Traveller Writer Series 2010
First Edition
Traveller Pride Week

December 2010

Foreword by Vincent Browne
The Traveller Writer Series

In 2000 during the tenure of the Citizen Traveller Campaign an initiative was created for what was then Traveller Focus Week, whereby Travellers penned a series of articles which appeared in a range of national and regional newspapers during that week.

The Irish Traveller Movement are delighted to revive this project to coincide with this years Traveller Pride Week and have again worked with some of the Irish print media to feature Traveller written articles to appear the week of Dec 6 – 10th 2010. Some of the stories in this booklet appeared in those national and regional papers.

The Irish Traveller Movement believe this separate writing space assists in contributing to a sense of confidence and pride among a community who have not experienced the same unguarded opportunities or environments to express opinions, or indeed been regarded as having an opinion on things other than issues which very often are of a negative focus.

The Irish Traveller Movement would like to thank all of the editors and newspapers who have kindly supported this initiative. Most especially we thank the Traveller writers who have enabled this project.
Foreword

About 10 years ago in the company of Traveller friends, I found myself in the midst of a Traveller celebration in a Dublin pub, which afforded us an official late-night extension! There was singing, storytelling, fun, laughter and drink and, incidentally, no drunkenness. Young and old women singing without affectation or conceit or reserve, each encouraged by the others and each then applauded by the others. It was a carefree, joyous, spontaneous occasion. I thought that night what a pity it everyone did not see Travellers as they were/are: happy in themselves, in their identity, in their culture, in their vibrant fun.

But, what is it about our national culture and identity that a section of our society can be despised and reviled for being what they are? Can be victimised, ostracised, brutalised, not for anything they have done but because of what they are? There is no soothing explanation. It’s just plain bigotry.

You hear occasionally that Travellers are their own worst enemies. No they are not! The worst enemy of Travellers is the bigotry that is part of the Irish identity, part of what we are as a society, the one that cherishes all the children of the nation equally.

The only adequate response is for Travellers to take pride in themselves and in what they are.

Every week should be Traveller Pride Week. But then we might need an Irish Pride Week soon, given how privileged elite has vandalised the country.

Vincent Browne, 3 Dec 2010
Introduction

The Traveller Writers Series is a selection of stories, articles and thoughts of Irish Travellers on a wide range of topics that are of personal interest to the authors. They have been collected to commemorate Traveller Pride Week 2010 and demonstrate that Travellers have opinions and contributions to make to many issues and debates that happen in our society. Some of the stories are topical, political, personal or funny and all are interesting and enjoyable.

Travellers are not a homogenous group; - there are different views, thoughts and politics throughout the community, as demonstrated in this book. However, one common theme throughout the stories is the shared ethnicity and experiences of Irish Travellers.

When we do get to hear or read about Travellers it is often only on Traveller issues and many times Travellers are not asked their opinion on any other topic. This book is a testimony to the intelligence and contribution Irish Travellers make to Irish society.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this worthwhile publication that can be used by schools and community groups to help their understanding of Travellers. We hope that this will become an annual publication for Traveller Pride Week.

Jim O’Brien
Chairperson
Irish Traveller Movement
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When I was a young’fla about ten years ago I was under the impression that the Celtic Tiger was this mystical creature, that was wild and exotic that created jobs everywhere that gave the average Irish person the confidence to go out and buy themselves a latte at 12 o’clock. Celtic Tiger my arse, more like a Celtic ally cat, because as soon as the property bubble reached bursting point, the good ole alley cat took for the nearest wall to scale up and jump over. The good ole alley cat had sprayed us all with his promising perfume, leaving us smelling of bad loans and toxic banks.

I remember many years ago when I worked in a medical device manufacturing company feeling that now was the time to get out and make your crust, make the money that will buy your house, that brand new car with all the trimmings, I remember this. Wasn’t I the lucky lad for being late 37 days out of 60 and got sacked, wasn’t I the lucky lad who didn’t save up all year to get a deposit amount for a house and
who has subsequently gone back to college and to see all those supervisors from my old job struggling to pay off that car they liked to show off in the staff car park.

It’s hard to say where the Government are gone, and even harder to know where they are going. Our Government are a peculiar bunch of idiots really, giving away trillions worth of gas to Shell, bailing out banks and bankers and now to take bigger loans at a rate we simply cannot pay. Dropping the minimum wage by a euro, huge cuts in social welfare, widening the tax band so everyone will pay something, well almost everyone, the mega rich will not be approached. When I was a young’fla about ten years ago, I didn’t know that even though I would not stay on working in the medical device manufacturing company, and even though I would not be saving up for a deposit on a house or for a brand new car with all the trimmings, I didn’t have a clue that even though I would avoid all these things that I, along with all the generations to follow me, would be paying off a loan that I didn’t even procure.

The other day while searching through my college emails, I got a lovely one from the young Fianna Fail’ers, they said how they want to organise college parties, trips away, days out and how anyone with an interest in learning about politics and Government policies should come to one of their meetings, it also went on to say how it will be a bit of craic. Well I’m sure the Fianna Fail government have done nothing but, expense paid trips away and days out, and I’m certain
that they have had a lot of the old craic over the years, and with the way they ran the country to the ground, it looks like someone who was smoking crack implemented the policies that got us here. As for learning about politics and government policies, oh I think we have all learned a valuable lesson already.

