**Press Pass Awards 2015**

**Features Category**

**First Place**

**Staff Suffer Behind Closed Doors at Clerys**

**By Karen Stapleton, Coláiste na Sceilge, Caherciveen**

Clerys was the heart of Dublin on O'Connell St. for 160 years. It was seen as a special place for all staff members where they all saw each other as family. On Friday 12th June 2015 the staff of Clerys were told that the building had closed and would not be reopening. 460 people lost their job there. Left devastated, staff members didn't know what to do as most of them have spent nearly all of their lives working there. I interviewed former worker and close family friend John Crowe for more information.

John spent over 43 years at Clerys working as a porter. He had a difficult childhood. He was in an orphanage in Kilkenny from the age of 3 months to 10 years, reared by the nuns. At the age of 10 years old he took the train to Artane where he spent 5 years. John says "I've been to four institutions, Kilkenny, Artane, Clonmel and Clerys, and Clerys was the best of them all."

On his first day working in Clerys a woman, Mrs. McGowan said to him "You have a job for life in Clerys, theres only two ways you'll lose your job, if you're caught stealing or if you're late." And he expresses that they're two things he has never done!

A man named Denis Guiney bought the store out of receivership in 1941 at the cost of £250,000. His widow Mary Guiney ran the store after Denis' death. John's first job for the first two and a half years was being a pageboy for Mrs. Guiney. " If I went into a butcher shop, Mrs. Guiney never got her meats or anything from the front windows, it was always brought up by a butcher and freshly cut. I must admit myself, I Iived in a flat in Parnell Square, I often used Mrs. Guineys name for myself too and I got the best of treatment because I got the same treatment as Mrs. Guiney got and paid the same price!"

Mrs. Guiney served on the Clerys board until she died in 2004 at the age of 103. The workers were very worried about the future of Clerys when she passed away but they were soon relieved as Mrs. Guiney left the business in trust for the staff to keep on working there. The new management looked to expand and borrowed heavily to buy a joining property at Celtic Tiger prices. €20,000,000 was paid for the Tumbledown building in the back lane. Workers were very worried about this and before long Clerys was struggling with property debt and declining sales. It was then put into receivership in 2012. What looked like the redemption of Clerys, came the shape of a U.S. private equity firm Gordan Brothers, headquartered in Boston. They brought in a new management team headed by Dominic Prendergast.

One friday in June last year word began to spread on the shop floor that the business had been sold again. In the afternoon, the workers were told to have their cash done immediately, to bring it downstairs to the safe and to be at the bottom of the red staircase by 6 o' clock. They all knew something was going to happen but not to the extent that it did. The screaming and shouting was uncontrolable as the workers were told they no longer had a job at Clerys retail store. They were then followed by security guards when they went to collect their belongings in case they took something that didn't belong to them.

John had taken that day off for family reasons and this is what he had to say about the cruel actions that took place:" In one sense I'm glad I wasn't there because I was round up in institutions that I think I wouldn't have left the building. I think, in my imagination I would have went on to the roof and tied myself down. I think if I was there on that day I would have exploded." He also expressed " I was never sick all my life at Clerys, I've been the best of health up until then so I was very, very down about it. I wasn't getting out of bed, I wasn't eating, I didn't even know what day it was."

The night before Clerys closed a group of people assembled and they conducted a transaction that eventually led to the staff losing their jobs the next day. New owners of Clerys have not even spoken to the staff about the actions that took place against them. They have only made one statement in which they promise to provide 1700 jobs in it's new incarnation over the coming years.

I admire John Crowe for the strength he had throughout his life and the passion he had for his job. He was a very dedicated worker and always had a smile on his face on his way to and from work. We all know that nothing lasts forever, however, if the building were to close, it should have closed on the respect and dignity for the people who worked there. After 160 years, the Clerys department store has closed, never to be the same again but for Clerys workers it still exists in their friendships and memories.

**Judging Panel Citation**

*What’s the difference between a news piece and a features article? A news piece reports a situation that happens. An election for example, the release of interesting research or the closure of a business.*

*A feature tells the story behind that news piece, the human impact that goes beyond the facts and figures. The winner of our features category grasped this concept perfectly when she wrote about John Crowe, one of the 460 workers who lost their job in Clerys, the store that was a job for life.*

*She goes beyond John being a number and outlines the heartbreaking affect that this closure had on his livelihood, his life. In his 43 years in Clerys, John was never sick but when it came to the day when staff found out the store was to close, he wasn’t working. She quotes John saying, “I think I wouldn't have left the building. I think, in my imagination I would have went on to the roof and tied myself down. I think if I was there on that day I would have exploded." Powerful words, a powerful piece*