

Remembering those who died from heroin addiction



Memorial

Exhibition of contending entries for the Memorial project is open to the public at the Fire Station Artists' Studio, Dublin, Ireland, until Aug 20, 1999.

At the beginning of July, a panel of 12 people selected a sculpture by artist Leo Higgins as the winner of a competition for a public memorial to those in their Dublin neighbourhood who have died because of drug addiction.

Invited artists had been asked to submit models and designs for a permanent symbol of remembrance for those who have died or suffered from heroin use. The criteria for their projects included acknowledging the grief of the community, being a part of the healing process, making a symbol of hope for the future, and providing a warning for future generations. Money was provided by the Arts Council and Dublin Corporation, but the sculpture is owned by the people in the community.

The dozen people on the judging panel have lost 13 relatives because of heroin use—one has buried four of her children. Some died of an overdose, some died from AIDS, and some committed suicide.

The north inner-city neighbourhood where the winning design *Home* will stand has seen hundreds die because of heroin. Indeed, the site where the 12-foot high sculpture will stand is on a traffic island where, in the past, most of the drug deals were done. Reclaiming that site is important sym-

bolically for the community, says Mick Rafferty, chairman of the Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign, who points out that for the past 4 years, the



Home by Leo Higgins

community has erected a Christmas tree on the traffic island with stars to represent each person who has died.

Home is a gilded bronze flame made of highly polished bronze and housed in a frame made from Irish limestone. The flame will stand in the inner part of the frame in a space that is exactly the size of an ordinary hall door. Leo Higgins describes his work as evoking "memories of home where those who are gone are never forgotten and always remembered proudly, in a quiet and dignified way".

He chose the theme of the flame as "a symbol of hope and light for the future and for those who remain". He says that when he casts the flame he will revert to a traditional custom associated with the casting of church bells in which the bishop threw some coins into the bronze. Relatives will be asked to provide some mementoes, so that the "flame will be inclusive of those being remembered".

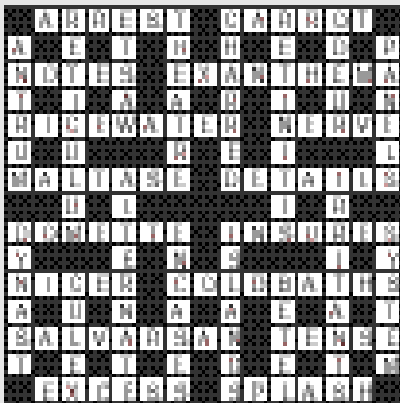
The artists in the exhibition were invited to work closely with relatives and with community workers to develop designs that expressed the spirit of the working-class community. For many months, the artists listened to relatives to try to understand the complexity of the problem, and to understand how best to use their talent to express "both the unspeakable tragedy of the heroin scourge, and to find a message of hope".

Until the mid-1990s there was a public misconception that heroin was a problem of the poorer classes; families with drug addicts felt abandoned, marginalised, and stigmatised. Speaking with the families, the artists found they continued to feel the stigma of drug misuse, and for this reason the families did not want individual names on the memorial.

Rafferty says that the community's involvement in the memorial project has been positive, acknowledging each person's right to have and to express their grief. He believes that in the future the memorial will speak in stronger terms, as people realise that they do have the right to say, "We did not deserve this. We did not deserve to be abandoned when our children were dying".

Karen Birchard
karenbirchard@tinet.ie

Solution to June Crossword



The winner of the Dissecting Room crossword competition (Sketches from *The Lancet*, June 1999, p 2169) is Dr John Anthony Wilson, from Worsley, near Manchester, UK. Dr Wilson retired from work as a consultant physician 17 years ago. He saw active service in the Far East during World War II, and has held a personal subscription to *The Lancet* since 1945.