As a Traveller from Tuam, I have grown up in a world where if I walked into a pub someone would think twenty more of my kind would follow and cause trouble and cost the pub money from dwindling sales. Well it wasn’t a Traveller who robbed the country of billions in the last decade, it wasn’t a Traveller who gave away trillions of euro in natural gas to Shell, and it certainly wasn’t a Traveller who decided to put your children into debt. At the moment I am studying towards a career in law in N.U.I.G, I hope that someday when I am qualified to practice, that my first case will not be representing someone who is in mortgage arrears, I hope that when I’m qualified there will be a firm willing to employ a Traveller, I hope when I’m qualified there will be work. This week is Traveller Pride Week, a week where Travellers are given a chance to show their pride, their pride in being a Traveller and more importantly an Irish Traveller. I am proud on both counts, and I pride myself in being an asset on both sides of the margin.
A day in the life of Martin (Beanz) Warde

Well it’s a frosty morning, with what is meant to be snow, but is actually frozen white water. As I wipe the crust from my eyes and begrudgingly throw off my duvet I realise I’m going to be late for college. The alarm is being a pig again, didn’t even make a noise, you would hear more from a silent order nun on karaoke. I realise today is no ordinary day though, today is “hand up your essay or else folks” day, hand up my essay or else what? I am a little resentful of the fact I need to get up on such a cold morning, God, how did the Travellers in the past do it. I must be the worst Traveller in the world, I get sick on trains, I can’t manoeuvre a van, the furthest I have travelled was Brussels and I am afraid of horses. I am what one would call an oxymoron, or moron, depending on which one of my cousins you are.

Out of bed I get, a mad dash to the bathroom to switch on the electric shower before my body realises and goes into spasm. After all the formalities of the day I go straight for the breakfast, strong coffee and a read of the national news. National news is usually a filling breakfast as you need to chew through some of the issues; it also fills you up with hatred for the economy for the day. Today is an especially dull day out, nothing special, except for missus Kelly my neighbour creeping through her garden towards the bottle bank down the road, with what looks like last nights tipple she had with missus O’Neill. I say hello but she ignores me, thinking she is camouflaged with her
wool jacket, but I know what she is up to, crazy ninja like character that she is, and her giving advice to us young’uns about the danger of alcohol, I know what she is like, having her binge sessions with the old birds of the estate, hyped up on a night of big Tom and denial O’Donnell.

So into my car, freezing and unresponsive, still this old white 99 corolla has done me proud on many occasions. The only time I couldn’t look at my car was when it was clamped, it looked like a drag queen with a yellow boot, and I felt like a mother hearing her son wants to be Britney Spears, although the latter would be far easier to digest. No one likes clamps, horrible yellow hub caps. Anyway, the car won’t start, battery I reckon, I call the father to ask him what he thinks is wrong with it. I don’t get any answers about the problem, but he does go into a lot of detail about what he thinks is wrong with me, calling him at 8am is probably not a good idea I suppose, but I was desperate. A lot of colourful words were used to describe me, a lot more colourful than the yellow hub cap, maybe I should have raised his heartbeat and gone all out and told him I want to be Britney Spears, just for the laugh, and start singing “oops I did it again”.

I finally get it started, push here, a kick there. I arrive into college just on time to hand in the all important essay, only to find the tutor is not in, apparently her car wouldn’t start, how ironic, I think I’ll give her my father’s number so she can call him for advice, and maybe he can tell her what’s wrong with her, say the things I only fantasise about
saying. By the time I finish my second lecture of the day it is already 2pm, like come on, who wants to have lunch at 2 pm, it’s such a bad time, no one around at all, except for the chess club, and that even I can’t join because I can’t finish the game in so many moves. Time for my sociology lecture, oh sweet mother I haven’t a clue what she is talking about, and I have a strange suspicion she is watching me all the time, I mean her glasses are that thick she could double up as a micro-scope.

Then the day draws to close fantastic news. I’m like a school boy on a cold day when the water pipes are frozen, except they are not, and I have already finished my college day. Still it’s nice to have achieved something through the day, something worthwhile. I suppose I will just go home now and talk to missus Kelly about how I am still keeping out of trouble and not drinking, and how Daniel O’Donnell is the best thing since the wireless, who would have thought it, Daniel O’Donnell the brainwasher who controls creepy grannies and teaches them the art of concealing alcohol. We love you Daniel.
2. Living Culture - Katie O’Donoghue

I was born in a tent on the road side near Ardfert in Kerry in 1945 and lived in a barrel top wagon until the age of 20. I moved into a trailer shortly after getting married and with my husband and eight children travelled around Kerry, Cork and Limerick for 15 years. During that time we experienced constant eviction and eventually we moved into a site in Cork city and more recently to a house there.

I have been campaigning for better living conditions, facilities for halting sites and fairer access to services for Travellers since the 1980s and am a founder member of the Cork Traveller Women’s Network which was set up 18 years ago. I have been involved in campaigning on health issues such as drug abuse, violence against women and mental health and recently I was a Peer Researcher for the Cork city Census section of the All Ireland Traveller Health Study.

