

# THE VOLUNTEERS

## THE DRAWING

This pencil and ink drawing is a temporary installation printed on panels of paper and fixed to the facade of Trinity College's 'House Two' with a biodegradable adhesive. This street art installation is seventeen metres tall, and made up of thirty-six panels. The project has been jointly funded by 'Trinity College - Creative Challenge' and 'The Arts Council of Ireland - Next Generation Bursary.'

Primary health care intervention in Ireland has been secondary to criminal justice procedures when it comes to dealing with drug addiction for the past fifty years. Addiction is an illness and should be treated by a health-led approach as opposed to channeling people into the criminal justice system.

## RED CROSS

The only physical display of confrontation in the drawing is between the nurse and an unidentifiable male figure - he is representative of Ireland's primary health care service. This conservative figure, with his gaze facing away from the group, is being drawn with a level of force into the complex conversation that surrounds the treatment of drug addiction.

There are increasing numbers of G.P.s willing to treat those with an opiate addiction, but the numbers remain relatively low at just under 14%. It is often those who are most in need of medical services that are the least likely to get them. It is important G.P.s are helped to find the capacity and desire to serve the socially disadvantaged and marginalised.

## THE PROTAGONIST

All lines in the piece point to the hooded figure. She is the only figure who is in direct conversation with you, the viewer. She stares frankly forward, projecting a quiet confidence and honesty. Her gaze is frank and brave. She is a contradiction of strength and vulnerability. Consider the angles of limbs, supportive gestures, fixed eyes and inanimate objects. This madonna-esque character sits enthroned on a medical practitioners bag, drawn from the exhibition 'Proclaiming a Republic: The 1916 Rising', in the National Museum of Ireland. She wears a combination of contemporary and period clothing. Her hoodie is made of a metallic fabric that alludes to the aluminium foil 'space blankets' used to provide warmth in emergency situations. It is representative of a life worth saving.

## SAINT CHRISTOPHER

This depiction of Christopher or 'Christ Bearer', is taken from an engraving by Albrecht Dürer dated 1521. It portrays the bearded figure of Christopher with the Christ Child on his shoulders. Saint Christopher was a man of great size and strength who devoted himself to Jesus by helping travellers cross a dangerous river. One day a child asked to ride on Christopher's shoulders across the river, but the infant seemed to grow heavier and heavier with every step. When they arrived on the opposite shore, the child identified himself as Christ, telling the holy man that he had just carried the weight of the world. Saint Christopher became one of the most popular patron saints for storms and burdened truth in the Middle Ages.

## SHELL CARRIER JACKET

This reproduction of a World War One shell carrier jacket is part of the National Museum of Ireland's collection. Similar jackets were used by the rebels during the 1916 rebellion to transport weapons. Women hid the jackets and their cargo beneath their skirts and overcoats. In the drawing the shells are replaced by the 'Bill' - a proposed piece of legislation to transform addiction policy, carried by a contemporary and independent 'Bomb Carrier'.



## BY JOE CASLIN

'The Volunteers' is a powerful new collaborative multimedia piece of public art and film, the first of a three-part series highlighting the importance of volunteerism in tackling some of Ireland's most pressing issues: drug addiction, mental health, and direct provision. The project reflects upon Ireland's century of progress, and asks us what battles we must fight in the present to remake the country for the better.

Caslin, known for his large-scale black and white drawings, has chosen to focus this piece and it's accompanying short film on the theme of decriminalising drug addiction. 'The Controlled Drugs and Harm Reduction Bill' is currently before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Both the Bill and this piece attempt to humanise the complex narratives around drug addiction, placing treatment as a health issue and not an offence to be punished within the criminal justice system.

This piece of cultural commentary features Rachael Keogh, an advocate in recovery from heroin addiction, Senator Lynn Ruane, author of the legislation, and Fiona O'Reilly, Managing Director of SafetyNet, a primary care service to people who are homeless. The male figure represents the doctor, a role which is frequently secondary in drug abuse intervention due to failed government policy and the mischaracterisation of drug addiction.

'The Volunteers' is about the preciousness of life, and the ways we betray it, as well as the ways that we honour it with our time, passion, and attention. Drawing from the example of the 1916 Volunteers, who made their lives offerings for a new world, this piece looks at those who offer themselves to transform their country in a different way, today.

[www.joecaslin.com](http://www.joecaslin.com)

Watch our film here



## We will let no life be worth less

There is a prologue to each of us.  
My history is a drawn line  
that stretches behind me endlessly,  
and in front of me: unwritten possibility.  
The volunteers, mostly their 20s,  
from all the various walks, laden  
with the burden of centuries:  
the tall pillars still hold the scars  
of their battles, as they still hold up the roof.  
Those elemental arms of survival.  
In the face of all of this sorrow,  
we offer our work as our proof.

I saw addiction grow in the soil of trauma  
a neighborhood inheritance, poverty  
and circumstance, a gnawing loneliness:  
an ache clawed of holiness  
only some howling chemistry lightened.

It was angry and bottomless  
and it wrapped like a lover  
but then tightened and strangled.  
It smothered. And to others,  
that fearsome illness turned me criminal.

Here, the ill get shamed  
as though their illness is earned,  
marched through halls of justice  
as though we haven't learned  
that they're already in a prison  
of their own pain.  
And treatment is a domain  
for another neighborhood.

St. Christopher, the burden-bearer,  
did what he could: he crossed the river  
carrying a weight heavy as the world.  
He said, 'Go your way in safety.  
Go on reassured.'

The ink is stark and black and white -  
the words all seem dry at a glance.  
But their truth is a chance.  
What they mean is a life.

These stones hold the echo  
of old explosions, but they hold  
the sound of us stacking them too.  
We'll mix mortar with sweat and dust  
from the rubble of sorrow.  
See what we can do.

There are bombs we can make  
with ink and with paper:  
a bill, a voice articulated,  
a truth plain as a picture on a wall:  
they hammer out a proclamation for us all,  
and in every cross-hatched line, the message:  
Life, in all its walks, is precious.

A country reworked for the better,  
a path drawn in line and in letters  
a prophecy that's built of our presence  
and made of our time:  
a life we can look in the eye as we rise.

We inhale possibility  
and exhale it as hope,  
grateful to the last for the breath as it goes.  
Our great cause is to cause an effect:

We will let no life be worth less.  
We will let no life be worth less.

The new volunteers,  
a nation reflected,  
its warrior creed:

We will be fierce in our compassion  
and believe.

Written by Erin Fornoff

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