



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF  
THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
AND THE BOBST CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

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Interviewer: Michael Scharff

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SCHARFF: This is Michael Scharff; the date is Sept. 7, 2010. I'm at the Healthy Living Center speaking with Mr. Charlie O'Donnell, the former principal of the Holy Child Primary School. He was principal from 1990 to 2008. Mr. O'Donnell, thank you very much for agreeing to sit for this meeting today. I much appreciate it.

O'DONNELL: *That's not a problem, provided I don't forget everything.*

SCHARFF: Maybe we can just start off the conversation by my asking you to kind of introduce yourself and give a little bit about your background and how you got to become the principal.

O'DONNELL: *I arrived back in Derry from training in Manchester in 1975, and at that time the population was quite high up here in Creggan. There were two primary schools. St. John's Primary School took children from right across the city and would have a great range of professional families—doctors' children, lawyers' children. I happily found myself a position in here. I found a wife within three months in there as well, got engaged after two months, married, had my two children—my two boys went there—and I was quite happy at St. John's for a long time.*

*We had difficult days. The school saw a lot of conflict as well, especially at the time of the hunger strike in 1981, where our principal—he was an American citizen although an Irishman, he used to travel every year, Hugh Kelly, a tremendous man—said that St. John's was going to be the one little theater: We never close, no matter what happens. He just was adamant—to all the pressures from the republican groups and everybody else—that we wouldn't close. But on the afternoon of the funerals—one of the local men who died was Patsy O'Hara, the other was Michael Devine—on the afternoons of their funerals, or the days of their funerals, there was such a huge crowd around the city and [Indecipherable 00:02:08] Park, you couldn't get any parking space in Creggan at all. Thousands and thousands of people had come from all over the north for the funerals.*

*He announced to staff that anybody who wanted to go to the funerals could go. I mean, the hunger strike here—of all the times, and I've lived through Bloody Sunday and everything else—I think the hunger strike was the worst time for a lot of people. That's not downgrading what the people on Bloody Sunday suffered or things that happened. I'm talking just as a person who went through something, someone who was disconnected to what was going on.*

*When I used to open my door in the morning to go out to school you would almost feel as if you had to take a razor blade and cut through the atmosphere, just to step out; everything seemed so heavy. It was almost as if you were going to be in 20 feet in water, swimming through it. Everybody experienced the same sensations. It was just a strange and eerie feeling, just so much pressure coming from everywhere. At that stage, again, because of the conflict, Creggan was pretty much locked off in terms of barricades across roads. And as a young teacher myself, my wife had to have a pass from the IRA (Irish Republican Army) to be able to drive into Creggan. I could have walked it in about two minutes, but sometimes because you were going to a football match with the children you needed a car.*

*So, as I say, I spent a lot of exciting days in St. John's—gun battles, all sorts of things going on while we were in school, lying on the ground, battles raging. That happened when I was at St. Columb's College as a teenager as well.*

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*So I applied for the post up in Holy Child Primary School in 1990. The post had been advertised the year before, but they hadn't appointed anybody. I had it in my head that I should go for the experience. I hadn't got my degree yet, got my teacher's certificate, but I'd started my degree, and you sort of tended to need a degree before you could get a senior post. But I was midway through it, so I applied and I was absolutely amazed when I got a phone call at 11 o'clock at night in my local bar, where I was two sheets to the wind. I was well aware the local priest phoned me and I thought he phoned just to say, "Look, Charlie, you didn't get the job." But in actual fact he phoned to say, "We're offering you the post."*

*He said it's the first and only time he'd ever phoned somebody who had obviously had about six pints of Guinness in him to offer him a senior post. But I took the post. That was in April and over the months between then and the end of school term I came up and met the staff of Holy Child. The principal gave me the keys on the first of August, and I traveled the 400 yards from St. John's. And this is really relevant. I traveled 400 yards from one part of the estate to the other. There was a very, very definite dividing line in Creggan—and there always has been. Going from what would be seen as one of the best schools in the North, traveling 400 yards from one school, where the percentage of children with free school meals was between 28 percent and 30 percent to a school that had the highest free school meals in the north of Ireland. I think at that time, I'm not exactly sure, but in my head it is 96.4 percent. So that was also reflecting an unemployment figure among males of those families of nearly 90 percent. You were transferring from sort of middle class to in some cases abject poverty.*

*When I walked into the school on the first of August 1990, I wandered around and I found a school that had huge grilles on every window. The windows couldn't be opened from the inside. There were no notice boards to display children's work. The place was very downtrodden. I remember standing at the front door with my backside stuck against the radiator, which was freezing even in August, and thinking, "Charlie, what have you got yourself into?"*

*Yet I'd have to say if I had my life to live over again, Holy Child would be the shining light there. That was such an adventure. It was very, very hard work at times, but what I discovered was, I came from a community that seemed to have everything to a community that had nothing but was willing to give everything that they hadn't even got. To me, that just made a huge difference. In those days we would have had quite a lot of violence against teachers, quite a lot of violence within the school.*

*I don't want to talk too much about the school, but one of the things that we decided to do was our academic scores. No one ever passed our 11-plus or went to grammar school—you might have one person every three or four years. I said do we work on academics, or do we work on people. This is taking you to the road we went with the election. We decided just to work with people. And we didn't forget about academics, because that's what you're there for day-to-day, but our main focus was getting the parents on board, getting the children on board, letting the children feel that they were in the best school in the world. We did a lot of work around that.*

*I was invited at the end of my first year to speak to all the educational inspectors across the North. I stood up at 37 years of age and I said to them academics don't matter. I was trying to put out the message that academics don't matter if you have chaos all around you.*

*So we worked very hard. I was blessed on the first of August that a guy called Jim McErn, who was the school's attendance officer, the education welfare officer, wandered in and we formed a friendship. We came up with the most ridiculous ideas, like American-style graduations and things like that. Over the 18 years I was there, we sort of put in 95% of our lunatic ideas. We had our children doing Spanish, German, French, Irish. We had our children doing drama. Our children produced Shakespeare plays. They had Spanish open days. We cooked. We did yoga from P4 to P7.*

*At the moment that I think everybody is doing yoga in the school and I think, you know, I had the staff doing yoga on a Friday afternoon before they went home. It was just to try and change the whole blast. It was from having maybe 10 assaults on teachers in a week, within a month it went to having none. We were having severe discipline problems where children were fighting in the corridors, fighting in the streets, I would say in my last 10 years as principal we had none.*

*In 1991, St. Patrick's weekend, so I was in post about seven or eight months, two young men broke into the school and in about half an hour they wreaked absolute havoc. I do have photographs, not here with me, but they smashed up the offices, they took every book off the library shelves. They emptied the fish tanks over the library books. They smashed windows, doors. They flooded the lower half of the school—it was actually underwater. Computers were smashed. It was just absolutely incredible wreckage, for no reason, because obviously, schools don't keep them away. But it wasn't really that. They just came in to wreck.*

