

In search of a Haven

**HAVEN victims support group
South Belfast**

in collaboration with
New Voices

ISLAND (44) **PAMPHLETS**

Published April 2002 by Island Publications
132 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey, Co Antrim BT36 7JQ
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ISBN 1 899510 35 4

Farsset Community Think Tanks Project is funded by
The European Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation

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Printed by Regency Press, Belfast

Introduction

HAVEN victims' support group, like similar organisations which have emerged over recent years, is a self-help group providing advice and support to those who had become victims of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. The fact that so many victims feel the necessity to form such groups is a sad reflection on the lack of statutory provision to deal with the multitude of problems victims experience – whether social, economic, physical or psychological. HAVEN's main function, however, has been to provide a means by which those who had been left deeply hurt and isolated could share their experiences with others who had suffered in similar ways and to whom they could more easily relate.

The members of HAVEN come largely from the Donegal Road and Sandy Row areas of Belfast, and became victims either by having lost loved ones to Republican violence, by being injured or maimed by such violence, or by having a partner removed from the family through long-term imprisonment.

HAVEN victim's support group is one of a number of community and victims groups in Northern Ireland which are being actively supported by the *New Voices* programme. The aim of this programme is to assist individuals – particularly those who have been deeply affected by 'The Troubles' – to share their personal stories in a safe, non-judgemental environment. As individuals touch upon painful events in their past *New Voices* provides the support and encouragement which assists them to undertake a journey of inner healing rather than allow their painful memories to become a barrier to personal growth. Furthermore, as they grow in strength and confidence, they are encouraged to share their experiences with similarly affected individuals from other communities, thereby facilitating an ongoing process of reconciliation.

New Voices, in the belief that HAVEN contains an important message for all those victims of 'The Troubles' who are still carrying their burden alone and with minimum support, asked the Farsset Community Think Tanks Project to assist the HAVEN members recount their personal stories and explain just how important it had been in the healing process to get together with others and share one another's pain.

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In search of a Haven

The need for a haven

The members of the HAVEN victims' support group were linked by a common bond – each of their lives had been changed irrevocably by the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. For Alan and his wife Anne that change had happened without warning.

Anne and I went out at Christmas 1991 to celebrate our wedding anniversary. We were only in the bar about five minutes when the door busted open and this fella started shooting all round him. I grabbed Anne, threw her on the ground and lay on top of her. The guy came over, put a shotgun to my back and pulled the trigger, then took it off me and put it to her head. The policeman told us she would have been dead only it jammed. At the inquest they said that the reason it jammed was that bits of my bones and even bits of my jumper was stuck up inside it! It's a scary thing, and your life's completely ruined. From then to now... every day you think about it, it never goes away.

For Anne, the injuries her husband sustained and his consequent illness, coupled with her own traumatic experience, proved almost impossible to cope with.

My GP was very supportive, and my husband's; they both would have called out, and without being asked... just dropped in uninvited, just to see how you were doing. And there was one day my own doctor came in and I was sitting in the bedroom crying my eyes out, just didn't know what way to turn, because there was a load of Alan's friends in seeing him and there could have been a dozen in the flat at the time sitting talking. Alan could have related right away and spoke about what had happened to us, but I was suppressing it, I couldn't talk about it. So this was really turmoil for me, all I wanted those people to do was to go home. And all I done was make tea and sandwiches, set it down and run back into the bedroom. And the doctor knocked the door this day and in he come to me, and I told him: "I can't handle this, this is every day they're in the house, I need my own space and I haven't got it." And the doctor said: "Anne, the best thing to do is just sit there, calm yourself down." And he walked into the living room and politely asked them to leave as he wanted to speak to Alan alone. I was glad he did it in a nice way, because these people were genuinely trying to be supportive – but it was at the wrong time, it was too soon. Well, actually, the marriage nearly broke down. I finished up I was living in the bedroom and Alan was in the living room, because the both of us were always on the edge of our nerves. And it took a good two years before we really settled down. But the start of it was the doctor just walking in unannounced, and him saying: look, this is what you have to do. Up until then I didn't know how to cope, I was

trying to suppress what had happened, while Alan was wanting to speak about it all the time, that was *his* way of coping. But I just didn't want to know – the two of us were coming from different directions.

As Anne says, once it happens your life, the whole family's life, is turned upside down. And I struggled on for a full year before they sent me to see a psychiatrist, yet you take the likes of the killings at the bookies on the Ormeau Road. As soon as that incident happened the social workers were on the scene immediately –but we didn't get that.

My social worker came and left these forms to be filled in. Now, the forms were quite thick and I took one look at them and threw them away. She came back *a year later*, and she asked me: "Anne, how did you feel about me not coming back?" I said: "What did I feel about you not coming back? What did you feel about Sean Graham's bookies?" "Oh," she said, "we were all there that night, all the social workers." I said: "Well, there was nobody there to help us; there's the door, get out and don't come back." Alan wasn't very pleased with me, but that's the way I felt. And she came back the next day and said: "I understand the way you felt yesterday, I wanted to see how you got on with those forms?" I said: "Those forms were thrown in the bin near a year ago? Sure, how could we have filled in those forms given the state we were in?" She said: "I'll bring you new ones." And she came back and helped me fill them in. But I had lost a full year of my claim, a year that I went through financial difficulties that I didn't need to –if she had've just taken half an hour with us. The excuse she gave me was that she thought I would be busy running back and forward to hospital and wouldn't want to be annoyed with her coming! But she didn't think to ask us whether that was the case.

I think you get more help out of the group talking than you do out of the psychiatrists; I can relate to the others in the group, because we've each experienced personal tragedy. Yet I feel I am one of the lucky ones who's been injured but is still alive, I don't class myself as bad as Joan or Thelma, or Robert, for they have lost someone who died.

Alan's belief that he and Anne were somehow 'lesser' victims was discounted by one of the other group members.

You have to remember what you both went through, not only on that night, but in the years since. And don't forget that the shotgun was actually put to Anne's head, and the gunman said: "Die, you Orange bastard!" but the gun jammed. So she wasn't suffering just because you had been shot and were now ill, she had been nearly at death's door too, for the gun had been stuck into her head, and she heard the gunman say: "Die, you orange bastard" – and that just put her over the top too.

Another bond linking the group members was that some of them had been deeply affected by the same incident. One of the two fatalities of the gun attack on the bar that Christmas night was the 25-year-old son of Robert, one of two lifers in the group.

When I was in prison my son was shot dead and I got help from a great friend who worked in the prison hospital, so they let me go down there to stay with him. I stayed there for nearly two years and there was a psychiatrist came in every week to see how I was doing. But I got more help from my big friend than I did out of the psychiatrist, yet when my mate died –he died in prison – I just fell apart, for I had nobody then, I just had to get on with it myself, or from people coming up to visit me. I just turned in on myself then, I didn't bother with anybody. Now the bar was packed with UVF and UDA yet the irony was that the two guys who were shot dead weren't in anything. Tommy Gorman and my son, my son wasn't in anything, neither the UDA nor the UVF. It's funny, isn't it – the whole bar was bunged with them too... the big fella Gorman was just home from London for his holidays.

For Anne the coming to terms with what had happened was almost as painful as the incident itself.

The aftermath was unreal, it was bad. And to try and get up from what you've come through and to struggle to be able to work again with people was the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life, and not fall apart in the process.

Furthermore, any sense of security she had known prior to the shooting was now swept away.

As Robert says his son wasn't involved and Mr Gorman wasn't involved, and Alan wasn't involved either. Before the incident I lived in this wee world where I thought that if you're not involved in anything then nothing'll happen to you. I was in a wee world of my own – this is my patch, this is my wee home and I'll bring my son up properly, I'll make sure he doesn't get involved, we'll keep ourselves to ourselves, right, and nothing'll happen. And I even remember saying to myself whenever somebody had been shot: well, they haven't got that for nothing. But it's just not like that. What happened to us has made me stop and think that it can happen to anyone, for nothing – there is innocent people out there becoming victims all the time. And it was a terrible shock to me to discover that this can happen to anybody. And now, to be honest, I'm totally paranoid.

