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 - [Sunday Life](#)

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Local & National](#)

Local & National

Memories flood back for the McCartneys as trial begins

Monday, May 12, 2008

The trial of a man charged with the murder of Robert McCartney is to open in Belfast today.

Terence Davison (51), will appear at Belfast Crown Court on a charges of murder and making an affray in relation to the death of the forklift truck driver outside Magennis's Bar on January 30, 2005.

Two other men, James McCormick (39) and Joseph Fitzpatrick (47), are charged with affray while Fitzpatrick is also accused of assaulting another man, Edward Gowdy, on the same date.

Robert McCartney, who was set to marry fiancée Bridgeen Hagans later that year, died after being beaten and stabbed outside the city centre pub following an argument which spiralled out of control.

His friend Brendan Devine, who he had been socialising with throughout the day, sustained severe injuries in the same attack.

It may be more than three years since his death, but Catherine McCartney can still hear her brother Robert's booming laugh ringing in her ears. She remembers the father-of-two as a man who loved making others smile.

Unfortunately for her, that was all too often achieved with a joke at her expense. "He could be a sarcastic so and so when he wanted to be," she recalls.

"He could cut you to the bone with one of his one-liners. But that was Robert, he had a great sense of humour.

"He was just a big, warm-hearted fellow. At the end of the day, he was our brother and he was very special to us."

Like the rest of the McCartney family, vivid memories of 33-year-old Robert will be at the forefront of Catherine's mind today as she steels herself for the first day of the trial of her brother's accused killer.

"We are not looking forward to the trial, it's like a big cloud hanging over us," admits Catherine.

"We know details of what happened to Robert are going to come up and that will be difficult to deal with. But we are determined to go."






Before their brother's death the McCartney sisters lived pretty normal lives. After the killing, normality was something they could only crave.

It was a pivotal time in the Northern Ireland peace process and the Provisional IRA as an organisation faced allegations of involvement not only in the murder, but also in attempts to hinder the subsequent police investigation.

The killing of Robert McCartney, who lived in the republican Short Strand estate, rocked the finely balanced political situation to its foundations.

And for that reason the international spotlight shone intensely on a bereaved family consumed with grief. With Bridgeen concentrating on caring for two young sons robbed of their father, Robert's five sisters stepped forward to face the world's cameras.

Those lens would remain on them for months as they took their relentless quest for justice across Europe

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and even as far as the White House.

All of a sudden everyone had an opinion on Paula, Catherine, Gemma, Donna and Claire McCartney - some of the most vitriolic from within their own republican community.

Three years on and the sisters' campaign no longer occupies the evening news bulletins, but that period has left its mark.

"Things will never be the same," Catherine said.

"It totally changes you, not just what happened to Robert, but what we went through in our efforts to get justice.

"Living in Northern Ireland, nothing is clear cut when it comes to murder and justice.

"People make judgements on you, sometimes fairly, sometimes unfairly, but it exposes you in a way that you never wanted to be.

"Professionally and personally it's been very hard to go back to normal life, or as I call it, become part of the wallpaper again.

"Some of the family don't want to interact with the outside world anymore. They've lost faith in human nature and lost faith in the society they lived in. That's the sort of impact something like this has on you.

"Most people in this world are very good, it just seems to us that bad guys too often win the day. It's hard to live with that."

The political landscape has changed immeasurably in Northern Ireland since the McCartney murder. Indeed Catherine believes a fear of rocking the Stormont boat resulted in the family's story being pushed to the sidelines.

"It's not only us that's left behind, it's other victims," she says.

"The developments that have taken place are welcome but certainly cases like Robert's, they're not seen as important any more, they've gone off the radar.

"But we are relieved it's getting to court, it has taken a long time. Although it does feel like only yesterday since it happened. We are all still in limbo.

"Bridgeen is the same, it's day for day with her, but she's trying her best to get on with life. The boys are doing well (Conlaed (7), and five-year-old Brandon).

"Those children are resilient but as they get older and start asking questions I think it will become more difficult. For some of us this may bring a degree of closure, for others, I'm just not sure."

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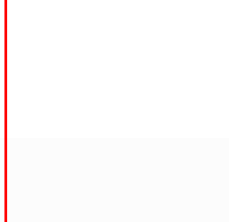
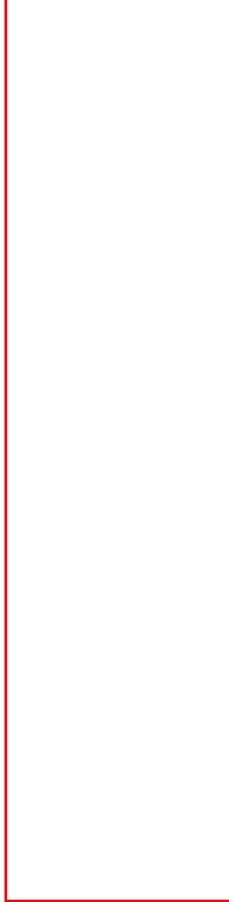
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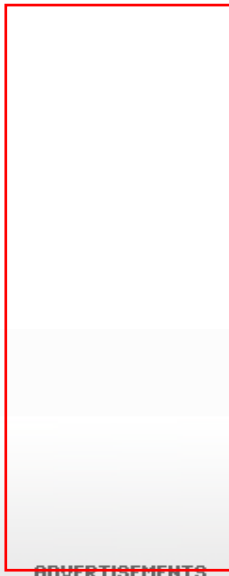


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