*I met with our local parish priest, when it was the young caretaker—God rest John McVay, he's passed away now—but he discovered it early on a Saturday morning. Father McCloskey, who was the chairperson of our board came up and we were walking around, surveying the damage. Already, the caretaker, had phoned our education board to get cleanup squads and everybody in, glaziers to do the windows. We decided sort of that morning that we weren't going to do that. We decided—and this was not my decision, Father McCloskey thought it would be a good idea to say to the people at the two evening masses and every mass on the Sunday morning, "Come and see what has been done to your school."*

*I spent perhaps three hours in the school on Saturday evening and all day in school on Sunday—without doing any cleanup at all. Literally thousands upon thousands of people walked in to see the damage. I had people who were grandparents—I'm a grandparent now myself—standing in tears because it had been their first school. Their grandchildren were going to the school. I had parents there. I have never seen as much grief, but I've never seen as much anger as well, and people were openly saying this will never happen again.*

*So again it was about the power of the people. An example of that: We share a site with St. Mary's College. I would say in the last three years when I was there, St. Mary's College may have had 2,000 windows broken; Holy Child had one. We share a site. There's no difference between the two schools, but we had one window broken. We think—we're not sure—we think it was young people playing football and smashed a window; it wasn't a vandal, it wasn't an attack.*

SCHARFF: What is so fascinating about that story and I think what you're getting at and why it is relevant to the election story as well, is because the election story in many

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ways is about local community mobilization, it seems. It's about actors like yourself and others who were there, working at a very, very grassroots level.

O'DONNELL: *Absolutely.*

SCHARFF: To get people involved, to say, we're not going to stand for this; this is not what we're doing. Can I ask you just for the listeners, to situate us in terms of Creggan and the Creggan estate and what exactly the territory is? We're sitting here in your offices and we're looking out these picture windows here and I don't want to confuse Creggan from the Creggan Estate. What are the two? Is it one? Just for someone who doesn't know Derry.

O'DONNELL: *We're sitting looking out over, as I said to you, four counties of Ireland in the Old Library Trust Healthy Living Centre's boardroom. I'll give you a way of looking back. The Old Library Trust's inception goes back to 1990 but as an organization it probably came about maybe nine years ago, 2001. It started off as Creggan Enterprises, Creggan Preschool Cares, Creggan Health Information Program. We ran all these little programs. Now we had—when I say we, I don't want to be putting myself at the center because I'm not. I'm a bit-part player, just a bit-part player.*

*This is about groups working together. That's important. I know, Michael, over the next few days you will get the chance to meet other people who are bit-part players, but when you put them all together—. I think when I spoke recently at a launch of a window downstairs to commemorate the dead, or a lot of the dead of Creggan, I said an old proverb that I used to use in school with the children—I think it came from Ethiopia—was: When spiders unite they can tie up a tiger or they can suppress a lion. I said that's what the Bloody Sunday families did. They got together as little beans and the conquered. They got the truth, which is the big thing.*

*We started with a lot of local people trying to do local things. As I said, I went to the board, our board headquarters, maybe 15 years ago. That is why this building is called the Old Library Trust, because there used to be like a mobile building downstairs—something that, if you'd had a hurricane, would have been gone in two seconds. I asked the guy in charge—I can't even remember his name now, great man—I said, "Any chance of giving us the building?" The building was worth about 40,000 pounds at the time because of the plumbing and the electricity. It had been the library for Creggan, but the library had re-sited further along the street here into a new building.*

*He said, "Actually, you might as well have it." So luckily he gave us a building. From working in flats and different places around and hiring rooms, we suddenly had our own space, and that old space lasted for maybe—again, when you meet Seamus Heaney, our project leader here, he will be able to give you that late history. We lasted there a long time, until we got the funding together to build here. Here we have crèches, out-of-school programs, we have podiatry, we have a dentist, we have a gym, we have health activities. We have a little café where you'll get the cheapest food in the world almost.*

*We have huge activities going on for all age ranges and abilities. It is a place where if you're under pressure, you can come in here. Again an example of that, just one from myself: A parent came to me one Friday afternoon and if I'd let her out of my office, I know—I don't guess at this, I know—she would have committed suicide. She may have harmed her children as well.*

*We phoned social services. I worked for a long time with great social workers in Derry, but Friday afternoon, in a chaotic city where there is a lot going on, to try and get an emergency social worker is almost impossible. That's not criticizing the MRO, but I came here to the little porta-cabin and I said look, I'm here and I'm petrified. Two of the girls came from here, from our crèches, and stayed with her from Friday afternoon until Tuesday. Got her six children resettled with a family to look after them, did a lot of cleaning of the house, got help. We supported—again, not we, they. The people here in the center supported. So they've saved lives in that way as well. Again, it is all community-based work.*

*As I say, we're dealing with every person on the estate. We try and get to everybody. Some people are very isolated, and we're trying to work with them. Seamus, the project leader here, was part of the resolution in the prisons dispute recently. That gave us a lot of peace in very worrying times. Again, it would be worth listening to Seamus. Seamus will tell you he was a past republican prisoner himself and had a brother shot dead by the British army a long time ago. But that's Seamus' story.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'DONNELL: *But Seamus was very much at the center of things. He was a guy that ran—I'm not sure if it was Creggan Enterprises, he'll put you right. But he started that organization, and he has been at the center of community development here for a very long time. So again it brings us back then to the election.*

*The school wasn't being used for elections for a long number of years. Then someone in the electoral office—I don't know if it was Patricia Murphy, because I don't know how long Patricia has been there—but certainly someone from the electoral office wrote to me and wrote to my board of governors and asked, could they use the school? And I thought; this is real progress.*

SCHARFF: What year was that?

O'DONNELL: *I'd need to check that for you.*

SCHARFF: Was it in the mid '90s?

O'DONNELL: *Yes, the mid '90s I would say. I can confirm that for you; I'll phone Patricia and ask her. But they phoned and asked could they use the school. I just thought it was really progress. They wouldn't have looked at using us if they hadn't seen that we're making progress in other ways and the community is starting to settle within the school. So we went ahead, and I thought nothing of it. I'm not supposed to have any role on election day.*

*What I do is I get my caretaker to open the school at six or half-five in the morning. Once he gets everybody set up, he leaves the school and doesn't come back until half past nine at night. The polling station always closed at ten. But as it was my school, I had to at least be dropping in and out and seeing how things were going. So I did. I just started. When I would walk in, people would say, "You don't have a role here; you're not supposed to be here."*

*I would say, "I know that, but I only live five minutes' walk from here. Here's my number. If there's anything that you're worried about, give me a ring." But I'd call*

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*them four or five times during the day, and they were saying, "You don't have access to your office."*

