

# Gift that keeps on giving

Fashion designer Helen Cody found a great deal of comfort and practical help at ARC Cancer Support while she was undergoing treatment — now she is appealing to people to consider leaving a legacy gift to any of dozens of Irish charities, writes **Eve Kelliher**

**W**HEN you're going through tough times, the kindness of strangers is not to be underestimated.

This is one of the many surprising discoveries Helen Cody made after she was diagnosed with cancer in January 2018.

"The outpouring of love from strangers was wonderful," says the fashion designer. "People sent books and gifts, like candles, to me. I think Irish people have a huge generosity of spirit, a responsiveness to when someone isn't well; people are just generally very kind. I got so many cards, so many letters."

Of course, friends and family — particularly Helen's husband Rory and her sister — also rallied to her side, and when she celebrated the end of her treatment she was grateful to everyone — including some 1,500 people she had never met who responded to a social media post.

"I remember the day my treatment finished, we went to a restaurant. I was offered a glass of prosecco and I posted a picture on Instagram. All these people came back to me sending me messages of incredible support. It was just gorgeous to know they had my back," she says.

Helen and architect Rory Murphy had been together seven years when she was diagnosed with cancer in 2018.

"I discovered a lump in January. We were going to Paris that weekend.

I was blindly optimistic. I was going to be fine. It was hormonal. I told myself, I had lumpy breasts. But Rory said he knew."

The couple returned from Paris "to devastating news".

Helen was told she would require a double mastectomy and then learned the cancer was also in her lymph nodes.

But, as ever, Rory proved to be her "best friend" through it all. "This gorgeous man was going to lift me up," she says. "During this time, he would take me for walks on the beach to distract me."

And it was while on one of these Sandymount strolls that he popped the question. "We got special dispensation from City Hall and we were rushed through," she says.

They exchanged vows eight days before her surgery. Of their wedding, she says: "It was perfect".

Helen's dogs Harry and Joe gave her away. Rory's two daughters were her flower girls, and his son was his best man, while 30 of their nearest and dearest attended.

## VITAL SUPPORT

Looking back, Helen says she would not now be frightened of surgery but adds: "Chemo was another story. There would be three weeks between chemo sessions and I would have one good week and two bad weeks."

"I had to say: 'Let it do its evil thing, it will make me feel better.' Time



**FUTURE FOCUS:** Helen Cody supports My Legacy, an initiative encouraging people to leave a legacy gift to charity in their will.

passes." Eventually, "I was astonished at how well I felt."

Helen is keen to share the message with others about the support that is out there, particularly from the organisation ARC with which she became involved during her own treatment and recovery.

"I had thought ARC was for other people and felt I should not be availing of it. But it's for everyone," Helen says.

"I was at stage four of chemo. I was in a really bad place. I wanted to quit. My oncologist very wisely suggested I contact ARC and I've never looked back."

Helen and her husband Rory attended the South Circular Road branch of ARC and the designer says the professional "shoulder to cry on" proved invaluable when she was at such a "vulnerable" point.

"We felt we could lean on them. ARC was somewhere we could ask the hard questions," she says.

"We felt nurtured, loved, and supported."

"There were tissues, tea, and biscuits. You can cry."

During pandemic restrictions, the online support ARC offers is "incredible", adds Helen, and includes the family of the person with cancer.

thoughts that occurred to Helen during a psychological journey that was as difficult as the physical one.

"The physical aspect is very logical," says Helen. "Doctors tell you: 'You're going to go into hospital, you will be in a lot of pain, you will feel better.' Cancer didn't hurt me. But when you're then going through the 'insurance policy' of chemo and radiation treatment — it's quite brutal, even though it's there to help you. I was allergic to one of the drugs so I was quite vulnerable."

"I am an independent person — I ran my own business for 30 years and I feel quite strong, so to lose control — I find that incredibly difficult."

The support offered by ARC "lifted" Helen and Rory, she adds. "It was like scaffolding."

Does Helen think exhaustive research works when figuring out such a diagnosis? She pauses. "I don't think that's a good way to go, personally," she says.

"I had the sense not to go Googling and self-diagnosing. The only thing I changed was my diet. I gave up sugar and I explored complementary therapies. Vitamin D and exercise — even if it's just a walk around the block — is very helpful."

## SELF CARE

Podcasts have a place in Helen's prescription for wellbeing. "Podcasts are great. Let other things take over your brain. When we have time we all overthink."

Her creativity came to her rescue. "Thank God I am artistic, as drawing helped me a lot. Sometimes I was not well enough to get out of bed."

"I should say too to people not to try to control everything and be gentle with yourself and say to yourself, this will pass."

"I certainly went through the blame game at the start. I would say to myself: 'What did I do to get cancer?' But cancer is indiscriminate. Don't blame yourself."

Practices like yoga and acupuncture, can be worth investigating for some, says Helen, adding: "I became quite obsessive about juicing, vitamins and organic health foods."

Helen says her dogs — her "two little personal trainers" — also supported her during her recovery. "At first my mum was worried and said to me, 'Helen, after your double mastectomy, your dogs will be jumping on you'. But they were so gentle. They would lie on the end of my bed and keep me company. They were with me 24/7. They are dotes."

■ My Legacy is a group of over 70 Irish charities who work together to encourage legacy gifting in Ireland. To find out more about leaving a legacy gift in your will, visit MyLegacy.ie.

■ ARC Cancer Support centres offer a holistic approach to people who have been affected by cancer; see [www.arc-cancersupport.ie](http://www.arc-cancersupport.ie).

## LEGACY GIFT

ARC is among 70 Irish charities asking the public to consider leaving a legacy gift in their will to a particular organisation.

"Ironically, I had never thought of writing a will," says Helen. "I never had children of my own. I had just married my husband and I hadn't wanted him to have any other difficulty."

"The legacy you leave is so important. I hate to tell you, but you can leave an awful mess behind so it's a nice thing to be tidy in your life."

These, of course, are among many