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Three years after IRA murder, McCartney sisters lose faith in the system

(by Suzanne Breen, Sunday Tribune)

Suzanne Breen, Northern Editor, talks to the McCartney sisters as the third anniversary of their brother's murder approaches

The family of murdered Belfast man, Robert McCartney, say they are deeply concerned that the trial of the man accused of killing their brother nearly three years ago hasn't yet begun.

Speaking as the anniversary of the death of her brother Robert approaches, Paula McCartney said: "Our faith in the system is being seriously challenged. The longer they delay the trial, the less likely it is justice will be done.

"The more the process drags on, the more damaging it is to the prosecution case and to us as a family. It's harder to keep witnesses on board and although people have made written statements, memory fades over time. We were considering requesting a meeting with the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) but we've been told that would be pointless."

Robert McCartney was stabbed to death outside Magennis's bar in Belfast on 30 January 2005. Three months later, Terence Davison (50) was charged with his murder. Two other men, James McCormick (38) and Joseph Fitzpatrick (46) were charged with making an affray.

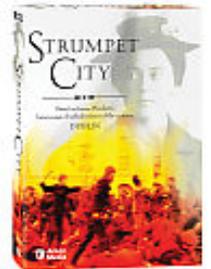
All three are on bail. Paula McCartney attributed the delay in starting the trial to defence legal requests. The family is considering marking Robert's third anniversary with a walk on Tyrella beach, Co Down. "Our grandparents had a house there which we visited as children. Our happiest memories of Robert are on that beach," said Paula.

The sisters will also make a fresh appeal for information on Robert's murder. "There are people who know something but who might feel ashamed they didn't come forward three years ago. We don't want them to be embarrassed. They should do the right thing and contact police," Paula said.

The family is disappointed only Davison has so far been charged

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with murder, she said: "Police told us that ideally five people would face murder charges. There are another 10 who should be facing charges for involvement in aspects of the killing or the clean-up operation."

Paula said Sinn Féin's recent support for the police hadn't helped: "Words change nothing. Sinn Féin and the IRA continue to stop witnesses coming forward or else instruct some who have come forward on what to say."

She said the family was appalled policing and justice powers could be devolved to Stormont with Sinn Féin holding one of the two ministries. "In no other country would it happen. Sinn Féin is a party which protects criminal gangs. Politicians elsewhere are kicked out of office for having an affair."

Paula said her brother's killing had disappeared from the political agenda because both governments and most politicians wanted to strengthen the Stormont administration and present Northern Ireland as a normal society.

"The DUP recently said ending attacks on Orange halls would build confidence in Sinn Féin. Not a mention of justice for our family or the family of Paul Quinn in South Armagh. Bricks and mortar means more than flesh and blood." Unionist MEP Jim Allister is planning to raise the murder in Strasbourg this week.

Paula said IRA decommissioning had been an attempt to appease the governments after her brother's murder: "The pressure over Paul Quinn's murder will probably lead to an equally meaningless statement announcing IRA disbandment. What counts is stopping the murders."

THE FIVE SISTERS

Donna McCartney

Donna ran a bustling sandwich shop in Belfast city centre when her brother was killed. Police warned her of threats by "republican elements to burn it down".

But Donna who was "the most outgoing and best craic of us all", according to her sisters, closed the shop for other reasons: "My personality changed after Robert's murder. I became introverted and withdrawn.

"I've always worked in the retail trade because I loved meeting people. Now I don't even like going into shops, I just want to keep away from the public. I'm doing a child-minding course because I want a job where I don't have to leave the house. I'd like to emigrate but my kids want to stay in Northern Ireland."



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Donna (41), a mother of four, has battled depression since the killing: "None of us were ever on medication before but since Robert's murder we've all taken something at some stage."

Catherine McCartney

Catherine had just moved to the Co Down countryside, which she thought would be a better environment for her four children to grow up, when her brother was killed. The need to be in Belfast for media interviews, and a desire to be near her sisters, led her to return to the city.

In 2005, she taught politics part-time and then worked for Women's News, a local feminist publication. But since her contract ended, she has found it impossible to secure other employment in the community sector.

"Catherine's high public profile has worked against her," says Paula. "She's not welcome in certain places because some unionists still identify anyone from a nationalist area as a republican. And it's hard for her to get work in nationalist areas because Sinn Féin controls so many jobs in the community sector there. She gets discrimination both ways."

