the half-time of the play of life, you're in the finale. We just have to go along with it. There's nothing else that we can do, but I have no intention of dying any time soon. You just have to make the best of what you can when you have it. That seems like a silly thing to say but that's the way it is. I wouldn't change it. I've loved every single thing that's happened in my life, I have few regrets. I've no intention of falling off the stage yet.'

He pauses and looks lovingly at his partner, whose sparkling blue eyes are fixed on him, smiling across the kitchen table and says: 'As long as Una Crawford O'Brien is around, I'll be fine.'

■ *An Old Song, Half Forgotten* will be at the Abbey Theatre, Peacock Stage, Dublin from April 14 to May 6. For details and tickets see abbeytheatre.ie or call 01 878 7222

'I now have to remember everything for both of us'