

REMINISCENCES

PORTRAITS & INTERVIEWS BY MIKE STONE



ISSUE # 01
TRAVELLERS



Bang, engine failure. Four darkening hours on the Heathrow tarmac and now at ten o'clock, through the fog of the night, driving the back roads of County Cavan searching for a pub. My directions, scribbled on the back of an envelope. Find the crossroads with the big tree on the road out of Ballymahon. I'm looking for an old friend from England now reinvented as an Irish country singer, a British Kinky Friedman if you like.

The pub appears. I step into noise and warmth. Shannon as he's now called, in cowboy hat and two-tone brothel creepers belting out ballads, the weddings and barmitzvahs I'd seen him at before a long way behind us. Heads turn. Myself the stranger, I settle at the bar, a pint of Guinness seems appropriate.

A well built country girl takes the lead. A nurse working with Traveller people, giving primary healthcare education. The conversation deep and heavy. Discrimination, prejudice, hard lives, early deaths, dying traditions. Now would that not be something you could photograph? Indeed it would.

Three years later: A group of Traveller families allow me into their homes to hear their stories. Working discretely, behind drawn curtains and often at night. The community still closed and suspicious of outsiders, of settled people, of each other. I'm greeted with warmth and find thoughtful, bright men and women who tell their stories with careful turn of phrase and great wit.

Mike Stone June 2016

Cover image: Kathleen. Photographed at the Cavan Traveller Women's Health Group

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MARY

I was born into a house but Jesus Christ, we're all Gypsies.

I went to school 'til I was 12, then I went to work and then got married. We'd want our children to get more education because we missed out. We wouldn't want them to have what we had, you could be here today and gone tomorrow so we want the kids to have an education

My mother and my fathers family were from the North, the border didn't matter, though some would be afraid to go into the North. The IRA knew who the Travellers were, they'd never bother Travellers and we had nothing against them and they knew that. We did our own thing, the Travellers don't get in with things like that. We fight amongst ourselves, strictly it stays with the Travellers, and we're like the IRA on our own.

Years ago we were moving around but there was a big field, we pulled in for a break, got the gas bottles out and put the kettles on and me as usual, Jack tomboy, had to climb into the field.

When I climbed into the field there was a big electric wire in the middle of the field. Sure didn't I just grab onto the electric wire, with both hands Aagh! Didn't affect me.

Mind you, in the Traveller people, if we were kids and we were playing out and our leg fell off, you wouldn't hop home and tell your parents. We'd try and fix it rather than tell them. You'd not be able to tell them, not a hope, 'cos you'd get a good few slaps for it. "Why were you so stupid to get your leg cut off? You're two thirds of a Pikey." There'd be no hospital like, it'd be wrapped up and tied off. Nowadays if they break a nail they'll come running but we couldn't have done it.

Going back years we'd have had long hair, you cut it all like when you got married. You're allowed to cut it when you get married, that's when you become a woman, become your own boss when you get married. My great grandmother was 13 when she got married, that's the age they were and the men 14 and 15. See in the travelling community when you get to 30 you're an old woman.

NORA

We were living in Dublin in Finglas camp, fields, a kip, a bank of muck, everyone had their own section, ours was the cleanest corner in the whole place. My mother, she was very spotless like, so if that cup there was empty, she'd be like "What's that there for? Should be washed and put back up there. Has to be done".

We all had our own things to do, we didn't sit down and wait for the next thing to do, we just got on and did it.

Do you know when we were younger we never got no schooling or anything. We tried school, I went to school but didn't like it. I was put at the back of the classroom anyway, but we used to go into town begging and if it was only a fiver we'd begged, when we got home that would go into food for us. When I look back, yes they might be harder times but they actually wasn't. They were happy times, we were all happy for what we got. There was only bread on the table and jam. You appreciate that. Now you can make a turkey dinner every day and what, you don't need it

I don't miss begging but if it came to not having no money, if I had an embarrassment in my pocket, then I could turn around and say right, my children need food and I'd take to the street or to the houses, knock on doors and ask for tea bags or sugar or a few clothes.

My cousins, we used to laugh at them, 10 girls and their father he'd never call them. My father used to call us by our names but her father he'd just give one big whistle and they'd all come running, dogs an all would come running, the whole 10 of them would come back, and 10 dogs.

At first I couldn't believe it. They'd run back, every one of them, we'd be in stitches laughing at them. We couldn't understand this because we were brought up that whistling is for calling dogs, so my father's dogs would be running back and my father's brother's children would be running back, the whole lot, ten girls and the dogs all back together. They weren't hard times, they were the best times, children never got sick, even to this day I never get sick.

