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'Ten years on, and Omagh is far from over for us'

Next month marks the 10th anniversary of the Omagh bombing, the single biggest atrocity of the Troubles. Many of the survivors remain devastated by the loss of loved ones and the litany of broken promises. We talk to those left behind and, among the private grief, find a story of love and hope

[Tracy McVeigh](#), chief reporter
[The Observer](#), Sunday July 13, 2008

The architects will be hoping the rain holds off at the unveiling of Omagh's new memorial on 15 August. Dogged by controversy, it is the first permanent tribute to the victims of the bomb that caused the worst loss of life in any one incident of Northern Ireland's Troubles. The plan is for 31 small mirrors on poles, standing within a garden, each representing a life lost in the town, including unborn twin babies, 10 years ago. When the sun shines, shafts of light will reflect off the mirrors towards a glass pillar on Market Street, some 300 metres away.

The pillar hasn't been erected yet and last week, in the drizzling rain of an Ulster July afternoon, there was no outward sign of what happened here in 1998 when a 500lb bomb exploded, leaving people dead and dying on Market Street. A purple-faced man is playing an accordion outside one of dozens of small shops, there is a new shopping precinct round the corner where the chain store Next dominates and teenagers hang out. The street bustles with shoppers and from its lampposts bunting and Union Flags tug in the wind to mark the town's festival next weekend. There was also a festival scheduled to take place in Omagh on 15 August 1998.

Kevin Skelton should have been refereeing a Gaelic football match that Saturday afternoon but it was called off. His wife Philomena persuaded him to drive her and their daughters the 12 miles from Drumquin into Omagh. It was two weeks before the end of the school holidays and Market Street was where the school uniform stockists were - SD Kells and Watterson's. Their first visit in the town was to a travel agents; the Skeltons had taken in a child from Romania for a few holidays and wanted to bring her over again. Mena was harbouring a hope that they might be able to adopt the little girl, Andrea, 11.

The town was busy and the crowds were not helped by an apparent bomb scare that had seen police herd people down from the courthouse at the top of Market Street, to the bottom.

Shauna Skelton, then 13, was going to the convent school and had to have brown shoes. 'We were up and down the street looking for these damn brown shoes,' said Skelton. 'My wife found some in Shoefayre but she said they wouldn't last 12 months and she wasn't buying them so we walked down to Kells. By this time I was fed up, walking about with three women looking at shoes, so I went out and in next door to Mr Gees, it sold wee knick-knacks. I was halfway in when I thought "I haven't given her any money" and as I turned, it went bang.

The shop window went out. I walked out after it. I saw the fronts of the buildings and windows just bounce out, going down the street,' he moves his hand like a snake. 'I found her lying face down in the rubble.'

Philomena Skelton, a mother of four, had died instantly. She was 39. Skelton couldn't find his daughters. Tracey, 15, found her way

through the confusion to her mother's body and police found her there on her knees, trying to find a pulse in her mum's wrist. It was several hours before Skelton found Shauna, her face half blown away, but she was alive.

A maroon Vauxhall Cavalier, stolen from County Monaghan two days before, had been parked outside Kells. The warnings had said the bomb was planted at the top of the street at the courthouse, the Cavalier parked outside Kells at the lower end of Market Street exploded at 3.10pm.

'The blood was all one colour, up and down that street. Whether it was Protestant or Catholic,' said Skelton. 'They say now that Bloody Sunday started the Troubles in Northern Ireland and that Saturday in Omagh ended them, but 10 years on and its far from over for us. We're still waiting. If that bomb had happened on the mainland there would be people in jail. Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, they all came here and promised me everything - and delivered nothing.'

'Some have gained. The businessmen in this town have benefited from the money poured into it, it's not the same town down there. Back in 1998 it was falling apart, but the Omagh fund has filtered plenty of money down, even the bloody pipe bands got a share.'

'My girls got a cheque for £7,000 in the post for losing their mum. My son Ray lost his mum too, but he'd gone fishing that day so he got nothing. No one but my mother has done anything much for this family.'

'The morning of Mena's funeral this house was full of social workers and what-not, the moment the door closed behind her coffin we never saw them again.'

'For six months the kids had no father either because I was somewhere else. The lowest it got, I came home from shooting rabbits and sat here with the shotgun between my feet and my finger on the trigger.'