Being part of Cork Traveller Women’s Network has given me the chance to work for Traveller rights on issues affecting our community and to promote our culture. I believe Traveller groups are so important in giving Travellers a voice and to get involved in making changes for
our community. I love to see younger Traveller women going to groups and meetings, getting information and improving their own and their families’ lives. I have seen women build their confidence and really come out of themselves, when they realise they can make a difference. It’s about Travellers seeing there are things we can do to better our lives and that we don’t have to just accept discrimination and bad services.

I first got involved in a women’s group to get out of the home and for the company of the women. We used to bake scones once a week, then we realised by being in a group we could change things, small things at first, by writing a letter here and there. That inspired me. I wanted to get more knowledge and confidence to change things. I have daughters and I wanted to see things better for them.

Many Traveller groups are run by Travellers but in the early days it was all settled people, now Travellers are in charge of running the organisations, making decisions and working for our rights, for better health, accommodation and education for our community.

As a Traveller I am proud of who I am and I am passionate about and committed to promoting pride in Traveller culture. I feel very strongly that Travellers keep in touch with our identity and culture and for younger Travellers to know who they are, where they come from and to be proud. As this is not taught in school it is important for young Travellers to learn about their past from their own community.
Many Travellers deny who they are for fear of discrimination. In Cork we have a great team of women working on Traveller cultural awareness training – challenging discrimination. We provide training to a wide range of groups including schools and service providers and we want to build better understanding between Travellers and settled people by promoting a positive understanding of Traveller culture. I am very glad to be working with other Traveller women who feel as strongly as me about pride in our culture and am always looking to encourage other Travellers to be involved. We are also recording our history and roots through a wagon and museum project in Cork Public Museum which is the only permanent exhibit in a public museum managed and curated by Travellers. The Museum’s Traveller culture room is a space to show who we are and where we came from and is especially valuable to younger Travellers who never lived a life of barrel top wagons and camps.

I am very proud to win a Traveller Pride Award and hope that it will encourage more young Travellers to get involved and to get active in advocacy.
3. Horse Breeding – Timmy Casey

I am a Traveller, born and reared in Limerick and from a family of fourteen. I have a love for horses and I want to express here what horses mean to me as a hobby.

My father John Casey, (may God give him a good bed in Heaven.) kept horses all his life as did his father, and he taught me all the skills and knowledge that I have about horses, how to breed horses and to train them. I am very skilled at shoeing horses and clipping their coat and mane. I can tell you how old a horse or a mare is by looking at their teeth. I could also tell you the breed of a horse or mare by looking at them, this is called marking them. I have passed on these horse skills to my younger brothers and sons, so they will continue into future generations.

Years ago, horses were used by both settled and Traveller people as a means of transport. They were very important to the majority of
Travellers as they were used to pull the barrel top wagons, which in those days were Traveller’s homes, as they travelled a lot in those days and by tradition, stopping in places. You would need a strong heavy mare to pull those wagons. My family and I travelled all over Ireland and it could take us two or three days to get to our final destination. When we would reach a “stop in” place we would light a fire and get something to ate before getting ready to go on the road again. These days the wagon and horse are no longer used because we have cars and trailers on the road now, but whatever the transport, travelling is a big aspect of our culture. However it is difficult for Travellers to travel now because of legislation that came into place in 2002.

In the past I went to a lot of fairs such as Cahirmee, Ballinasloe, Puck Fair and Arklow Lake Fair. These fairs were a good way to break down the prejudice between Travellers and settled people; it was also a good way of getting to know people. I built up a very strong relationship with settled people in Limerick and they come to me for advice on how to train ponies and how to breed a good mare or horse.

I was the first man in Limerick to breed a trotting horse. I bred ‘The Magpie’ horse forty five years ago. He was black and white (known as a piebald). He was a square trotter horse and he could do thirty miles an hour. Years ago, I used take him out on the sulky and drive and race him for sport. I bred a lot of trotters from The Magpie. The only mare I have left now is his grand daughter, Molly. She is old so I only
keep her for the grandchildren. It is too hard to keep horses these days.

I hope that generations after me, will enjoy breeding horses as much as I did.
4. The Shame Game – Rosaleen McDonagh

An identity would seem to be arrived at by the way in which the person faces and uses his experience. - James Baldwin (1924 – 1987). I could identify with Baldwin’s responses to a question concerning identity. He was a black, homosexual writer and also had a significant disability. He is my favourite writer so I owe him a lot but I needed something less macho. The African American writer Rita Dove, who received a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1987, gave a more realistic response to the question of identity in which she said, "I prefer to explore the most intimate moments, the smaller, crystallized details we all hinge our lives on." What I liked about Dove was that she talked about the mundane aspects of our lives. Yet the mundane becomes significant when your identity is something that you’re told is worthless and shameful both in the public and private sphere. I’m not the first Traveller activist and I won’t be the last to articulate how precious one’s identity is. Identity gives dignity. Identity brings with it
pride and participation. It removes any residual passivity, shame or worthlessness.

