

• THE BERKELEY TRAGEDY - REFLECTIONS •

Our Community United In Grief & Support

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Kennelly herself will never forget where she was when she got the phone call: "I remember listening to it ... right, I'll figure it out, and hanging up ... I looked out the window and thought, 'how did this happen, what can we do,' trying to formulate a plan to be whatever we can be for whomever needs it."

As family members arrived utterly shell-shocked from Ireland, J1 students from all over the US converged on Berkeley, and on Wednesday evening a silent gathering was held in Provo Park downtown. A ring of several hundred, the overwhelming majority of whom appeared to be friends and peers of the students, quietly assembled holding lit candles and handmade signs with photos of the deceased, captured in some carefree, unaware moment of their young adulthood. A local Catholic priest emerged from the crowd and stood bravely in the center of the ring, and called for prayers. At the end of the prayer liturgy a chaplain from Trinity College told the assemblage that he too was available for counsel.

The American priest asked those who wished to speak to come forward. No one spoke, but several instead emerged to carry handmade signs to place them on a park bench in the center. A stream of others then followed with their candles, and eventually dozens of others joined them in filling the makeshift shrine with candles, signs, and flowers. Nobody spoke, and nobody moved to leave, as if there is no closure when death and crippling injuries visit ones so young and full of good life. There is no resolution, and never will be, no matter how long one stands in the candlelight.

On cards and signs left behind at the memorial, the wistful messages reflected the unresolved feelings of lives cut short so early in the first surge of life, the urgent engagements with sport, study, travel, and revelry, and romantic pairings-off.

Media was there but their intrusions were restrained by the mood, and it appeared that no one of the crowd wished to share their feelings before a camera or microphone. The only sounds were sighs and quiet sobbing and the occasional soft shuffle of footsteps as yet more arrived and joined the circle.

In the aftermath, not only the Irish community but also the local first responders had to deal with the shock, with many sent for trauma counseling. Fire Chief Gil Dong said: "It was probably one of the worst multi-casualty events I can recall during my time in Berkeley."

The community pulled together in incredible ways. Major community groups immediately came forward with money and support, including the GAA, the United Irish Societies, the United Irish Cultural Center, the Emerald Society, and the American Ireland Fund. Aer Lingus was widely praised by families and support groups both in Ireland and



The candlelit vigil in Berkeley on Wednesday, June 17.
A Irish flag forms part of the poignant tribute at the scene of the tragedy.
Photos: Martin Lacey Photography.

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the US for the great care they bestowed during the incredibly difficult journeys to and fro. A GoFundMe website established for the J1 Students raised well over \$200,000 from every manner of citizen in under a week.

Irish government Diaspora Minister Jimmy Deenihan flew over to be with the families and express solidarity, symbolic of the huge response from official and public Ireland back home ... expressive of the

strong links between Ireland and America and especially the San Francisco Bay Area.

His words at the Kittredge street site: "The sympathy of Ireland is with you. I've never seen such an outpouring of love and genuine sympathy and grief on the whole country for the families of the bereaved. The six who are dead have become the children of Ireland. They have now become symbols of (our) country. And the people have

responded accordingly in so many different ways ... And to the greater Irish community here in San Francisco, just thank you very much. It shows really how Irish people support each other in times of need, and this was a time of real need, and it demonstrates again the affinity ... that Irish people have with each other ... and that Irish people are just one great community the world over."

Minister Deenihan also

recognized the great well of support coming from fellow J1 students: "The young people who are out here represent the present generation of Irish youth, and the future leaders of our country, and we want to see this program continue."

Words also came from the bereaved families of those who passed away and those who remain severely injured in hospital. As they left America with the remains of their loved ones via Aer Lingus, the families of some of the deceased issued this statement through the Consulate: "As we leave Berkeley and return home to Ireland with our beloved sons and daughters, Eimear, Eoghan, Lorcan and Niccolai, we would like to thank everyone in America and Ireland for their sympathy and support, which has been a tremendous comfort to us at this tragic time."

The statement continued: "Particularly we thank the local authorities, emergency services, medical staff, parishes and communities of Berkeley. In addition we are forever grateful to the Irish Consul, Philip Grant, and his local team, and also the amazing service and support received from Aer Lingus, the Department of Foreign Affairs, US Ambassador Anne Anderson, and a special appreciation to Minister Deenihan.

"We cannot thank enough the students that were in the apartment and apartment complex that night. The manner and speed at which they reached out to our families, to our Consul, and to each other was faultless. Our children were extraordinarily blessed in their friends and we are enormously proud of them."

We heard final words from some of the youth who passed away as well. At the funeral service in Ireland for Lorcan Miller, his father read from one of his last postcards from Berkeley, from a kind and considerate young man very close to his family: "As part of my job I have to talk to customers and I always tell them about my amazing brothers and sisters and how much I miss them. I hope you're having lots of fun like me and being good. I'll see you soon. Lots and lots and lots of love as always, Lorcan," he wrote.

One of the survivors, Clodagh Cogley wrote that: "The fall from the balcony left me with 2 collapsed lungs, a broken shoulder, a broken knee, 5 broken ribs and a broken spinal cord ... Meaning the chances of me using my legs again are pretty bleak." But she promised to give the long path of rehabilitation "everything I've got. Who knows maybe legs have been holding me back all these years and I'll realize my talent for wheelchair basketball."

That is the spirit of these young Irish people: strength, unity, optimism, and an undying sense of commitment. This is the spirit that coming generations of J1 students will carry with them as they arrive in Berkeley for their American summers.