

Excerpt from a conversation between **Nancy Falvey** and **Bernice Jones**, Ballyphehane/Togher Art+Craft Initiative and artist **Marie Brett**

*[Discussion about the women's Amulet project experience including the layettes made by group members for families with deceased babies at Cork University Maternity Hospital]*

---

MB

*I realise it's very private and intimate the work you're doing with the layettes, and I realise it's not just the two of you, its broader with other people from within your group, and that it goes beyond CUH as well, but I'm keen to get your thoughts about your work and what you're doing and it being involved in an artwork in some way ...*

NF + BJ

My own impressions of that first meeting<sup>1</sup> was that her (*Neonatal staff member*) work was so very important and she was being taken from that work, and yet there was an opportunity to voice a need that she was very much aware of and that she was trying to do something about it on her own and the minute she said 'can you do something for the very little babies that don't make it' it was like there is a purpose straight away and without questioning it, in my own head, even if I had to make them myself, I just connected with it. I don't think that you have to be through a loss to connect with it, you just have to have a certain awareness of what happens, some people have that kind of awareness without suffering the loss of a baby. But having a loss some place else in your life you have the experience, like an empathy and that connects ....

And I thought 'yes, we could do that' But if she (*staff member*) hadn't voiced it that day, we wouldn't have known that there was such a need .....

And that need has gone on to lots of different hospitals. The sets have gone to Holler Street, The Rotunda and they'll be going to Kerry General Midwifery soon. So there is a national need, they just never, you know, asked. The staff have said you have no concept of the difference it makes to people.

You can talk about it more maybe when its an adult (*who has died*) because you're saying 'I'll get our her best clothes now' and its something people seems able to talk about, but this seems to be an area – when it's a new baby coming in to the world its highly sensitive.

But the thing that is coming back is that it's a need – it's the same thing – when laying out a loved one you'd be saying 'what do you think of that and what do you think of this?' (*different items of clothing to dress person in for the last time*) and you want the best and really what Lucille (*staff member*) was saying and asking for that day was that she too wanted to best for her little babies.

From my own experience, when my Father died, my Mother said 'I can't bear the idea of having to dress him, will you pick out his clothes' but it is almost like a privilege to be given that job because you are dressing them for the last time so you try to put on the best or the things that were their most favourite or their most loved – its out of respect – it's a way of showing love to them as well. And it's so hard for people to comprehend it but isn't it amazing to think that you can be talking to someone and they might say '(...) died but she was made up in the most beautiful clothes and you'd say: she looked really beautiful, she was her real self' It's very important, its crucial, the last robe – and in some ways, with the little babies, they're so early that there is nothing there to dress them in and make them pretty, warm and beautiful and that's where the layettes come into their own really...

But perhaps you might tip toe around, when it's around a baby, it's very quiet, let them sleep, it's a quietness, but people don't know how to deal with it either though, particularly about babies though because they are normally met with such joy.

So what the layettes do at the end of the day is that it humanises the baby, and it's their memory and image. With the layettes, the parents then go away with such a beautiful image – their beautiful baby so beautifully dressed and there is great healing in that. That image stays with them. They kind of fill them out and makes them cosy and what do you want for a baby, you want them to be cosy and of course you can't buy things that small enough.

Remember when Audrey (*hospital liaison/project co-ordinator*) said .. At the time parents can't deal with it, (*the death of their baby*) and often there are three sets of parents, there are the parents of the child that was lost and there maybe both of their parents too, especially if it's a young couple. Perhaps it's a year later that they are ready to think about what happened and perhaps it's at that stage that the image of the baby is so very important. Because it's such a terrible thing – you want it to be over quickly – where as it is an actual fact that the more you can be strong to take your time over it, the better it is for your healing.

But that's the things isn't it – loss is part of life. Where there is life there is loss. There's a commonality of experience between life and loss. And there are so many different types of loss. But if you are in this position and you have lost a baby you think that you are the only person in the world that this has happened to. And again, with every loss you feel like you are the only person who is going through it...

But it is a privilege to make those little layettes, because those little babies they are on a journey, they are going back to where they came from and it is a privilege to have any hand in doing any of that and I think any of us who had a hand in the making of them would be aware of that. That it's part of our culture, it's part of our belief that this is only one part of our journey when you die the other part starts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Meeting with CUMH A/Director, Neonatal & Bereavement & Loss staff