I am an Irish Traveller. As Dove explains, the most intimate and crystallized details of all our lives involves choices. The big difference for Travellers in making such choices is that there is always a prerequisite. A fear in one’s head, an ultimate knowing that racism will covet or, at least override, whatever choices one makes. A questioning: Will I be allowed in? Will I be followed or harassed on the premises? Ultimately, whether in school or in work or accessing services, am I going to be denigrated and humiliated because they know I’m a Traveller? Even before a look is given, a word is spoken; I know that they know who and what I am. It’s an innate feeling. Sometimes positive but invariably negative. Will I have to lower my head, pull my shoulders tight around me for protection? My main worry is gaining access in the first place. Then I worry will I be asked to leave. Will they play the number’s game and say there are too many of us? Secretly, sometimes being asked to leave is more honest. I’m not honouring or colluding with racism. It’s more to do with the fact that I can’t control my shame that will rise to the surface. It’s those knacker jokes that bring the worst out in me.

Traveller ethnicity has an ambiguous position within the Irish State. It’s not formally or legally recognized. However, in some government documents, Traveller identity is afforded the status of cultural difference. This ambiguous position brings with it a licence for people to be racist or to demonstrate Anti-Traveller sentiment. Just like
religious sectarianism, racism stems from the same unwillingness to respect diversity, plurality and cultural difference.

Drawing on a new book by Dr Andrew Finlay ("Governing Ethnic Conflict: consociation, identity and the price of peace" Rutledge, 2010), that examines the cultural pluralism that underpinned the Northern Irish Peace Process and the Agreement signed on Good Friday 1998. The analogy regarding the peace agreement can be quickly defined in terms of three principles:

- Power sharing
- Cultural recognition or autonomy
- Proportionality in allocation of jobs and resources

The mechanisms for the Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland had principles to work from which are based on equality, fairness, respect, diversity. In short, these are the tenets to give Traveller ethnicity its full status or official recognition in Ireland. The benefits for us as a community and for Ireland as a country would be equality of opportunity and fairness of outcome. We’re not looking for remuneration. Just an apology for the wrong doings of not recognizing our ethnic status within the State and protection for our future. Some sort of admittance or recognition by the State of what that invisibility of Traveller ethnicity has done to our community by way of poverty, discrimination, underachievement, low self-esteem and a lack of pride. The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study September 2010 shows
the fallout of institutional racism and discrimination that Travellers experience:

• The Traveller population in the island of Ireland was estimated at 40,129 in 2008; 36,224 in the Republic of Ireland and 3,905 in Northern Ireland.
• Life expectancy at birth for female Travellers is now 70.1 which is 11.5 years less than women in the general population, and is equivalent to the life expectancy of the general population in the early 1960s. This has improved from 1987 when life expectancy was 65 years.
• Travellers, in particular males, continue to have higher rates of mortality for all causes of death.
• Suicide rates are nearly 7 times higher in Traveller men compared with the general male population.

Finlay documents the Irish government’s championing of cultural pluralism in the North; in light of his analysis the government’s refusal of Traveller ethnicity seems to me to be even more anomalous than ever. The book does not address this anomaly but offers a methodology or approach that may prove useful in understanding it. Finlay also describes when he was speaking with a trade union official about ethnic monitoring. The official explained the everyday informal situation of identifying who was Protestant and who was Catholic. The official said “Whether you designate yourself or not, people will
designate you”. How true this statement is in reference to Traveller ethnicity.
As I sit in a street-side eatery having ordered oysters, not exactly a delicacy here in Taiwan, as they are in the West and battling chopsticks to ensure the noodles enter my mouth rather than once more staining my jeans - I stick out like a sore thumb, though I am somewhat luckier today as the locals sit entranced by a rickety T.V set in the corner broadcasting the worrying latest reports from the Korean peninsula. Asked to contribute to this Traveller Writer Series has given me time for some reflection as both an Irish ex-pat but perhaps even stranger, a Traveller expat - and what my identity as an Irish Traveller means to me.

Living abroad, particularly in a social setting so widely different to Irish society, has been an incredible experience. Firstly the people, the Taiwanese, are remarkably friendly but also remarkable on so many other levels too. Taiwan’s GDP has gone from $400 dollars to $40,000 in the space of little over six decades, an incredible achievement by any means and one that dwarves our own (now deceased) Celtic Tiger. Also the country itself is breathtakingly
beautiful and rivals anything that Connemara has to present in terms of visual beauty, so much that the first Europeans who arrived named this island 'Formosa' which translates from Portuguese as "beautiful island". With a long history of being colonised and the omnipresent threat to their national sovereignty posed by China, in a paradoxical way, the Taiwanese are very open and friendly and yet personally guarded, much like the Irish, one might say.

I cannot deny the odd pang of homesickness amplified by the fact of being away both in terms of physical difference and culture, social norms and values. As a Sociology graduate these differences provide intrigue and interest. Westerners tend to stick very closely together in Taiwan and common language and humour is a bond. Though so far away, seeing news from home and the dismal state of the country I am grateful to be employed versus almost zero prospects at home. It is more than a little disheartening though to know that even if I wanted to return, it is an almost impossible prospect at the moment.