We were a very close family, we didn't need outside family, we didn't need to see our cousins or strangers, anyone. We built our own Barbie house, get our dolls and played together. We'd sit down at the table together and chat we didn't need anyone else.



BARNEY and NANCY

Barney & Nancy currently foster five Traveller children from heroin addicted parents and have been active in Traveller community development for over 20 years





Barney Before we got this house we saw a house up in Beechmont and the agent said it's a good job it's you that's interested because there's Travellers interested and I don't want to give it to Travellers. I said to Nancy let's see if we get it first and then we'll tell him, but I got furious with him, I didn't take it.

Without a shadow of a doubt if we had recognition as an ethnic minority we'd be entitled to rights, without it we're just seen as dropouts. Once it's proven that we're an ethnic minority, and it is in the North and England, it's different.

Nancy I've been involved in Travellers rights for 20 years and nothing has changed. Only 0.1 % of travellers go on to third level education. The vast majority who are in full time employment with settled people are hiding who they are, hiding that they're Travellers, they can't self identify.

There's a couple in the Gards that will not identify themselves as Travellers, there's a prison officer in Mountjoy who's a Traveller, he can't self identify and that affects the census. They say there's 36,000 here and 4,500 in the North but there's not, there's more.

Barney Once the children have finished primary there's nothing like, schools round here they can refuse you as a Traveller. I was 10 when I left school, Nancy was 11.

I remember being involved in a youth training centre when I was 13 or 14. I was vocal and kind of got to like it. You become a mouth and people listen to you and you like it you know, it's an ego thing but it's a feel good factor when you feel you can do something right.

The sense was easy to get, the education part was hard because it wasn't heard tell at that time for Travellers to get onto third level and I had a very bad primary education, it was frowned upon, everyone was sneering. Now, you could continue acting an eejit or you could try and do something for yourself. So first and foremost it was about yourself.

My education came from myself, my own initiative. My understanding was you've nothing in this hand, you'll never get anything so you've got to get up and do something, you can keep going this way and end up like the majority of the Travellers or if you're passionate about something you'll actually change it.

Nancy I got involved with Pavee Point. I knew that they talked about human rights and that's when I became aware that we were treated differently. But we were powerless, you see it as the norm. Say you walk into a shop and get put out and instead of causing a scene, because its seen that Travellers cause scenes, you just walk out with embarrassment, shame, whatever. You go for hotels and no matter how well you're done up you get put out.

Barney You're resilient, see when I was a young fella and living in a housing estate here in Navan, the mothers were telling their kids not to play with us and it was at that point you see there's something different. Even though you weren't told it, your instinct told you that if they're not expected to play with you, you drew the conclusion that there was something strange.

Nancy You can see it even with the small children here. This estate we're staying in is a private estate and the children won't be let mix. You can see with my three small ones, they go out and play among themselves, there's segregation. Stay away from them people is what the settled children are told, they learn very early.

Barney The media is deadly, they never give a good story about Travellers. When they do a story about Travellers they'll get it the wrong way round on the front page and the next day there will just be a line inside putting it right.

We went to Rome last year, 3000 Travellers at the special invitation from the Pope there was not a word of coverage in Ireland and we definitely made ourselves known.

Mag O'Leary got a selfie with the Pope. I said how did you get that and she said "Well I just made it my business to get it". This is the Pope like and still its not newsworthy. Now she's a solicitor, she's a character.

There's a study shows that Travellers have different DNA from the average Irish person. Traveller DNA goes back before the 10th Century, back to the 5th Century so we're distinct.

On a European level the state has to recognise Roma and Travelling people but it does not have a knock on effect inside Ireland. Politically they have to recognise it but it doesn't filter down to the average TD. There is one Traveller TD from Sinn Fein in County Donegal, well his grandmother was a Traveller.

The government, they're afraid to do anything about it because they were asked in 1989. When they drew up the Nice treaty they were asked if there were any ethnic minorities in Ireland and they refused to say yes. So now they're not accountable. How they can manage to escape it I don't know but they still receive European money for minorities. There are 52 councils around the country and nine spent the money, the rest sent the money back.

I do know that when we moved to Cavan I applied to the council for the Traveller Grant and they'd never heard tell of it. I had to get the Department of Environment to tell them. It was ringfenced.

