

Project will preserve



Many of the 'firsts' of LGBT activism took place in Cork, writes **ELLIE O'BYRNE**, who talks to the author of a new book and archive

"IT WAS the first time that two men or two women had been able to dance with each other in a public space, and it blew people's minds."

Cork LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) activist Orla Egan is remembering an evening in Connolly Hall at the first National Gay Conference, which took place in Cork in 1981.

Many of the 'firsts' of Irish LGBT activism happened in Cork: the National Gay Conference, the first Irish AIDS leaflet in 1985, the first Irish Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1991, and the first Irish LGBT float in a Patrick's Day Parade in 1992. Yet these are often unacknowledged, according to Orla, who is the author of a new book, *Queer Republic Of Cork*.

She believes that in the aftermath of the same-sex marriage referendum, Cork's history as an important hub of LGBT activism is in danger of being overlooked in favour of an emerging narrative that focuses on Dublin as the centre of the movement that brought marriage equality to Ireland.

For Orla, remembering the history of Cork's gay and lesbian community is about honouring the people who fought hard for their rights in an era where homosexual acts were still a crime.

"There's this concept that the very recent activity of a number of individuals that were in the media a lot is what got us marriage equality, and I think that that's obscuring the fact that what happened in 2015 didn't happen in a vacuum," Orla says.

"It happened because of decades and decades of people being brave and people demanding respect and equality; of being people not being willing to be second class citizens."

Orla has spent the past few years assembling an archive of pamphlets, letters, posters, photos, badges and stories of Cork's LGBT community. The project began with the discovery that Arthur Leahy, one of the founders of The Quay Co-op Health Food Shop and an early campaigner for gay rights in Cork, had been hoarding memorabilia from events and activities in his basement for years. But the boxes of artefacts, a treasure trove of insight into the founding of Cork's various LGBT clubs, telephone helplines and events, were damp and in danger of being lost.

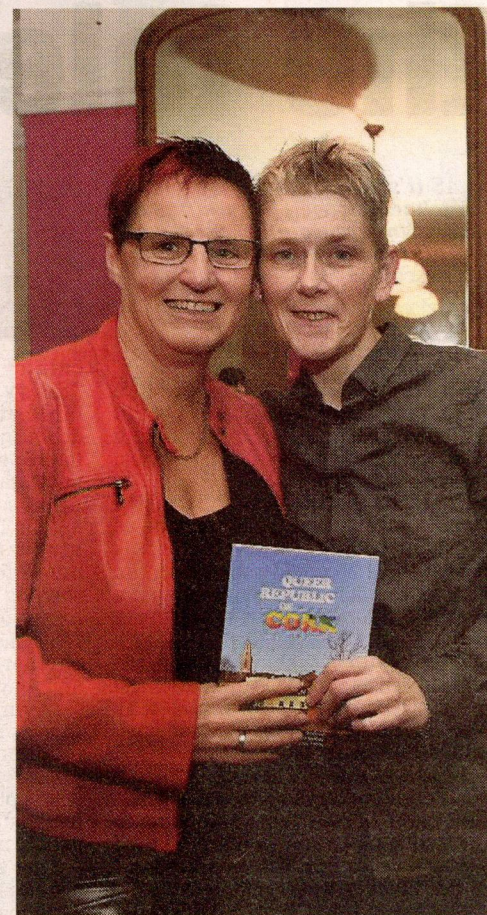
Orla embarked on an unfunded voluntary project, returning to college for an MA in Digital Humanities to better understand how to preserve what she describes as a "hidden history," which now exists as an online archive as well as a physical collection that she's hoping to find a home for.

The archive, and now Orla's book, give a fascinating glimpse into life spanning a period of great change in Irish society for LGBT people, from the 1970s to the 1990s, ranging from early attempts to carve out social spaces where gay and lesbian people could feel acceptance to the founding of telephone helplines, women's groups, health information at the height of the AIDs outbreak in the 1980s, and sporting and social gatherings.

The marginalisation is particularly clear when Orla's book describes how the *Evening Echo* was unable to print adverts for the first telephone counselling service in Cork, the Cork Lesbian Line, which began in 1985, stating that the adverts would be deemed illegal.

One particular stand-out story from the 1970s is that of The Butterfly Club: a gay activist who was a member of Cork Lepidopterists Society made use of the club's meeting rooms at the back of St Francis' Church in the city centre to host gay-friendly Sunday afternoon wine and cheese socials, until it was shut down.

"People don't know about this," says Orla. "If you read mainstream history books about



LAUNCH NIGHT: Orla Egan with her partner Carol O'Keeffe, an independent film-maker, at the launch of Orla's book, in Quay Co-Op, Sullivan's Quay, Cork.

socio-economic change in Ireland, or the history of Cork, you don't read anything about the LGBT history.

"I've always been aware of the fact that there's such a rich history of community activism and development in the LGBT community in Cork, and I've been part of that since the 1980s."

A grant from the Heritage Council to buy special acid-free boxes to store the fragile documents in was an important recognition for the project, Orla says: "It was hugely important, practically and financially, but also symbolically; it was a recognition from the Heritage Council that LGBT history is an important and valid part of Irish Heritage."

Arthur Leahy's collection, which had been housed in the basement of his home in the Magazine Road area, formed the backbone of the archive, but many other people contributed and Orla says she's always keen for further submissions to the archive, especially from bisexual and transsexual people, who she says often remained marginalised even within the gay and lesbian community in the early days.

Arthur Leahy and his then partner, Laurie Shaw, made waves when they appeared in an interview on RTE's *Week In* programme in 1981, where they talked openly about the challenges they faced as a gay couple.