And, on top of the trauma, she developed an overriding concern for her son.

My son was a few weeks off seventeen at the time –he had just started work after coming out of school – and I was worried sick of him getting involved because of what happened to his dad and I. But we were lucky enough, for he was very level-headed and he said to me: “Mum, I'll never get involved, don't be worrying about that. My only interest is to get you and daddy back on your feet. There's no way I am going to add to the worries you already have.” But he went through those years as a victim as well, for he was living with us, and Alan and I were always bickering with one another, and all that was going on in front of him. I'm sure half times he was pulling at his hair going out the door, hating the thoughts of coming back in again. And at the time it happened he was going out with a Catholic girl, and he had Catholic mates as well. They used to come to the house, and I had to say to those boys:

“Look, it’s too dangerous for you coming here; don’t think it’s because I have turned bitter or anything like that, ’cause I haven’t, I’m just really afraid for your safety round the district, especially after this has happened.” They understood and would still have kept in touch by phone. Now, they would have been in playing cards in our house, and they would have told me who they touched for the night before – and I enjoyed their company. But those boys had to stop their visits, and he had to stop seeing the girl, just because she was of a different religion. The reality seemed to be that these are the things you have to do in this country.

Another group member, Joan, was left devastated when her nineteen-year-old son was murdered in their home by Republican gunmen, again in 1991.

My husband never got over our son’s death; he took to the drink and was unable to work. Anyone who knew my husband would have told you that he lived for his work, his children and playing football. When John was murdered he just didn’t want to live; he tried a few times to take his own life. This is the part of grieving the outside world doesn’t know about. Everybody thinks victims just get on with their lives but they don’t see the terrible turmoil some families go through. Mine have come through a lot. I just wished I could have taken the pain away for them, but I couldn’t. This is why groups like HAVEN should have been around in those early years. And people in authority should have treated everybody the same, rather than just respond to major bombings or shootings – when a person is murdered it doesn’t matter if there is one or twenty-one, they should all be treated equally. If we had’ve had counselling in the early days my husband might still be alive today. This is why I am angry about how we were treated. If it wasn’t for the people of the Village, Donegall Road and Sandy Row I don’t know how I would have got through it all. And it only took three little words: ‘How are you?’ It meant more to me than anything to know that others cared.

Joan too had found an inner need to make a personal statement.

Our John was murdered in September, and you had Christmas coming up. Now, I went out in defiance, because I live on the front of the road. I mean, people were probably saying: she has a Christmas tree up and her son’s just murdered. But that was my way of coping: they have taken my son, they have destroyed my family, but they’re not going to destroy me. And I went out fighting, but yet withal I couldn’t talk about it to my family; my mother is still alive and I have yet to discuss my son’s murder with her, and I don’t think I ever will. Because I can’t bring myself even to speak to her about him. I couldn’t cope with it, I couldn’t see her upset. I couldn’t talk to my own kids about it for they never really wanted to talk about it either. And I couldn’t talk to my husband about it, because he fought about it, he took an awful hatred within himself about it. So I was in limbo and over this past two years I have really seen an awful lot, and learnt an awful lot, through this group and going out and meeting other people. If these groups had’ve been set up in our area years ago it would have been better help to me. But I am thankful for what I have got out of the group.

This reality of being left alone in the daily struggle to look after one's family was another common bond between the group members. Group member Isobel was left feeling totally isolated when her husband Albert became a 'lifer'.

Mine is a different situation. I didn't lose anybody from the Troubles, thank God, but Albert was arrested in 1974 and sentenced to 25 years in prison, and I was left at home with four children, ages three, seven, eight and nine. And I never ever had a social worker in my life, never had anyone to call or ask anything. In fact you were more shunned than anything else. The lady next door started giving off to the kids once she knew we were on our own. He was inside sixteen and a half years, and it was a long time, with plenty of hardships along the way. My youngest was three when Albert went into prison and was twenty, getting married, when he came out. And I got involved quite a bit with probation service and I found that any problems I had I could always ring them. One son in particular gave me a lot of problems and I could always ring them for advice. My church never came near me; it ended up I broke away from the church and got involved with people who were of neither religion, just met in each other's homes. My church never ever came near the door, and I remember walking up Donegall Road one day and there was about six or seven churches on that road and there wasn't one door open, only on Sundays, so I didn't get any help from there.

Isobel felt that she had been handed down her own 'sentence'.

It was like I was given 'life' as well, but with all the added responsibilities. I had to take on the role of both parents. I joined the Peace People and started a football team, trying to make up for what the children were missing. They never ever said much, probably because they were young enough to adjust. My daughter was three when he went inside; she slept with me and she used to keep me up every night complaining: "My head's sore, my stomach's sore..." This went on for ages and I was running back and forward to the doctors with her, and finally he said: "Listen, there's nothing wrong with her, it's all in her head, just try and ignore her." So I did that, and after a while it stopped.

She found too that she was largely abandoned by her husband's former colleagues.

I'm not bringing this up out of malice, but, as I said, when Albert went in the children were aged from three to nine, and never once at Christmas time – and I never forgot this – did my children ever receive a selection box from his organisation. They never got anything until I think my oldest son was about fifteen, when they were invited to a Christmas party by another organisation. Nobody ever knocked the door to say: have you got a loaf on your table, have you anything to eat, or have you any problems? I never, ever seen any of them. And yet if I had've come down into Sandy Row, they were all asking: "How's Albert?" but they didn't really care about his family. Out of sight, out of mind. That's just something I never forgot. I would have seen people from East Belfast who got a big hamper for Christmas and they got this, that and the other, but I never found them helpful to me in any way. In

fact, sometimes people could be very hurtful. I had to learn to drive for the simple reason that I didn't have a lift to get to the Maze prison, because I used to stand on a Friday waiting on the transport and often no transport came. And you had to rush and get a taxi then. So I learned to drive so that I could get up and down to the prison by myself, and this girl was standing talking to another friend of mine and I waved at her going past and she said: "Oh, I must send my husband into prison then I'll get a car." But I had paid for that car, I didn't get it for nothing, it was through my own doing. If anybody seen you getting on your feet there was always something to say about it. That's what I found anyway. I got to know quite a lot of Catholics as well as Protestants, and I think that Catholics were much better looked after than Protestants, in the community sense.

Her husband concurred with that sentiment.

Jealousy is a big thing in our community; it's everywhere. Even when you work for things, people say: where'd he get that? And it's getting worse. They're quick to put you down if they think you're a wee bit above them.

This abandonment had surprised others in the group.

When Isobel told me all this I could not believe it, especially because of how highly Albert was thought of, I thought she would have been well looked after. My husband was in a different organisation to Isobel and there was a few fellas inside. My husband was in the welfare section and money was paid out for people that was inside. Now, I know for a fact, because it was me that done it, that those prisoners' wives were looked after. I took that money every week to them. If they needed jeans, they got them; one had a daughter who was disabled and I would have gone down to look after her. We all mucked in and looked after her. I seen me going out and getting loans to buy things when money was tight, or if the dues weren't coming in. But that's the way I was myself. Them men went out and give up their freedom, they thought they were doing it for a cause, and their families should have been looked after. I would have paid for food parcels out of my own pocket; for I didn't know if it was going to happen to me, luckily he was only in and out. We would have minded kids or accompanied girls on their visits to jail.

Outsiders could also be very judgemental, as Isobel had discovered.