Of course the problem with right to buy is that if you can afford to buy your house from the council where have you got the money from? You'll lose every entitlement and benefit if you're on social welfare. Unless you're working legally, but that's the catch because how do you get a job?



BRIAN

I have the luck of a black cat but I'm not as vital as I was. I've had nine strokes since 2010.

Now I'm here seven days a week, can't get out, I see nobody and it's a long day.

Really I'm lucky to be alive but you see a lot worse sights than me in the hospital. There was a young lad had a bad stroke and his sister was smuggling in drink to him. He was swearing at the nurses, blinding and cursing, pissed, he wouldn't go to his physio. She wasn't right in the head his sister, thought she was doing a good thing for him.

Problem is there's a lot of stress now, the young ones are a long time in school and there's no jobs for them, they're full of drugs, they need something to do, something to look forward to.

There was this fellow in Navan, slaughtered with a hatchet in his back and thrown off a cliff. That's the drugs.

The religion is gone too. Mostly Travellers are Catholic, they used to go to the mass twice a week and confession, though I wouldn't go myself. My last confession was six or seven years ago.

If you're a good soul it doesn't matter what religion you are.

DENISE

I'm fifteen and the boy I'm to be engaged to, he is fourteen. When he's fifteen we'll be getting engaged.

He's away in London working. He's living on a site in West Drayton near Heathrow. He's working there to make some money for us.

I'll join him when we're both sixteen. Then we'll get married and I'll go over to live in London with him.





CHARLES

Charles, he wants to be a boxer just like his brother.

His brother was sixteen. He was good, he was winning fights. His grandfather's father was a boxer.

It was last year when they went up to the lake. They were all doing a course up at the workshop and those lads that took him, that family, they were all brothers and cousins, they knew that he couldn't swim.

They watched him and they didn't call the Gards until he was drowned.

The Gards called us and we heard the helicopter come. We went up there but they wouldn't let us near. The Gards said that when they took him out of the lake he was already dead.



JOHN

Living in a house is lovely, I was reared in tents.

I'm from Galway. There were five sisters and seven brothers, we were beside the road in a caravan and tents. My mother did begging. When I was reared you might go a couple of days without food but they were good times.

My father was from Roscommon. He found his mother dead when he was seven years old and he was reared by these people in Roscommon, the man was a boxer, won belts all over.

My mother, her people were from County Claire. She got married at 13 years and 8 months, what sort of priest was that then? She was smoking at 14 and was 86 when she died. Had 12 children, well 13 but one died. She was pure blonde a small little woman, loved three or four bottles of Guinness.

My grandfather, Packy Sweeney was at both wars and died a couple of months before he was 100. He could walk to the town until the day he died, his heart gave up. A lot of the traveller men went in the army for the money but deserted, my grandfather didn't, he got his army pension.

First time I went was to Scotland when I was 14, picking spuds, potato picking, I was getting a fiver a week there and we slept in a shed, a bothy with a sack for a bed and a sack for a pillow, came back at 15 and worked in a lamb factory taking the guts out of the lambs for a fiver a week as well. If you brought me a lamb tomorrow I could still kill him and gut it for you.

I went to England in 1963. I was 16 years of age and this man got me an insurance card to work on the building sites, said I was 21. It was hard going, digging fucking trenches with a shovel in your hands.

I came back at 19 and married the wife. Last August I was 68. I'm a smoker and I've taken a drink all my life. Last year my brother said never get your blood took and tested, it shows up everything, but I was at the doctors with my chest and she looked at her screen and said did you ever get your blood tested? So she did and everything was 100% so I'm still smoking and drinking.

BRIAN

I cannot read and I cannot write. I was born and bred in Cavan, moved to London, met my wife, we've been 20 years together now, came back here 17 years ago. She wanted to come home. I was getting well happy and settled in London, different way of living you see and you could make a pound in London, no one knew you, no one wanted to know you. Came back here and we've been here since. Worst move ever.

If I got to London now I don't know if I'd like it as much. I liked London then, the thing about London was we were all Irish over there, it was which county are you from, not are you a Traveller. We were all working all week and when you'd hear of a clatter of lads meeting up, maybe 20 of us would meet up, its great to look back, no rows between us. I never wanted to come home, she did.

I'm born and reared in Cavan, there's not too many people around Cavan I wouldn't know. Trust me they give out about English people and Protestants this that and the other. I say this regularly to people, they're a far better breed of people than any Catholics I've ever met, if you have a deal with them for something there's no squirming. If a Protestant person doesn't like you back here then you don't go up their lane, but a Catholic fellow would have you up the lane and back down with the bones out of you. Fucking robbing bastard.