*I said, "I don't want access to anywhere." One of the things I did notice was that I would wander down the corridor and there could have been 15 police officers there—and that would be the old RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary). I take it, it was the old RUC; you need to check up with Seamus. It was the police anyway. They were sitting in our staff room having their cups of tea and their lunch and they were saying to me, "We had to be here at half past five as well, and we will be here until we get the ballot boxes out of here tonight." I just got the sense from talking to them, I started going, "Why would you worry about getting the ballot boxes out of here?"*

*I did get a couple of phone calls during the day when young people, not doing any damage—maybe 10, 11, 12 years old—would come in and climb up on the roofs and be running around the school grounds, trying to get into the polling station, things like that. But once they got up and they saw me, they would speak to me and then walk away or run away. That's the ones that knew me at that time.*

*But then it changed when it came to 8 or 9 o'clock at night. It just became so sinister. It was obvious there was going to be trouble. I remember the first year, I was standing out at the railings along the front of the school—the railings are still there, and I will show you this, Michael. One of the policemen sent the caretaker out to me and he said, "The police are saying, will you come in?"*

*I was going, "Why do they want me in?"*

*He said, "You'll see."*

*I went back in and the police said, "You're not safe to be out there now, because we're going to take the ballot boxes out." My memory is that it was probably about half past 10 or 11 the first time we got out. One of my really vivid memories is that the presiding officer was told—I don't know who he is now, perhaps maybe John Haggerty or Terry McDevitt; they'll tell you if it happened to them—the police officer said to the presiding officer, "Hold my belt."*

*We had to grasp the sergeant or the lead officer's belt and hold onto him and all the shields were up. At this time, the police had all changed into riot gear. The Land Rovers had come in along Central Drive and there were petrol bombs, paint bombs, bottles being thrown. I still remember as they headed out towards the Land Rovers, they had tried to create a little cordon of maybe 20 or 30, 50 yards. But there were bottles and stones and, as I said, paint bombs, petrol bombs coming from the other side, behind a small line of shops. You'll see the geography in a while. It was just crazy. It was absolute bedlam.*

*There was paint on the school grounds, the whole thing was scarred. The school itself wasn't damaged, although there was broken glass on the grounds. I knew straight away that John and myself and the board workers would have to be up at six or seven in the morning just to get the place cleared so that the children could come in. That was my first experience, and it was a horrible experience. I remember saying—and I said this very clearly to people on the ground—I said it to the parents, I said it to Sinn Fein, I said it to local councilors, both Sinn Fein and SDLP (Social Democrat and Labour Party). "This is never going to happen*

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*again, because if this happens you're not using my school. That's the bottom line, you're not using my school."*

*One of the big advantages of using Holy Child Primary School in Creggan in Derry is that it is at the center of a huge voting population. Now, one of the tricks of the trades here in elections is that you may get a rap on your door at half-past nine from Sinn Fein to say, "You haven't voted this year. The polling station closes in half an hour and you haven't voted, so look, we'll drive you." That still happens. They'll still knock on your door and say, "You haven't voted. Are you not going to vote then?"*

*I had the call last year when my son didn't vote. He said, "I'm not voting for anybody; I'm 21 and they don't know what they're doing so I'm not voting for them." But I had been out and voted. But that's what goes on. So I was thinking, if they—and I mean specifically probably Sinn Fein, because they were trying to get up the electoral ladder at the time—if they have to suddenly transport a lot of people out of Creggan to other polling stations, they're going to lose votes.*

*So I think it was councilor Barney O'Hagan—who is friend of mine, a very good friend, and will be playing golf with me next weekend; I was trying to get in contact with him today, somebody is trying to track him down—Sinn Fein would say it was Barney's idea that the police should be taken out, but with the political situation at the time, that wasn't going to happen. So the next step was how, when the next election came around—I don't know if it was the following year or eight months later, because we would have council elections and then Westminster elections, so it depended.*

*So the next move I was trying to work out was who do people fear in Creggan. First of all, people would have feared the paramilitaries; there's no doubt about that. People feared the police as well at the time, but more than anything else the young men on the street feared the women of Creggan because when the women go onto the street they have sharp tongues and they stand up for themselves. So the idea came up then that we would try at the next election to try and get about 30 women down. Again we targeted people out of our own parents, out of our own school and said, "Look, is there any chance you would be willing to come down at half past nine at night?"*

*I don't know if the guys from Sinn Fein were involved at that stage or not; they probably were—I probably talked to them. I'll give an example. I know that Tony O'Doherty, who you'll speak to, was part of that team as well, because someone reported midafternoon that young men were storing petrol bombs and paint bombs in a certain house in central Derry close to the school. As soon as I was given the address, I phoned Tony, and Tony went over and was emptying, destroyed all the petrol bombs and the paint bombs, he and a few of the local men. So it wasn't just the women.*

*But the women were great, because they arrived on the scene about 8 at night. We were hoping to get the boxes out by 10, maybe quarter past 10. The women would go over, wander through the crowds of young people. "We're here, and you're not going to riot here tonight." They would have had good success, but something worked against us that night. This is the thing. The problem was then not a Creggan problem, because although we had huge violence here on election night, the problem was that the police had to go to all the different polling stations and pick up the ballot boxes and return them to the center, where they would be counted and collated.*

*So they were leaving, say, Ballymagroarty; I think it may have been Holy Family Primary School in Ballymagroarty. I'm hoping you'll get a chance to meet Gary Matthewson. And by the time they got away from another polling station to make their way here, they might not have arrived until midnight. Now we had young mothers on the street from half past 8 trying to control young men who were out to riot. These young mothers had young children at home. So when it came to a certain time—for example, half past 10—they had to go.*

*While they were there, everything was calm and quiet. It didn't turn out as bad that night as it could have been. Certainly an improvement on the first night. But certainly if we had had the police at 10 o'clock and taken the ballot boxes immediately, I don't think we would have had a tenth of the trouble because the ladies were on the street at that time and we were coordinated. But it was just the way it tended to happen election after election after election. I kept pleading with people in the electoral office, and I would plead with the police—I went down with I think Father Raymond Graham, and we went and met with the police chief and we said, "Look, we can have the ballot boxes at our school gate and no trouble on the street if you're there 10 past 10."*

*They would say, "Right, we will do our best." At that stage we had, with the help of Tony O'Doherty, Seamus, local activists from Sinn Fein, from the political IRA, from the real IRA—all the groups, all the paramilitaries were involved at this stage. We were creating probably about a 300-yard cordon so that there was nobody inside that cordon at all.*

SCHARFF: Approximately how many election cycles have happened now? Are we three elections in? Are we into the late 1990s now?

O'DONNELL: *You're probably into the very late 1990s now.*

SCHARFF: Just to situate the listeners to where we are in the timeline.

O'DONNELL: *I would say it was around that time. I'm sorry I didn't keep a diary. Again if I talked to Patricia maybe before you go away I might be able to sit down here and may be able to coordinate it a wee bit tighter, or even when you send me your transcript, I could add to it then.*

SCHARFF: Wonderful.

