

How community spirit helped the McNallys



Stephen McNally (9) from Little May Street, Upper Markets, Belfast with his pets — Lassie and Ricky. An abandoned car is Stephen's playground.

WHEN tragedy struck the McNally family from the Lower Markets area of Belfast three years ago, they thought their world had come apart — but more was to come.

Fire destroyed their terraced house in Murphy Street and their two young children, Georgina (1½) and Patrick (2½), died in the flames.

Their elder brother Stephen was six at the time and although the tragic loss of baby Georgina and Patrick broke the McNally's hearts, they thanked God that Stephen had been spared. They didn't know then that he was to suffer as well.

The McNallys moved out of their gutted home to another house just around the corner in Verner Street. It was cold, damp and miserable, but it was home, a place where they could pick up the threads of their shattered lives, and they were among friends.

The community spirit in the Markets is not unique. Other working-class areas have it too — places like Sandy Row and the Shankill Road — "self-sufficient and caring" was how one resi-

dent described it. It was this spirit of good neighbourliness which was to help the McNallys through their next crisis just 12 short months after the fire.

Without warning young Stephen became very ill. His father, George, was out of work, he still had not recovered from the shock of losing little Georgina and Patrick, and he worried about the back rent owed on the Murphy Street house. In Verner Street the family were squatters, but it was no place for a sick boy.

They moved out and stopped with a sister-in-law in Little May Street, Upper Markets, until the house next door became vacant. They moved in and have squatted there ever since.

Stephen was given only months to live. That was two years ago — now he runs, plays and goes to school like any other nine-year-old and no one would guess from looking at him that he remains ill.

The change in Stephen which confounded the doctors is due, says his father, firstly to the new house and secondly to the menagerie of pets he has collected since he moved. At one time he had two pet goats called Billy and Whango, a tortoise, two dogs and a cat. But it was the billy goats that put him on the road to recovery, claims his dad.

The goats lived on a patch of waste ground behind an advertising hoarding in May

Street. They chewed up everything in sight, including a hedge and what grass there was — and ate their way into Stephen's affections.

Then one died and the other had to be taken to the country because it gnawed Mrs. McNally's clothes line down and helped itself to the baby's nappies. But Stephen still has his two dogs, the cat and the tortoise and spends mos. of his day romping in the street or playing in the back of his other love, an abandoned car outside his door.

Stephen attends hospital regularly and takes two tablets a day — and a massive 13 at one go on a Saturday. He knows he is ill, but he is full of pluck and the pets are just the therapy he needs at the moment, his father reckons.

Footnote: When the Housing Executive heard of the McNally's predicament they contacted the family immediately and informed them that they could be reinstated on the housing list and also be entitled to a "disturbance allowance" which would cover the back rent owed on the Murphy Street house.

The first 30 tenants of the re-development area behind the markets move in at the end of the month. Work on re-development area 18 (Upper and Lower Markets) vested by the Department of Environment continues.

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