Because I didn't drink or go out, and everybody else was going round bars and all, they all assumed I thought I was better than everyone else. But they didn't know how I was really feeling inside. They thought: oh, she thinks she is something. I felt I was no better than anyone else; but because I didn't associate with them certain assumptions were made. I got involved in 'Meetings with God' a couple of years after Albert went in, and I remember this friend saying to me: "Is there something wrong with your head, why don't you go out and enjoy yourself, you're only a young girl?" And I said: "That's alright, you all go out to drink and enjoy yourselves, but you wake up the next morning with a sore head and an empty pocket. The enjoyment that you get by going out to the bars for a drink I get through listening to the service."

After I had been to the meeting I would have went home happy and content within myself. But everybody expected you to do what they wanted you to do, or what they thought you should be doing. And when you didn't they thought: she thinks she is something. It wasn't that at all, I knew I had four children to bring up and I wanted to do the best for them and I wanted to let people see that we were getting on, we weren't going to be trailed down, we were going to get on with our lives and make the best of it. My father was a good help to me but there was nobody who could have supplied money. I could go to Albert's mother and sisters for support, but few people could have helped you financially.

Daily life was hard enough without the added stress of prison visits.

I remember going to Magilligan, and I had to be out standing at 8 o'clock in the 'Village' to get the minibus and it wasn't that you could have took four children with you for there was an awful lot of people from the area going. But I was out from 8 o'clock in the morning and wasn't back until maybe 7 o'clock at night, so my sister looked after the kids. I remember one time, it was on the 12th July and we were going down to Magilligan, and I went and asked for a lift and they said: 'No, you couldn't get any transport on the 12th July, the minibus is going to the Field.' And the *whole* day was spent waiting for trains and buses, there and back. At that time it cost £9 and that was an awful lot in them days.

Isobel's husband, Albert, did what he could to alleviate some of the hardship.

When I went in I was getting a parcel, and they cost a tenner a week. I stopped that; I stopped smoking. Why should your kids suffer for me being in here. I worked all night getting things ready to be sold – handicrafts – so that I could help them out. My mate got 400 cigarettes every week sent in, and the best of meat, but he had no consideration for the difficulties it caused for those on the outside. He just sat and smoked and smoked.

He also readily acknowledged that his incarceration had totally dislocated his family life.

When I went in at first... we have a photo of the kids all standing on the doorstep as nippers. And then over the years during visits you seen them getting bigger and bigger. There was three of them got married while I was inside. Time stood still while you were in jail, and then when you come out for a while things go too fast. It is hard coming to terms with it. I'm ten years down the line and I'm still trying to come to terms with it.

Robert, as a fellow lifer, concurred with that assessment.

In a sense you lose your family while you're inside. When you come out you try to relate to them again as their father but you can't, you've missed all those years, you've lost that bonding.

Apart from the sympathetic support of GPs, few of the group members felt that professional support could satisfy their inner needs.

My husband actually went to see a psychiatrist in Windsor House, and he

came home and says to me: “You want me to go up there, but what does she know about me? She didn’t have her son murdered.” And I can understand that. I know that they’re qualified people, but I think the only people who can really help victims are people who have gone through the same experiences.

These professionals are not on the same wavelength as you.

Leanne, the group’s outreach worker, described the group’s primary needs.

A lot of people think that victims need training, and our group offers that, but most of them really just yearn for happiness and peace of mind. A lot of people I went out to visit didn’t know that support groups existed until then, so knowing that there are groups out there is really important. The training and the therapy we offer, as well as all the activities, all helps, but the main thing is that they feel that other people care about them. For the one thing that a lot of them say is that they feel they have been forgotten about.

It was in an attempt to overcome this sense of being ‘forgotten about’ that the first steps were taken which led to the formation of HAVEN, as Anne noted.

It all started with Thelma and myself getting together; we needed help and we didn’t know where to go to get it. We didn’t know how to handle what had happened to us. It didn’t start hitting us until two or three years down the line. And we spoke to Joan one day and the three of us went upstairs in the PEP [Prisoners Enterprise Project], which was in Donegall Avenue then, and we sat and just poured our hearts out to each other. And at first we three just got together every week, then a few others joined us. We just talked about what had happened to each of us, and everyone could relate to what everyone else had suffered. It just developed from there –we decided that we must try and take this further, we knew there were other people out there who needed support and there was nothing in South Belfast for the victims of the Troubles.

Joan acknowledged the importance the group held for her.

I felt very, very isolated, until Anne and Thelma started up this group. It’s okay somebody turning round and saying they feel sorry for you, but they don’t really understand until it happens to themselves. You can sympathise with anybody but until it happens to *you* you don’t know how they really feel inside, because everybody has different feelings and ways of coping. And whenever I met up with Thelma and Anne I was able to get rid of a lot of frustration that I was carrying within myself, because I had had nobody to speak to. And Thelma was on the same wavelength as me, because she had lost a son too – and a husband as well. And it helped me being able to run in there and tell them how I felt, and they were able to relate back to me because I felt the same way, and then when the group itself started up we met on a Thursday and it was just great being able to sit in each other’s company and say how you felt. We built up a trust within ourselves, and we actually had other groups coming in to talk with us. In my own situation my husband took really ill and we ended up having to see a psychiatrist. Now, when there is an atrocity like the Ormeau Road, or Shankill, all these councillors are sent in, but we were left to cope by ourselves.

As well as being able to share personal experiences an effort was made to understand the circumstances both communities had found themselves in.

All these tragedies only seemed to happen to people who live in working-class areas, it never happened on the Malone Road or the Stranmillis Road. Why did it always happen to us?

The politicians and the middle classes manipulated us. That's why we tried to form our own parties, with the likes of Hutchie and McMichael, they're the people who should be representing us, because Paisley and Trimble don't represent us.

Our politicians were never there for us. They never came near us. Paisley always keeps himself on the right side of the law.

In my opinion, Paisley was the most dangerous man of them all.

If you look back to our day – '71-'73 – you have got the politicians going on now just like they were going on in them days, and it's the exact same.

I was sitting in the house last night and see when I heard the news [that the IRA had begun decommissioning] you would have thought I had won the pools. I says: brilliant, fair play to the 'RA'. Now, if somebody had've heard me they would have said: is his head away, you know. But fair play to them, they have given up something, they have taken a big step, as Republicans, for what they believe in, like.

I don't disagree with them decommissioning, but I don't like all the praise they're getting now. The suffering they've caused is just forgot about, all the people they have butchered.

I know what you mean. A friend of mine was mentally retarded yet they took him away and burned him in the back of a car, up the Grosvenor Road – do you remember that murder?

I do, and his mother ended up in Purdysburn, she was never well again after it. And that wee lad from East Belfast, they tied him with barbed wire and all, and cut his privates off and stuck them in his mouth and everything. The last place he was seen was at a bar at the corner of the Albertbridge Road, that was the last place, and they found his body in the Short Strand. He'd been butchered.

Yet, withal, see when I was in jail, I met Republican prisoners – you know, on the visits? – and they were saying: "We're very, very sorry to hear about your son." But that's the way it was in prison. Republican prisoners were coming to me and saying they were very sorry to hear about my son – and they were genuine about it too.

Yes, we're definitely going to have to listen to the other side too.

After all, there's no difference between our side and theirs, apart from religion.

What of the cross-community contacts the group members had engaged in?

For the last few years we have got through this by self-help. But to be able to sit in a mixed group took us a very, very long time, and in fact the first time we met ones from the other side I could not speak. At the first meeting, what that lad told me about himself just went over my head; I froze when he told me his name, totally froze. And when I was asked to relate his story, his background, I said: I can't tell you. Yet he was able to tell me what I was all about.

That's because he was ready; you weren't.

I just froze. I said to myself: that could even be the man that shot us. But you get over that. If you didn't get over that this country would be in turmoil. You have to fight with yourself to get on with what has happened, and to try and overcome this fear. And the thoughts that you have. I mean, the thoughts that went through my head was unreal, at the start.