The bomb changed Skelton's life in the most extraordinary way. His attempt to honour Mena's memory by returning to Romania ended with him marrying the mother of the girl he and Mena had tried to adopt.

Andrea, it transpired, was not an orphan as they had thought, but a child from a deprived background. Her mother Maria began a correspondence with Skelton that led to the couple marrying in Omagh in 2005.

'I think Mena had a lot to do with the way it all worked out somehow but I still haven't managed to get Andrea a British passport and that's really what I think will be the memorial for Mena. If I can achieve that then I'll have achieved something,' said Skelton. He is being modest because the Omagh families have achieved a lot - and they are still fighting.'

A decade ago next month, then politicians, from British Prime

Minister Tony Blair and Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, to US President Bill Clinton, were loud in their expressions of sorrow and outrage. For the first time Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein president, condemned an attack and the IRA splinter group, the Real Ira (RIRA), which had carried it out, its motive being the derailment of the peace process that had been ratified by Northern Ireland voters three months before the Omagh bombing.

There were promises that those responsible for bringing such bloody cruelty to the heart of a small Northern Ireland town would be 'ruthlessly pursued'. Blair's eyes were wet as he shook hands with survivors saying 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' over and over again.

Even after 30 years of bloodshed in Northern Ireland, the roll call of the Omagh dead was especially harrowing. It crossed sectarian divides; seven of the dead were mothers; six teenagers; two babies; three young boys from the same Donegal village; a 12-year-old exchange student from Madrid and his teacher; a Unionist official and his son; a Mormon schoolboy; the woman pregnant with twins. Over 300 people were injured, a young girl was blinded and many, many others lost limbs.

But all that political will and international attention has ebbed now, people have moved on and jobs, even the police force, have changed. No one has been convicted of the murders and the pursuit of justice has been left very much in the hands of the relatives and the survivors of Omagh. It is not hard to see why many of the victims' relatives are so disenchanted.

A police ombudsman report into the handling of the murders and of the intelligence reports beforehand that an attack was being planned was damning. But the response from the chief constable of the then RUC, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, was simply that if the criticisms were true he would go out and kill himself immediately. There was more than one relative of a victim of Omagh who wrote to invite him to follow through. The judge who acquitted Sean Hoey of murder and terrorism in 2007 said the police handling of the case was 'slapdash' and named two officers for doctoring evidence. In 2002 Colm Murphy, 58, was sentenced for conspiracy in connection to Omagh - he had allegedly loaned the bombers mobile phones. The verdict was overturned on appeal and he is awaiting a retrial.

The only continuing efforts to pin some kind of blame on those may have carried out the Omagh bombing lies in the ongoing civil case first brought by the families of all 29 victims in 2001 against the RIRA itself and named suspects, Seamus McKenna, Michael McKeivitt, Liam Campbell, Colm Murphy and Seamus Daly, as individuals.

The case finally reached a Belfast court earlier this year and will reconvene after the summer.

What the families really want is an independent international inquiry. Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness, who refused to help the RUC investigation, has agreed that Republicans would take part.

The 10th anniversary itself is not without controversy either. The official memorial service the council is planning for 15 August is being boycotted by many of the victims' relatives who say they don't need any more dignitaries offering false promises. Instead they intend to hold the service they want, as they have done every year since 1998, on the Sunday closest to the anniversary.

An independent facilitator had to be brought in to negotiate over the wording on the plaque for the memorial. The families represented by the Omagh Support and Self Help Group wanted it unambiguously to remember those 'murdered by dissident Republicans' - the Sinn Féin-led council did not.

The wounds are deep in this town of 22,000 people where, according to Michael Gallagher, whose 21-year-old son Aidan died in the blast, 'you can't go to Asda without seeing another family member of a victim'.

Gallagher and his wife Patsy and two daughters Kathy and Sharon won't be attending the official service.

'We'll have the families' service the way we see fit, as we have done all along, on the closest Sunday to the 15th. So the council and all the bigwigs and the politicians can come along and have their speeches and ceremony but we will be remembering our loved ones the way we have been doing for the past 10 years,' said Gallagher.

The mechanic has also seen his life change beyond recognition in the decade since Aidan was killed in Market Street. 'The terrorists dictate the first words of the victims' families. How often have you heard a mother say "make mine be the last".'