One day I was talking to a black man over here. I says, how do you find discrimination over here? He says you get it, you see people looking and that. I said would you believe it if I said we get it ten times more than you? He said the only problem with Travellers is they don't stand up for their rights, they will never all get together and stand up for their rights. He said you'll always get put down and he's right.

In Cavan Town for the like of a travelling person, there's no opportunities here. We've a lad of 17, he don't want to do a course, he thinks he must go the Travelling way, I'm fed up saying to him "Take a course, I'll help you get through it, carpentry, electrician, plumbing, mechanic, you pick it." But no he won't go back to school. Where do you go with that?

Looking at me. He sees me going off in the van every day, looking about bits of work, power hosing whatever, there's nothing happening. We done a little job yesterday. I brought him with me, I went off and got a number to do yesterday, cleaning a yard and power hosing. We went and done it, grand. Now what are we doing today?



MISSIE

Missie Collins and her daughter-in-law Tessa Collins both work at the Pavee Point Traveller & Roma center in Dublin, as primary healthcare workers and in the violence against women programme

Missie We face discrimination every day of the week because firstly I'm a woman and a Travelling woman.

No less than last week I was followed around a shop by two Gards. I was with my little grand daughter, wasn't here in Dublin, but it could be all the same here in Dublin, I was down the country. I said to my little granddaughter don't be afraid, we're doing our bit of shopping, we're not doing anything, we have receipts for what we got but she started panicking.

So I walked to the two Gards and says how are ye? Oh we're grand. So he looked at the other fellow and they thought well she's not a Joe Soap and they walked out. In a way I'm regretting one thing, that I didn't say "Are you following me round the shop?"

I wouldn't be a person that would discriminate, I know what that's like and I don't mind anyone from anywhere getting on in life. We are white, we are Irish and we're Irish to the backbone since the 12th century and we should be able to go anywhere with pride and say I am an Irish Traveller and we should be respected. Respect for who you are, respect goes a long way, and that gets me angry.

A black doctor pulled me one day. I was doing me talking in a hospital and one of the black doctors put up his hand and says, I can't understand, you have all this discrimination in education, accommodation, all these things. I said but when I step foot out of here and walk down the street I'm recognised as Travelling woman. You could fool me he says, because you look no different to any other white woman.

Your childhood lasts a lifetime, you see I had a good childhood, I had a great father and mother. I'd say I was about 12 years old and my father said to mother I'm going to try and get a house because the older ones had got no education because we were always moving.





My father was a Longford man, he was in the army for a while before he married my mammy, he couldn't read or write. Come the summers he'd venture out to Galway or Connaught because at that time the feathers and the horse hair was on the go, he would go into the farms and they'd give him feathers, they'd give him the horse hair from their horses tails when they'd got too long. He'd get it all up in pile on his pony and cart and he'd go up to the market in Athlone where a fella would buy it off him and that's how he'd earn a few bob. He could tinsmith as well, he could make buckets. Only 58 when he died.