O'DONNELL: *But as I said, we created a cordon. Again, the most frustrating thing for us is that—. I wouldn't say no other community at the time was trying to do anything, but Creggan was really grasping the bull by the horns and saying look, we're going to stop this problem, we don't want this. We had had houses close to the corner of Central Drive, which is just at the corner of the school hit by petrol bombs. The people's garden was destroyed with paint and glass. Again, if young people are gathering and a lot of them drinking from 6, 7, 8 o'clock right through to maybe 3 the next morning, then people's lives are being severely disrupted.*

*And you come up in the morning after the election and Central Drive would be covered with paint, glass and burned-out vehicles. So it was a constant thing. People used to call Central Drive, where the school is situated—and it was very famous then—Gaza Strip because, for example, we used to be involved in Project Children, where children would have gone off to America on holiday. And My VP—unfortunately he has passed away, he would have been one of the*

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*coordinators and he decided that things had settled down so much that we would bring all the children from all over the northwest of Ireland to our school as being the leadoff point and have 15 buses there.*

*Unfortunately, the night before, a young soldier who was later convicted shot somebody, a joy rider, down in Belfast, and when we came up early in the evening there were nine vehicles burning along Central Drive. Now you're talking 400 yards, maybe 600 yards of a road, and we had twenty buses coming in that night. We then had to try and go to all the republican factions and the City Council and literally get guys on the street with guns to ensure that when the buses come in they weren't going to be burned.*

*We got a pathway and the buses came in and the children got away on holiday, but it wasn't the nicest way to send children from Donegal out. To come in, to see cars burned over a street.*

SCHARFF: Welcome to Creggan.

O'DONNELL: *Welcome to Creggan. Then head off. I sort of pictured it as [Indecipherable 00:33:21], but we never came back. We finished that trip and the next time it was taken from a school a long distance away. So we lost out there as well, and tens of people saying 'God we're in this little school'. It was great, but they were brought into a war zone. So, as I say, that sort of thing would have been a regular occurrence.*

SCHARFF: So the question I think that a lot of people would ask is: You become principal of the school, and year after year after year there is this cycle, this pattern of violence. But you had said that initially—that first year when you were principal and there was violence—you said, "Enough is enough; we're not going to have this next year. If there's violence you're not using my polling place." You did go down and you did plead with the electoral office and the police to do something about it.

O'DONNELL: *And the republican movement.*

SCHARFF: What happened? Why did the violence continue? Why didn't you just as principal of the school say, no more?

O'DONNELL: *That's a very good question. I suppose I didn't want to lose it for the school. I thought it would have been a backward step. Saying that we've come so far but we can't control this, therefore we're walking away from it. We're not one to walk away from problems.*

*It was a social problem here. At that time I was very involved in community development too. It was a social problem that needed to be resolved. Whether it was going to have an ear—. You know, St. John's, which is just down below us here. St. John's had a new school built 10 years ago. They spent something like 10 million and we're still sitting in an old school from 1956. Well, theirs was beautiful. Theirs was built more like a chalet building. But even in my time when the wind blew it shook a lot so they needed a new school, but we're hoping with all the development that you see around us that Holy Child will get a new school as well. But St. John's was used for elections as well, and they had quite a significant bit of bother. It was just the police dealt with it. We're here in the center of the estate, and we've always had the dream that Central Drive one day will be able to turn it into a village at the center of a public-housing estate.*

*We are moving. We have a day center developed. We have a new, modern library, which is fantastic. We have this building which has been here now just two or three years. We have a new sports hall which just opened last year, a community sports hall. We spent a lot of money on that and we developed all the ground—we're in the process of developing all the ground for usage outside here. So it is a vision that's never going to stop.*

*So to suddenly turn around and say no, we're going to give up on the elections—it just doesn't fit in with the scheme of things. And needless to say, the more I spoke to people like Barney O'Hagan, who is a Sinn Fein councilor, to Tony O'Doherty, to Seamus, to other people involved in the republican movement and various factions in the republican movement—I taught some of them in primary school. So you get to know these people.*

SCHARFF: So you almost knew, in that second election that was held at your school, it seems you were able to call on a number of different local individuals, Sinn Fein political party members, SDLP, mothers, and a host of other individuals to kind of come out that night and to support you and to sort of damp down violence. That's particularly interesting because again it is a very grassroots.

O'DONNELL: *I think it was too. Again, I'll go back to Tony O'Doherty, Tony and a man called [Indecipherable 00:37:19], that's his nickname, Tierney was his surname. They were the guys, when you found out where petrol bombs were, they would be here all day and they would be touring around the estate. They would have guys who had been republican prisoners, they would have had Sinn Fein activists—the Sinn Fein were magnificent, I have to say that. They would have had people on the street all day and all night.*

*If they heard of petrol bombs being stockpiled, they went and destroyed them. So what was in there, just to buy into the process? So really, when it came to the cordon going up, I would say 99% of it, or 95% of it, was Sinn Fein.*

SCHARFF: So who actually implemented the cordon? It was Sinn Fein do you think?

O'DONNELL: *It would have been. It would have been Sinn Fein—the Sinn Fein/community workers. I mean I don't even know whether Tony would consider himself Sinn Fein or not, but Tony was a community activist. He never has been seen to have any political allegiance to anybody. I mean he wouldn't be turning up at Sinn Fein things or SDLP things.*

SCHARFF: As a community worker, you mean they were paid through the Community Reconstruction—?

O'DONNELL: *Tony wasn't paid, We were blessed with having a huge number of volunteers. In this building here now, you would look and say it cost nearly 2 million to build and I think we have paid staff of five. There are about a hundred volunteers. So a lot of people do a lot of voluntary work and get involved. A lot of our processes here would be to take people with no skills at all and develop them so that they have skills.*

*Many of them then would just stay on and maybe do a lot of private work on Reiki or massage, or physiotherapy if we train them down that line, or run art classes. So they'd get a small amount of money to do different things. So when I talk about the cordon being there, obviously it would be Sinn Fein. You could say*

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*Provisional IRA or whatever way you want to dress it up, but it's all the same. Martin McGinnis would have been a great man I could have called on at any time, and was a tremendous support to me when he was minister of education here. He gave me his mobile number. "If you ever need anything, Charlie, give me a ring and I'll do what I can."*

*But it's great having local politicians, because for far too many years we were ruled from across the water. I'm going to sound like a raving republican, but that's just as a nationalist or somebody who is practical. If you have local politicians that you can lift the phone to and they know where you are and what situation you're in, then you get things done. If it is some guy sitting 2,000 miles away you're not going to get much from him; he doesn't know the situation.*

*So to go back to the cordon. It would be, very specifically, a combination of community workers and political activists; probably that's the best way to put it. Community activists like Seamus Heaney, Tony O'Doherty, [40:17 Indecipherable] Tierney, Kevin Campbell, who you'll meet later on. And then Sinn Fein as well. At the time, I didn't care as long as we got peaceful elections. But we still had the same problem. And Patricia and hopefully the people in the electoral office or the police—I don't know if you're going to meet the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) over this—they will still tell you that the problem wasn't Creggan at that stage, that the problem was getting to Creggan and moving us up the schedule.*

