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Preserving the Promenade, a Tidy Towns Tutorial with Donna Cooney

Spring would still happen in Dublin 3 without the help of local Counsellor Donna Cooney, but it would be a decidedly less splendid one. The flowers planted by her Tidy Towns unit proudly bask in the sunlight on one of the first true days of spring, their technicoloured heads cheerfully adorning the Clontarf promenade. Cigarette butts, plastic bags and crisp wrappers are now uncommon on the seaside walkway, dutifully snatched by Donna and her assiduous team of volunteers and placed inside their blue bin bags whenever possible.

I sat down with the council member after an hour of volunteering with the Tidy Towns group she leads. If it wasn't such a beautiful day, the last sixty minutes could be considered taxing work. I became all too acquainted with the drinking habits of my local community, to the extent that my reeking bag tore from the stress of carrying the collection of beer cans I found stashed in a lane less than a hundred meters from the picturesque promenade.

I'm assured by Donna, over the cup of hot chocolate she graciously bought me, that this Saturday's haul was not a reflection of the amount of litter we'd usually pick up, as we were cleaning a day after the St Patrick's Day bank holiday. Overall, Donna is proud to see a general reduction in waste since she started the community's Tidy Towns group over lockdown.

"We used to have to change our bags after walking maybe 50 to 100 meters because you couldn't carry your bag with the weight of it. It's nothing like that now, sometimes we just have a little bit (of waste) at the end of a bag. Generally, I think there has been a reduction and I think it (Tidy Towns) has had the effect of reducing waste." she beams.

Donna Cooney has played a role in gradually transforming attitudes towards littering, both in her advocacy within the Irish political scene as a member of the Green party, and on a local level in her work with Tidy Towns. As a constituent of Clontarf, I have seen our grassy seafront or "horizontal park" a term Donna used to describe it, actively improve from a dumping ground for boxes of fish and chips, to a community area that residents now treasure.

People actively change their behaviour because of Tidy Towns, she tells me. "I've actually physically seen people look at us (the Tidy Towns group) and make sure that they're hanging on to their litter, making sure it doesn't blow out of their hands in the wind!" Donna laughs while telling me this. Engaging with the community is clearly a role the councilwoman relishes. Over the time I spent with the volunteers, I witnessed several constituents exchanging respective "hellos!" with Donna as they pass by. Our interview was even interrupted by a man stopping to compliment her hat, a blue cap decorated with a yellow flower, a nod to the colours of the Ukrainian flag.

This sense of wider community belonging is a feature of Tidy Towns Donna finds rewarding. She tells me that "it's about making friendships, it's about different generations and different ages. There're not many things that are so intergenerational that have people interested in their local community and their local environment. That knowledge exchange that you get from talking to different people from different ages with different experiences, it's all very positive."

A view held by a portion of society is that tidying up the area should be the task of Dublin City Council alone and that by paying taxes all social responsibilities are fulfilled. Donna Cooney looks to

challenge that perspective. Being a local councillor, she sees the budget and knows that despite litter and waste management being the biggest expense, the council is unable to clean the entirety of Dublin City. "We can't keep putting all our resources into that (litter and waste management) because that leaves less money for other things.... they (constituents) might want the lamppost painted or the pavements fixed." Donna feels to ease the burden on the council, citizens should actively play a role in litter reduction within the community.

With summer just around the corner, people will flock to outdoor areas such as the Clontarf promenade in increased numbers. Enjoying a meal or a drink in the sunshine is an essential and positive way to spend time with friends and family but an overall increase in foot traffic in natural areas will inevitably lead to more litter. After my conversation with Donna, I would ask everyone to consider getting involved with your local Tidy Towns to preserve the beauty of your area for everyone to enjoy.