Conor O’Leary Purple House – goes Nationwide

Purple House is a community-based, cancer-support services organisation based predominantly in Wicklow and South Dublin. It supports cancer patients and their families. The best way to consider the service is that a patient goes to the hospital for their medical treatment needs but then the patient comes to Purple House for everything else: all their emotional supports, transport needs, therapies, family supports, and mental health supports too. Purple House also helps with many practical needs associated with looking after patients while complimenting the medical treatments.

Services are presented in a holistic fashion, everything from therapies to transport issues, all the things not at first associated with living with cancer. Issues can range from how can they pay the mortgage, how will they tell the children that they have cancer and their appearance may change as a result, to how can they go to hospital appointments if they don’t have a car as public transport may not be an option.

“We also have a range of services for cancer survivors. There are more people now living with cancer in Ireland today than ever before – more than 200,000 survivors in fact. We help these people move beyond cancer and go back to their work and some sense of normality.”

These services are for everyone, for all ages from three-year olds up to people in the nineties. Another important consideration is that it is not just the patient that needs support, but the families do too.

Purple House has worked from several physical centres in Wicklow but when COVID19 arrived this changed overnight and not necessarily in a bad way.

“COVID19 has allowed us to go nationwide. We had to stop people from physically coming into our centres and we had to adapt and move our services to an online setting. For example, our counselling service went from face-to-face counselling in a room to telephone or video counselling. The first impact was no matter where you live in the country you can avail of our services.”

By moving online, the cost of providing the service dropped as well. With some of the original classes, such as a relaxation class, there was a physical limitation on how many people could fit into a room. However, by using Zoom, those numbers could go as far as 200 attendees and already the Zoom classes on Facebook are in the hundreds.

Conor feels there is a huge opportunity with COVID19 to reach more people, including perhaps family members who may be based around the country away from the original Wicklow patient.

“Technology is making the world smaller, allowing people to connect from the comfort of their own home, and also from their hospital bed. Often cancer patients can be in hospital for a very long time and we can offer them online help.”

Conor points to a children’s art therapy class which takes place very Wednesday. With COVID19, Purple House posts out the therapy art kits to their homes – so they have the delight of getting their very own post – which they then use as part of the online art class, making things like dream catchers.

“I am very proud of all our staff: we managed to get 90% of our services online practically overnight so we did not let anyone down.”

Other practical services such as food hampers are provided through the national food charity Food Cloud. These food services are even more important for cancer patients who cannot safely go grocery shopping. The food comes into Purple House on a Thursday and teams of volunteers pack up the hampers and deliver them to the families.

“It’s not just fear of contracting the virus but also the unemployment means people often don’t have enough money. These hampers are more important than ever.”

Challenges facing elderly clients means some people cannot access video, and in these cases Purple House ups the ante to make sure that contact via telephone is still maintained. On the flip side, children are ahead of the curve, often amazing therapists with their digital knowledge. On one case, children started using the chat function on Zoom while the teacher was not aware of this function.

“That was a learning curve,” says Conor laughing.

The choir is a very important part of the services offered by Purple House. It is now on Zoom and may be for some time to come. Two metres is the social distancing required for ordinary situations but with choirs – which expel lots of air – the recommendation is six metres. That rule would make it difficult to run a choir at such a distance.

“Zoom choirs, classes, these are all very important to provide routine and structure to our clients and we are very grateful it is available. We never would have gone online except for COVID19 and so there is a silver lining to this terrible virus.

“So, wherever you live in Ireland you can access our services. Reach out to us and we gladly support you.”

Purplehouse.ie