

Address* in *Áras an Uachtaráin* on 26/03/2019 marking Spirasi's 20th Anniversary Rory Halpin

President Higgins, Thank you for your kind and inspiring words. On behalf of Spirasi, a sincere thanks to you and Sabina for inviting us to *Áras an Uachtaráin* – your home – to celebrate our twentieth anniversary. I hesitate in saying ‘celebrate’ as we are also marking twenty years of the need for an organisation that works with asylum-seekers and refugees who have suffered torture – unimaginable, deliberate and intentional pain inflicted by human beings on each other, and sanctioned by the state; torture continues to be widely used, often with impunity, even by countries from which we would expect a much higher standard of behaviour. But I will stick with the word ‘celebrate’ as we acknowledge that, despite the most horrendous wounds inflicted by torture that affect every dimension of the person, rehabilitation (a word that we use a lot in Spirasi) and healing of the whole person – physical, psychological, social and spiritual – do happen. And that is so worth celebrating.

I also want to thank you, President Higgins, for again recognising Spirasi. I say ‘recognising’ because whether we are physicians, administrators, teachers, psychosocial officers or therapists, we want to recognise and see clients for who they really are, to see beyond the labels of asylum-seeker, refugee, or torture victim to the real person with a unique story. That recognition is ultimately empowering, enabling the tortured person to move beyond that self-identification with torture to realise that s/he is a human being of infinite worth and value, with – if allowed and encouraged – so much to contribute.

And so, President Higgins, as the person you are – with the role that you have, and the legal and moral authority that you possess – when you say or do something, it really matters. Welcoming this particularly vulnerable group of people into your home, recognising them and recognising Spirasi's work sends out a powerful message that Ireland can truly be a place of welcome, of sanctuary, of hope and of healing for the stranger and for those most hurt by our world. Your recognition of us and of our work encourages us, giving us a little more self-belief, confidence in our message and a greater willingness to raise our voices on behalf of those with no voice – until they can do it for themselves.

To finish, a word of thanks to Spirasi's staff, volunteers and interns, current and past, who have shown extraordinary dedication over the last twenty years. I include those volunteers on the board with the often thankless task of steering the organisation on its truest course. Thanks also to the Spiritans for listening to the signs of the times in the late 1990s, responding with generosity and foresight to found Spirasi, and continuing to provide much-needed support today. To our funders, thank you for your continued support. I hope that you can see at least some of the fruits of your funding here today.

Finally, to our clients, many of whom are in the room, you are the reason that we are here today. Thank you for your courage, your trust in us, your willingness to engage in the often long and difficult healing process, and your inspiration to us in our own struggles to keep going especially when things are at their toughest. Dare I say it, thank you for the challenge that you are to us all to be better - as people, community and nation.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh go léir!