While I would not be particularly patriotic at home, I find myself clinging to my Irish identity abroad. Irish Travellers in my opinion have not experienced the pains of emigration nearly as much as wider Irish society. While we are nomadic, we are indigenous to Ireland, and most travelling occurs within our home environment. My identity here means no less to me than what it means at home. Often when introducing myself to other expats, I'm left stunned when their first question is about my surname Joyce is 'Are you related to James?', a
much different connotation of my surname at home, which on occasions has been reacted to with hostility, fear and loathing. Travellers are an extremely social ethnic group, with huge emphasis put on family, and I can say that it is hard living away from my family, but it also forces me to push myself into new boundaries and to become far more self-reliant. Travellers have a remarkable ability to adapt and survive to new situations and to keep their identity alive, I feel that this has not been lost on me; I'm now a Traveller and will always be one.

However, I often question what it means to be a Traveller. I have already broken many social conventions associated with being a Traveller. I have not married at a young age, nor do I hold devout religious views and am in a sustained relationship with a woman from the settled community. Does this in any way make me less of a Traveller? The answer to that question is quite simply no; I am a Traveller, which means I was born in an ethnic community, which holds its own, customs, values, traditions, language, folklore and culture. It is not something you can become less of, and it's not something that I will ever be any less than proud to have as a part of my identity.

A term which has come into common usage is ‘Settled Traveller’. I believe it is a dangerous one and whether intentional or not it dismisses our history, ethnicity and our place in Irish society, an
acceptance of this term would not bode well for our community. In spite of this, our culture and ethnicity remains and is thriving. I think Traveller Pride Week is a very important time for us to reflect upon ourselves and our ethnic group, as a celebration of our culture and how we would like ourselves to be seen and referred to by the wider Irish society so that we may look to the future with hope and that our place as accepted members of Irish society is achieved. Conversely it must also be accepted by Travellers that any future developments of acceptance for Travellers in Irish society must be based upon a relationship of mutual respect between both communities.

I feel that I may have travelled more than any other Traveller has travelled before, in terms of physical distance, though there are Irish Travellers in America, Australia and the United Kingdom to name but a few. However, in terms of emigrating to, and living in a country so different to our own, I have travelled thousands of miles physically but also socially and culturally.

As I began, my experience of Taiwan is an oyster, well protected and difficult to clasp open, but once open the wonders and deliciousness of what lies inside is released. And that is exactly what this experience has done for me, I have left one culture which contains great values, an intriguing history and a beautiful tradition of oral story telling and folklore, and entered another with equally exotic and charming features.
I am a gay Traveller man and am very passionate about my work with people with disabilities in the area of social inclusion. I have been employed in this area of work for many years and my journey into which was a very personal one. Following a childhood accident I spent long periods in hospital which I believe sowed the seeds in me as I gained an insight into the caring profession.

One of fourteen children, I was born and bred in England, but I was an Irish Traveller living in England. I took on the role of father figure aged fourteen, for my younger siblings, due to the untimely death of my father. As a young lad, I was expected to contribute to the family income and was taught by my older brothers to drive Lorries, go tarmacing and collect scrap. I identified strongly as a Traveller and all my experiences were based on a traditional Traveller way of life and identity. However, for me, there was always an inner desire to do something else, to be somebody else. It was obvious to me that I did not fit into the role that I was born into.
While growing up I realised I could not fulfil my role in the family tradition of being “the Traveller man” and experienced a sense of “difference”, emotionally, psychologically and physically. I was unaware of what the difference was, I just felt out of place, but it drove me to seek answers outside the norm and tradition and out of the box I was put in since birth.

My initial steps to exploring those feelings were helped by good communication skills and an ability to connect with people. Looking for answers I rang the Samaritans to find out what was wrong with me. Meeting with one of their support workers it arose that I might be gay. I was shocked, mortified and disgusted with myself. That a stranger would even suggest that I could be gay! Me. A Traveller man surely cannot be gay; Travellers can’t be gay that only happens to other settled people…

I came away feeling as though my head would explode. It tormented me. I knew I was different to my brothers but put this down to my hospitalization as a child. When the gay word was spoken to me I started to identify with gay people that I saw on the telly and gay people on the street. Everything added up, I got the ONE answer to years of questions. But I was left with the sense of how can this be happening to me, I am a lorry driving Traveller man, the bread winner working in construction tarmacing and block paving, how could I be gay?
I suppressed my feelings for some time and continued to live my life as the Traveller man that I was. I often heard derogatory terms used by my family towards “queers” describing them as perverts, child molesters, weirdo’s etc. It was all I could hear. I thought I cannot be one of those people, that wouldn’t be right; I cannot bring shame onto my family. I would rather have been diagnosed with a terminal illness; it would be much more acceptable to be dying than to be a ‘gay’ let alone being a gay Traveller.

Going through my late teens and adolescence I wasn’t doing things I should have been, dating girls and doing the normal things young Traveller boys do. I felt pressurised to get married and this made my life a living hell. It was becoming more and more evident that the path to my difference was becoming clearer to me, but continued to deny my feelings. I believed because I could socialise with girls, work and contribute to the family income, I was doing my duty as was expected of a proper man, but inside of me was a storm of upset.