Catherine (40) has been offered a teaching position in Perth and is currently in Australia on a 10-day trip with her husband Ed to see if the family would be happy settling there. Her book on Robert's killing, 'Walls of Silence', will be the basis for a television drama by 'Bloody Sunday' producer Mark Redhead.

Gemma McCartney

Unlike her sister Paula and her brother's fiancée Bridgeen Hagans, Gemma says she's lucky – she hasn't been driven from her home by intimidation. But she has installed security measures at the house in Dunmurry, on the outskirts of west Belfast.

Gemma, 43, a nurse and mother of two, suffered serious depression after Robert's murder and needed a year off work. When she returned, she found it impossible to cope. After more time off, she now works part-time.

In November when running a mobile cervical cancer screening unit in the Markets area of Belfast, yards from where Robert was murdered, she was forced to leave the premises after an associate of those who killed her brother abused and spat at her, she says.

She has decided to change career and begins a teacher training course at the University of Ulster in September: "I always wanted to teach history but never had the confidence. Robert's

death has given me more courage in lots of ways so now I'm determined to do it.

"But I still find myself getting very emotional about him. Sometimes, I can't even say his name without crying. A friend I hadn't seen for a while called round the other night. He works in the Royal Victoria Hospital and he told me he was there when Robert was brought into casualty. I found that very upsetting."

Claire McCartney

Eight months after her brother was killed, Claire (30) had a miscarriage. A month later her relationship broke up and she moved out of the north Belfast house she shared with her partner.

"It was a very rough time. I lost Robert, then my wee baby and my home in less than a year. I had to live with two of my sisters until I got my own place so I've moved house three times in three years which is stressful by itself," says Claire.

When Robert was murdered, she was working as a teaching assistant; she now waitresses part-time. "I received counselling for depression. I've dealt with my personal stuff but Robert's death is still raw. It's like it happened yesterday.

"Last month, I bumped into Terry Davison, the man charged with Robert's murder. He was in town Christmas shopping. I told him what I thought of him. I was physically sick afterwards."

Paula McCartney

Paula was doing a Women's Studies degree at Queen's University when Robert was murdered. "I stopped temporarily, then restarted, but my motivation had gone. I decided to give it up totally, not to torture myself any more by trying to concentrate. I now hope to begin working as a volunteer with Women's Aid."

Just months after the murder, Paula (42) and then a mother of five, became pregnant again. "It was completely unexpected. I didn't plan to call the baby Robert because I thought it would upset my parents but, in the end, they wanted that. He's two now and he's certainly not a carbon copy of his late uncle, he's his own wee person."

While pregnant, Paula was intimidated from her Short Strand home and moved to south Belfast. "I was born and reared in the Strand. I spent over 40 years there. Now, when I go back, it feels like a strange place."

She suffers insomnia and nightmares "not of Robert being murdered but of people betraying us". She says the family lost many friends during their campaign: "Somebody joked we're a bunch of no-mates. But tough times test friendships and many of ours failed.

"There's one girl who was so close to us we called her 'our sixth sister'. She was in my house every day for 25 years. When Robert was killed, she was great. She came over, did the washing and cleaned the house. But when we started doing interviews and speaking out against Sinn Féin, she ended contact.

"The night I was on TV, packing up to leave the Strand, she phoned and started talking like nothing had happened. But I couldn't resume the friendship. She hurt me big-time."

Like Catherine, Paula is considering leaving Northern Ireland after the trial. "I'm attending Spanish classes and would like to try a new life in Spain. I'm a home bird, I always thought I'd stay here forever.

"But Northern Ireland is a sick society. Peace and justice is about more than Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness giggling at Stormont. They're telling the tourists it's a nice, normal wee place. They should warn them not to look at the side of Belfast pubs, or in sheds along the Border, in case they find dead bodies."

Paul Quinn's murder was no surprise to Paula: "The Provos in South Armagh watched the boys in Belfast getting away with killing Robert and decided there was no need to worry about facing justice.

"They got away with it once, they got away with it twice, and they'll do it again. Sooner or later, another young lad from south Armagh, the Strand or Ardoyne will be murdered by thugs from their own community, and those in power will turn a blind eye."

She said the past three years had been hard for the sisters: "When we began the campaign for Robert we didn't know it would dramatically change our lives. But there hasn't been one minute that any of us has regretted it."

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