*They knew areas where they were going to be attacked, so they said, "We'll go there first"—instead of coming here and having the biggest public-housing estate in Derry quiet. If they'd come here at 10 past 10, there would have been nothing. They would have been gone and everything else would have been quiet, because the other areas are smaller than Creggan. As I said to you, Creggan is about 11,000 people overlooking the city here.*

*People would say there is a divide in it. There certainly was 20 years ago. I think that divide has lessened quite a lot over the years. We have a lot more new housing up here. And our local housing executive, which would be the owners of public housing, seem to be doing quite a lot of refurbishment, and a lot of people are buying their houses now. I know that our free school meals in Holy Child have dropped from as high as, as I told you, 96%, down to something probably in the mid-70s, which is pretty good now.*

*So there was all of that process going through, and we were still being challenged because the police weren't arriving to pick up the boxes until later on. So we had to try and move it on again. What we had to do then was, everything has a process and a time scale.*

*So we saw the cordon. The cordon worked to some extent. One of the years that the cordon didn't work and I got into a row with hopefully someone that I've arranged for you to meet as well, another Sinn Fein councillor—because Sinn Fein then decided to ask all the young people, who at that time despised the police, not to throw stones, not to throw petrol bombs; therefore they could have a peaceful protest. Father (Stephen) McLaughlin, when you meet him, will tell you probably something similar.*

*I was working very closely with councilor Dodie McGuinness at the time, and we thought we had everything tied down tight. And Tony and all the boys were*

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*there—they were going confiscating petrol bombs. Father Stephen will tell you he was over confiscating and destroying petrol bombs himself.*

SCHARFF: What year again do we think we're in?

O'DONNELL: *We think we're right at the—probably at 2000, around that timeframe.*

SCHARFF: Sure.

O'DONNELL: *We come out and we had actually got the police in a little bit earlier, and we came out, because the cordon was then 300 yards. I could walk out with the police when they were walking out.*

SCHARFF: Three hundred yards meaning that if somebody was going to launch something, it would be very difficult to hit—.

O'DONNELL: *They couldn't reach. They just couldn't have reached, from either side. Three hundred yards is three times the length of a football patch. You're talking how far Tiger Woods hits a golf ball. So you're talking 300 yards. There's no way somebody is going to throw something that far.*

*So it was very well controlled. But when we came out that night, as a sop to the young republicans, there was going to be a silent protest. And I had no problem with a silent process and the young people holding up placards against the police and things like that. But when we came out and we were loading up the ballot boxes and getting the presiding officer into the Land Rovers, the youth made their silent process across the road, so we had no exit.*

SCHARFF: Did they actually break the barrier?

O'DONNELL: *It wasn't a barrier in the sense that we build something; it was just people saying you don't go past that line.*

SCHARFF: So these were—?

O'DONNELL: *People just standing there, people like you and I—community works and Sinn Fein saying, "You don't go past here." That was respected, because at that stage young people were afraid of republicans.*

SCHARFF: Pretty much if these were elder republicans who were seen to have some authority.

O'DONNELL: *So they wouldn't have crossed. But unfortunately, the young men stood just in a line across the road blocking an exit at the route that the police had said they were going to take the ballot boxes out. My memory is, I spoke to the inspector in charge on site and he said, "We have to go out that way because we don't know what's out the other way." Things weren't that calm at that time. "If we don't go out the route we have chosen and we turn and go back that way there could be a bomb waiting on us."*

SCHARFF: They hadn't swept the road.

O'DONNELL: *They hadn't checked it even. They always planned to go this way. So it was just decided, they drive out even though these young people are standing across the road. It was just agreed that they'd drive at half a mile an hour so that they're*

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*absolutely just crawling and pushing against—the Land Rovers actually pushed, very, very gently against the placards. No one could have been hurt. Absolutely, it was impossible for anyone to get hurt unless they lay down on the ground in front.*

*As the Land Rovers went through, there was anger. Anger from senior republicans as well as young people because they said, “We’re having a peaceful protest and you’re physically breaking through it.”*

O’DONNELL: *So there were paint bombs. I don’t think there were any petrol bombs that night. There were paint bombs, because Dodie McGuinness and I would still have a large [Indecipherable 00:47:06]. She was so confident—and first of all, Dodie McGuinness is one of the most genuine people I have ever met in my life, a fantastic councilor. Her car was parked inside the cordon, and some fellow threw a paint bomb and it splashed the side of her car.*

*She and I had a great relationship. I taught her two boys, Kiernan and William. But I rubbed my hand along her car when the police had gone and it was green paint. And I said, “Is that poetic justice?” There wasn’t a lot of paint on it, but I’m telling you that as a bit of Derry humor. Certain Sinn Fein people were really very critical of me and a couple were shouting at me and things like that, but Dodie McGuinness took it that it was all that could be done. She saw all the reasoning I think behind—like she didn’t agree with them pushing through that way but at least—she saw my position as saying “OK, right, Charlie, that’s all you could do.”*

*Again, I wasn’t in control of it anyway. If I’d turned around to the police and I said I want you to go out that way, they would have probably said to me, “No, sir, we’re not going out that way.” So you’re constantly negotiating between sides. I think that’s what my role was at the time, communicating to community workers what we were hoping to do.*

*At those times, I would be at the school quite a lot of the day. I might arrive at the school at 8 o’clock at night and would go and visit Tony and some of the other guys and say well what’s happening? Can we check behind the local shops? Are there stockpiles of missiles there? Again, these guys were all brilliant at all this. They would check. They would do whatever you asked. What you did, you said to them, this is what time we’re hoping to get out. Then they would go off and do the work.*

*I remember one night standing, before the cordon went up and the shops had all closed because they were afraid of trouble. This white van came and parked almost opposite the school, just overlooking it with two shady characters in it, and I didn’t know them. I think I know everybody or most people.*

*They sat for a very long time just looking at the school. I have to say I was afraid that there could have been a bomb or something, or guns, in it. But after a while they moved off. I’m fairly sure it was something, but they moved off and I was mightily relieved. We went through that whole phase. I think that was the last year that we had any trouble, because when it came around again, we were really pushing the Creggan model. Why are you bringing the police in? The police don’t want to be here. I mean I’ve talked to so many police officers who said, “We don’t want to be sitting in Holy Child Primary School, or any other primary school for that matter, all day and then coming out and getting pelted. We don’t want to be there; we have to be there because we have to protect the ballot boxes.”*

*So we went down to have very intense time of negotiations between the police, the electoral office, Sinn Fein, SDLP, everybody. We had meetings; I'm sure Patricia talked about this. We had a meeting where we actually gathered all the principals of the schools in and around the city and started to look at how they or their communities could protect the ballot boxes going out and cut down on trouble. I know that Garry Matthewson and his chair were very active in it. I'm not sure about St. Eithne's Primary School, if they were [Indecipherable]. I have a feeling those two schools both were used, and they would have been part of our problem because they were where the police were held up in coming here.*

SCHARFF: I believe there were approximately six schools that were considered to be the hot spots if you will: Holy Family, St. Eithne's, Holy Child Primary School, St. Bridget's School, St. Theresa's Primary School, and St. Joseph's Youth Club.