My fantasy dream was about breaking away from all the expectations placed on me by my family and community. Sure they knew I was different but it definitely was NOT something you would discuss over a cup of tea. I was also at this time slowly but certainly being subjected to bullying and name calling, the hope being I would get “back in line”. I was identified as being different, without giving it a name by my own
community and by settled people, I was identified as being different, as being a Traveller - I did not belong.

By the mid 80’s my family were travelling all over England, as work became available. We did not stay long and moved around a lot. One summer we pulled into a camp near Vauxhall Bridge, London. Right across the road from the camp was a pub - a gay pub. Further along was another pub frequented by Travellers. En route to it the Travellers had to walk past the gay pub and would often shout offensive language towards the gay men and jeering them. For me the Vauxhall Tavern or “queers” pub was certainly somewhere you wouldn’t go into. When I walked by it was in a sideways motion, and a fear would be instilled in me.

Over the two years there, the familiarity of that gay pub tamed me. I made eye contact with some of the men, walking by I even dared to smile and greet the men outside the Tavern. The pub was like a magnet to me, but I was on the wrong side of the pole. One day I saw an ad outside the Pub, for a sports day. It took all my courage to go through that door, after all I was led to believe these places were where disgusting queers drank together to discuss their filthy plans.

But I went through that door. Many of those men who had seen me passing during the summer were there; they greeted me and were so friendly and encouraging. These were the same men who had got a lot of stick from the Travellers. To me they were lovely people who I
admired and looked up to. They were so confident about who they were. All the feelings I had in myself, about being a disgusting child molester was not true. I made a life-long friend, who talked to me that day in such a loving caring way that it blew my mind away, a friendship which has lasted 30 years. It turned out to be the best and the worst summer of my life. I started to sneak into the pub and made lots of friends. They even nick named me the “Little Gypsy”. The pub offered me a sanctuary, a place I could feel “normal” being myself. I could identify with the stories; and what was being said. These people were like me or more importantly I was like them. But how could this be they were not Travellers but they were gay. I was accepted in this new community. Breaking away from my traditional lifestyle was becoming even stronger. I was nineteen years old.

But then the day came that was to change my life forever, the men from the camp saw me entering the gay pub and they had enough and came to take me out. I was beaten up, BUT it was the day I decided to leave my family and be true to my feelings. It was the day that confirmed my gayness.

I left my community, my security and my family and sought and got help from the friends I had made from the pub and ran away from the shame and the black legacy my family would have to live with.

I didn’t know how to read and write and I lacked social skills. Presenting myself as homeless and being given a council house was
new to me. We always had a place to live, we lived everywhere, and we were free to roam around and go and work where we wanted. I was also born and bred in a trailer and used to having people living with me; I was never alone in my life. Mentally I was a nomad and physically I was made to settle. Hawking was the only skill I had. My opportunities were limited. What did I have to offer?

Sitting in my bedsit I thought, how odd? I had given up all I had known in life, family and friends and my community to have my feelings liberated? I gave everything up to be gay, to be alone in a bare flat without personal possessions; stripped of all my dignity, respect and identity and to feel the humiliation of my family for being gay. If I could have gone back then to my old self I would have but it was too late the damage done, the hurt caused; there was no going back for me. Depressed and living on the dole, my friends from the Vauxhall Tavern kept an eye on me and linked me into gay and lesbian groups for support.

Another turning point in my life came when I was invited to a creative writing course for gay and lesbian people. I was there to learn to read and write to help find a job but everyone else there talked about seagulls, and journeys, and leaves and the wind and things that didn’t make any sense to me. Luckily for me the tutor was sympathetic to my situation and we struck a deal, he would teach me the magic of reading and writing and I would share my stories of growing up as an
Irish Traveller to the rest of the class. So, I progressed with my own journey and learnt my letters in exchange for funny Traveller stories.

My next step was to find a job, with little skills other than being a good hawker and driver with limited reading and writing, my first proper job was to be a bus driver for children with disabilities, bringing children & young people to and from their sheltered accommodation and day care centres. I loved it and developed friendly relationships with the children’s families and the people around them.

It was then that it struck me how similar the life of a disabled person is to the life of a Traveller. Both communities live outside of the general, broader community. Both communities have different lifestyles and have similar challenges. Both have to fight against prejudice and isolation. It struck me how unfair it was that people are isolated, judged and grouped together just because they are different to the majority. Travellers and disabled people were perceived and treated different. This empathy, related to my experiences as a gay Traveller man, drove my passion to support not only disabled people but other marginalised peoples.

I have always believed everyone has a right to a job, which provides job satisfaction and hopefully one which generates a passion. I strived to be as good as anybody else, for equality, for education, to have friends; I wanted a nice house, a home and I got all of those things with the help of good friends, people who invested and
believed in me. These were mainly gay people and I was lucky to
have met such wonderful people. Also with my qualification and many
years experience in the health and social care arena, I am also proud
of my professional work.

