

# A place of succour

Pieta House is a place where those in crisis can go to be supported, founder **Joan Freeman** writes about how the service is expanding

I NEVER believed in light bulb moments, until I experienced one during a time of terrible tragedy; the first few weeks of grieving for a loved one who had died through suicide. I found myself going through a time of great despair because I had discovered that suicide could be prevented. While that was good news, I had hoped that I would find information that would exonerate me, information that would tell me that no one could be saved from suicide because then I would not need to feel this terrible guilt.

I remember feeling so bleak, my days were endless and although a mother of four children, my life seemed senseless.

During this time, I remember leafing through a book called *The Seven Sorrows of Mary*, which included artist's interpretations of the seven most difficult times in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Each story was illustrated by an image that reflected the story.

The selected stories included the time when Mary and her husband had to flee Egypt while she was heavily pregnant, when she lost her child for three whole days and of course when her only child, Jesus, died. The visual interpretation of this final story was a modern painting of the Pieta—where Mary is depicted holding the dead, broken body of her adult son.

The painting was accompanied by an explanation of Michelangelo's sculpture. Michelangelo deliberately made Mary's body larger than that of her adult son. Her pose is similar to that which she would have used when holding Jesus as a baby. Her shoulders are broad and her lap is deep so that she can hold Jesus' body and embrace his death. She is also depicted in the Pieta as a young woman and her face has a wonderful serenity portraying a majestic acceptance of her son's death.

## Realisation

My 'light bulb' moment came when I realised that this is exactly what was

needed for people who were suicidal or self-harming in our community, a living Pieta – which would provide a service that was both compassionate and accepting. This service would allow us to provide support to broken lives in our community, to accept and sustain people who were suffering. That was the start of an incredible journey.

Pieta House opened on January 19, 2006 with a staff of six people. This professional, free-of-charge service helps people who have attempted suicide and survived, and those who have a strong urge to take their life or who self-harm.

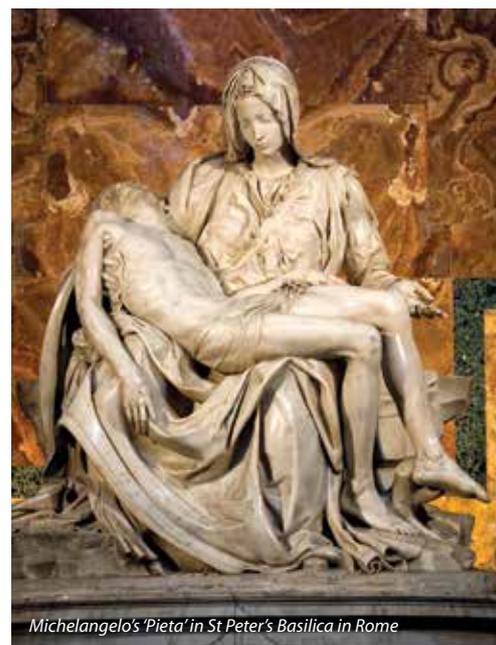
People of all ages have been helped by Pieta House, ranging from children as young as six years of age to those in their 80s. Pieta House has seen people from every postal district in Dublin and every county in Ireland. People from all over the world email us asking where the nearest Pieta House is.

Seven years after we opened we have a staff of almost 100 and six centres: four in Dublin; one in Limerick; and one in Roscrea, Co Tipperary.

We will be opening three more centres around the country, in Bishopstown Co Cork, Tuam, Co Galway and Castleisland, Co Kerry, thus eventually servicing 16 counties in Ireland.

This is such an important and critical move for Pieta House. Pieta House was invited to set up a service in these counties and each county has taken ownership of the service by providing a premises and pledging funds for their centre. In the last couple of years, all money raised in a county for a Pieta centre has remained in the county.

Pieta Cork will be opening in September in a beautiful convent in Bishopstown. To ensure the success of this new centre, I will be moving into the Convent for three months. This will save on travel and accommodation costs and I believe that it is necessary in order to ascertain the



Michelangelo's 'Pieta' in St Peter's Basilica in Rome

needs of the people of Cork at ground level.

The people of this country are beginning to look at suicide as a social issue that needs to be addressed. Never again will we sweep this terrible scourge under the carpet, never again will people experience the shame and stigma that is attached to suicide. From now we will see that, for many, suicide is a reaction to a life event – a crisis that is generally short-term, but where a person in distress needs to be held and supported. Now people know that there is somewhere to go to and that place is Pieta House.

There are lots of ways you can get in touch with us if you, or anyone you know, needs the help of Pieta House.

- Website: [www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)
- Tel (urgent): 01-6010000
- Regional phone details are available via our contact page on: [www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)
- Facebook: [www.facebook.com/pietahouse](http://www.facebook.com/pietahouse)
- Twitter: [www.twitter.com/PietaHouse](http://www.twitter.com/PietaHouse)

*Joan Freeman is a psychologist and the CEO and founder of Pieta House, a centre for the prevention of suicide and self-harm*