The Eolas Participatory Photography Project

“The Road We Travel...”
I would like to thank all of those who participated in the EOLAS Participatory Photography Project. You have provided us with insights, which without you would have been impossible to capture. They say a picture speaks a thousand words. The photographic images captured in the project communicate a powerful message about the lived experience of severe mental health problems, such as psychosis and the positive impact of being involved with the EOLAS intervention. The insightful narratives threaded through the exhibition demonstrate the value of participatory methods in communicating research findings in ways that are accessible and engaging to a wider audience.

The final images within the exhibition refer to ‘Hope’. This theme challenges us all to ensure that EOLAS continues to be integrated within the mental health services in a manner that authentically honours the collaborative model that has underpinned the EOLAS programme to-date.

We would like to thank the Health Research Board without whom the project would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the HSE and KYS for their ongoing support in making the EOLAS Project happen.

A special thank you to the EOLAS Coordinators and Facilitators, who on a daily basis keep the EOLAS Project alive in making a difference in people’s lives.

Thank you

Prof Agnes Higgins
The EOLAS Participatory Photography Project

‘The Road We Travel…’

‘The Road we travel…’ is an exhibition that features the work of service users and family members who facilitate and participate in the delivery of the EOLAS Programme. The exhibition seeks to raise awareness about the impact of serious mental health problems and the contributions of the EOLAS programme. Through the medium of photography and in their own words, the contributors share their stories of living with a severe mental health problem, the journeys they have taken towards recovery and how the EOLAS process has helped them on that journey. The exhibition is an artistic venture developed as part of a collaboration with PhotoVoice and is funded by the Health Research Board (HRB) through a Knowledge Exchange Dissemination Award, and with support from the Health Service Executive (HSE). Nine contributors (service users, family members and researchers) were trained in the PhotoVoice method. Through photography, they have documented what EOLAS has meant to them and their families, and their experiences of involvement with and facilitation of EOLAS.

In creating the exhibition, the contributors reflected on the pictures they took and prepared explanatory captions. They came together as a group to design and develop the narrative of the photographic exhibition, in a process facilitated by the exhibition's curator. The photographs you see here this exhibition are the culmination of their work together. The exhibition is organised around 5 themes that illustrate the ‘road’ travelled by those who experience serious mental health problems and their families, and their journey on the road to recovery. This road is reflected in the journey you will take through the exhibition’s themes:

- Where do we start?
- Ways of coping; The Struggle and the Rituals
- What EOLAS brings
- Finding your way
- Hope is our Legacy

In 2020, The EOLAS Photographic Exhibition, will be hosted in different venues around the country. A full catalogue of the pictures captured as a part of the project can be seen at:

https://photovoice.org/eolas/
EOLAS Education Programmes

EOLAS provides two Information Programmes, one for service users and one for family members, which run over 8 weeks. Different topics are covered each week with guest speakers for a number of sessions. While not privileging any one theoretical perspective, the information is framed within a recovery ethos and emphasises the right of people to participate meaningfully in decisions about their health and well-being.

Participants are provided with a manual containing a summary of all the information that is discussed during the sessions. The programme content is constantly under review and is based on extensive research and consultation with service users and family members. Each programme is delivered by a trained peer and clinical facilitator. This co-facilitation model enhances the learning process through utilising knowledge gained by lived experience and clinical expertise.
"Where do we start?"
My son is mentally ill!! What do I do?

Alan 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
In the past, there wasn’t really an understanding of mental health - a doctor could simply decide someone was ‘unwell’. Just for being different, they could be admitted to an institution. People were locked away in mad houses. We’ve come a long way but there’s still more to go. We need to continue challenging the stigma around mental health.

Brian 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
On the day her daughter was locked up behind bars in a mental institution, she felt knocked down, all her dreams dead and withered.

Jean.F 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Experiencing mental health issues, you can feel like you’re in a hole, like there’s no way out. In that state of mind, suicidal thoughts are common and many turn to drink. I myself was in that dark place for two years. But there is another side - with medication, support and people you can trust, it is possible to get on the road to recovery. It’s not an easy journey but they can and they do.

Brian 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
The first time she got unwell, it took us days to talk her into going to the clinic, with each day she got more lost. We would get her outside the building, but couldn’t convince her to go in.