All tears are the same, all feelings are the same. While I was in prison if something came on like... that Enniskillen bombing, everybody was crying, everybody, Catholics and Protestants, in the Maze prison hospital, I'll never forget that. I made good friends in there, Protestants and Catholics, and their stories are the same as ours.

It was the same with the women too; they got on too. I went to Corrymeela a couple of times with other prisoners' families and all the children got on and all the women got on, there was never a cross word said. There's no TVs up there and at night we just sat round in a circle, with a cup of tea and a biscuit and talked and talked. One person said what happened to them, then another, and there was never any animosity arose. In fact, the kids would be crying when they were going home.

It doesn't annoy me going on cross-community activities. I had said before that if I knew who murdered my son I would give him a slow death. But until I know it was you or you, they're not going to destroy me that way, mind-wise. I was at a cross-community thing and we were all sitting round a table and I happened to say this to a person, and she was a Protestant, and she nearly jumped down my throat: that's hatred, she said. But to me it wasn't hatred... if somebody does something on you and you know for definite they done it, you're going to have it out with them. So for me it's no different. If somebody comes up to me and says "I murdered your son", the way I feel at the minute I would give them a slow death. But until I face that situation I don't know what way I would react; it might not be like that at all, I don't know. But the only thing about it was that I said I would never let it destroy my life, because if I took a thing into my head it would eat and eat away. It destroyed my husband and I said there's no way it was going to destroy me.

So going on the cross-community activities doesn't annoy me. In fact, I have found that any we went on we always got on very well together. I don't know what they're thinking of us when we leave, but there's an awful lot of sincerity in it. I was actually going up the road one day and a voice called out: "Hiya, Joan!" And I looked around and it was one of the wee girls we had met on the last weekend and she comes from the top of the road. I hadn't recognised her, it was her recognised me going up the road. Even for her to do that, to remember me, I thought that was nice of her, because she didn't have to shout out or anything. I think we got on well at our weekends away. I mean, those weekends gave me a great lift, because we were amongst *everybody*, policemen and everything, and listening to everyone's stories. And you look at families and see how close it has brought them together, and there's other families have been just pulled apart. But whenever these things happened there should have been more support for the families, and then maybe they could have coped better. If HAVEN had started earlier it might have helped us, me and my husband.

I went to Corrymeela for a number of years and I agree, never once was there an argument between either the women or the children. I really got something out of it. This girl and I got friendly, and her and I spent the next ten years the best of friends, and when we got together we went to lifers' meetings and things like that. And I always found her a great help. I could have went and spoke to my sisters but they didn't really understand what I was about because their husbands were there, their families were there. They might have been able to mind the children or visit you but they couldn't understand fully how I felt inside.

Twice a victim

The group members insisted that two other members who had not been able to attend the group discussions be interviewed. One of them was Ralph, who had been wheelchair bound for the past nine years.

I got involved in HAVEN through a relative, who had helped set up the group, and they got in touch with me. From then on I got more involved. It's been a good thing. I found that you can become very isolated. You just hear of people who this has happened to or that has happened to, it's just a name, but when you're talking to the person it makes it reality. And I found out that a lot of people have the same hurt and feelings that you have yourself, and I think a lot of people who have been injured have been left isolated, not coming in contact with other people who have gone through, or are going through, the same sort of thing. So I think it has been a very good thing.

Like others in HAVEN the devastating change in his life had arrived without warning.

I was in the town with friends, one Saturday afternoon. We were all out on a pub crawl after a football match. I was in *The Jockster*, and there had been a shooting at a bar down the street from it, unknown to me and my friends. The gunmen had shot the doorman a couple of times in the head, and as we left *The Jockster* they were making their getaway. There was a bit of shouting and screaming from people who had seen what happened and somebody threw something and hit their car. And as they were taking off the guy in the back of the car shot a couple of rounds just as I walked round the corner and straight into it. I just went down and that changed my life for ever. One of the bullets passed through my ribcage, through my left lung, crossed my spine, through my right lung, and out the back of my ribcage. And it done enough damage to render me paraplegic, and I have been unable to walk or work from that day to now – and that'll be for the rest of my life, there's no miracle cures. And you are just left the way you are and you have to get on with it.

I went from there to the Royal Hospital to get my lungs sorted out and I was moved from there after eleven days to a spinal unit, where I was taught how to live from a wheelchair. I was three months there going through rehabilitation and learning different things. I am completely paralysed from the waist down, so you have to learn to make other parts of your body work that don't work voluntarily – bowel and bladder – you have to learn how to control those in a different way than you would normally. I was there three months learning everything, then was discharged and came home to a house that wasn't adequate for a wheelchair. That was a nightmare as you can guess, living in a front room with a bed and a commode, with no easy access to toilet facilities or a shower. This was all pressure on the family right away. The kids were very young, Ryan was three and Kirsty was five, and all of a sudden their dad was in a wheelchair. So they had to grow up with my disability; and my wife and I had to cope as best we could at the time. Getting things sorted out, from trying to get extensions done on your home, trying to cope with your disability, your wife trying to cope with it, trying to make the kids come along with you as best you could.

Getting grants from the Housing Executive was another nightmare. I had to leave where we lived and buy this house I'm in now, because there was room here to build on the back. So, that was another upheaval, moving house; children, wife all going through this stressful time. One thing after another. Eventually we got the house extended and it was a great help having a toilet for myself and being able to shower, and having a room downstairs to sleep. But I was still having to cope with a lot of pain, while trying to bring the kids up as normally as possible. And my wife had to come to terms with a different way of living; things we had done which we couldn't do now.

One thing I felt terrible about was that I was unable to work again; actually having to write into work and tell them that I wasn't going to be able to come back to my job. I was a bakery labourer, and that was finished. That was a big, big part of my life; instead of going out and working your 40-50 hours a week and paying for your bills, it came down to signing a couple of books every week, which I felt terrible about. You had nothing else to do, sitting about in the house, and then depression set in. You felt as if you

were... not worthless, like, but you weren't achieving anything. You weren't able to work, you weren't able to do things you wanted to do, and you were trapped in the house and there was no sort of outlet.

Eventually I became, through my social worker, a member of the Island Resource Centre on the Lower Newtownards Road, and for three days a week I was able to go there. I took a great interest in art and it really helped to take my mind off things. There was people there who were the same as myself, who had young families and were disabled through illness or accidents in work, but you were able to talk to them and find out that you weren't on your own. And it was a great release for me; I don't know what I would have done with sitting in the house seven days a week, if that opportunity hadn't come along; it was an outlet for me. As I said, I do art and I have done some at home. That has helped us as a family, especially as it meant I wasn't sitting depressed all the time, moping about. If you felt better yourself it passed on to your kids and your wife. We started to take a holiday on the Continent.

Like the other members of HAVEN Ralph felt abandoned by the wider society.

But even with things in general moving to a better feeling within the family, I still feel I have been let down at times by politicians, members of this new Assembly, newspapers, legal people. I went through all the legal proceedings to try and get compensation for my injuries and being out of work, the pain that was involved, the upset to my family. But I was turned down because I had been sent to prison in 1976, that's some twenty-five years ago now – I was inside for three years. I appealed twice through the courts for this compensation, but was turned down. I appealed to the then Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam. After her I appealed to Peter Mandelson, then I had a judicial review under the European Convention on Human Rights, and again couldn't get compensation, not only for myself but for the suffering my wife and family went through. The judge said that the previous decisions by different Secretaries of State were right, because I had been given a prison sentence twenty-five years ago, for something which was considered political.

