

Manx Linksa series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about remarkable people they have met!

Maurice Day died last month. Though I didn't meet him regularly, I have mourned his passing... he was one of those remarkable people that somehow changed your consciousness. He was known on the Island as a sculptor, he also worked to develop awareness on the Island of disability and to introduce disabled access, changing the very consciousness of the Island itself.

Since I met with Doug and Rosa Drown of Castletown, I've been suddenly much more focused on how the Island does cater for the needs of those with disabilities. We have prominent disabled parking, shopmobility, disabled toilets, lift access, pavement access and ramps; no doubt Maurice would have said that we still have a long way to go, but we are working to become a more inclusive society.

It is difficult to imagine what it must be like to suffer from a severely disability. It is even harder to imagine what it must have been like a hundred years ago in our society, or, to live in a society today where disability still has social stigma. Doug and Rosa came face to face with that reality in Romania 1990.

A chance meeting at the International Music and Dance Festival in Castletown created the contact with Marcel Morar who had had multiple sclerosis for 12 years. Trained as an officer in the army during the communist period, he was now unemployed and working as a volunteer to help other MS sufferers. From two small rooms at the back of a children's hospital in Oradea, Transylvania, he was single-handedly attempting to help a community of over a quarter of a million people.

On their first visit Doug and Rosa, both teachers, took with them funding raised through King Williams College to finance an emergency telephone and helpline; they subsequently returned with walking frames, medicines, clothes, blankets and goods, borrowing vans from KWC and The Whitestone Garage. A respect for the vision of this amazing man developed into the partnership that founded the Manx and Romanian charity Ro-Man-Aid in 1992.

Multiple sclerosis is a progressive condition, which affects the nervous system, for which there is no cure. Everyone with MS has a different set of symptoms that change from time to time and vary in severity and duration. In many people after 10-15 years, remissions decrease and disability becomes increasingly evident. Marcel was well aware of the "non-status" in society of those with disability, a direct result of the policies and social attitudes of the communist regime. Through him Doug and Rosa came to meet people locked away from society, hidden in institutions, in apartment blocks in the city, lost in rural communities. People with no rights, no life, no hope. A lady who hadn't been out for 5 years because she lived in a 5th floor flat with no lift; a man who lived with his mother in a

one roomed cottage, where the Doctor was 10k away, and neither they, nor the doctor, had a car.

Through his army connections Marcel knew a number of influential people who respected his integrity and trustworthiness, the partnership with Westerners added credibility and financial support to his plans. Having learnt English through the BBC World Service, Marcel was able to act as an interpreter and translator and introduce Doug and Rosa to key people to help negotiate for premises for a new centre, a disused Kindergarten, which opened 1995. It now operates 3 days a week with physiotherapy, occupational therapy, lunch and the opportunity for social interaction. On other days there are home visits by a nurse and social worker. They now have a modern disabled transport provided by a Swiss charity replacing the old converted Fiat van, and are in discussion for the health department to fund staffing costs.

Marcel has now had MS for nearly 30 years but has maintained his work and vision to enable other MS sufferers to meet together and to get back into their community. He is internationally recognised, bringing to the MS movement a unique combination of personal knowledge and expertise combined with awareness of social issues. Having helped set up the National organisation, he found himself coordinating the national office. His present health has forced him to relinquish this responsibility.

We are often guilty of looking at a country through our own cultural understanding. In ex communist states where “voluntary” work was compulsory and where the state owned everything, charitable giving and voluntary work is still rare despite increasing wealth. The prediction is that new development through joining the European Union will only create a greater divide between the rich and the poor. Doug and Rosa are aware that there now seems less need for outside help, but more need to help empower people to take up the small grant schemes that are available through the European Union.

As Marcel has become weaker Ro-Man-Aid continue their work, encouraging a new committee to take over many responsibilities including negotiating for funding from the Local Authority. The social stigma of disability is lessening but there is still a long way to go before they have the possibility of equal access that Maurice Day championed here on the Island.

If you would like more information about the ongoing work of Ro-Man-Aid or small grant applications please contact: Doug and Rosa Drown