O'DONNELL: *St. Joseph's Youth Club, that would have been in Rosemount. The guy you're going to meet tomorrow, Terry McDermott, would have been presiding officer both at Holy Child and St. Joseph's Youth Club. So he'll be able to really fill you in on the troubles that they had there. But this whole process started then and people really were talking about what we can do. I don't know how it came about—eventually, just people saw sense and they said, right, OK, we're not going to police them; we're not coming. We'll patrol the areas and we'll keep an eye out, but we'll not come anywhere near—we'll not be standing at the doorway.*

*It used to be when you walked in to vote Michael there were two police officers standing there. Immediately—if you're a republican and you're walking in the door—you're seeing two symbols of a British state that you didn't agree with. So there was conflict straight away.*

*I still remember it. I wrote a little article for the paper when I retired and I talked about total exhilaration I felt the first night when we brought the ballot boxes out—I think it was John Haggerty, who you'll meet as well this week; my caretaker, who has passed away now; Father Sean McKennon; myself—and there were a group of about 300 people standing at the school gate as we carried the ballot boxes out at about five past 10 at night. Not at midnight and not at one in the morning. We put them into the back of not even a security van, just an ordinary delivery van. The presiding officer got in beside him and they drove off. As we were carrying the ballot boxes out, somebody started to clap; somebody started to applaud, and then everybody was applauding. It was just an extraordinary, extraordinary sensation. There were no petrol bombs, there were no paint bombs, there were no stones, there was no wrecking. There was no disruption to the community at all. I think nearly everybody went off to the local pub.*

*We didn't quite get off to the local pub, because we were looking at Holy Child Primary School, and when we were leaving—when we got the ballot boxes away and we were leaving—we saw that there was a suite of furniture, believe it or not, a sofa and two big armchairs being burned besides St. John's School, which was also an electoral polling station. We didn't have any jurisdiction for that, because it is on the periphery of the estate. But it is not one that had got a lot of difficulty.*

*So there were four of us in the car, and we decided, all right, we'd go down there and see what's happening and we can phone Tony and the boys. As we were arriving, the fire service were arriving and we stopped them. We went down and a group of young boys there—I'd say anything from 14 to 17—had stones and*

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*bottles as usual. The fire service said, "Just look where those sofa and chairs are, it will burn out in half an hour and it's not a danger to anybody." So we agreed with them that they should leave it.*

SCHARFF: Because the fire officials are like the PSNI (*Police Service of Northern Ireland*), seen as—?

O'DONNELL: *No, they weren't. The fire officials here would be a completely ordinary fire service; they're not politically attached to anybody. But unfortunately, they're still seen as an authority group—same as, at that time, an ambulance couldn't have come in here to carry somebody out, because an ambulance was seen as an authority figure. Now that's not from anybody with any intelligence, but young people see something coming in—.*

*So the fire service drove off and left the thing burning, and we went down into the St. John's School, the four of us, and we just asked the presiding officer to hurry up. It was very frustrating, because he didn't. But we waited until we got the ballot boxes out there as well. Then we went to the pub for a few pints.*

SCHARFF: For a job well done.

O'DONNELL: *It was one of the most exhilarating things I will ever, ever remember. The following election, which was maybe in the mid 2000s, before I retired—because I retired 2008, 2007—so this election runs 2005 or so.*

SCHARFF: I think 2005 was the first year when the police were no longer there.

O'DONNELL: *So that's the one I just talked about. So this is the following one. Again, we got people together. We said, "We're not going to have any police on scene at all." Actually, this time I drove up in my car. I opened the hood of my car and at 10 o'clock or five past 10, all the polling boxes, the ballot boxes, and all the remnants from the election were put in the back of my car, and myself and the presiding officer drove to the returns, which is about three miles away. And nobody said anything at all. People were just standing about; there was nothing.*

*It seemed to have spread. In different places, there would have been an odd stone thrown, but nothing had I just gone.*

SCHARFF: You must have been a bit nervous. I know there was hesitation at least on the part of the electoral office. They were strongly opposed to the idea of removing the police, for fear of the safety of their own poll workers.

O'DONNELL: Yes.

SCHARFF: Take me back to this election, the first election after 2005. What are you thinking might happen—that night? What's the worst case scenario running through your mind, now that the police are no longer there? Or was it a foregone conclusion—we know there's going to be peace tonight?

O'DONNELL: *No it wasn't—I was very, very apprehensive. I was apprehensive because this was a historical thing. And even within the electoral process here and even within the state, there are people who don't agree with the electoral process, people who think that Sinn Fein have gone down the wrong road, have capitulated to the British state. My big concern was not for the safety of any of the workers,*

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*because that wouldn't have been obvious to anybody—it wouldn't have been useful for anyone who wanted to disrupt the election.*

*My fear was that if the van went down Central Drive with two people in it, certain people could hijack the van and destroy the polling cards. That was my thing, and that was my fear—we wouldn't get the ballot boxes out safely. I think we'd been reassured by talking to everybody—I mean the Tonys and the Barney O'Hagans, the Kevin Campbells, the Seamus Heaneys, talking to all these local guys, who were very well connected.*

*I knew when we took out the ballot boxes—and certainly, I don't know what you could compare it to. Maybe you could compare it to knocking down the Berlin Wall or something. To me, we had something symbolic to knock down, and when we carried those ballot boxes out, you felt as though you were walking on the moon. You really felt that something was being achieved.*

*Here was a reign of terror. Maybe it had only been one or two nights a year, but some way there was a sense of normality that this was what elections were all about. As I say, the first time, I was just very apprehensive that the ballot boxes wouldn't get out safely. On the second occasion, I didn't have that fear, because another one of the factions had actually put up a candidate to be elected. So suddenly, from my perspective, there was no threat. If you had the two big factions putting people up, they wanted to see what their vote would be so they weren't going to hijack and destroy the ballot boxes.*

SCHARFF: And they were certainly going to have their people out that night.

