

EMMA GROVES – An Inspiration to all



West Belfast's First Lady

BY Damian McCarney

Emma Groves may have been the inspirational leader for the campaign for the banning of plastic/rubber bullets, but to her family she was a much-loved mother and granny.

Emma, who passed away on Monday aged 86, won the respect of the West Belfast community for her tireless work for the banning of the lethal weapon. She was blinded in a horrific incident in 1972 when a British soldier shot her through the living-room window of her Tullymore Gardens home. Along with her great friend, Clara Reilly, she helped found the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets following the killing of John Downes in August 1984.

This campaign brought together the families bereaved and many of those injured by rubber and plastic bullets and highlighted the lack of police investigation and lack of recourse through the courts.

In addition to addressing the European Parliament, she brought families to Scotland where the plastic bullets were made and stood outside the factory to inform the workers of the damage the weapons caused in Ireland.

She also addressed the shareholders of the production company in America, which decided immediately to discontinue their role in the production of plastic bullets.

Head of the family

Speaking at the Tullymore Gardens house where she was shot over three decades ago, Emma's grandchildren paid tribute to her.

"She meant everything to everybody," said her granddaughter Sinead Groves.

"She was the head of the family, she kept us all together.

"She was a party animal and enjoyed a good get-together with us all and was there for us all, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

It was a credit to her strength of character that Emma managed to forgive the member of the Parachute Regiment who shot her – although she never got to meet him – and to rebuild her life.

"She did not change after the shooting, she was still granny.

"Her disability didn't disable her. Even for the younger great-grandchildren, she was just granny, we didn't look at her as a blind or disabled person."

Despite her loss of sight Emma was very independent, and to the amazement of everyone she continued to walk unaided around her house and prepare meals for her extended family.

"She was an inspiration to all," said her grandson Bill Groves, "if you think of what she went through and how she dealt with it.

"There was a positivity around her all of the time and I think she helped mould a lot of us."

It would have been a source of regret for Emma that there was not a total ban on plastic bullets, however her relatives are determined that the campaign for a

total ban will live on with her memory.

“If she had strength and hadn’t had the strokes she would still be out there, standing on the middle of the road with a placard.

“If she had any breath in her she would still be campaigning until there was a total ban,” said Sinead.

“She has been able to campaign for this last 36 years and there is no doubt that her family coming behind her will do exactly the same,” added Bill.

Speaking on behalf of Relatives for Justice, a campaign group which Emma helped to found, Andree Murphy attributed the Chief Constable’s declaration that those killed by the use of plastic and rubber bullets were innocent to a direct result of the veteran campaigner.

Noble Peace Prize

“Emma Groves was a formidable figure whose dignity, integrity and humanity touched all who came into contact with her. She was undoubtedly a great woman and was often referred to as West Belfast’s First Lady.

“This is not only a great loss to our organisation, and the families who knew and loved her, but also the entire community who have lost a human rights champion.

“There are many who believe that had she lived somewhere else, and had she not been from West Belfast, she would have at least been nominated for the Noble Peace Prize.

“Emma was robbed of the sight of her eyes but not her vision. She knew that our entire community could be policed better without these weapons of death and human carnage.”

Sinn Féin West Belfast MP Gerry Adams has also extended his condolences to the Groves family. He said Emma was “an energetic and committed champion in the fight to eliminate the use of rubber and plastic bullets.”

“I knew Emma Groves well. She was a warm, kind, gifted and articulate spokesperson for the campaign against plastic bullets.

“Mrs Groves had a large family who will mourn her passing.

“But she also will be mourned by the many thousands of people who came to know her over the years and who respected and admired her determination and courage.”