I came out of prison twenty-three years ago. I had no further convictions, I was involved with nothing other than trying to do the best for my family. But thirteen years later somebody comes along and you're shot and end up in a wheelchair, and in their wisdom the legal system, the Northern Ireland Office, decided that because I had broke the law twenty-five years ago there was no compensation for people like me. Nor for my wife and children who had committed no crimes. They had to suffer because of what I had done a quarter of a century ago and what had been done to me in 1992. Their suffering wasn't taken into account; it didn't matter to these people. I went to MPs, who wrote to different people, but they just sent me back letters saying there didn't seem to be anything they could do, they could take it no further. I felt at times they could have done a bit more, and the press didn't really want to know, they sort of ignored it after a time.

But you're still left with the guilt in your mind that you've let your family down, that they're being penalised for something I did twenty-five years ago, before I was even married, and before I had any children. They have lost out

on what a normal father would do with his children, they have suffered too. But it is of no consequence; you're just left to get along with it. My efforts to get compensation all came to an end and I couldn't take it any further myself. That again brought a lot of pain and suffering to the fore, which was another thing you had to cope with. This battle had gone on for years and years and you'd be let down time and time again, by the Northern Ireland Office and the Compensation Agency. I wasn't looking a million pounds; just enough to buy a house or a bungalow that we could have lived in as a more normal family, that's all I would have wanted out of it.

The support of family and friends over this time had been crucial.

Certain friends have been a great support. I used to belong to a football team and they ran a couple of functions to raise money to help out. Even people I went to school with ran nights in social clubs to raise money – any way they thought they could help, that's the type of friends I had. It was good to know that there were people out there who cared. Once you were in a wheelchair and you weren't able to do many things a lot of people drifted away but a small amount of people stayed with me, and with the family. People from my own background who didn't have much yet tried to give you. They wanted to help. Sometimes I felt a bit embarrassed these people bringing me money. I was saying: "Look, you don't have to do this." And they were saying: "But we *want* to do it." Even at the start, when I couldn't drive until my car was specially adapted, they were calling to take me out. I felt I was putting these people out, and at times I would say to the wife: "I'm going to tell them not to call, for at times I feel I am putting it onto them." And they were telling me 'no', and there were phoning Elaine and saying: "As far as we are concerned he's still the Ralph we knew years ago, he's no different. He's in a wheelchair, he's been shot, we still want to keep in touch with him."

And then I got a lot of support from the people in HAVEN, very genuine people, and they helped – laying on transport or helping with the family and things. Even give me a wee voucher now and again to buy the kids something. To me it was amazing that people just wanted to do this, and they were ordinary people who didn't have much. And at times it was a bit overpowering and raised a wee lump in the throat. But at the end of the day it was a comfort to know that you weren't on your own. And to know they were there on the phone for you. And to me, that's... I find it hard to talk a lot about it.

Again, like other members of HAVEN, Ralph had experienced a real disillusionment with local politicians.

I have wrote to politicians and I feel they could highlight my case a bit more. But I feel distant from them, they're a million miles away from me. It suits them to come on the TV and say certain things, but they could be doing more for ordinary people. They owe ordinary people a lot, for before I went to prison I turned on the TV every day and there were these politicians preaching, warning us that my community and my heritage were in danger, that my country was going to be overthrown, and that it was time to stand up against this threat. To me, looking back, they were channelling people down an

avenue where maybe they wouldn't otherwise have gone; you felt as if the IRA were out to destroy your country and you had to do something about it. And I was one of those people who felt something had to be done, after listening to these politicians and other prominent people. And in those areas, at that time, sectarianism was at its height and young people were going to prison in their droves. Now, I spent only three years in prison, but I could have done something more serious and been sent to prison for life – because listening to our politicians that's the way they were leading people.

When I was growing up during the Troubles I couldn't have told you what a Catholic looked like for years, you were that engrossed in your own area, you didn't even go into the town during the height of the Troubles, so you didn't know what was going on outside your own community. You grew up in it and didn't know any different, and you weren't told anything; or else you were told the worst by certain politicians. These people have a lot to answer for, yet according to them they are squeaky clean, they have never lifted a gun or broke any laws. But to me a lot of people who *have* lifted a gun and went to prison did so as a result of listening to these politicians on TV, or going and listening to what they had to preach. To me they are not squeaky clean, definitely not. They always come up with this excuse; "Oh, we didn't mean you to do that, that wasn't what we meant." But I seen them marching with their berets and their flags, and when young people hear them warning that the 'other side' is going to take us over unless we do something, they turn to the nearest Loyalist organisation and volunteer to do this and that – and end up in jail, only the politicians don't follow them in there. And they're not there either when you're an innocent victim as well.

Ralph felt that even the present stance of politicians was eerily reminiscent of the stances they had adopted prior to his imprisonment.

The people that were saying all those things in 1976 are still saying them today, and not only are *they* saying it but their sons are now saying it too. And they're going to become the new politicians, for they're just a chip off the old block. And you can see them coming through with the same rhetoric, the same talk, and I think if the Troubles were to break out again – let's say if the ceasefires were to end and things went back to what they were years ago – I think people would be led down the same path as I was led down. And this is thirty years on and I think the same people would listen to the same thing, and be involved and go to prison in their hundreds, as happened to me.

Despite all the difficult times Ralph preferred to look on the positive side.

I believe I came out of prison a better person, more wiser. I think the experience taught me to look at these people and see them for what they really are. I came out and got a job and came away from anything political, even remotely political, I just didn't want to be part of that any more. To me it was something I had got caught up in, like so many others, but now I just wanted to get on with my life. And that's what I done – I got a job and worked hard, went on holidays, just became an ordinary person, didn't get involved in politics at all, I just became a guy who wanted to work. I met a

girl, got married, came out of that sort of area where these things were happening, just detached myself and got on with those things any ordinary person wanted to do: have kids and do the best you could for your family. And then ‘bang!’ all that was turned upside down in 1992. I finished work on a Friday, went out for a drink on a Saturday with my mates and ended up in a wheelchair on a Sunday. It was a terrible change of events in your life.

It’s hard to cope with, but as the years go on, you do adapt. I mean, you *have* to adapt; you can either adapt to it or go and sit in the corner of a room in your house and let life go by you. If you don’t put the effort in, I believe I would have lost my wife and family and I think my own sanity at times. I believe internally it has made me a stronger person. I had been a victim of the Troubles in 1976, and now I am a different type of victim, I have had a double experience of what the Troubles can bring. The thought often came into my mind that I was being punished twice for the same crime. But I have come through the other end and I believe I am better and stronger, and looking at what I have come through I can say: well, I have come through the dark days and I am now at a time in my life where I have accepted what has happened to me. And my wife and children, although they have suffered, have accepted me being in a wheelchair and being shot by the IRA. My children asked me what I was in prison for and I have tried to explain to them as honestly as I could, and they have come to accept me being in prison and being shot by the IRA, and not being shot *because* I was in prison but as an innocent victim who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We’ve got to a stage now where things seem to be flowing along okay. But it was hard, and at times it still is hard. Like when you look at your wee boy and you can’t play football with him. Kids up the street go with their dads to watch football on a Saturday morning, and there’s guys up the street would take my wee lad to a place called the ‘Glen’ where they can play around, or sleigh when there’s snow. He would come in and say: “So-and-so’s dad is taking us up the Glen, is that okay?” And I say: “Aye, that’s brilliant, son, away you go.” But when he’s away you say to yourself: Jesus, I’d love to be there with him. But you have to carry on and hope that you make the most of the things that you *can* do with them.

As with the other members of HAVEN, sectarian bitterness was not a by-product of Ralph’s experience.

