

'I Could Never Pass A Child Crying On The Street'



It's no wonder that **Rio Hogarty**, from Clondalkin, Dublin, was once named Inspiring Mum of the Year. She and her husband **Hughie** have fostered more than **140** children over 50 years. She tells Hannah Bass her story

The first child Rio, who's now 76, fostered came from close to home. Pregnant, abandoned by her boyfriend and terrified of telling her strict parents, her friend Janet sought Rio's advice. Together, they devised a plan. Janet would start dressing in loose, baggy clothes and, so that her mum would think it was the fashion, so did Rio and all her friends, even though it was the height of summer. When Janet started experiencing labour pains, she packed a case and told her mum she was going on holiday. In fact, she went to hospital and gave birth to baby Rose, who went to live with Rio.

'Rose grew up thinking that I was her mother and Janet was a family friend,' she explains.

When the time came for Rose – who's now a surgeon – to go off to university, they decided to tell her the truth. She took it surprisingly well, not least

because 'Janet had always loved her and taken care of her – she'd suspected since the age of seven that there was something deeper.' But Rio believes it's also because she'd grown up in a house where it was normal to see children with different parents coming and going.

Rio was working as a dressmaker when Rose came to live with her. But it was when her husband Hughie lost his job as a butcher that her informal foster home really

be with their relatives if it's possible and I do everything I can to help families get back together.'

Once a fortnight she'd take the lorry on the ferry to France, stopping for a bite to eat at a cafe by the dock. One day she came across two French boys begging. The cafe owner told her their mother was an alcoholic who'd disappeared and the two boys were sleeping rough in a shed. 'I asked

'I do everything I can to get families back together'

took off. Driven by the need to supplement the household income, Rio set up a market stall business – and in doing so became Ireland's first female lorry driver. She started coming across homeless kids, who she let sleep in her lorry during

the day before taking them home with her for a square meal and a safe bed. 'Then I'd report them to the authorities and we'd get the Salvation Army – who are absolutely brilliant – to search for their families,' she says. 'Children should

these little boys if they'd like to come home with me for a bit, and they were delighted,' says Rio. 'I told the police I was taking them to Ireland and brought them home. Through the Salvation Army we managed to find a grandmother in Spain who'd been going out of her mind looking for the boys. I still hear from them occasionally.'

Her unofficial fostering grew and grew in the unregulated decades of the 1960s and '70s, and Rio's home began to be run 'like an army barracks', with everyone having their chores. Rio says, 'Someone cleaned out the fire; someone polished the shoes. No one got away without helping out.' Some of her stories are simply astonishing. During a particularly traumatic period

of The Troubles, she ended up offering refuge to 35 children from Northern Ireland. 'A priest asked me if I'd mind taking in a couple of kids. He turned up with three vanloads! I lived on an estate at the time, so I rounded up all the women from the flats and everyone took somebody in. I'm good at organising – I've been like that all my life. Some of the children even stayed with those women afterwards,' she recalls. 'I took in 10 children that night. My own son and daughter had to sleep in the bath!'

Ask Rio's son Patrick whether he ever found it strange having all these other children in the house and he replies, 'I thought



Left-right: Rio, her mum Winifred, her daughter Gwen and Gwen's baby Nicola

this happened in every household!' And as for her daughter Gwen, Rio says, 'She was very bossy so she loved being able to play the big sister. She's always been a very loving girl and still gets on like a house on fire with a few of the kids.'

It took a particularly distressing incident for Rio to finally become officially affiliated with social services, several decades after she first began taking in needy youngsters. A priest had asked her to come in and advise a family with 15 children who were 'in a bad way'. She remembers: 'The head social worker warned me that nobody wanted to go into their house.' But I went to visit them and it was horrible. The husband was an alcoholic, the children were living in their own filth, and the mother was expecting another baby.' Rio worked with

the family for a couple of months before the baby, Lily, was born. 'The minute the father saw her, he said, 'I am not having anything to do with this child.' She had very bad congestion of the lungs,

'I never ask anyone to go, or anyone to stay. I don't impose my will on any of the children'

an irregular heartbeat, and lots of other problems. The doctors didn't think she would make it.' Rio acted as a go-between for the family and the different departments of social services – whose hands were often tied. But she insisted on doing things her way: 'They wanted me to tell the children as little as possible, but I always prefer to tell the truth – even if it's difficult to come to terms with at the time.' 'Miraculously, Lily started

to breathe properly. It took her about six months to be well enough to leave hospital but I went into see her every day and, of course, I fell in love with her. The father still wouldn't let her be brought

home, so I took her in. And she's still with me to this day.'

Lily is now 23, has nearly finished university and is – Rio relates proudly – very beautiful. She's one of five young adults who still live with Rio. 'My house is always full. I'm getting too old for this,' she half jokes. 'I never ask anyone to go and I never ask anyone to stay. I don't impose my will on any of the children. Some are always in touch with me, whereas others

I'll only hear from again when they're in trouble. Sometimes I'll get a knock at the door and there's somewhere standing there with a suitcase saying, 'Do you remember me?' And I always say, 'I'll never forget you.'

Rio believes her calling to help needy children is something that was 'born in her'. 'I could never pass a child crying on the street without asking them what's wrong. To me, what I do is no big deal. There's a child living near me who's got very thin and I've noticed him with a black eye. Whether there are problems at home or he's being bullied at school, I won't stop till I've found out what's wrong. And I'll know before the month is out.'

You don't have to spend much with this indomitable woman, to know that she means it.

❖ **A Heart So Big** by Rio Hogarty is available in paperback (£6.99, Penguin) and eBook.



Rio and husband Hughie