

The Story of Romi Ramtohol

by Alice Leahy

From the streets of Dublin back to his home- land faraway

It was in the early 1970s when a Surgical Registrar working in Baggot Street Hospital asked me to consider going to Mauritius to help him set up an Intensive Care Unit. After some reflection and discussion with some colleagues I decided not to go. These were pre-Google days and Mauritius was an exotic island, a world away. In the Indian Ocean with a population of 1.27 million – it is an expensive tourist destination.

Since then I have often wondered how different my life would have been if I didn't go down "the road less travelled". I decided to work with people labelled homeless, outsiders to my way of thinking. All of us at that time would have been familiar with the men of the road, some people ending up in the County Homes and some drifting to cities here, in England and some even in the U.S.

Life in our Capital City and other cities in the 1970s ensured living an anonymous life safe with their personal history and finding



Paris to Port Louis 8,603 km

hospitality and odd jobs, often in gardens of comfortable, generous people. Food and shelter was provided by voluntary bodies and so often religious groups had an open door. Knocking on the door of a hostel ensured a bed for the night without having to divulge too much personal information, it often being their only possession. How things have changed in our world in so many ways in the past 50 years and how time flies. The human condition doesn't change even though we now use a language often cold and impersonal, more suited to the corporate world to describe pain, isolation, even poverty.

The people I refer to still exist, often struggling to cope, but often finding a way to live a meaningful life to the beat of their own drum that manages to challenge us all, planners, researchers and politicians alike.

The national and universal conversation around homelessness is now almost exclusively about money and bricks and mortar. Yes, we do have a major housing problem that will only be solved by building more houses. Last year, we in the Alice Leahy Trust made a submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage which can be viewed on our website www.aliceleahytrust.ie

In it we highlighted the difference between the need for hous-

ing as opposed to the many social issues leading to homelessness. The social issues will continue – for example broken relationships, addiction, mental health issues and much more. This must be acknowledged and dealt with and they are much more difficult to address than housing alone.

People visiting our cities and, sadly, some big towns through the country will be familiar with sleeping bags in doorways, tents in laneways and too often people selling and taking drugs. This is common throughout the developed world. We all could too easily ignore it, often apportion blame to a fellow human being without acknowledging how lucky we are and how easily we could be that person.

Mauritius entered my life again recently when we met Romi – this is his story with a happy ending.

Romi came to Ireland age 32 in 2006. He had a stable family background, his father was a pastor. He worked in catering in Dublin and around the country; Kiely's in Donnybrook he often spoke about with affection. He had certain eccentricities – don't we all. When he first came to us in 2014 in our small basement centre in the heart of the Liberties he was working but sleeping rough, unable to get accommodation, sadly

like so many people today. He got hostel accommodation from time to time but his eccentric behaviour didn't always help him to maintain it. He was assaulted on the streets in 2016 and ended up with a clot on his brain two years later. He then couldn't work and couldn't get money, often resorting to eating from bins outside supermarkets.

Like many other people, he ended up in court for being drunk and a danger to traffic – a minor offence and a fine was suggested – but he had no means. As he could not pay the fine he ended up in prison, but having a bed, getting a rest and good food offered him some respite. He then began to think of going back home – how would he get there?



Garda Damien McCarthy, Romi Ramtohul and Garda Alan O'Dowd with me at Dublin Airport en route to Mauritius – I didn't go to Mauritius this time either but I was happy in the knowledge that Romi was in good hands.



Garda Damien McCarthy and Garda Alan O'Dowd with Jeanette O'Brien, Manager of the Alice Leahy Trust, and Alice Leahy, Director of Services. Also joining them was Chief Superintendent Michael McElgunn, (DMR South Central, Kevin St) a Thurles native who has since been promoted to the rank of Assistant Garda Commissioner.

Romi's behaviour and difficulties made it impossible for some people who could have helped him to do so. They found it difficult to understand him and therefore were unable to build up a relationship with him. Seeing so many people from around the world sleeping on our streets, and no doubt some wishing to return to their homeland we decided in the Alice Leahy Trust that we must do something.

The Alice Leahy Trust is sandwiched between Pearse Street Garda Station – the busiest in the

country – and Kevin Street Garda Station and we value the support we get from them in so many ways. We contacted Garda Damien McCarthy (Pearse St) and he and his colleague Garda Alan O'Dowd worked with us and Romi to see how we could help Romi return home. The work they did is unquantifiable, first building up a trusting relationship with him over time and this led to so much more.

In 2020 the board of the Alice Leahy Trust decided to pay the fare and any expenses incurred for Romi's return home. It was

the only way he would get to his homeland far away. As he would not have been capable of travelling alone or even getting safely to and through Dublin Airport, let alone Mauritius, we decided to ask the two Gardai to accompany him to ensure a safe problem-free journey during pandemic times. As this all happened during Covid it meant they all had to quarantine on arrival. Damien and Alan gave up their free time to ensure Romi reached his home safely and of course we were anxious about them until they returned safely to their young families. They described meeting Romi's family after a long journey in difficult times – this really was a huge humanitarian effort. At one point Romi's family thought he was dead because it had been so long since they had heard from him.

Well-known award-winning journalist Mick Clifford documented Romi's story and his successful repatriation in the Irish Examiner. It was a two page spread and can be viewed on our website – see link below

www.aliceleahytrust.ie/2021/11/

Last July thanks to technology we had an email from Romi reminding us that a year to the day had passed since with our help and two young Gardai from Pearse Street, both Munster men, he was successfully repatriated to Mauritius and reunited with his

family. His photograph showed how happy he was back with his family; he looked a different man and was so grateful for our assistance. This was only possible by the combined efforts of ordinary people from so many areas of life.

On Thursday, December 2, 2021 on the roof top garden of Kevin Street Garda Station a presentation was made by the Alice Leahy Trust to Garda Damien McCarthy and Garda Alan O'Dowd in recognition of their amazing work in the repatriation of Romi Ramtohul back to his home country of Mauritius. The two unique bronze pieces of sculpture were made and were very generously given to us by Jarlath Daly, Sculptor of the All Stars, IFTAS and many other celebrated awards. Jarlath, a Tipperary native, is known as Sculptor to the Stars. When making the presentation on behalf of the Alice Leahy Trust I said, "Garda Damien McCarthy and Garda Alan O'Dowd now join this stellar collection as Humanitarian All Stars". The four doves represent: hope, trust, inspiration and gratitude.

All in the Alice Leahy Trust with support from our donors and the two Gardai in Pearse Street made this good news story possible, and how important good news stories are in today's world. It shows too that anything is possible when people work together for the greater good. ●