I have so much and I have so much to give, yet I have a fear that
revealing my identity in this article will result in some people not being
as tolerant or accepting of my Traveller and gay status. It is for this
reason I wish to remain anonymous. On the other hand neither would
I want to be congratulated by people for everything I achieved. What I
have achieved is from hard work and what I earned, I earned by
myself.

By concealing my identity here I ensure that nobody can take away
my pride, my achievements and my success in life. I am no
spokesperson for gay or lesbian rights nor am I a spokesperson for
Traveller rights. I am a spokesperson for myself.

My message as someone who has experienced discrimination of two
kinds is to give people a chance; acknowledge them for what and who
they are. Support people to realise their visions and dreams and let
us put into practice the notion of “all equal but different” and to be
proud of our individuality and our contribution to society.

This is what I can offer as a gay Traveller man, what can you offer to
me? What deal can we strike for the future?
My name is Astrid and I am currently working and volunteering in the Ennis Community Development Programme as a receptionist. Ennis CDP is a great place for the Traveller community to come to, to use the drop-in centre which is resourced by a community development worker.

The main issues we deal with at the drop-in are supporting people that have accommodation problems. We also have a Primary Health Care Programme which is a great place for Traveller parents to go to if they have any concerns with health issues. or they might just need a helping hand in getting some forms filled out.

These issues bring back a lot of memories for me as they are the same one I had when I went to the Ennis CDP when I was living in a caravan with my kids and they where just 1 and 2 years old. Our caravan was impounded and we had nowhere to go and someone
told me about the CDP and how it could help you with information and advice.

When people call these days it is mainly with those same issues, but definitely things have changed in the last couple of years from how they used to be. There is a lot more things for Travellers to do such as at the St Josephs Training centre. I attended there and completed my Leaving Cert Applied. Currently there are 37 Traveller parents attending St Josephs to better their education so they can help their kids and grandkids with their homework. St Josephs have a homework club 5 afternoons a week for the Traveller kids which helps make sure they don’t fall behind in class, but it’s also just a great place to go, to meet other children.

There are also Traveller students from Youth Reach Progression that attend St Josephs twice a week to study Hair and Beauty and Woodwork. If the Travellers lose St Josephs Training centre it will be a backward step. In this day and age it is important for every person to have an education.
8. Traveller Ethnicity is important to me – Rosemarie Maughan

To start off - the term Traveller ethnicity can be sometimes confusing, but it simply means what makes you, you. So when we think about it as Travellers we mean things like that we are born Travellers, our nomadic lifestyle, history, language, religion, cultural values, traditions and beliefs. These are the characteristics that make up a person’s ethnicity or identity. Travellers share the same identity and culture and are a minority ethnic group in Ireland.

Our Culture is very important to us and we are very proud to be Irish Travellers. But unfortunately our culture is often misunderstood, not respected, accepted or recognised as a valid way of life both by the Irish state and the majority population of Ireland. All Travellers share the same culture and have similar experiences of oppression and discrimination. Travellers know how difficult it is to hold onto our culture when people often think that if we are educated, live in a house and stop travelling we automatically become settled people.
Growing up as a Traveller without my ethnicity respected and recognised, life threw up many challenges and struggles which I believe could have been avoided. I was born into a family of seven children in Co Mayo, I spent my early days living in a caravan and moving into a house at the age of three. So I don’t have the memories or know how it feels to be nomadic but I do have stories from my grandparent’s life on the road. I remember as a child my grandmother telling me all about her journeys, where they were camped, who they travelled with, what happened along the way, the ghost stories, and she always had a smile on her face when telling us. As children we were always eager to hear about our history and when she spoke of these days I always felt I would have loved to have grown up then.

Even though Travellers had nothing and were much poorer and lived in much worse conditions than now, they seemed to be happier in her stories.

We would ask her, why if she liked to Travel so much how she moved into a house. She said “life was too hard on the road with no facilities and country people didn’t want us there any more. Then the people from the council came and sold a dream of living in a house and how great it would be for our children. Knowing we would never get any other accommodation we moved in”. At the same time the same thing was happening to my other grandparents in another town in Mayo.

Looking back, I believe if my Traveller ethnicity was accepted and valued my family would never have stopped travelling. My experience
in education would have been more positive where Traveller culture would have been embraced and celebrated as a valid way of life. I believe this would have broken down stereotypes and settled and Traveller children could have been friends. More Travellers would have stayed on in school because we would have been more welcome and felt wanted. I would have been able to get a job with settled people knowing who I was. Levels of discrimination would have been lower in my life.

As a Traveller I dream of an Ireland where we are viewed and treated as equal Irish citizens with our Traveller ethnicity recognised, respected and valued. I deeply believe this will never happen until the state and Irish society recognise Traveller lifestyle as a valid culture. And that is why, as a Traveller, the Irish Traveller Movement’s Ethnicity campaign is very important to me, as recognition of Traveller ethnicity could prevent further erosion and damage to our culture and Travellers could play an equal role within Irish society with our identity intact.
9. Heart Flooded with Love - Marie Cash

Last year I attended a programme about diversity in different cultures and society that helped me to understand the difficulties of developing countries. During the course, Fr. Stephen from the Vincentian Lay Missionaries (VLM) came to speak to us about the volunteering project he runs. After he had spoken to us a group of women asked if maybe they could go to Africa to experience first hand the issues people are facing and he was happy to facilitate such a visit.