'Victims are always a difficult issue for politicians and in Omagh they have just paid us lip service. But even now we are carrying the whole weight of this thing by ourselves we will go on.'

'It's not just the person that dies that suffers, it's the whole family that suffers for the rest of their life. Kathy says she'd rather spell Omagh than say it.'

'Really it's almost impossible for people to understand.'

'I lost my brother in the Troubles. Hughie was assassinated by the IRA on 3 June 1984. He was 26 and had two little kids. I thought that was the worst thing that could happen to me until 14 years later when Aidan died. At least then I could walk out of my brother's house and walk home to a full family.'

Like many families, the Gallaghers thought of leaving Omagh but Aidan's grave is here. 'There's unfinished business here. Maybe when that is resolved I'll feel freer to go.'

'You tend to be more cynical, I'm a completely different person I'm not the person to thrust myself forward in life but I felt I had no choice in this.'

Gallagher and his wife struggled hard to keep their marriage and family together in the aftermath of the bomb, one of his daughters attempted suicide in the grip of grief and depression.

'In contrast to some people who can't even bear to hear the name of their loved ones said aloud, we talk about Aidan every day. He was 6ft 2in, cheerful, good company, his big passion was cars. At the weekend he loved to go out with his friends and enjoy himself.

'He didn't give us much worry, it was all healthy interests. Didn't care anything for politics, he'd rather watch the Flintstones than the news. When it came to voting for the Good Friday agreement, we all went to vote as a family, Aidan didn't even know what political party was "yes".'

Aidan had gone into town to buy a pair of jeans with his best friend Michael Barrett, they were laughing as they walked down the street towards the maroon Cavalier. Aidan died, Michael lived.

'Michael suffered terrible survivor guilt, he was three weeks in the burns unit and the first place he went from the hospital, was our house and he was there every day for several years.'

It was 14 hours after the explosion before Gallagher knew his son was dead. 'I'll never forget the carnage, the scenes, at the hospital, the chaos,' he said. '

'At the leisure centre where we all had to sit and wait for news, I kept hearing Spanish voices and thought I was mad.' A group of Spanish students had been passing through town, a 12-year-old boy and a teacher died.

'They were using the army barracks as a mortuary and they brought Aidan out, I was one of those lucky to have something left to identify,' he said.

'I drove out of the barracks and the dawn was breaking and I was going home to tell the family Aidan wasn't coming home and I just couldn't understand, I just couldn't understand why he wasn't going to see this new day.'

Despite its new shop fronts, Omagh is dominated by landmarks of the 1998 atrocity - the leisure centre, the army barracks, the courthouse from where police had herded people into the bomb itself. 'The town is trying move on,' said Gallagher.

'Just over 10 years ago if someone had told me I'd have met the people I've met and gone to the places I've gone, I'd never have thought myself capable, but I felt it was important for those who died to make sure someone fights for them.'

A decade of strife

15 August 1998

2.32pm - first of three warnings is received by Ulster TV. Two name the 'main street' and the courthouse.

3.10pm - the bomb explodes 400 metres from the courthouse.

17 August 1998

The Real IRA claims responsibility.

January 2002

Colm Murphy sentenced to 14 years for conspiracy. Conviction overturned. Awaiting retrial.

December 2007

Sean Hoey is found not guilty of murdering 29 people at Omagh.

April 2008

Start of civil action against Michael McKeivitt, Seamus Daly, Liam Campbell, Seamus McKenna and Colm Murphy.




15 August 2008

Memorial due to be unveiled in Omagh.

- The official memorial service that the council is planning for 15 August is being boycotted by many relatives of victims.

They say they do not need any more dignitaries with false promises, but will hold the service they want, as they have done every year, on the Sunday closest to the anniversary. Michael Gallagher, of the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group, said: 'We'll have the families service the way we see fit. So the council and all the bigwigs and the politicians can come along and have their speeches and ceremony, but we will be remembering our loved ones the way we have been doing over the past 10 years.'

An independent facilitator had to be brought in to negotiate over the wording on the plaque for a new memorial in the town. The families represented by the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group wanted it to remember those 'murdered by dissident Republicans'. The Sinn Fein-led council did not.

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