

Tribute to Rosemary Fahey

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My dear friend Rosemary Fahey passed away on December 26th, 2017. We had been friends for 20 years. Like so many others, my life and my work were enriched by knowing her.

In 1998, another inspirational mentor and friend Anita Craig, nominated me to join the central executive committee (CEC) of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE). Sadly, nine years later, I found myself writing a tribute for the REACH journal to remember this wonderful lady, who had contributed to many of the developments in modern special educational provision in Ireland. Involvement with the IATSE offered me many opportunities and a wide network of connections and friends. At my first meeting I was introduced to Rosemary—a striking, tall Galway woman deeply immersed in her work with students with general learning disabilities.

Our connection developed into a wonderful friendship that lasted until Rosemary's untimely passing. Now, sadly, I find myself trying to find the words to honour her life and work. To say that her demise was premature is an understatement. Right to the end she was hugely committed to her work in special education. Her drive to provide high-quality learning experiences and outcomes for her students and her care for the staff, to whom she provided exemplary leadership, was tireless and her loss leaves a void that will be difficult to fill. She stoically continued to work despite the many challenges that she had to endure over recent years. Few understood the full extent of Rosemary's illness as she remained fully engaged in school life and in a myriad of other professional involvements.

For over twenty years, she was a stalwart member of the CEC of the IATSE. She tirelessly engaged in the organisation's endeavours and events. Rosemary's leadership skills saw her twice in the role of President of the organisation. She also served as Membership Secretary and Treasurer, always meticulous in her preparation and in carrying out her duties. She was enduringly principled, always a 'safe pair of hands', trustworthy, honest and fair.

We shared the role of Director of the Annual International Conference of the IATSE over a few years, a job we both enjoyed but performed with enthusiasm and frustration in equal measure! With Rosemary at your side, everything seemed manageable. Her Galway practicality and her intuition made for easy collaboration. She maintained a laser-sharp focus on the job at hand and kept a dreamer like me on task!

Involvement on the editorial board of REACH journal was important to Rosemary. She valued the collegiality and professionalism of her colleagues and she forged strong links and friendships with former editors Pat Lynch and Mary Carrig and current editor, Anna Logan. She understood the importance of the journal as a vehicle for sharing best practice. Apart from having an article published in the journal based on her research on the *Post-School Outcomes and Social Experiences of Past Pupils of a Special School for Mild General Learning Disabilities* (2007), Rosemary contributed to the journal through her perceptive and keen editorial skills.

Rosemary served on various committees and groups with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). The balance and experience that she brought was much sought after and in recent years, she served as a branch secretary. She used her voice to promote fairness for teachers, especially those working in special education, and to ensure that issues related to special education remained to the fore. Rosemary's contribution to special education is widely acknowledged and respected. She worked at various times with the NCCA, St Patrick's College (DCU), Trinity College, UCD and numerous other institutions. Her name is synonymous with excellence and creativity in special educational provision. Rosemary played a key role in supporting the annual special schools' choir competition, at which a moving tribute was made to her memory earlier this year. She provided significant support to other school principals offering guidance and kind words where they were needed. Rosemary's discretion and wide-spectrum view of education provided her with a clear understanding of current educational issues and problems. This wisdom was always enthusiastically shared.

At Rosemary's core, she was an inveterate teacher. She enjoyed spending time with the students long after her classroom teaching days were over. During her time as principal, she often commented, that on the most challenging days, her happy place was interacting with the boys and girls in the classroom or in the yard. True to her vocation, she taught many of us, her colleagues and peers, so much - always generous with her knowledge. She was a brilliant role model and her legacy lives on in St Ultan's Special School today.

As much as Rosemary loved teaching and learning, she also loved the sunshine, good company, the fresh air and exercise. But her real love was for her home county of Galway. The boys and girls in maroon and white brought massive joy to her on every win, but none so sweet as last year's lifting of the Liam McCarthy Cup! Through great effort and support from her family, Rosemary made her pilgrimage to Croke Park, despite significant personal challenges. Every Galway victory made her heart soar.

To those of us who were blessed to know Rosemary well, there was laughter, style, a listening ear- always there at the other end of the phone, a tireless supporter, a collaborator and a steadfast friend. My memories of Rosemary will always be of her resilience in the face of professional challenges and her utter bravery in her final days.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread.

(The Wild Swans at Coole by W.B. Yeats)

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