

EMPOWERING PEOPLE IN CARE

Empowering People in Care (EPIC) is an independent rights-based organization that works with children who are in the Irish care system and adults who, at different stages of their life, may need some support, advice or advocacy after leaving the care of the State. They are based in inner city Dublin and have offices in Cork, Limerick and Galway. Here, Peter Lane, an Advocacy Officer with EPIC shares a bit about the work that EPIC is undertaking with help from The Ireland Funds.

The Ireland Funds Help

EPIC *Give a Voice*

and Services to

Young People in Care

Little Epic Stories resulted from a creative writing project supported by The Ireland Funds. Young people in care and care-leavers came together to craft poems, essays and dramatic readings which reflected their life experience. The project facilitated the development of communication skills, confidence and resilience through the creative arts. The compilation of stories was presented to President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins in 2016.

MY NAME IS MARK AND ME AND ME TWO BROTHERS WERE TAKEN INTO CARE WHEN I WAS SIX. • Me older brother was sent to one place and me and me little brother were sent to another. • He was three. By the time I was nine, me and him had five different homes – two with our ma, one in a care-home in Dun Laoghaire–twice–one in a care-home in Dalkey, and one in Temple Street Children's Hospital. • Actually that last one was a bit mad—we kept thinking we must be sick or something—sure why else would we be in a hospital? Truth was they'd nowhere else to put us. • Two months we were there. It wasn't too bad though –the nurses were all real nice to us, playing with us and all. Probably felt sorry for us when all the other kids in the ward had their parents visiting them and we had no-one except the social worker. • Still, at least me and me brother had each other. • **SO – FIVE HOMES, FIVE BEDS.**" — *Mark Gray, in an excerpt from Little Epic Stories. Mark is now 27 and serves on EPIC's Youth Board and was recently featured on the Humans of Dublin website.*

THE MISSION OF EPIC IS :

- To advocate at a national and local level for the rights of young people in and with care experience.
- To promote the voices of young people in and with care experience.
- To base advocacy on meaningful engagement with young people, documented data and commissioned research.

EPIC IS DIVIDED INTO FOUR KEY PARTS:

- Advocacy
- Policy
- Research
- Youth Engagement

These four sections work together to better promote the rights of children in care and young people and adults with care experience.

As an Advocacy Officer with EPIC I meet with children and young people and support them in having their voices heard. I get to meet some of the most remarkably resilient and engaging kids and young adults on a daily basis. I have an ever-deepening respect for their stories; what they have been through to get where they are truly opens your eyes to some of the problems which still blight Irish society.

When children are taken into care in Ireland, they can be placed in residential centers, with foster carers or with relatives (called relative foster carers). They often need help coming to terms with the reasons why they were taken into care, and may need support overcoming childhood trauma. It is important to them to be able to count on the adults around them and to find stability; that is why it is crucial to prevent their placement breaking down, or a high turnover of social workers. When they are about to leave care, it is important to ensure that they hold the sufficient skills to transition into independent living after an often chaotic childhood. Our team at EPIC has an abundance of experience working with children and vulnerable adults, supporting them to access and navigate bureaucratic systems which are all too often, not

designed with traumatized children in mind.

This is part of the reason why EPIC worked on the development of a peer-led education program. Members of our team who were themselves once in care, devised Life Skills modules for young people who are about to leave care. It includes information and advice about mental health, budgeting, relationships and aftercare. It is proving to be very popular with the young people that they meet. Often times, young people will accept advice from someone who has been through the system rather than someone who they may see as part of the system.

Funding from The Ireland Funds allowed us to run a creative writing course for care leavers, and it was the perfect balance in between teaching the participants new skills and ensuring that they produced something tangible that could be shared widely. This is why the book *Little Epic Stories* is so powerful. It was written by adults who grew up in care, to raise awareness and change people's perceptions of what being in care is like. It is genuine and incredibly moving.

There is a very high proportion of care-leavers depending on homeless services in Ireland today. There are many more hidden homeless young adults who

are "couch-surfing" because they are too afraid to access the emergency hostel system because of stories of violence, bullying and drug use. The Dublin EPIC Council is currently working in collaboration with other youth groups on a campaign that will highlight this situation and hopefully prompt the government to take measures to provide a fairer system for young people who have been in care. The recession in Ireland hit many people hard but care-leavers, especially those who were in residential care, were hit the hardest.

It is poignant to reflect that, while we as an organization are feeling excited and energized coming up to our eighteenth birthday; many of our teenagers who are in state care feel most apprehensive and fearful about this time of their lives. EPIC are committed to continue making significant changes to children, young people and adults' lives and striving towards systemic improvements in the care continuum in Ireland. We believe that to do this most effectively, you have to listen to the voices of those who are the least heard – the children themselves.

— Peter Lane, Advocacy Officer, EPIC