



"We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." - T.S. Eliot

www.thephilomenaproject.org

THE PHILOMENA PROJECT

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Dear Congressman Fitzpatrick,

In 1952, Irish-born Philomena Lee gave birth to her son Anthony at the State-funded Sean Ross Abbey mother-baby home in Roscrea, Co. Tipperary. Sean Ross was one of three mother-baby homes run by the Sacred Heart Sisters in Ireland, responsible for more than 25,000 adoptions in and from Ireland. Despite the state's funding of the home, for three years, Philomena nurtured and loved her son while working off 'her keep' in the home's laundry, until her son was cruelly taken from her and trafficked for adoption to the US. Anthony was one of more than 2,000 such 'Banished Babies' sent to the US, including **nearly 100 Pennsylvania citizens** (c.f. *Banished Babies*, Mike Milotte, 1997). I am one of those as well, adopted from Ireland to Philadelphia in 1961.

For many years, Philomena tried in vain to contact her son, or at least determine if he was happy and well and gave the Sisters her contact information. Each time, she was rebuffed. Likewise, her son Anthony (now named Michael), tried to find his mother, despite being told by his adoptive parents that his mother had 'abandoned' him. Michael had gone on to a brilliant career in Washington, serving as the chief counsel for the Republican National Committee under both Presidents Reagan and Bush. Twice, he visited the convent in Roscrea and was turned away. His last visit occurred in 1995, as he was dying of AIDS. He asked the Sisters if they would not help him find his mother, would they at least allow him to be buried there in the graveyard at Sean Ross? They finally relented, but only if he would consent to make a very sizeable donation, which he and his surviving partner did. He was laid to rest there in 1996.

Even after Anthony's death, the nuns continued to refuse to divulge information to Philomena – in fact, they didn't even tell her he was buried on their property. It was not until 2003, when Philomena shared her story with her daughter Jane Libberton (and she in turn reached out to our organisation), that we discovered photos of Anthony's gravestone and the truth behind the lies.

Philomena and Anthony's incredible story has become the basis for the Oscar-nominated film *Philomena*, starring Dame Judi Dench and Steve Coogan. But more importantly, it spurred Philomena herself to become a passionate advocate (at 80 years of age) for the rights of all adopted people, and particularly those of us trafficked to the US. In January 2014, Philomena and Jane partnered with our organisation, **Adoption Rights Alliance**, to start **The Philomena Project**. The ultimate goal of The Philomena Project is to change current Irish legislation to restore the right of adult adopted people in and from Ireland to their original birth certificate and documents, including those now US citizens, and the reunification of and justice for families that were separated by forced or illegal adoption.

I had the honour of visiting Capitol Hill with Philomena and Jane, and meeting with key representatives including Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), and Irish Ambassador Anne Anderson on the issue of adoption rights. The feedback and ongoing support we received from those senate offices and the Irish Embassy has been phenomenal.

On behalf of Philomena, Jane, myself and those 100 Irish-born Pennsylvania citizens, we now urge you to reconsider your support of the Children in Families First (CHIFF) Act. This act serves as nothing more than

a means to fast-track intercountry adoption, and does not serve the best interests of mothers, fathers and their children. Creating a family through alternative means when one finds oneself biologically incapable of doing so is not a Constitutional right. It is a privilege. And trying to create one by any means necessary, including by flaunting the basic human rights of natural parents and their children, makes for a playing field and supply/demand scenario ripe for fraud.

Ironically, the Bill is sponsored by Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA), whose own husband was trafficked from Ireland in 1949 – before a legal Adoption Act was even on the books. His export from Ireland and adoption was and is illegal. She and the CHIFF committee make the odious argument that there are ‘more than enough [children] to go around,’ as if children were somehow party favours. Supporters of this Bill recently hosted a conference to which not **one** intercountry adopted adult was invited. When questioned about the lack of representation of those with lived experience on the topic by groups of Korean, Irish, German, Vietnamese and other internationally-adopted adults, CHIFF committee members told us the conference was geared toward the ‘legal aspects of the Bill.’ So there are no intercountry-adopted lawyers out there? Ms. Landrieu’s own husband is a well-known Louisiana attorney. But perhaps he remains ignorant of his own trafficked status, unaware that perhaps somewhere in Ireland there was or is a mother who lives devastated and grieved that her child was taken from her simply because of the social mores of the day.

We know that the best outcome for most children is to be raised within their natural families, within their own country and culture. Money and power should never be used as tools to subjugate women in other countries and strip them of their children. Implying that privileged white adopters can better raise a child is the worst sort of racism and classism, and does not represent choice or empowerment for women in underdeveloped nations or without resources to parent. And making it easier for that power imbalance to continue is certainly not the answer. It is exactly that imbalance of power, along with societal and religious shame and stigma, which stripped Philomena and my late mother of their children. Adoption is no guarantee of a better life – only a different one. And tens of thousands of us who have lived the experience can attest to that, if we could be heard. But we are the “stories” CHIFF does not want you to hear.

We believe you wish to leave a better legacy than that, and we believe you’ll do the right thing. Reconsider your support of CHIFF. This legislation does not represent the best interests of children.

Respectfully,

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The Philomena Project

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