Special report

'He did wrong but he had his whole life in front of him, there are worse people'

Joseph O'Connor, 27, pleaded guilty to a crime known as revenge porn. On the day he was due in court to appeal against a nine-month prison sentence, he was found dead in his bedroom. His family feel the media coverage of his case was too heavy for him to bear, writes **Mick Clifford**

Joseph O'Connor's family Edmund, Ned, Breda, and Laura. They say there are two sides to every story and feel Joe didn't get the chance to tell his. Joe left his version of the story on his laptop.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR left two notes. One specifically for his parents, the other explaining in detail what had occurred.

"I'm so sorry that I have to write this letter to you," he wrote to his parents, Breda and Ned.

"I never wanted to hurt you or make you ashamed of me. You don't deserve to have a son show up in the papers like this. I'd planned on doing this before it all came out, so you wouldn't have to suffer my shame. I didn't know it would be public until on the day."

He left other messages on his laptop, including a story the bare bones of which had been writ large across the media though court reports. That morning, he contacted his solicitor by email.

He was due in court to appeal against a nine-month prison sentence for a crime that is known as revenge porn. He was hoping for an adjournment as a psychiatric report on his mental state was not available. His solicitor advised him that it was best to bring a bag. He may be going to prison.

Sometime before 8.30am, he completed the missives and prepared himself for his death and went upstairs to his bedroom in the home he shared in Galway.

"I cherished everyday with ye over the years. I always want ye to know how much ye mean to me, mam, dad, Laura, ed... If you can pass on the message to Adam and Mary. I tried to treat every time I saw ye as the last.

"I hope I treated you all well while I was with you and I'm sorry for when I wasn't. I love you all very much. I hope I see you again some day. Joe."

His housemate Kate Farrissey arrived back just before 10.30am. A few minutes later she heard the alarm going in O'Connor's room. She thought he might have gone for a nap. She entered the bedroom and found him.

"He set the alarm clock for that time," she says. "He knew I would be home by then. There had been a few changes in the house; friends of ours had moved out and I was moving at that stage. I was the only one there who knew his situation. He confided in me."

Once Kate had informed the authorities, she texted Jade Baldrick, who was in New York. Jade had been a housemate of O'Connor's and Kate's before leaving on a, it a few months previous.

"I was going to work and Kate sent me a text, asking me to call her. I texted back to ask what was it and she just come back again and said, 'call me'. I rang and I said, 'it's Joe, isn't it?' I was working in a bar. I fell to the floor and was screaming. The thought wouldn't leave me that I could have done more."

At 10.28pm that evening, Gardaí were called to the O'Connor family home just outside Newtownshandrum in North Cork to relay the news. Joseph O'Conor was 27 when he died on July 20, 2022.

There was no reporting of O'Connor's death. The previous month, following his sentencing hearing, his name had been all over the media. One newspaper referred to him as a "pervert". Another referred to a woman whose daughter had taken her own life after online harassment mentioning the prison sentence.

O'Connor's photograph was all over the media, as he was escorted away from court, his face as embarrassed as anyone's would be under the circumstances.

O'Connor's family and friends felt he was being treated in a terrible manner that was at odds with the severity of his crime. They all acknowledge that what he did was wrong and that his victim's hurt was deep and real. But they feel the minute details of the case in terms of history and even motivation were not tested in court as he had pleaded guilty.

They don't say it, but there is a feeling that if he had escaped prison if his appeal was heard. Whether such an outcome would have saved him from the decision he ultimately took will never be known.

"What he did was wrong, but he didn't deserve all of that," his father Eddie says.

"There's more than one side to a story. When he went into public, he didn't come home, he was afraid to go out, afraid to meet anyone."

It never dawned on us that anything like suicide would occur. We got a message from his friend a while before it happened and he was chilling out and feeling better about himself."

Mistakes made

Kate Farrissey says O'Connor knew he made a mistake but that the person who was portrayed in court reports and the headlines was not the person she knew.