The group met regularly and planned the visit for about one year, we covered all sorts of things, health issues, culture and tradition, the reasons the global south was kept poor.

We also looked at our own lives and the things which have affected us over the years, our opportunities for employment, access to health and education etc. We were well prepared for our visit, yet when we got there we realised that no amount of preparation can fully prepare you for the reality of life in Ethiopia.
We landed in Addis Ababa at 21.05pm.

Early the next morning about 8.30am the bus that was bringing us to Jimma arrived. It took us eight and a half hours to get to Jimma on a bus.

While it was a long journey, we saw some beautiful scenery, passed through many towns and were constantly waving back at people who seemed fascinated by this bus full of Ferengie, (Foreigners). Of course we stopped several times on the way to stretch our legs. On one occasion we were standing at the side of the bus when people appeared from out of the bushes with arms full of fruit to sell. We did our best to communicate and to haggle with them over the price of the fruit. They were very friendly and we were happy to buy some of their fruit.

We were warned that sometimes in Jimma we might not have electricity or water. So we might not be able to have a shower in the mornings. Even if there was water, we should use it sparingly and only have quick short showers.

The next morning we made our first visit to the Tulema Leprosy Village. When we arrived into the village we were given a great welcome with clapping and singing and of course a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony. After coffee we sat down and talked to
each other. We all shared our stories and we got a really good understanding of their lives, their hopes and their dreams. They were women of great dignity and strength and we were very touched by their sharing. We were especially touched when we heard one woman who was speaking in Amharic describe her life living in the cemetery as:

“Living above the dead and below the living”.

She said that a lot of the older children living in the village were born in the cemetery and she pointed some of them out to us. She also told us that at that time they are marginalized and rejected from other communities and how hard life was for them not having enough food to feed their families. She said that many of them had to beg on the streets for money to put some food on the table. She said that if they were lucky enough to have breakfast they might not have dinner or supper.

We also shared stories about our lives in Ireland and they were a little shocked to think that people in our group had experienced some of the same things as them, discrimination and exclusion, rejection and isolation and how we are marginalised from the settled community in Ireland. The fact that a few of us were not able to read and write due to not having access to education in the past was hard for them to believe. They thought all western people would have such things as a
matter of fact. Tejita said “her heart opened up and flooded with love when she heard our story”.

Jimma is a place I will never forget, I will treasure the experience for as long as I live. For me now it’s my second home.

We will never forget the experience we had in Ethiopia. It was a different world yet we were the same people. We experienced a very different culture to our own. Although we saw great poverty, we also saw people working to ensure that their children would have a different life. It made us think about how we worry so much about the recession and how we don’t seem at all grateful for all that we have.
I was born in Mullingar in Co. Westmeath and spent my early childhood in Bellewstown in Co. Meath. I played Gaelic football for my school and joined a running club in nearby Stamullen and it was with the Stamullen running club and from competing in cross country events that I developed a lifelong passion for running. I was always encouraged by my father, Tom who was a great runner in his day, winning numerous medals and trophies all over Ireland, mostly in 100 meter events.

In 1985 I developed a liver complaint and so at the age of 11 my running career was put on hold. I spent 6 months in Our Lady’s Hospital, Drogheda before going to Kings College Hospital in London for a Liver Transplant. I celebrated two birthdays in Kings College and have good and bad memories of my time there. I was well treated and well looked after and made many friends there, but I also missed my family and friends back at home.
After I came out of hospital I stopped participating in sport due in part at least, to the fact that I was to be on medication for the rest of my life and of needing to be careful with my health. I was always interested in sport of all kinds, including boxing, soccer and big events like the Olympics.

Eventually I got married and had three children. At the back of my mind was always the desire to run. In 2006 I eventually began a training programme, progressing from short runs up to half marathons.

In 2007 I completed the Dublin City Marathon. This was a massive achievement. Motivated by my childhood experiences of long hospital stays and a desire to put something back, I raised €11,000 for Temple Street Children’s Hospital. When I crossed the finish line I knew I had to do it again.

In December 2009, I became the first Traveller to complete the New York Marathon. I had trained for seven months when disaster struck and I injured my back, a slipped disc and trapped nerves. After enduring this tough training regime, I now had to face the prospect of being unable to participate in the race. But I was determined to get fit enough for the run and travelled to the United States in anticipation. It was not until two days before the marathon that it was decided, I would be able to run. The last 10 miles of the marathon were the hardest of my life, but I would have crawled on my hands and knees if
necessary to reach the finish line. I raised €8,500 for Temple Street Children’s Hospital as a result of this and I also dedicated this accomplishment to, Community Garda Brian Smyth who is recovering from osteo-sarcoma.

In 2010 I completed the Dublin City Marathon as part of my preparation for the 2011 London Marathon.

I consider myself to be a lucky man. I am able to pursue my passion for running while raising funds for sick children. I want the kids in Temple Street Hospital to have the best possible time during their stay there. With my positive childhood experiences of hospital stays, I know how important that is.