

OTHER ISSUES

WTV has tried to bring about a level of closure for victims, by pursuing human rights and justice issues. It has also organised events that took the members into the Irish Republic (the first time in 30 years for many of them), where they have met with people in a cross-community/cross border context. Members have also been actively engaged in dialogue meetings with people from across the religious and political divides in N. Ireland, in an attempt to understand where others are coming from, and to give them the opportunity to learn where we are coming from. The group gave people the opportunity to travel abroad for the first time in their lives, by organising group holidays to Portugal, Bulgaria and Greece, visiting Spain and Gibraltar, and to experience a different culture, language, climate and lifestyle. WTV's ethos ensures that it is a safe place for victims to come, to learn, to grow, and to heal.

OUR AIMS

- To be a voice for the victims of paramilitary terrorism and their families
- To seek justice for these victims
- To seek formal recognition of their suffering
- To provide support and advice for our members
- To ensure the story of our pain and loss is never forgotten
- To seek the re-integration of our members back into the wider community, especially the young adults.



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WEST TYRONE VOICE

Speaking and Acting for the Victims of Terrorism

WHO ARE WE?

West Tyrone Voice (WTV) was established in 1999 to help meet the profound needs of the victims of terrorist violence in the West Tyrone region of N. Ireland. These largely 'forgotten' people had no one to help them, voice their concerns, or support them in their darkest hours. Now they have such an organisation, with staff and volunteers who visit the elderly, widows, infirm, disabled and orphans in their homes. Additional full-time help is urgent.

West Tyrone borders the Irish Republic, from where many of the terrorist attacks were launched, and to where the terrorists returned after their murderous tasks were completed. The region is mainly rural and agricultural, and covers an area of about 1500 square miles with a population of approximately 88,000 people. In this beautiful area in the Sperrin mountains, people still live in fear of their neighbours. We also work in the Mid-Ulster area.

In 1998, two documents led to our establishment. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's Report, and the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement. Bloomfield identified the '*need for a powerful voice for victims' interests*', while the Agreement stated, '*It is recognised that victims have a right to remember as well as contribute to a changed society ...and the participants will support the development of special community-based initiatives based on international best practice.*'

WTV is non-party political, nor is it linked to any religious grouping. Members are drawn from all sides of the community, and have denounced ALL acts of terrorist violence. We have enjoyed some success in enabling victims to advance, but there is much work still to be done, and many hindrances—terrorist violence, government policies that favour terrorists, lack of justice, discrimination against victims, not being listened to, ongoing concessions by government to terrorists, etc.



MEMBERSHIP PROFILE

The main purpose of this grassroots group is to deal with the genuine concerns that many victims have, and to *voice* these concerns at the highest levels in society and abroad. WTV now has 582 members, as well as 187 non-members availing of our services. This means we are working with at least 2300 people in total including immediate families.

The group comprises mainly families of security force personnel, where the breadwinners are dead because terrorists murdered them, or are no longer able to support their family because of injury sustained either on or off duty, and accounts for 70% of our membership. We have many families who, as civilians, were caught up in terrorist attacks as a means of ethnic cleansing. The bombing in Omagh town centre in August 1998, where 31 people lost their lives, and 270 sustained varying degrees of injury, many of whom will never work again. We work with these victims.

The organisation works with the depressed, the anxious, the downcast, and the fearful, as well as the bereaved and the physically and emotionally injured. Many of our members are weary of life, and do not have much hope for the future – some even ask, ‘What future?’ The elderly, whose sons and daughters and husbands were murdered in the genocide, benefit immensely from our outreach service with specially trained counsellors. **Our aim is to facilitate the recovery of victims, seek justice for their loved-ones, and aid their eventual re-integration back into society. We want to give victims back their life.**

Co Tyrone is the third worst affected area of N. Ireland – per head of population, Belfast lost 48 people of every 10,000, South Armagh lost 37, and West Tyrone lost 26, and **the second worst area for security forces losses.** 82% of UDR army murders were done while off-duty, making them civilians, and all murdered police officers were civilians.

Fear and distrust still stalk the roads of this region, terrorists are still active, and people are still on their guard and vigilant.

A SUFFERING COMMUNITY

West Tyrone has suffered greatly at the hands of terrorist death squads since the terror campaign started in 1968. In our area alone, terrorists murdered 133 people, with another 101 people from the area murdered elsewhere. Whilst major atrocities are remembered, the fact is that most of our deaths were either of individuals or small groups. The number of people injured physically amounts to 384, while those injured psychologically, emotionally and mentally would come to some 13,000, based on the estimates used by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield (*We Will Remember Them*, 1998). 38 are currently under terrorist death threat.

These atrocities have created more than 100 widows, 300 orphans, 236 parents who have had a child murdered, and many extended families who have been affected by the campaign of terror in our area. Many murders and attacks still remain unsolved, which only serves to prolong the agony for their families. As our work continues, we are becoming aware of more and more people who have been diagnosed as suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as a direct result of terrorist violence against them and/or their colleagues, friends and families.

We are also trying to teach our members that whatever successes terrorists gained from their violence, this is not the right way to go, though we understand the reasons for the current unrest.

SERVICES OFFERED

The organisation offers a wide range of ‘therapies’ of various kinds, including home visits for the ‘shut-ins’, counselling for emotional disorders (e.g. PTSD/PDSD), and transgenerational trauma, befriending, social events (to break feelings of isolation and to establish a sense of belonging to the community), craft classes (to stimulate creativity and provide an oasis for the confined), historical awareness classes (to provide members with an understanding of who they are and where they came from). While training is an important aspect of our work, it has a narrow beneficiary base of less than 100 people. The other 2200+ people involved in the group are left with nothing from PEACE II funding.