"He never told his side of the story so nobody knew the full details," she says. "I know that things can happen in a relationship but I couldn't recognise what was said about him. I lived with him for two years. He was just a goofy kind of guy, very kind-hearted to me and others."

"The stuff that was being said about him in court was completely alien. When it did come out in the paper, his first thoughts were for us and how we would cope with him; he was worried about our address being in the media. Even with all he was going through, he was still thinking of us."

Joe O'Connor was the middle child of three. Laura his older sister, Edmond his younger brother. He went to school locally in Newtownshandrum and then Hazelwood College in Dromod-Jagher.

In 2013, he entered NUI Galway to study for a BA in Arts and Philosophy. He then went on to do a master's in philosophy, completing it in 2017.

In his second year in college, he met the woman who was a fresher. They were both staying in the student accommodation facility and a relationship began. There were exchanges of messages and communications between the pair which suggests it was an intense relationship, particularly sexually.

At one point, the woman posted a photograph of O'Connor in a closed Facebook group. There were at least 15 people, most of them known to the couple, in the group. The post was done without O'Connor's permission and was angry and upset about it. After a year, the relationship ended, O'Connor being the one to finish it.

Sometime after that, he posted photographs of the woman on a pornographic website. Her face was not visible but there was a link to her social media account. When, in 2018, he was confronted by her and her father of a complaint from the woman, he owned up immediately. The garda asked why he did it.

"It was an accumulation of things," O'Connor told them. "I felt I was being left out from the break-up. I felt that there was rumours going around about me after the break- up and prior to the break-up. These involved me allegedly jumping or attacking people in bars."

"Being cheated on by her was another reason. There was a photo she posted of me on a group chat which I was naked in. A day or two after the breakup she put off with me in a bar and I felt she was humiliating this in front of me. After that then an accumulation of rumours and gossip about me which she would avoid talking about when I confronted her."

He did make a complaint to the accommodation centre about the rumours which had an impact on his mental health. He also claims he went to the gardaí about the matter but was told nothing could be done unless he could show something concrete. The woman concerned denied that she ever made any rumours or anything of that nature.

"I was just being an asshole," he told gardaí. "I was drunk at home after being on a night out and went on the laptop when I got home and I found photos on the laptop. I deleted a file when I got the phone call from yourselves today. I panicked. I have no excuse."

Under pressure

The woman told gardaí that she had sent O'Connor the photos when they were going out. She said he put her under pressure to do so. She said that he was a controlling person, very manipulative and demanding in terms of sex.

"Things I did with him sexually were things that I would have been uncomfortable with and things that I wouldn't have done with anyone not me. Things that would have happened were things that I wouldn't have sought or things that I wouldn't have thought about. He knew that I hated fighting and I would do a lot to avoid confrontation."

The whole thing came to her attention when she was contacted by another woman who received threatening communications from anonymous men who had seen the image.

Among the files left by O'Connor was a series of messages between the couple from the beginning of their relationship. These messages have been seen by the *Irish Examiner*. They do, in places, portray an intense sexual relationship, but not one in which just one participant is the dominant figure. None of that in any way excuses his action in uploading her image on a pornographic website.

His friends became aware of what was going on around Christmas 2021 when Jade showed up at the house.

"Joe went down to talk to him and we were upstairs and he came back up and said he didn't want to talk about it," says Ms Farrissey. "Jade was upset. He's trying to deal with it himself. We forced it out of him, me and Jade, and he did tell us in the end."

Guilty plea

In April 2022, O'Connor pleaded guilty at Galway District Court to harassing the woman by sending threatening communications from anonymous men who had seen the image.

Since 2021, a new law, the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act, covers distributing or threatening to distribute images without permission. As O'Connor's offence predated the law, he was charged under Section 10 of the Act. The judge imposed reporting restrictions on the name of the parties.

