

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **PROFESSOR EAMON O'SHEA**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 17 October 2018 on the occasion of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **HELEN ROCHFORD BRENNAN**.

A Uachtaráin, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle....

Helen Rochford-Brennan is from Tubbercurry in Sligo. She is married to Sean Brennan and they have one son Martin who is also a graduate of NUI Galway.

Helen lived and worked in the USA and the UK in her early years. On returning to Sligo she devoted tireless years to business and community activism, working at Board level in several organisations, particularly in relation to infrastructural development in the West of Ireland.

She spent nine years managing a national disability services organisation. Helen received the Spirit of Sligo Award from Sligo County

Council in 2017 for her overall contribution to business and community life in Sligo and, more recently, a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Sligo Business Awards.

But it is for her work in dementia that Helen Rochford-Brennan is being honoured today. Helen is one of a small handful of self-advocates with dementia internationally who are having a profound effect on how we think about dementia and how we view people with dementia.

In July 2012, Helen, at the age of 62, was diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer's. Helen has spoken eloquently about the significance of the diagnosis for her and how fearful and bereft she felt on hearing the news.

Outside of her family, there were few sources of community-based support for a person diagnosed with dementia. Helen was on her own with a devastating diagnosis and, on her own admission, found it difficult to function properly for almost a year.

Her decision to join the Alzheimer Society of Ireland and become involved in research proved to be the catalyst that would change her life almost as radically as her initial diagnosis. Helen threw herself

wholeheartedly into advocacy and research, working diligently to provide a better understanding of what it means to live with dementia, including the possibility of people being able to live well with dementia.

The innate personhood and preserved self of Helen prevailed, taking her on an amazing adventure that has helped to transform the perception of people with dementia and the provision of dementia care in Ireland and internationally.

Helen realised that while her diagnosis would lead to a different life, it was still possible to have a good life. Just because she had a cognitive impairment, did not mean that she could not function. And, more importantly, that she could not help others with dementia.

Helen became Chair of the Irish Dementia Working Group, supported by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. She used her time with the Irish Dementia Working Group to raise awareness of dementia and raise the profile of human rights for people with dementia.

The Irish Dementia Working Group when it was established was a small group of 5 or so committed people and it has now grown to a membership of over 30 people living with dementia across Ireland.

Helen provided incredible energy and leadership in those early days when involvement and engagement of people with dementia in advocacy and policy activism was only beginning and barely recognised in Ireland. She is also currently a member of the Monitoring Group for the implementation of the Irish National Dementia Strategy.

Helen joined the European Working Group of People with Dementia in 2014 and served as Vice-Chairperson until 2016. She is currently Chair of the Working Group in Alzheimer Europe. She is a Board member of Alzheimer Europe providing insight and support to that organisation as the authentic voice of the person with dementia. She has brought the message of hope and transformation in dementia to governments, NGO's, the European Parliament, the World Health Organisation and global pharmaceutical companies.

Helen has given people working in the field of dementia an understanding of what human rights mean to the person living with

dementia and was one of the first dementia advocates worldwide to demonstrate solidarity with the global disability rights community.

She is driving a new narrative of dementia, one that emphasises the citizenship rights of the individual, including that person's civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. She has helped to broaden the contemporary debate on dementia to include empowerment, participation, equity and non-discrimination for people with dementia.

There is much work to be done in this area, as Irish people still have no legislative right to community-based care services. But Helen will not rest until the right to personalised home care for people with dementia is enshrined in legislation in this country.

Helen has been an inspiration to the dementia community in Ireland and internationally. She has helped set the agenda for future research priorities in this country. She powerfully demonstrates that those personally affected by discrimination are sometimes in the best position to create the changes we need to see in the world.

But most of all, Helen reminds all of us to be human and to listen carefully and attentively to the voice of the person with dementia, to see

their world as our world and our world as their world. We are one and the same person.

As she advised me recently, stay connected, stay living and stay loved. Good advice at any time, but especially so coming from someone whose life epitomises the grace and dignity that can be achieved through connecting, living and loving.

PRAEHONORABILIS PRAESES, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum *Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico*, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.