I have told my children that there’s good and bad on both sides – although my own upbringing wasn’t like that. My father was a Sandy Row man and I think his opinion would have been that the only good Catholic was a dead one. And I think from a young age growing up in Sandy Row, collecting for the bonfires, going and watching the bands, you were brought up to assume Catholics were all bad, they were trying to destroy your country. You certainly weren’t told there was any good on the other side; you sang the songs and chanted ‘Kick the Pope and the IRA’. You weren’t told any different, that there were good Catholics too, trying to get a job and look after their families. Nor that we shared the same poverty, the same bad housing conditions. There was actually ten of us living in the one house, but it was the same on

the Falls. You were ignorant of what happened on the other side. And the politicians drove through Sandy Row on the back of a lorry with a loudspeaker and they waved the Union Jack and people followed it. But in prison I said to myself: there must be more to it than all this? I came out of prison when I was 21 and the one thing I had learned there was that I wasn't going to go back, I didn't want to go back to being what I was, I felt I had moved on.

The kids accept that there's good and bad on both sides. I don't be strict on it, but I try to steer them in the best direction. I think that you can scar children from an early age with the things you put into their minds – especially sectarianism and hatred. I'd rather tell them something good about people than something bad. Despite what happened to me, I don't turn round and say "I hate Catholics" – I can't even bring myself to feel bitter – so I try and put that across to my children. I don't want my children walking up the street saying: the IRA are Catholics, so all Catholics could have contributed to me being shot. I have told them that that's not the way to look at things. I hope that what happened to me won't scar them in later years. I would hate to think they would go near an organisation, or feel that Catholic friends that they're going to have are going to be bad people. If I can get this into them at this stage in their life, hopefully it will carry right through until they become adults and have their own families and friends. I want them to see Catholics as ordinary people like everyone else.

Every day, however, had its struggles.

I wake up every morning in pain. Days there it is unbelievable pain; this is pain in your spine that I never thought was possible before this happened to me, horrendous pain. And although there's supposed to be 'peace' in Northern Ireland now, some people's suffering still goes on. And the pain of having lost loved ones, which must be terrible again, as bad as the physical pain; the mental pain of those who lost sons or daughters, or whatever, must be terrible. When this first happened to me I went through a grieving period; I felt the same sort of grieving when this happened to me as when my mother died. It actually takes a long time to come to terms with it and live with it. It never goes away, because it doesn't let you, the pain doesn't let you forget what has happened. One part of you has died and you have to carry on with the person that you now are, you will never be the same again.

I think I have become a more understanding person, especially to what *all* our communities have suffered. To me there's no 'Catholic pain' or 'Protestant pain', pain is the same for everybody. At the end of the day people on the other side who have been injured by the police or the army or Loyalist groups... their pain is the same as mine. No-one has a monopoly on suffering. I am not saying that I forgive the ones who shot me, but I never talk about them to my family or kids, to me they're insignificant, they're ignorant of what they've done, and what came afterwards, of how what can happen in a few seconds can totally change one person's life, and the lives of their family and friends. I don't think these guys understand that at all.

Ralph readily acknowledged that HAVEN provided an important source of support and friendship.

Now and again we go down to HAVEN and there's tea and sandwiches laid on, and we would just sit and have a chat. And there was this lady there one day – her son was murdered away back in 1972 –and I was speaking to her and it was just as if it happened yesterday, and that woman was never able to talk to anybody until she walked through the door of HAVEN. And she was telling me what had happened to her and she started to cry. She says: "I have never been able to talk to anybody and my son was shot dead in 1972." There was nobody brought people together then. And that woman was crying about the effect it had on her family and her daughters, all through their lives as they grew up, the hurt, and she had carried all that pain inside here. Her husband had died and she was carrying this all those years, and that woman was never able to go to anyone and speak to anyone, and she was a woman in her 60s. And she was just letting it all out. And I was saying this is unbelievable, this woman is talking to me about her son being murdered, and there was other people saying things I never thought would be said. It was amazing what came out over tea and sandwiches. We've had a few functions and daytrips, and to me it means you are involved with other people. And that's only one small group of people. Think of all the people in this society who need that friendship and support right now, and aren't getting it.

'The IRA killed us all that night.'

The other person whom the group insisted should be interviewed was Thelma, one of HAVEN's founder members.

HAVEN started when Anne and I met above a chippie. We had known each other for a long time. Our two tragedies happened within a few weeks of each other, and me and her got together to talk about it. And we used to sit in that room, just an attic, and talk, and it done me more good than going to all the psychiatrists I'd been going to and everything. Sometimes we'd come down the stairs in tears, sometimes we'd come down laughing our heads off. And it just continued on from there, that's how it started. The Prisoners Enterprise Project was starting to form then in Sandy Row and they had their offices above the chippie, and it was actually they who approached me to use part of their place as a victims' group. At first I had very mixed feelings. Even my son said: "You're a hypocrite, you're working with ex-prisoners, but they're in for murdering people, and after what happened in our house, how can you talk to them?" But, I said, I need to talk to them ones too, to find out what motivated them to do what they did. I went through a very weird time coming to grips with that, I really did. And my own daughter, she's involved in HAVEN too, and there's a fella there doing life and she used to say: "He done the crime, so he deserved to do the time." And it was only one day when he sat and told his story – about while he was in for murder his son got murdered – and the tears were tripping our Shirley, and she said: "I never realised this before, but everybody is a victim in some way." Everybody's

pain's the same, no matter what side you're on. I had reservations when I started meeting other groups from the other side. I used to clam up, I'd have listened but I would never speak, and everybody was noticing this and would ask me why. And I said I was scared to speak in case one of the people there from the other community was the wife or cousin or related in some way to the one who done the killing in my house, so I was scared to open my mouth. But I've got over that a wee bit, I can mix a lot more with them now, in fact two of us are to go up onto the Falls soon, that'll be a big step for me. I know it will be. The only ones who can help are other victims, those who have been through it.

It was evident that the horror of the event which left Thelma bereaved had hardly diminished over the intervening years.

I lived across the street and it was 13 November 1991, a Wednesday night. We had a new granddaughter, five weeks' old, and she had just been brought round and we were all excited. We were all in the living room and two of my children, Terry and Shirley, got up to go out, which left my other son Sammy and my partner Billy playing with the baby – Terry's child – and I went into the kitchen to start making the tea. The back door opened and I thought it was our Terry coming back for something, but when I looked up there was a man standing there with a balaclava on, and what I know now to be an AK47. This other fella ran in with a handgun, and I just froze. I couldn't do nothing, I froze like a statue. And they headed for the living room and I ran after them. When I got as far as the stairs the fear took over and I must have took the stairs three at a time, and locked myself in the bathroom. And they started shooting and it seemed to go on and on forever to me. But then I pulled the bathroom door open and came charging down the stairs again and they were just going out the front door. They had a car parked outside. I was afraid to go into the living room, but when I went in Sammy and Billy were lying at each end of the settee. I really can't remember where the baby was, although people say she was lying on the chair at the window. But she was in Billy's arms when I left her. Samuel was still talking; he was pleading with me: "Mummy, please, get the ambulance quick!" But Billy wasn't moving or anything. So I just hit the street then, squealing for somebody to help me. The neighbours all came in. And I remember having the baby then and giving her to a neighbour and she run with her. And then the police came.

But what I'll remember to the day I die is the smell, the smell of the gunshots – you would have thought the room was on fire – and the smell of the burning flesh, for Sammy had been hit nine times with the AK47 and Billy was shot six times and the baby was shot four times. Billy was also shot once with the handgun in the face. So you can imagine the mess. Blood was up the ceilings, up the hall, over the radiator – everywhere. I remember being out in the street then; I can remember Billy being brought out on a stretcher. But I can still never see no blood with Billy, never; to me there was never a mark on him. Obviously there was... And then I remember squealing 'cause Samuel wasn't coming out. I was squealing: please, don't bring him out in a bodybag, don't bring him out in a bodybag! Then I seen the

ambulance man coming running up the street with the child in his arms and I seen all the blood. And Terry collapsed in the street, squealing: “The baby’s shot, the baby’s shot!” But we didn’t know how bad it was.

