

## • THE BERKELEY TRAGEDY - REFLECTIONS •

# Mourning The Loss Of Six Young Stars



Above: The victims of the Berkeley balcony collapse, clockwise from top left: Olivia Burke (aged 21), Eoghan Culligan (21), Eimear Walsh (21), Lorcan Miller (21), Ashley Donohoe (22) and Niccolai Schuster (21).

Below: The remains of four of the victims laid in repose at St Columba's Catholic Church in Oakland, Friday June 19. The other two, Olivia Burke and Ashley Donohoe, who were first cousins, were given a funeral Mass at St Joseph Catholic Church in Cotati on Saturday June 20. Photo: Martin Lacey Photography.

by Tony Bucher in Berkeley

EVERY YEAR NOW FOR THE PAST SEVERAL, groups of Irish J1 students have appeared on the streets of downtown Berkeley with the arrival of the long sunny days of late May. They move about in groups of three or four, seemingly unfazed by the raucous indigents and grimy brick sidewalks of downtown, and fully taken with the infectious multicultural buzz that has overtaken the heart of Berkeley as a gathering place for youth, scholars, activists, performers and gourmards. The dominant strains of lingo heard on the streets are Korean, Spanish, East Bay Street, Chinese, scholarly liberal, aging East Coast Jewish hippie. The muted conversations of the Irish students add a bit to the harmonies of the street, a wistful echo of the Irish who crowded the large American cities in earlier generations.

The clear, sunny afternoon of June 15 gave no forward indication of the horrible events to come that night and what was to befall these bright young people full of life. Several dozen of them had gathered at the party at a 4th floor apartment on Kittredge Street, next to the Main Library, to celebrate a friend's coming-of-age, only to see a sudden plunge from the balcony into the darkness of the street far below.

A dreadful silence was reported after the fall, then sobbing, followed by the bedlam of police, fire, and ambulances descending. Berkeley jeweler Wilfy MacManus was awoken by the helicopters over his Berkeley home not a mile away from the scene of the disaster, and was concerned that it was another police pursuit, only to be told by his brother in Ireland

what had just happened downtown.

The following day, Irish Consular officials traveled to Berkeley to lay down an Irish flag and wreath and to gather forces for the response to the disaster. Consul General Philip Grant faced a swarm of press with cameras and microphones with somber dignity, alongside a phalanx of Berkeley officials—Mayor Tom Bates, Chief of Police Thomas Meehan and Fire Chief Gil Dong, as cops in bulky bulletproof wear and firefighters paced about solemnly and a solo bagpiper played a sad refrain.

Word went out from the Irish Consulate to all of the Bay Area Irish groups: your help is needed across the board. Please make yourselves available, let us know specifically what you can do. And the local Irish community moved like a force of nature to take care of those in need and deep emotional distress.

The Irish Immigration Pastoral Center, led by Celine Kennelly and Father Brendan McBride formed one of the key centers of support. Kennelly says: "I suppose we always thought that there would be an earthquake, and that the IIPC would be a cog in the wheel. What happened is that we became the wheel, alongside the Irish Consulate."

They had to coordinate a massive groundswell of support from community members known and unknown to both. "From Berkeley, before we had even put out a request for it within three hours we had the gamut of support, from transportation, to housing, to feeding the families. It was an amazing, overwhelming response from the community."

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## From Philip Grant, Consul General of Ireland to the Western US



ON 16TH JUNE, THE TRAGIC COLLAPSE of a balcony in Berkeley extinguished six of our brightest lights: Eimear Walsh, Lorcan Miller, Olivia Burke, Eoghan 'Culli' Culligan, Niccolai Schuster, and Ashley Donohoe, and dimmed those of seven young men and women: Clodagh Cogley, Jack Halpin, Sean Fahey, Niall Murray, Aoife Beary, Hannah Waters, and Conor Flynn.