They were filmed out and about on the streets of Cork and sitting in their home discussing their relationship. At the time, it was a landmark moment, and one Orla regards as a brave decision, although Arthur himself remembers the day spent with an RTE film crew very differently.

"I don't even think that brave is the right word," says Arthur, now aged 71. "Particularly when you're young, you just do these things. I



RECORDING HISTORY: Orla Egan, who launched her book *Queer Republic Of Cork*, at Lansdowne, which over looks the Northside of Cork City. Pictures: Domnick Walsh

rich history of Cork's LGBT community



FLYING THE FLAG: Author of the new book, *Queer Republic Of Cork*, Orla Egan, pictured with her son Jacob. The book takes readers on a journey through the development of Cork's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities during the 1970's to 1990's. Orla has been actively involved in the Cork LGBT community since the 1980s. Picture: Domnick Walsh

remember filming it; it took a whole day and was incredibly mundane. We had to make tea about seven times.

"The brave people were probably my family, and specifically my mother. When you're involved in something that directly affects your life it's very different from being on the sidelines looking on, so for them it was quite a big thing. They had all the usual anxieties and fears that people had: 'what will the neighbours say? You'll get beaten up, you'll never get a job'."

Arthur had left Cork for London at 17, where he found a sense of community that was absent in his teenage years in the late 1950s, a very isolating time for young Irish gay people in an era when the topic was still taboo.

"There was no sense of being gay," he says. "You couldn't look anywhere, you couldn't say, 'that's what I think I am'."

I used to look through the Sunday Times book section for references, which did turn me into a reader at least."

Always politically active, Arthur became involved with the Labour party in the UK and also in gay rights movements. Returning to live in Cork with Laurie, the Australian partner he met in London, in his early 30s, Arthur became a founding member of The Quay Co-op, which, while not specifically an LGBT organisation, always provided support, employment and information for LGBT people.

"I used to hoard things from the Quay Co-op," Arthur said of the vast archive he amassed over the decades. "I'd have a box and I'd just throw stuff into it. Things we generally feel that we should put into archives are generally

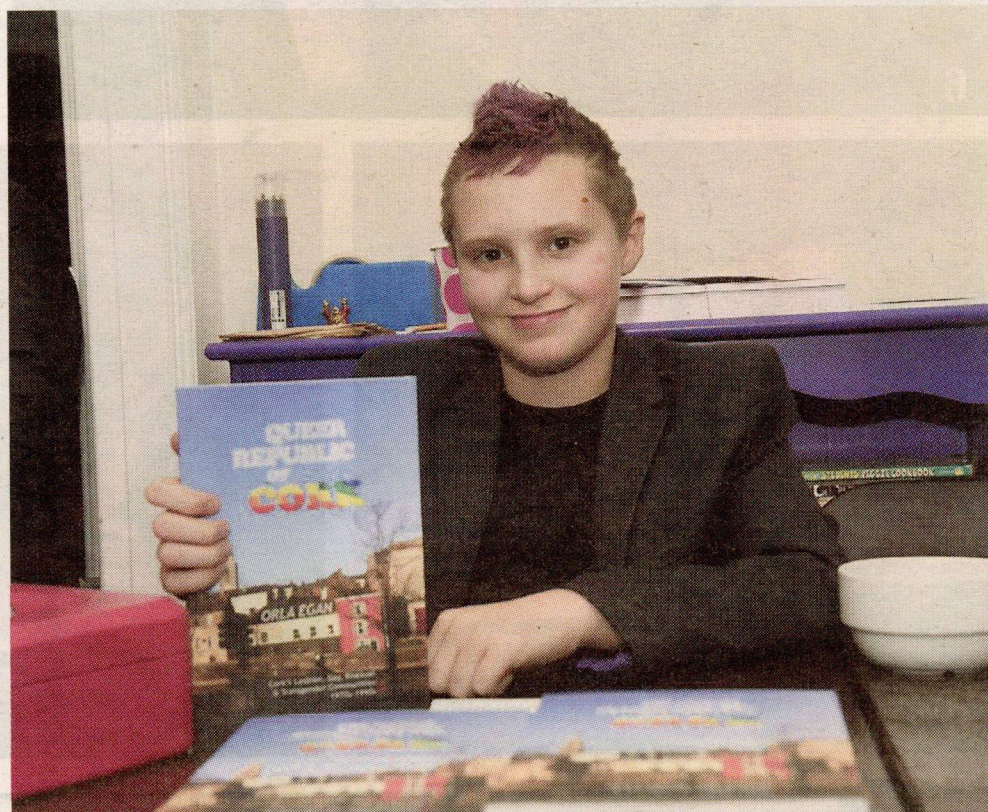
“If you read mainstream history books about socio-economic change in Ireland or the history of Cork, you don't read anything about the LGBT history.

quite boring. It's funny how the most interesting stuff isn't the stuff that seems most interesting at the time. It's the little notes and things, some of the quirky stuff, that shows you much more about the reality of life."

Sadly, Arthur and Laurie's relationship didn't stand the test of time and Laurie now lives in Australia.

"We were together about 20 years," Arthur says. "Things moved on and it wasn't a traumatic break-up; people grow differently. I think he got fed up with my politics," he smiles.

■ *Queer Republic of Cork: Cork's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities, 1970s-1990s* is published by Onstream Publishing and is available to purchase from www.onstream.ie. The digital archive is visible on www.corklgbt-archive.com and Orla Egan welcomes new submissions to the collection.



PROUD SON: Jacob Egan Morley at the launch of his mum's book, *Queer Republic Of Cork*.