O'DONNELL: *They had their people out. When I would call the school during the day, you would have had Sinn Fein represented; you would have had the other republican parties who had their candidates standing. They would all be there handing out their political leaflets as you went in the door. I would have talked to them all and they all knew me, and as a nonpolitical person, that has always been my strength, that I'm not lined up to anybody.*

*As a principal, if someone came into me—for example, many was the time when a mother came into me who was struggling with different things. When you would get talking on how you could support her, you'd find out that her husband was a republican prisoner. That didn't matter to me, whether he was a republican prisoner or an alcoholic or whatever. So politics never mattered to me.*

*That's what good community work is all about: people who are not particularly connected to one faction or another, but people who have very good connections to each group, and someone the groups would know well. "Charlie is not going to stab us in the back. He's not going to betray us. If this is what he says he is going to do, or this is what the community workers say they're going to do, then that's what they'll do."*

*Now, as I say, things do go wrong. The peaceful protest with the Sinn Fein youth went wrong, and it was something I regret. But looking back, I'm not sure that I could have done anything about it. Things happen. But gladly, no one was hurt that night. It has been a long journey, but I have to say it has been won, though. When there is an election, I know that I've retired from the school but I will still go and vote. I vote in St. John's and on election night I would come up and around.*

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*The last election was not that long ago, because we have a new government in Britain. I was up and it was just complete normality here. The ballot boxes were gone early, and there was nobody hanging about at all.*

SCHARFF: Back in 2003 and 2004, which were the two elections before the police were removed in 2005, would you attend specific meetings with the police or with the electoral office that were sort of set meetings, a week, two weeks, a month before? Can you give us a sense of exactly how these meetings were scheduled and what they looked like?

And part two of that question: were you also coordinating with other principals, with other senior presiding officers?

O'DONNELL: *No. I would say in the elections when the police were still there, I was talking only to Creggan and only about Creggan and only to the people in Creggan, because there was no point in us trying to solve a problem in an area that we didn't know the logistics of. I'm sure the guys in Sinn Fein or the community workers would know who the key players were in those areas, but I didn't know them.*

*From my point of view, this was a local issue—just the same as not having a playground for the children. It was a local issue that we felt that we had to solve. In terms of meeting with police, I've sort of said to you already that the very first meeting was with Father Raymond Graham, and he and I went down to meet—I think the Chief Inspector at the time was Peter Sheridan. I was trying to remember his name today, and I couldn't but I think it was Peter Sheridan.*

*I met him in the barracks in Strand Road. We chatted to him about what our hopes were and what we were trying to do. Then after that—I don't want to get myself shot here, but certainly when it came up to election time, my telephone mobile number would be given to the police officer in charge of the school or two police officers in charge of the school and the electoral office, and maybe the chief down at Strand Road.*

*When I'd be out and about during the day, I might phone them and say everything is calm at the minute. Or I was going through the presiding officer and let him know how things were happening as well. I really don't want this to sound like it's a Charlie O'Donnell Show, because it's not. It's not about me, it's about everybody being involved. But sometimes when you're telling your own story, it comes across as "me." But it was really the group doing all this. I just was the link person at that stage.*

SCHARFF: So a meeting is fascinating. That meeting that you would have had down at the police barracks on Strand Road—do you believe that's a meeting the officer there would have had with you, and then he would meet with the other officials from the other five or so hot spots?

O'DONNELL: *Honestly I don't think he met anybody else in those days.*

SCHARFF: You had requested that meeting or he requested to meet with you?

O'DONNELL: *We had requested a meeting with the police at that stage.*

SCHARFF: So it was your initiative to have that meeting, to reach out to the police.

O'DONNELL: *Again, I come back to this Creggan thing. Some people didn't want to talk to the police at that stage and it was Father Graham, our local priest, who said, "We'll go and talk to them." He was on the Board of Governors of the school as well. "We'll go and see what can possibly be done." So it was just a meeting like that. We went down and sat for half an hour and talked about what the issues were for us. We left it with them. It was like planting the seed and saying, "Come on, you nourish the seed as well as we're trying to nourish it within Creggan. You nourish it there and see what you can be creative about."*

*The electoral office—Dennis Stanley would have been the boss man at that time—again was very apprehensive about not having the police there.*

SCHARFF: Was his assistant June Butler?

O'DONNELL: *I think—I don't remember her.*

SCHARFF: She was the assistant chief electoral officer.

O'DONNELL: *Dennis Stanley and I met on a huge number of occasions. We'd be talking about what could possibly be done. Certainly the meetings down at City Council with all the schools and community groups represented were very, very useful. There must be minutes of them somewhere, I don't know where.*

SCHARFF: Yes, sorry if I keep coming back to this but it there just seemed to be a ton of different meetings and negotiations and talks that were going on. So just for the listener, there are the meetings that are taking place—this meeting, for instance, with the police at Strand Road.

O'DONNELL: Yes.

SCHARFF: Then the Derry City Council has a role here.

O'DONNELL: *Right.*

SCHARFF: Are you attending the meetings?

O'DONNELL: *I would say the initial meetings with Father Graham were when we were trying to set up a cordon. I think they weren't anything to do with getting the police off. At that time we were talking about the logistics of Creggan and Holy Child. So those meetings at the very early stages were really between ourselves, community workers and the police and the electoral office. Nobody else from any other area at the time would have been involved at that stage. In fact, I would say the only time that everybody became involved was for that 2005 election, where they said we're going to go with this, let's see.*

*That's where it took off and that's where they got the big group around.*

SCHARFF: Did you receive—I know this is going into the technical; I apologize.

O'DONNELL: *I'm just trying to remember; you're OK.*

SCHARFF: I'm asking you to remember too many things too far back. But January 2005 rolls around and there's thinking on the part of the police who are spearheading this effort that maybe this year we're going to try and pull ourselves back. This is the year we're going to try.

O'DONNELL: *Take a chance.*

SCHARFF: Take a chance. So how do they go about that, how do they sell that? Do they meet with the electoral officers, the electoral office and just the police? Does the Derry City Council get involved? Do they then send you a memo and say come to our meeting?

O'DONNELL: *I'm sure that I wasn't at every meeting. I would say that. I'm sure that the police sat down with the electoral office on probably a huge number of occasions and took intelligence from where we were and where the other schools were. Looked at the flashpoints, looked at the problems. I mean I wouldn't have attended that many meetings with them.*

*I know that Patricia would have held meetings with presiding officers and done certain training. I'm sure she would have talked to them about how there's not going to be any police and here are the arrangement for that. But literally, I would have been to maybe, over the years, no more than four or five meetings—really, as few as that. But I would have had a lot of communication with people in the police when it came near the time—the sharing of telephone numbers, and the same with sharing telephone numbers with community workers so that I would be able to phone and say, "Tony, what's it looking like up at upper Central Drive and down at lower Central Drive? It's fairly quiet here."*

*So there would be a lot of communication at that stage. Maybe the year the police stopped there may have been at two or three meetings but that would have been the absolute limit of it. Really, I'm sure. Other than that I don't remember. I remember two, maybe three meetings down at the City Council, where the conference room was pretty packed and everybody got their say.*

*But as I say, I haven't contacted people because I wasn't sure who you were going to contact but I got contact numbers out for some of the other people involved.*

SCHARFF: Thank you.

O'DONNELL: *I'm not sure where I go from there.*

SCHARFF: Why do you think 2005 was the year that this happened? What was going on here in Derry that would have given way to this moment, this change?