Mary from Dublin 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
The terrible shock and horror at the awfulness of the illness is absolutely overwhelming at first. The problems coping with it seem mountainous and impossible. This renders the shocked family members incapable of doing anything, including accessing support.
“Ways of coping: The struggle and the rituals”
Suffering is a part of life, but there’s a way through it. We may experience hard times, but it is these challenges that make us more human.

Brian 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
The only thing to occupy his mind his thoughts and habits in the psychiatric ward.

R.Kelly 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
His fingers move somnambulant

The little pleasures of tobacco keep him sane from the bleak surroundings. The psychiatric unit only provides a respite for family and friends, a place where service users are sedated. For more effective treatment of mental health issues, more focus on stimulation alongside medication is needed.

R.Kelly 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
The Cost of Medication

What you see here costs 6 Euro with a medical card or 108 Euro without it. The financial burden of being on medication alongside the side effects which have their own financial implications, mean people with mental health challenges have to weigh up their options - do I feed the family? Pay the rent? Or buy my medication to stay well? Mental illness diagnoses should be included in the national long-term illness scheme so that those affected have access to affordable medication.

Kelley Lee 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Always take your meds.

Alan 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
As a mother of someone affected by mental health issues, my faith helps me a lot. Prayer plays a big part in giving me hope and positivity. It’s easy to forget about yourself when a loved one is unwell, but who will support her if I get ill myself?

Mary from Dublin 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
“What EOLAS brings...”
As EOLAS co-facilitators, clinician and service user are brothers in arms.

Alan 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Ireland
There are plenty of difficult obstacles in your path don’t allow yourself to be one of them. I needed to learn to get ‘out of my own way’. The self stigma created from my history, under the spotlight of judgement, stuck behind the veil of vulnerability were all the parts of me that could not be denied, that I had to acknowledge and nurture to allow me to step aside and know I could not do this alone.

S.L.Ferguson | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
It’s only through knowledge and understanding that we can make better, informed choices. EOLAS gives service users and family members the information and support they need, in order to have a voice, to ask questions and to be empowered in their own recovery. The route we take in life is chosen only when we become aware of the path we’re on.
Eolas gives people the awareness and knowledge to choose what path to take next.

J.B. 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Salt and Pepper

The relationship between the facilitators is unique. It is like salt and pepper. Completely different as condiments, but you cannot think about one without the other. You would never use one without the other. It is a relationship that is inseparable.

Mark M 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Sometimes people talk about the light bulb moment. The penny drops, suddenly it makes sense. EOLAS for many who have participated, has become that ‘lightbulb moment’, creating a new understanding and offering a chance for a new relationship with their loved ones. The sentiment often said by participants, ‘If only I knew this 20 years ago…’ Knowledge is a valuable thing.
My involvement with EOLAS has required me to unpack the different parts of myself and to question at each stage, what aspect of myself am I bringing to the table? EOLAS has taught me how to draw on my strengths and to acknowledge my perceived weaknesses, without shame or despair. I have learnt the meaning of empowerment, not theoretically but practically.

J.B.  2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
You don’t have to be alone - education brings enlightenment. You’re not the only one.

Alan 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
“Finding your way”
EOLAS throws you a lifeline. Through the programme, we learn that mental health issues are a fact of life - that the illness is not something to be ashamed of. Though meeting others, it is normalised. People who I didn't expect to understand had great sympathy for our situation and were able to support us.

Mary from Dublin 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas| Ireland
Experiencing mental health issues, you can feel like you’re in a hole, like there’s no way out. In that state of mind, suicidal thoughts are common and many turn to drink. I myself was in that dark place for two years. But there is another side - with medication, support and people you can trust, it is possible to get on the road to recovery. It’s not an easy journey but they can and they do.

Brian 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
I learnt about recovery and what it means for all involved. I could share this knowledge with the participants. Family members and service users can live WELL, independently, each following their own dreams, in their own way, as they choose.

Jean.F 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
You get around one bend, then realise there’s another uphill path. It took me nine and a half years, and three GPs just to get a referral to mental health services. There I received a different diagnosis and was put on different medication. I thought I’d finally got to the end of the bend but was told that the next six months would be the most challenging of my life as I was stabilised. If mental health professionals would have listened to me in the beginning, then the last nine and a half years wouldn’t have been such an uphill struggle.

