

Sally Shovelin Campaigner who championed human rights, the poor, the homeless and migrants

Sally Shovelin, who was a tireless campaigner for the homeless and underprivileged, has died at the age of 65. She also worked hard to promote women's rights, justice and equality in Northern Ireland, the rights of immigrants and refugees and other issues.

She was born into a farming family at Rathmullan, Co Donegal, on August 25, 1957. Her parents Manuel and Sara (née Kelly) moved with their children to a Land Commission farm 40km away at Brockagh, near St Johnston, a year later.

She attended St Attracta's National School at Trentamucklagh, just outside St Johnston. She moved on to second level, initially at the Loreto Convent in Letterkenny and later at the Royal and Prior Comprehensive School in Raphoe, before returning to the Loreto Convent where she did the Leaving Cert.

In 1975, Shovelin went to University College Dublin, where she was awarded a degree in social science in 1978.

She went on to work in the Dublin County Council library system from 1979 to 1988. Between 1988 to 1991, she was seconded to work full-time for the Local Government and Public Services Union, now part of the Fórsa union.

From 1991 to 2013, she was a community welfare officer in the homeless persons unit of the Eastern Health Board, which merged into the HSE. For nine years from 2013 she was a community development officer with the Department of Social Protection, retiring due to illness last year.

Shovelin met her future husband, John Gallagher, at a concert in the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, on March 18, 1990, and they wed on September 10, 2001.

Initially diagnosed with cancer 13 years ago, she made a recovery but suffered a more severe version over the past 18 months and died on August 4.

Speaking at her requiem mass in the Church of the Holy Name in Ranelagh, Dublin, where music was played by organist Frank O'Donnell and flute-player Fintan Vallely, Fr Paul Taylor expressed the hope that mourners could draw inspiration from Sally Shovelin's life.

He quoted the poet Iris Hesselde: "Some people give us strength and hope to make a bright new start/And walking through our lives, they leave their footprints in our heart."



● Sally Shovelin also supported hunger strikers at Long Kesh

In a warm tribute at the end of mass, human rights activist and former RTÉ producer Betty Purcell recalled first meeting Shovelin in 1975 at the Women's Group and the Socialist Society in UCD.

"We campaigned hard on a lot of things, for women's rights and contraception; against repressive legislation — always something she felt strongly about; fighting student

fee increases, because that would impact on working-class students getting into UCD; and supporting striking UCD workers in the canteen in their effort for better pay."

Although generally a quiet person, when it came to political campaigning Shovelin was vocal and assertive. She campaigned hard for the 1981 republican hunger-strikers in Long Kesh and against strip-searching of women prisoners in Armagh Jail.

Shovelin was opposed on human rights grounds to the treatment of migrants under the State's direct provision system and she supported women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights "before they became a popular issue".

"She worked ceaselessly for the homeless, believing they should be entitled to adequate public services, delivered by public servants," Purcell said.

In another tribute at the church, trade unionist and former teacher Helen Mahony said: "Recently, Sally received an outstanding lifetime award from her union, Fórsa, which is a very great honour and one which she deeply valued because it came from her work-mates and from her union colleagues.

"She was a socialist and a feminist and a campaigner all her life and time and time again she stood for workers' rights, for a decent public service and for public housing to be provided by the state. She stood for refugees' rights: full rights and full welcome.

"She was brave and fearless. She brought great joy to her friends, to her beloved friend and husband John and to all her family. She loved with all her heart."

Sally Shovelin, who was involved with the People's Democracy group, part of the socialist Fourth International, died in the presence of her loving family.

She is survived by her devoted husband John, sisters Nora and Mary, brother John, extended family and friends. A video of her funeral service is available at www.churchservices.tv/beechwood.
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