

'Zest' Self-harm conference

City Hotel, Derry

28 October 2003

Opening remarks by John Hume MP MEP

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin my remarks by thanking you all for inviting me to open your conference here in the City Hotel this morning. It is a privilege to be asked to carry out such a duty on behalf of a voluntary organisation like 'Zest' that does so much good work in the community here in the Northwest.

Since its foundation under the name 'Combat suicide' in 1996, I know that 'Zest' has come to be known as a professional though compassionate and personable organisation. Though much of the work that is done by 'Zest' is often undertaken outside the glare of public attention, it is a fact that the service provided is not just of great benefit to the clients who use it. It is also of considerable benefit to the entire community here in Derry and in the surrounding area.

Issues relating to self-harm, self-injury and to suicide have too often been met with a veil of silence in our society. These are clearly sensitive and delicate matters that must be responded to with a sympathetic and effective response. We are lucky that here in the

Northwest a gap that is seen to exist in terms of service provision is met by such a worthy organisation as 'Zest'.

Perhaps the community as a whole sometimes views those who self-harm as a homogenous group, that we think that what drives someone to that point can be met with a uniform response. Of course, that is not so. What motivates every human being is different, the experience of every person is different. And those who self-harm are the same only really in so far as they are all different. The self-help emphasis of 'Zest' is a recognition of this reality. In helping people to help themselves, you are helping our entire society.

Nevertheless, much more needs to be done by that society.

It is one of the more regrettable facts of our time that the realities of self-harm are not a regular feature of public debate. It rarely features in the columns of the newspapers or on the TV news bulletins. Perhaps more sad is the fact that it is usually only when a person commits suicide that the eyes of the media open.

One tragic statistic is that those who self-harm are one hundred times more likely to commit suicide in the following year than a member of the general population. So self-harm represents something of a warning signal to us. In dealing with self-harm, this organisation plays an invaluable role in helping people to deal with their problems before it is too late. In so doing, you provide a great service to the community as a whole.

I hope that in gathering here today in order to discuss issues relating to the assessment, treatment and patterns of self-harm, the awareness of the importance of this issue can be raised. One does not have to be an expert in matters relating to mental health or to self-harm to have an appreciation of the significance of good communication to dealing with these issues.

In coming together to exchange information as peers, as professionals and as survivors, I hope and trust that you will be able to advance further along the road in helping society deal with these matters.

As a community we are changing. We are moving forward in a whole host of areas. With the improvement in the situation on our streets, and not ignoring the difficulties we are currently having, politics and politicians are much better able to respond to real issues affecting people every day. It is certainly my hope that restored institutions will respond dynamically and imaginatively to the problems being faced.

As I said, one only has to look back to the Special Olympics to see the way in which attitudes and perceptions can be changed.

As a community, we do have the ability to move from a position of not knowing about others to fully appreciating the skills and talents that people have to offer. Through events like today's, I hope that we will be able to develop awareness of the reality of self-harm and of related issues. In doing so, I hope that we can help to prevent the problems that it can bring. We have a duty to respond constructively

to those facing difficulties, no matter how temporary or how acute, so that we can help each other reach our full potential.

'Zest' means passion for life. What is clear to me and to all of us gathered here is that those who self-harm want the same things out of life as everyone else, a sense of being valued, something to look forward to, friends, family and happiness. Organisations like this help people to get back on the track. I hope and believe that we can help the community as a whole to understand and fulfil its role in that process. Today's event will certainly move us a little further along that road.

I know that you have much work to do. Once again, on behalf of those you have helped and on behalf of the entire community here, thank you for all the work you have done and for everything that I know you will do into the future. I wish you every continued success.