

# CORK WOMAN CAMPAIGNS TO 'ASIST' EMS PERSONNEL

On 6 July 2012 Elber Twomey's life changed forever; she lost her family when a suicidal driver crashed into her car while holidaying in England. Now three years later the Cork woman is using her tragic experience to campaign for improved suicide awareness training for firefighters and ambulance personnel. Report by Michael McHale.

**E**lber Twomey's family was wiped away three years ago by a sudden tragic incident when a suicidal driver crashed into their while on holiday in the south west of England.

Her 16-month-old son Oisín died instantly while her husband Con passed away from his injuries 10 months later. Five-and-a-half months pregnant at the time of the crash, Elber recovered but sadly her unborn daughter Elber-Marie did not survive.

Elber is now using her tragic experience to highlight the need for improved training for emergency services personnel here in Ireland, in dealing with suicidal drivers.

An Garda Síochána has implemented Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) since September 2014 for its latest graduates, and she is now looking for similar measures to be introduced for firefighters and ambulance personnel.

Her campaigning work in this area began after Con's death on 3 May 2013, when the Cork woman started to look at the circumstances surrounding that fatal crash. "I never looked at what had actually happened, my life was otherwise occupied," she told 'Emergency Services Ireland', describing the time after the crash she spent looking after her injured husband in hospital.

## PREVENTING TRAGEDY

Oisín's inquest in November and December 2013 led Elber to inquire



In happier times – Elber and her husband Con with their son Oisín on his first birthday. (Pic courtesy of Elber Twomey).

further as to how the crash could have happened, and what measures were in place to prevent a similar tragedy occurring in the future. It was then that a clear picture emerged of what happened leading up to the crash, and what could have been done to stop such a tragedy.

Polish taxi driver Marek Wojciechowski had written a suicide note just hours before he drove his car onto the wrong side of the road and crashed into Elber's family car. When Marek's widow

alerted local police to the note, a young officer was discharged to find Marek in the hope of preventing any loss of life.

However, Elber believes that the nature of the police officer's pursuit contributed to the fatal crash which took place. With lights flashing, and sirens blaring on the police car, she believes such actions frightened Marek and led to his erratic driving behaviour which caused the crash.

"On the day that he crashed into us,

Marek drove down that road – Hamelin Way, about a mile and a half long between two roundabouts – 12 times before doing anything wrong,” Elber said.

“The only difference was that on the 13th time he had a police officer behind him with sirens blaring and lights flashing. And as soon as that happened immediately he went to brake, swerved across the road and crashed into us. I honestly believe he was on the edge of the cliff, possibly didn’t know what he was going to do, and panicked.”

### LEARNING TO FORGIVE

With the help of a local priest Elber learned to forgive Marek, but found herself shifting the blame to the police officer at the scene when she learned more about the crash. However, this changed when she met the young officer at Oisín’s inquest.

“It wasn’t until I saw him that I thought ‘Oh my God, he’s only a young lad’. And he got no help or support from Control Room or anything on the day. He got no training to fall back on.

“He was completely left up to his own gut instinct. So, for that reason I started looking into what kind of training goes on here, and that led me down the road of being involved with Templemore [Garda College].”

Elber’s work with An Garda Síochána has involved discussions with the Garda driver trainers in Templemore, where she told them her story in order to hammer her message home. “I was trying to get through to them that, God forbid, they get that call. They should use the principle of least intrusion – you would never turn on a siren, that you would never have blaring lights. Follow from a distance.”

### FIRST RESPONDERS

Now with the recruits stationed throughout the country and equipped with the principles of ASIST, Elber is turning her attention to the first responders in the fire and ambulance services who are often the first to the scene of a incident where someone has indicated an intention to take their own life.

It wasn’t only until Elber met one of these first responders at a recent conference that she realised the gap in training that exists for them in this area.

“Suicide awareness training needs to be extended out from guards to every first responder because, the way that I would



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look at it is, if you have a firefighter or an ambulance paramedic who has maybe a sick child at home, might have had an argument with his wife in the morning, might have a lot going on in his head, and he’s faced with this, he needs to have something to draw upon, as opposed to just his own gut instinct.”

Ros MacCobb, Vice President of the Irish Fire and Emergency Services Association (IFESA), agrees that more could be done to train fire and ambulance staff in this area.

“Any training that can be given to first responders would be most welcome, especially in suicide awareness. We believe that it’s something that is vitally needed, and that it should have been provided years ago,” he told ‘Emergency Services Ireland’.

### ONGOING TRAINING

“It would have been provided an initial stages of training for certain people depending on where they entered into the service, but there’s always a need continuing and ongoing training in relation to suicide awareness in terms of different approaches and tasks and how to deal with them.

“You can have circumstances with a fire officer or a paramedic, where you would get to the scene first, and you’d be

### TWOMEY FAMILY’S WEEKEND FUNDRAISER FOR CHARITIES

*The Twomey Family ‘Remorial’ Weekend has raised in the region of €90,000 over the last two years for charities such as Pieta House, Suicide Aware (Cork), Inspire Ireland, 3TS Dublin and Brú Coloumbanus – the accommodation for relatives of seriously ill patients in Cork hospitals.*

*This year’s ‘Remorial Weekend’ on 6-7 June was again an action-packed weekend of sport and fun in honour of Connie, Oisín and baby Elber-Marie Twomey.*

*\*For further details on this campaign [www.twomeyfamilyremorial.com](http://www.twomeyfamilyremorial.com)*

waiting for a guard, especially if you know that the individual is still armed or could have a knife.

“Then you can have a very difficult position even when the guards and the paramedics are there, and the fire service, and they’re trying to convince the person that the best place for them would be hospital to seek help.

“It’s a fine balancing act – you have to take each incident as you find it. They’re very unique. But any training would be welcome by the people out there.”