In the immediate response, we witnessed the speed, professionalism and humanity with which the Berkeley uniformed services acted. The care the city provided, and the sensitive and compassionate manner in which it was offered, was testament not only to the highest levels of service, but also to a deep and caring humanity. The work of Berkeley's Police and Fire Departments,

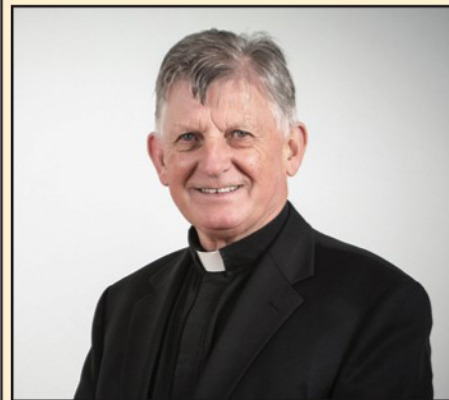
and the support of the city authorities was an act of solidarity with our J1 students that will never be forgotten.

We witnessed an outpouring of sympathy across the United States. Offers of support from near and far, sympathies eloquently expressed or simply stated raised us up. With the faultless response of the J1 students themselves, we stood united in grief, supported by a kindness and humanity unbowed by distance, uncomplicated by borders.

However, there was no more steadfast support to the J1s and their families than that from our own Irish community: with volunteers opening their homes, providing lifts for loved ones between airports and hospitals and hotels, and so many other simple kindnesses. I want to express our deepest thanks to you for the extraordinary solidarity and support you have given to those most affected. In this a particular thanks goes to the tireless work of the Irish Immigration Pastoral Center. Without Fr Brendan, Celine Kennelly, Natasha McParland, Joan Cuddihy and a special thanks to Angus McCarthy, the crisis response effort would have been overwhelming.

Our work to support the injured students, the bereaved and all the families and those affected by this tragedy will continue, though it now enters a different phase. We are grateful beyond words to know that we stand together at this time of need.

## From Fr Brendan McBride, Irish Immigration Pastoral Center, SF



John McNerney suddenly appeared and were a source of great strength to me. Everything was possible when it came to families of the victims.

"God has given us the power to create beauty, to make another smile, to be a healing presence in someone's sorrow, to console those in difficulty, to bring peace and joy to others, to help those in need, and most of all to love."—Iris Gerez.

We are grateful to Archbishop Cordileone, Bishop Justice and the entire Community of San Francisco. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you visited me."

When a tragedy like this happens five thousand miles from home, we are dealing with The Tyranny of Distance. We are separated from families and friends by airports, miles, emotions and barriers which cannot be solved by social media. I have spent most of my life working with Irish Immigrants, many successful and happy, but many who experienced loss and tragedy, unable to relate their difficulties to those at home. I watched people put other systems of love, care and support in place where friend and former strangers become family. I saw this happening this week.

We pose the question "Who do we belong to?" This week I saw young people wanting to be together; wanting the company of their friends. It was comforting to see many parents come to be with their children, even though they were not directly affected by the tragedy; the vigil in Berkeley; going in small groups to the Newman Center to light candles and pray.

The Consul General, Philip Grant, the Vice Consul, Kevin Byrne and their staff; the Irish Immigration Pastoral Center; Celine Kennelly, Natasha McParland, Joan Cuddihy and the fantastic group of volunteers from the Center are all actively involved in answering the question by connecting those who were affected in varying degrees by this tragedy.

MY NERVOUSNESS STARTED ON TUESDAY morning at 4am when I got the phone call about the Berkeley Tragedy. I took a moment to compose myself and say a prayer. Then with Natasha and Angus, we headed into the unknown. We went to the scene in Berkeley and were directed to Highland Hospital, Oakland where some of the victims were with their friends.

Celine was organizing volunteers to spread the load and with our Consul and Vice-Consul we were putting plans in place.

The mind is its own place. In seconds I had crossed the Atlantic Ocean to homes of parents and families that were on the receiving end of bad news. We were helpless in deflecting the pain. But as Christians our spirituality is not for own profit but we believe that 'in giving, we receive.'

In the course of a short time over 300 people signed up to help. Offers of help kept pouring into the Pastoral Center—Joan and Fionnuala kept everything orderly. The nuts and bolts were put together at a kitchen table in Moyvane, County Kerry.

In the midst of death and suffering I was extremely proud of our Irish community. The compassion and love they showed was heart-warming. How refreshing to think that goodness and inspiration can come from most unexpected of sources. Fr Aidan McAleenan, Fr Donal Burke and UCD's Fr