Emma is survived by her brothers John and Paddy McClory, children Jane McGuigan, Rita Austin, Danny Groves, Moira Clarke, Brenda Hall, Edna Butler, Pat Groves, Roisín Dorris, Deirdre Groves, Katrina Baldran, Bronagh Groves and 42 grandchildren and 26 great-grandchildren – with two more on the way. Emma Groves’ remains will leave the family home in Tullymore Gardens today (Thursday) at 12.15pm for funeral Mass in St Agnes’ at 1pm, before burial at the Groves family plot in Milltown Cemetery. The family would prefer that instead of floral tributes, people would make a donation to Sightseers International who supplied her with her guide-dog Beta.

Read Máirtín Ó Muilleoir's tribute to Emma Groves on 'A Publisher's Blog' by [clicking here](#)

On behalf of the Andersonstown News, Robin Livingstone offers a tribute to Emma Groves

When I was a boy of ten in Lenadoon, my best friend was Michael McClory. For Michael, the West Belfast of the early 70s isn’t just a lifetime away, it’s an ocean way because now he’s a Mountie in Canada.

On the odd time we get together, we share memories of the West Belfast of old, the characters, the laughter, the mayhem and the madness. Michael was a nephew of Emma Groves and now and again – particularly on summer evenings – I’d join him on the walk across the Shaws Road to the Groves home in Tullymore. I liked going there because the Groves were like my own family: plenty of them, friendly, boisterous, fun. I will put my hand up, though, and say that I didn’t like the Groves’s pugs as much as Emma did. I seem to recall there was always at least three or four of those little dogs in the house, vying for Emma’s affections. You could hear the flat-faced snuffle of their breathing as they milled around her feet. When we came in Emma would look up at us and smile and the pugs would grunt suspiciously, ever-jealous of her affections, and sniff noisily round our feet.

After Emma was blinded, Michael and I would sit on the periphery of adult get-togethers at both our homes, gleaning what information we could from snatches of conversations to which we were never privy. And the story we patched together – of rebel songs on the record player, of out-of-control British soldiers and of a point blank shooting – was enough to ensure that all communication between the children of the estate and the British army came to an abrupt halt. New regiments were always fascinated by our love of cricket – yes, cricket – which we played long into the evening on the small green outside the McClorys’ house. They even took pictures of us playing and where once we would have been happy to chat and occasionally even let one or two soldiers have a bowl; after Emma our only response to their approaches was scared and sullen silence.

When Emma came home from hospital, we continued to visit her at her Tullymore home, and later at the family’s rambling new house on the Andersonstown Road where the dog at her feet was not a snuffling pug, but a dozing guide dog.

Rubber bullet

It was a rubber bullet that blinded Emma, a plastic bullet which killed my sister Julie in 1981. Three years later the Groves and the Livingstones were brought closer together by the formation of the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets. While all of us played a part in one way or another, Emma and my father, Archie, put the rest of us to shame with the energy and passion with which they travelled this city, this island – this globe, indeed – in their tireless efforts to ensure that no more families were exposed to the trauma that had shattered their lives. More were to be killed and maimed, though, because Emma and Archie and their tireless UCAPB colleagues were opposed by powerful forces, not only within the British and unionist establishment, but within the nationalist community whose support was never forthcoming when it was needed the most.

Emma never saw her family after that day in 1972. She never saw her children, her grandchildren or her great-grandchildren. She never again saw a First Communion dress, a Christmas tree – or an Easter basket. But although she was robbed of her sight, they never took from her that inner light that illuminated anyone lucky enough to be in her company, whether at a picket or a protest, at a sing-song or a dance. As she walked the Andersonstown Road arm-in-arm with her great pal Clara Reilly, or with one of her ever-extending family, she brought a powerful sense of belonging with her, as if she knew this was her place, whether she could see it or whether she couldn’t – which, of course, it was. And she exuded what in others would appear contradictory or impossible – energy and calm; determination and acceptance. In Emma, these things came together to form the core of the innate dignity that was her defining feature. Dignity is an overused word. All I can say is that when it came to dignity, Emma Groves made the Dalai Lama look like Wee Jimmy Crankie.

It's perhaps a cliché on her death to say that I was privileged to know Emma and that her like will never be seen again, But I was, and it won't.