

Remarks by President Higgins at the Traveller Pride Awards

Thursday, 1st December 2011

Dia dhaoibh a chairde,

Tá an áthas orm bheith anseo libh inniu ar an ócáid speisialta seo.

I am delighted to be here with you this afternoon at the third Traveller Pride Awards. I would like to thank the Irish Traveller Movement and your Director Damien Peelo for inviting me here today. I would like at the outset to commend the Irish Traveller Movement on reaching your 21st anniversary earlier this year - 21 years of dedicated work in promoting the rights and welfare of Travellers.

The awards ceremony here today is part of a week-long celebration of the Traveller way of life. Traveller Pride Week is an important event for the Traveller Community and has many dimensions; educating the general public on issues relating to Travellers; seeking to dispel the misinformation about Travellers that is widespread among the settled community; encouraging the media to give more space to Traveller issues and, most importantly, celebrating Traveller culture.

The poet WH Auden said that “Civilizations should be measured by the degree of diversity attained and the degree of unity retained”. Today we are celebrating the achievements and contributions of a group of special and unique people. People who are proud of their diversity and of the distinctive traditions and customs that make up their ethnic identity; but people who are also determined to fully participate in the wider community to which they, as active citizens, also belong.

Today’s awards cover a large and varied range of accomplishments. Each

award winner has demonstrated a particular talent, gift or skill which has set them apart from the crowd and singled them out as champions in their own particular field. Each and every winner here today, however, shares in common the commitment, the courage, the determination to overcome obstacles and the drive to succeed that marks out those special people that we meet in all areas of life; the people who make a positive difference to society.

Many of you here today will, regrettably, know what it is like to feel excluded; and others will know how it feels to be unfairly stereotyped due to ignorance, prejudice or misinformation. I know that, for many members of the travelling community, these experiences of marginalisation and exclusion are a daily reality of life as you struggle to hold on to a culture that is perceived, by some in the settled community, to be incompatible with the norms and expectations of contemporary society.

There is a real issue that remains unresolved, it seems to me, in achieving a workable balance between various forms of rights; the implementation of those rights; and conflicting definitions of what – to use the term that has been used in legislation – ‘culturally specific’ housing accommodation or ‘traveller specific’ accommodation really means.

As we face Christmas it is not acceptable surely that many of our fellow citizens, including young children are without the benefit of electricity, running water, toilets or washing facilities.

Women have rights as women, children as vulnerable citizens. There are rights that cannot be made conditional but the right to a way of life has also to be accommodated, provision made for it and for this to be accepted and supported by civic society.

If basic society is to achieve full participation, meaningful citizenship, we need to get the balance of rights issues resolved.

In whatever area of endeavour their achievements have been made, all of

today's winners have heroically worked on the very difficult interface between ignorance and understanding, between tolerance and intolerance, between prejudice and justice and between exclusion and inclusion. In seeking to remove the divide between our settled and our travelling communities, all of our winners embraced the challenge of being the arrows of positive change and not the targets of an unjust status quo.

Some of our winners have highlighted areas where members of the travelling community experience discrimination and exclusion, and have worked within the system to try to remove unnecessary barriers and obstacles. Others have focused on working within their community to tackle problems at source and reduce the risk of unfair and negative stereotyping. Some have promoted a deeper understanding of the traveller community through creative expression. Others have demonstrated that sporting and artistic talent transcend boundaries and are a positive source of national pride.

Individually and collectively you are all wonderful ambassadors for the traveller movement, highlighting the positive contribution the traveller tradition makes to our society. You have also done much to root out some of the prejudices that still, unfortunately, exist in this country against your community. Do not underestimate your role or the magnitude of your achievement by being nominated for an award here today. In profiling and celebrating these nominations, you are showing all the people of Ireland what the Traveller community can achieve when it is allowed to fully express its innate talent, its sense of active citizenship and its rich and distinct culture.

All of you who have received awards here today can be justifiably proud - proud of yourselves and proud of the community from which you come. By being honoured here, you have been recognised as role models for your community. The achievements you celebrate will instil in others in your community the expectation that they too can succeed; that they too can aspire to pursue a high quality education, to become spokespersons for the traveller movement and other campaigns for positive change, to tackle

injustice, to create employment, to succeed in the worlds of the arts and sport, and to work for the benefit of their community and wider society. Moreover, it is important to recognise that not only are you role models for your own community, you are role models for any community that is determined to transform an unjust reality into a better and more inclusive future.

When I was inaugurated as President of Ireland I expressed my hope that we would build together an active, inclusive citizenship; based on participation, equality and respect for all. I am proud that so many of you here today understand my Aisling of positive transformation; you have already demonstrated that an inclusive society is not a society where one culture seeks to change the mores, traditions and way of life of another; or a society where one group feels obliged to abandon their ethnicity and their customs in order to better fit in. You have shown us how a truly inclusive society can allow a harmonious and mutually enriching co-existence between citizens from many different backgrounds and from many different ways of life. I am deeply grateful to you for that wisdom.

Of course, today we have also honoured a very special member of the travelling community. A person who has inspired great fondness and respect, not just within his own community, but amongst all those of us who admire his great work as an actor, a playwright and an advocate for travellers' human rights.

Using his unique creative gifts, Michael Collins has, for many years, been bringing audiences right into the heart of traveller culture. Although probably best known for his role in Glenroe, the authenticity of his voice and the passion with which he articulates the traveller experience is always an artistic delight. Like all good artists, his work reflects back at us the common dilemmas, sufferings and emotions of the human state. His talent operates on two distinct levels, presenting new perspectives on the familiar for the travelling community while also challenging a settled audience to view events through a newly adapted perspective.

Michael is a true example of how we can use our particular gifts and talents to challenge society's perceptions and expectations. He has done an extraordinary amount to promote understanding of the travelling community and to inspire, within that community, a rightful pride in their rich culture and tradition. That is a legacy to be very proud of and something for which we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to Michael.

I know his community and his family are very, very proud of Michael and I am very honoured to have had the opportunity to present him today with his lifetime achievement award.