Kelley Lee 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | EOLAS | Ireland
Not a Show

People forget that there’s a real life and a family at the end of social media.
If we could change people’s perception on schizophrenia, they might be able to see the vulnerability and those affected and support them rather than making a joke of their condition.

R.Kelly 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Footprints in the Sand

You can feel like you’re walking alone but through EOLAS, you realise that many others have walked the same journey.

Kelley Lee 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
“Oh my darling it’s true beautiful things have dents & scratches too”, the battered, the bruised and the broken, feeling washed upon the shore, restful at last in this place, not alone or at sea fighting the storm, just battered and bruised but no longer broken, I’ve found my place where I can settle and be, I’ve found a place where it’s safe to be me.

S.L.Ferguson | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
“Hope is our legacy”
My Hopes for the Future
More EOLAS courses held, many more, all over the country so as to let all see that there is light at the end of the tunnel

Jean.F 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
“Forget your perfect offering there’s a crack in everything it’s how the light get’s in” - Leonard Cohen
Here is my perfect offering to you that puts up a wall that loses sight of you. Here is a crack in that wall don’t you see where hope it lies waiting for you to be all that you can be. The crack in the wall is open to all especially the ones who always catch you when you fall. But how do I get there how do I see what’s beyond the wall waiting for me. Well first we need buy in from the powers that be to see if the crack in the wall is one that they can see, then there’s the time it will take to believe that the crack in the wall is the place you should be.

S.L.Ferguson | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Many think that those affected by mental health issues won’t work or lead normal lives. Through EOLAS, I have met other family members whose loved ones have experienced mental health problems but are now managing it and living good and productive lives. Seeing this gives me great hope that my daughter can do the same.

Mary from Dublin 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Through my engagement with EOLAS I have come to understand that working collaboratively with service users, family members and clinicians gives everyone the opportunity to gain new insights - to learn, grow and to spread their wings in new and exciting directions.

J.B. 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Small victories can lead to big ones, I’ve always loved sport but social anxiety made it hard for me to be involved. I’ve overcome this and learned to find joy in the sport again - I have been coaching and refereeing for young people in my hometown. The situations around don’t change, it’s our thoughts and feelings about them. I’ve learned coping strategies to approach these situations.

Brian 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
There’s still challenges ahead but whereas before, I was always anticipating the low and could never see what was in front of me, now I appreciate what’s around me.

Kelley Lee 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Eolas | Ireland
Tap, tap, tap…

A limitation to EOLAS is that it cannot happen often enough. Referrals may not be made for various reasons. Resources and availability of programmes can mean that the person in need has to wait… but what do we do if the programmes cannot run, people are left with no knowledge; sometimes alone because they do not know the resources and support are out there. EOLAS has the potential to change that.

Mark M 2019 | PhotoVoice | Eolas Trinity College | Ireland
“The road that I’ve travelled through my photographs and story would not have been possible without EOLAS. EOLAS is not just a programme, it’s a coming together of people and lives, who share a story. EOLAS is the place where you don’t feel out of place, as the person beside you says, I’ve been to that place”.

Sharon Ferguson, EOLAS photography contributor and peer support worker

“I believe EOLAS is a very worthwhile programme. It is heartening to see photography being used in such a beneficial way. You might ask what makes a good photograph? It is a combination of a number of things, composition, lighting, techniques, and most importantly, the emotion behind the image, the story the photograph tells us. It’s often said the camera points both ways and these images are deeply personal, thank you for sharing them.”

Damien Eagers, Photographer

“A wonderful exhibition which visually tells the stories of recovery in a very positive way. The EOLAS programs have inspired and encouraged participants to tell their stories with photography and provide hope to others in similar situations.”

Rose Marie Murphy, Assistant Director of Nursing, Louth/Meath Mental Health Services

“The creativity with which the contributors translated their very personal journey into photography and captions is very impressive. EOLAS exemplifies the way services should work – in collaboration with and responding to the needs of the service users and families”

Anne Cody, Head of Pre-Award Research Strategy and Funding Directorate, Health Research Board