O'DONNELL: *I would say, from a nonpolitical point of view, that's politics. Sinn Fein were certainly experiencing success in office. The dissidents were looking to the republican model of going into government, and they were actually at that stage really considering it as an alternative as well to the violence. Probably we were just ready. The peace process was getting well bedded in and people were starting to have confidence.*

*I know it drives ordinary people mad when you see our politicians bickering and fighting and services being withdrawn because they're not communicating or getting on. That is something I'm sure whole world agrees with. We see money being wasted and we think—for example, the riots in North Belfast. They cost nearly a million pounds to fund. It's crazy. That could put so many nurses in our hospitals. It could put so many teachers. It could put people in jobs we could*

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*create, and yet we're wasting money on violence like that. So I think a lot of the community had turned against all sorts of violence at that stage.*

*We were ready for it, and I think the political parties were certainly ready for it. That's why we had the success—everybody was saying, "Let's see if we can achieve our goal." The goal for a lot of people would be, "Let's see if we're moving towards it." And I think we are moving towards it. Unfortunately, some people don't agree with me at the moment, and that's the dissidents who are causing so much friction, a very, very small group, with no support.*

SCHARFF: It's interesting that you say in 2005 Sinn Fein was really seeing their support grow. So they had a vested interest in not having violence at the polls to detract from their share.

O'DONNELL: *Absolutely.*

SCHARFF: Could they almost turn on or turn off the violence like a spigot of water?

O'DONNELL: *Probably. I'm smiling as I say that, but certainly they grew out of the republican movement. They grew out of an organization that went to war with Britain. In 1968 was the first civil rights march; I was 15. And 1969 was the battle of Bogside, when I was 16 and away playing chess in Wales and came back to a city completely destroyed. There were people in my class at school shot dead, who after Bloody Sunday had joined the IRA and gone out. And literally the day of Bloody Sunday I know for a fact, and everybody knows, that there were recruiting stations opened up for the republican movement on that night, because of the atrocity of Bloody Sunday.*

*Bloody Sunday caused thousands of deaths. It caused years of trouble because at the time there was just too much dishonesty about it. If the British government had had any sense at the time and just come out and said, "Look, our guys made a mistake, overreacted," then I think you would have saved probably thousands of lives and Ireland would be in a better place now, even with the 13, 14 deaths that day.*

*So it's crazy; it has cost a lot of lives.*

SCHARFF: So even in 2005. Let's say, for instance, the police were not removed—the police were still there at the polling station; they had a role in removing the ballot boxes. If Sinn Fein had wanted, could they have prevented any violence from occurring? Or was it really the removal of the police? Or was it a combination of both, the political will was there?

O'DONNELL: *Well, the political will was there. But also I think that if the police had still been there in 2005, we would have had trouble and it wouldn't have been Sinn Fein oriented. Sinn Fein at that stage were a political party and were experiencing huge success. But there are a lot of dissident republican groups who coordinate the violence in Derry and in Belfast now. You know we've had bombs recently. These people have absolutely no support. Yet they coordinate violence; they coordinate the riots in Ardoyne. Unfortunately, young people aren't afraid of Sinn Fein or—. The provisional IRA has gone away, but they're not afraid anymore, and that's an issue that we as a community now are looking to ourselves.*

SCHARFF: That's interesting, because even on election day now you can still have Sinn Fein guys who are out there on the streets but as they get older, and the youth are getting older, it seems that they are losing some of their relevance as well.

O'DONNELL: Yes.

SCHARFF: As you're saying right now the youth are not as scared. They're not as easily able to say "Shoo, go away, go home." The youth stand up and say, "Who are you to tell me, old man?"

O'DONNELL: *They're not afraid. Even the younger members of Sinn Fein—the younger people are not afraid of anybody. I would honestly say that. I had a long conversation yesterday about teenage drinking. I was at a meeting last night with the police and local communities around the town, and they're saying it's not a Derry problem, it's not a Creggan problem—it's a problem across certainly Britain. I don't know about America, but it is a crazy problem.*

*Our park is opening now hopefully within the next month. We spent a huge amount of money there, it's beautiful.*

SCHARFF: It is.

O'DONNELL: *We're already talking about—there are maybe 40 houses overlook the park, and every one of those houses will be given three or four telephone numbers so the first time they see young people going in to drink or going in to destroy, they will phone one of the community groups and we will move people inside. If we have to go sit in the park all night, we will. We will literally go and sit in the park ourselves, sit on the swings. We did it at our local church at a time when the church was being abused at night with young underage drinkers. We used to go. Everybody took a couple of hours. A few friends will do 9 to 11 on a Friday night. Somebody came and took over from 11 to 12, and somebody from 12 to 2. We'll do that.*

SCHARFF: It's a magnificent facility. There's a football field here, there's a playground, there's another field we see bulldozers working on.

O'DONNELL: *And we're putting in a running track and basketball court and things like that now. When this school goes—St. Mary's is going to be knocked down now.*

SCHARFF: It's one of its own in Derry.

O'DONNELL: *Absolutely. But when it comes to protecting what we've got, if it means men—and young men, 18, 19, 20, sitting there and protecting what we've got until we get the time right—we'll do it. But it is a process that just keeps going on and on and on. Whether it's elections or play parks or underage drinking. As a community we're strong and we try to deal with it.*

SCHARFF: I hesitate to take too much more of your time. Can I just ask in conclusion your hope in the next decade or so, particularly around elections. Are things going to continue to be peaceful? Should we expect perhaps a return to violence? What's the prognosis and what still needs to be done?

O'DONNELL: *I don't think we'll ever see the police back in the polling stations. I think it has been proved that that doesn't help, that that doesn't work. My hope is, for example, the building we're sitting in. My grandson who is 2-1/2 years of age*

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*comes here three days a week to play group for two hours a day. I bring him myself. I'm hoping next year that he will go into Holy Child Primary School and to the nursery. I'm hoping that he'll progress in to year one there and stay through until he's 11 or 12 years of age. I'm hoping that Center of Creggan, that we do achieve our dream of creating some sort of village so that we can lift the esteem of the people on the estate.*

*In terms of where Northern Ireland or Ireland is going at the minute, I think I thought about 20 years ago that we would have a united Ireland in 10 years. I'm not sure when it will happen. I'm sure if you asked all the Catholics in Creggan how many of them want a united Ireland today, you would have a huge percentage that would say no as well. So it's hard to know.*

*I think Sinn Fein have done tremendous work. They've come a long way. SDLP have always been a solid contributor, John Hume taught me, and I know a lot of the guys that work for SDLP as well. They're all very good people working towards the community, but it's a worry for the whole planet: When you have small groups of people who want to disrupt and destroy. And they're here. Everybody knows who they are. I would say everybody knows who they are, but you can't convict people on no evidence and we certainly don't want to go back to internment again without trial which was here a long time ago.*

*I mean I would be very hopeful for my grandson and my children, that we'll see the country continue to grow and move forward. I don't mind if I don't see a united Ireland in my time; I can be patient.*

SCHARFF: Thank you.