And then my next memory is of being in the City Hospital casualty, I don’t remember getting to it or anything. But when we got up to the City they sent for us and relations of Billy, so we went into this wee office, and the staff told us Billy was dead, he had died on arrival, but that Samuel was still living. The child was transferred to the Royal, she was going to lose her leg. And then we sat for about two hours and finally they came and told me Samuel was dead too. Later on the nurse came over and handed me two wee plastic bags, with their jewellery and whatever they had in their pockets. And I remember thinking: a few hours ago we were sitting a happy family, and now I’m left with two wee plastic bags – and that’s it!

We were getting word about the child all night – that she was in theatre, that she was probably going to lose her leg, that she had all these other problems. But the surgeons fought on with her and saved her wee leg. And then the next morning the headlines were: “We are going to blow Terry-Louise out of the hospital!” Some woman had phoned the hospital and threatened to blow the child out of the hospital –five weeks’ old, like! Then we had the funerals to go through and none of the men were allowed to go up to visit the child for their own safety in the hospital, I only went up the once and I couldn’t go back for I was afraid. Up there is a very creepy place, the Children’s Intensive Care, there’s a big tunnel to go through to get to it... and you were never sure who would be hanging around it.

That night... it is the smells that I’m left with, the sounds, and see when anything happens now... see the Omagh bombing; I couldn’t go out of the house for a fortnight after that ’cause all them sounds, noises and smells all came back to me. And Dunblane – remember the wee children? –that nearly killed me, for I could feel those wee children’s fear, I could smell the blood and everything. And, I’m telling you, burying two of them on the same morning was terrible, so it was. It was ten years ago last Tuesday.

As with all victims, the aftermath was one long struggle just to survive.

I wanted just to die too, but I had Terry at sixteen and Shirley only fifteen, and I had to carry on for them. But I tried twice to commit suicide after it, about eleven months later, I just lost it, I couldn’t go on any more, and it ended up they had to take me into the psychiatric unit in the City Hospital, Windsor House. They had me in there for six months. But it was only then that I realised the effect it was having on us, and I still say to this day: the IRA might as well have wiped the whole lot of us out that night, ’cause I’m not the person I was, from that night to now. You learn to cope, you learn to exist, but you’re not really living, you know? Terry changed, he had to become the man of the house overnight, he had the responsibility of keeping an eye on me, that was his wee baby that was shot, he had lost his brother, he’d lost Billy... We never went back to that house again after that night, I got rehoused. I have never crossed to that side of the street, ever. Manys the time I sit at night in my bed looking over, but I never go over. The IRA killed

us all that night, 'cause I am no longer the person I was, no way. Neither is Terry or Shirley. You learn to exist, that's it.

It was a few years down the line before I started to feel a bit stronger. I came out of Windsor House but attended it as an outpatient. In a way I think Windsor House made me worse. Every time I came out of it I was more depressed – it's an old-fashioned, dull building. There were days you had to go up for your appointment and didn't really want to talk. There were other days when you *did* want to talk, but you just couldn't go up and wrap the door and say: I want to talk today. And I went from being bulimic to anorexic – I was swinging from one to the other for a few years and I ended up having to go to another psychiatric clinic, and they were trying to say it was because I had never come to terms with what had happened. So I hit the drink for a while, but that was no answer, I realised I was only hurting Terry and Shirley by doing that. But it's very, very hard to even come to terms with it. I don't think you ever do. Losing a child is bad enough no matter whatever age they are; if you lose them through an illness or something like that I think it would be easier to accept it, if you know what I mean. But for somebody to have sat and planned... and they must have been creeping around outside my house, watching it. And to walk into your house and just take their lives away like that, in cold-blooded murder, I think that's what makes it so hard for you to ever accept, for there was no reason whatever on this earth for it to happen.

The first psychiatrist I got was brilliant, I really got on great with him, but they kept changing them, and the new ones take you back to day one, and you have to start from scratch again. Then when you get there somebody else takes over, and I felt they were just dragging me back all the time. One who helped the most was this fella from Dublin, and the first day he walked in to meet me I went; shit! What am I going to talk to him about! He looked about 22 and was an RC, and I'm saying I can't confide in this guy, he could be anybody. But whenever he sat down he said to me: "I just do not know what to say to you; I have discussed your case with a few of my colleagues, and I just don't know where to begin." And he started to cry reading my story, and I ended up comforting him and then we both started to laugh. And me and him hit it off great and that went it on about a year, and I felt he was really helping me. Then he got moved too and another stranger comes in.

Far more valuable than professional help was the support and understanding that only fellow victims could provide.

You get the most support from others who have suffered too for they know exactly what you're talking about. You have meet Joan, her wee boy was only nineteen, the same age as Samuel, and he was shot nine weeks before him. The same gunmen, on the Donegall Road. And me and her being able to sit down over the years and discuss it and tell each other exactly how we felt, and you can't do that with somebody who doesn't know what you're talking about. And Anne will sit and say to me: but you're worse than me for we didn't die, me and Alan, and I say: "Yes, but you know what that fear is like, when them gunmen walk right up to you, you know what it's all about, you have seen the carnage, and seen Robert's son and the wee pensioner lying

dead, and you thought Alan was dead.” And she’ll say: “Aye, but I never lost a son.” And I say: “But you know how we felt on the night, that fear.”

When I would go to bed at nights afterwards the fear would grip me, my stomach... even now I wake up in the mornings and my stomach just goes like that there. For I always had a terrible fear. We were all in our house that night, every one of us... And I remember listening to Mr Paisley on the TV a couple of weeks before it, spouting about something. And he said that he had information that a whole family were going to be wiped out. And with what happened in my house that stuck in my head and I was going: I wonder was that my family? ‘Cause our Terry and Shirley had just walked out, and I have no doubt that if I had been still in that living room I would have been shot as well. It was pure chance that I was in the kitchen, and they didn’t shot me for that would have warned Samuel and Billy that they were there. I think that’s what saved me. But to this day I have a terrible fear of them coming back to get me, or our Terry and Shirley. The police have told me they won’t come back, but that fear is still in my head. Our Terry once said to me: “See if there is ever a fire in this house, we’ll never get out.” I have big bars on the doors and as well as that I have a mountain bike jammed up against the back door. I have to do all that or I wouldn’t sleep in bed.

As with the other group members Thelma harbours a deep cynicism towards anything political.

I don’t believe them about peace. Don’t get me wrong, when the first ceasefire was announced I was down Broadway and I came charging up Broadway and I was crying and crying. One part of me was delighted and relieved that no-one else was going to die, but then the other part was saying: but why now? it’s too late for me. And then a few weeks later our ones announced their ceasefire and I cried even harder, I didn’t know where my emotions were. And I was starting to trust them. But then Canary Wharf happened and I thought: that’s it, I’ll never believe them again. Sure look at how many people’s died since we’re supposed to have ‘peace’. There’s another child buried last week, although he was throwing a pipe-bomb and killed himself. But the Godfathers of them organisations are to blame for that as far as I am concerned, I have no time for none of them. I wouldn’t be in any way politically motivated at all now, I just don’t believe none of them. I think the politicians are a load of shite to be honest, I think they’re just in it for the money and the glory, they don’t really care about the ordinary people on the street. The only one I would say was a decent one among them was John Hume, I think he was sincere, I think he done a good job. I sit here sometimes listening to our politicians and I get embarrassed. The Protestant community has no decent leadership at all.

Like the other group members, she holds no sectarian bitterness.