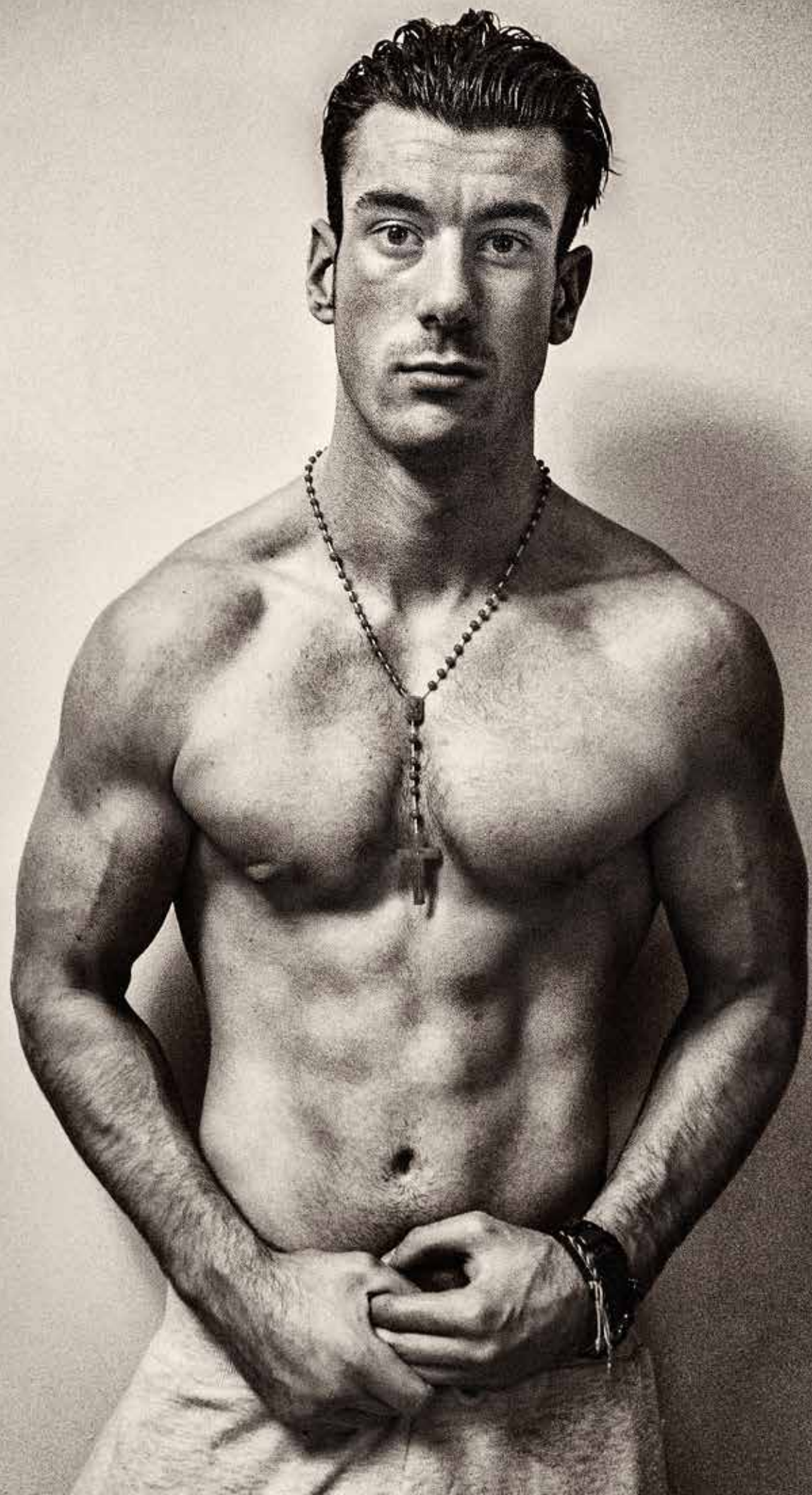
They were contented people, they never asked for anything, Granny would say if she had a smoke and a saucepan of tea that would settle her soul.

Tessa I'm a traveller, but I never travelled. I was born and reared in the heart of Manchester around English people but that never made me no different. I knew I was a Traveller. Me mother and me father taught us, even though we was brought up in England around settled people. I still knew me Cant. If we came back from school with a bit of the Manchester accent, my father, do you know what he would tell us, all six of us? Talk right. He meant talk like a Traveller. If I came back talking like an English, he'd say Tessie talk right.

My daughter got married, I'm back in Ireland 21 years at this time, so I said to myself I can't walk into my own local county and get a hotel, I have to hide I'm a Traveller, I'm not doing it, I spoke the way I speak. Every hotel I went to, I didn't say I was a Traveller but I didn't hide it, I couldn't do that. They wouldn't give it to me anyway, they wouldn't do it, they all had different reasons. I could have give a different name and got a settled person to go in and pay for it but I'm not doing it. I work in Pavee Point fighting for my peoples rights, why be a Judas, you're trying to battle this, so then why go and deny who you are? Don't ever be ashamed, no matter who you are or what you are, be proud of it.

I'm in Pavee Point working in the violence against women programme, I work with the services. I'll go out to meet the primary healthcare women and talk about the forms of domestic and sexual violence. So I sit in on a lot of meetings with the Rape Crisis Centre and Womens Aid, Probation, the Gardai. You know it's surprising, when you're sat at that table and these are right head up people, couldn't be any higher. They have not got a clue about Travellers.

They'll say to me, what are the barriers, what's going on? They don't understand that part of it. Then they don't understand that we actually live in a community that we're facing barriers within our own community. When I sit in these meeting and talk, no one will say anything to me, but at the side of the meeting, in a corner, they'll say is that right? Is that the way it is? In that interaction, in a one to one, they'll get an understanding of it, but I say you're very professional people and you haven't got a clue.



Opposite Martin, boxer in training.

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