I have nothing against the Catholic people whatsoever, I never had a problem with them. I would go up to Andersonstown even up to last year visiting people I have known all my life. I know there’s good people there who don’t want nothing to do with this. I hate the IRA, but I have nothing against the

Catholic people. And I'll tell you something else: when that happened to me I got all these messages of support from the Catholic community, complete strangers. I kept all the cards and letters that I got, they're all up the stairs in a big box. I got hundreds of letters from people all over – Omagh, Dublin, you name it, everywhere. One just read: "I am scared to give you my name but I am a mother from the Falls Road, please don't judge us all the same." And there's one which was posted to Terry – he'd been away to Holland on a cross-community thing – from all the kids up at Turf Lodge, and every one wrote a wee individual message, and they're lovely. I got Mass cards from people, I still have a whole lot of them which I carry around in my purse, I have carried them for ten years and I wouldn't part with one of them. Even from convents saying: "If you ever need a break just phone us." And Father Mullen from Omagh... I've only just recognised him lately. After the Omagh bomb he came on the TV one night, and his name rang a bell with me. I opened my purse and there's the wee card from Father Mullen from Omagh, saying: "I hope your son Samuel is in Heaven this Christmas." But I thought to myself at the time: imagine complete strangers taking time to sit and write to you, you know? I got more messages of support from the Catholic side than from the Protestant side, a lot more. Apart, that is, from people in the 'Village', as they call this area; it's a very tight wee community, and really without them I couldn't have got through it. I have a lot of good friends round here. But it surprised me the people who wrote to me and offered me holidays. I never took any of them, but at least the thought was there. There was a priest who came into the area and rapped the door to come and see me and all; he said: "I'll probably not be welcome" but it wasn't his fault, I mean, I didn't blame the Catholic people at all.

And I wouldn't appear on the TV or give statements to the papers, I wouldn't do none of that, for what are you going to say? I couldn't have gone on like that man Wilson after the Enniskillen bomb and say he forgave them, as quick as he did, I knew I couldn't have done that. 'Cause I don't forgive the gunmen, I hate them. But my minister says to me the media are wanting a statement. I said: "Just tell them I want no retaliation, 'cause I don't want any other family going through what I'm going through. Just tell them that, and that's all." I didn't want to see them, 'cause they tortured me. They were outside my house while I was still up at the hospital, my son wasn't even dead, and they were offering people money to go into the house and look for photographs. Forensic was there for about 48 hours, I couldn't get in for clean clothes or nothing. They tormented me. And then afterwards they rang me up one time and were offering me money to tell my story and I said: it's my story, it's nothing to do with youse. The way they go about it is ridiculous.

That was a mad night. They shot Billy and Samuel dead; they shot the Lynn brothers up the Shankill, they blew another fella up on the Shankill, he lost a leg, and they also hit Annadale trying to get Joe Brady. I didn't want Mr Paisley to come near me, he was up at Roselawn for the Lynn brothers, but I didn't want any of the politicians near me at the time.

I wish to God it would all end. My kids have never known anything only the Troubles here. I used to go over to the Park Centre but I rarely go over

that way now, for I know that's where the gunmen came from. I wouldn't know them because they had balaclavas on, but I would imagine they would know me. The police know who they were. And when prisoners were being let out as part of the Good Friday Agreement I was all over the place about that. Everybody was cheering for their own side, and I said you can't cheer for one side, like, and expect them to keep the other side in. The other side were probably doing the same and hoping they would keep the Prods in. And all the thousands of families must have been really gutted to see them coming out those gates, I know I was. It's all forgot about now, and nobody will ever bother now about the crimes that were never solved.

I would like to come face to face with them and ask 'why?' And did they feel any remorse for it? And he shot a five-week old baby too, how can he sleep in his bed? Does he ever think about it, or is he so hardened to it? I know he is one of the 'main players' as they refer to them, the police were able to tell me about him. But does he ever look at his own kids and say: what would I feel if something ever happened to them?

Like Anne, Thelma had a real fear about what the tragedy could do to her surviving son.

I really worried that our Terry would run out and join an organisation looking revenge. But I'll tell you what stopped our Terry. Not long after they shot Sammy and Billy and the baby, our ones did the Devenish Arms and there was a wee boy in playing pool with his daddy and they put the gun to his eye and pulled the trigger. We sent cards and all up to that child. And there was a TV programme on about both him and Terry-Louise, a while after it, and I thought he was brilliant that night. It showed you all the operations they did to Terry-Louise, the first time I had seen it all in detail, her in the theatre, the extent of her wounds and all, the extent was horrific, and it showed you him as well. And it showed you him with a wee glass eye. And when the bullet went through that wee boy's eye half his head was blew off and he's left with a big steel plate and all this. And when they were interviewing him they asked him how he managed with the glass eye, and he says: "Oh, I just take it out and clean it every day, and when you're putting it in again sometimes it tickles." And he was laughing and I thought: God love him, like. But that's what turned my Terry. He said: "Mummy, that makes our ones every bit as bad." And he has no time for any of them, wouldn't entertain them.

Terry hasn't talked to me about it, I think he's scared of upsetting me. Sometimes we say "Do you remember this, or this?" but not about the shooting. Terry got engaged a fortnight ago and I went: we'll have a party. But he didn't want any fuss. Then I started thinking: I will never get the chance to see Sammy get engaged or get married. I was going through photographs this morning, and every time he would come back to me in dreams he's about ten-year-old. I never dream of him as he was then, nineteen. He had a gorgeous mop of curly hair, but he always wopped it off. It's only in the last year that I am able to dwell more on the happy memories. Nearly every time you would think about them it would be to do with that

night. Now, I do see them in their coffins, I see that quite a lot, that'll never leave me. But I can look back now and say: do you remember Billy did this, or Sammy did that, or we were all away here and there? I can do that now, but it took a long time to be able to do that, a long, long time. People tell you 'time's a great healer'. Time's *not* a great healer, for things get worse as the years go on. I see our Terry, he was three years younger than Samuel, and he's grown up into a lovely lad, everybody loves him, he always has a smile on his face, but everything he does you say: our Sammy should've have done that too – you start comparing, thinking about what you are missing. You never stop loving them or missing them. I can still tell you every single part of our Samuel's body, every wee mark or scar and go right back to when he was born to his very nappy rash. There's an awful lot of things come back to you, and you hold on to them like grim death so you do, every single memory you won't let go. I still have all his clothes, and Billy's clothes. I have never threw any out. People say get rid of it, but I couldn't.

Terry-Louise was the youngest victim ever here; imagine putting four bullets into a wee thing like that. Samuel idolised her, he loved wee babies.

I think the victims have come into the spotlight since the ceasefires just to appease us. But they make you feel like a beggar to get something out of the Memorial Funds. The way they dealt with the compensation fund was very bad. I got £3000 for Samuel, and the way they worded it from the Northern Ireland Office, I'll never forget it, they said: your son was 19 years of age so he probably wouldn't have been at home much longer so that's £25 a week housekeeping money for three years. And that's what he was worth. And any benefits you are entitled to you have to fight for.

Billy was buried from his sister's house, and Samuel was buried from his girlfriend's house, because we could have buried nobody from here for they riddled the whole place. Which meant that when the two bodies came home my heart was ripped asunder, because when I was with my son I wanted to be with Billy, and when I went down to Billy I wanted back to my son. And I couldn't be at two funeral services at the one time, so the two coffins met at Donegall Avenue, so I went behind them to Roselawn to hear the joint service at the graveside. To this day I can't grieve for them together; I can either grieve for Sammy or grieve for Billy, but not for them both together. He was my son, my first born; Billy was the man I loved. And he was the father that Shirley never had. His own kids come to visit me maybe two or three times a week, they're grew up now.

There's an awful lot involved in the aftermath. People say we look all right now, but people don't really know you. It changes your life forever, it's always like a dark shadow hanging over us.

It's very rarely that I talk about it; I have to be ready to talk, I just can't turn it on and off. HAVEN meet every Thursday night, we've got a place on the Donegall Road. It's dead cosy, and we get the aromatherapists in, and the reflexology, and we get pampered. It's just to have our own room, we can lock the door and nobody comes in on us. We can do whatever we like; we all cuddle up and sometimes have a good laugh. If somebody is down they'll talk. That's what we're there for, that's what it's all about.