The following month, Jade Baldrick left for Manhattan on her J1. "We went on a bike ride and I told him I'm sick of going away thing, I said, 'I'll see you in September', and he gave me a hug bye and texted me with a message when I left Galway. I didn't think much of it at the time. He said, 'I'll see you, I'll see you again and you're one of the greatest I met and I want to thank you for everything you did for me.'"

In July 2022, he appeared before Judge Mary Fahy for sentencing. The court was told that the victim wanted O'Connor identified but for her to remain anonymous.

The facts of the case were outlined for the judge by Garda Padraig Moran, following which the judge synopsised as follows: "Someone he really knew well and after a year together he felt free to do the kind of things do — so, to get his own back he did this. Is that fair to say?"

Garda Moran testified to the reasons the defendant had given for his actions. Judge Fahy said there was "a very, very unusual case" of victim sending a photo to a group chat and the uploading of her images by O'Connor.

"Reading the woman's victim impact statement, Judge Fahy noted that a subsequent relationship she had entered into with another man ended when he found out about the online photos. The judge said the victim's view was "outwardly doing OK", the impact of what had occurred would always remain with her.

The garda also confirmed that it was nearly four years since the offence had taken place and there had been no contact between the parties since then. A number of references on behalf of O'Connor were also handed into the court.

Detective Sergeant said that while the photos may have been taken down, some people had already taken screengrabs of them and they could still be uploaded to websites. The woman had stated it must be one of the worst nightmares for any young woman to have to deal with the consequences of such material being uploaded widely and without consent.

A message had to go out that "this is just not acceptable". She imposed a sentence of nine months' imprisonment. The severity of sentence for revenge porn crimes are frequently a topic for public discourse.

The sentence handed out was almost the maximum that could have been imposed, at 12 months. O'Connor was escorted from the dock to the courts before, admitted his guilt immediately on being questioned, and there were mitigating circumstances, not least the previous incident on Facebook.

First of its kind

His solicitor immediately lodged an appeal. The case was the first of its kind in Galway and one of the first in the State.

The day before the sentencing hearing, O'Connor rang his brother Ed and asked him to say nothing at home about what was in the court and the solicitor suggested he have somebody there to support him. Ed travelled up from Cork to attend the court. It was the first that any of his family knew about what was going on.

O'Connor's mother Breda got a call from a friend the morning after the hearing. It was all over the media.

"She asked me to come downstairs and my sister-in-law showed it to me on her phone. I read it and said, 'that's not my son'. She said she knew that. The whole thing was such a shock."

The reporting of the case was "horrendous", she says across the media. Some reported it straight. 'Revenge porn; man jailed for posting images of ex-girlfriend online' was the typical tabloid headline. One tabloid coupled with 'Revenge porn pervert jailed for nine months'.

"The fare on social media was, as is often the case, polarised and hate. Some people commented around the courthouse."

At 3.45pm, he messaged again. "Joe, you might please confirm your whereabouts?"

Grieving a suicide

O'Connor's mother and sister retrieved all the communications from his laptop.

Grieving a suicide is complicated and usually fraught with regrets. In this instance, there was not even just a note for his loved ones but a whole file setting out his version of the history of what had occurred.

"He tried to put his part of a very familiarising herself with the material as O'Connor had not let them in on all that he had been going through over the previous few years. Above all, his mother was struck by the fleeting public profile of O'Connor in the wake of his sentencing is a complete distortion.

There are aspects to the processing of his victim's complaint with which they take issue.

Laura feels strongly that sufficient weight was not given in the court to the incident in which his image had been uploaded on the Facebook group. The impact of images is shocking, but there's often two sides to a story. Why was it that his name was the one thrown around? Why, even in the adverts on TV that we see now, is it always men who are the perpetrators?

Breda O'Connor feels that some of the comments in the court were unsuited. "Why was it necessary to make an example of him? He did wrong but he had his whole life in front of him. There are far worse people out there who would have made a perfect example if that was what was being looked for."

The family are experiencing her own trauma. The spectre of revenge porn of any description is a frightening and degrading one. While, as is often the case, the sentence handed down in this instance was minuscule in the characterisation of the crime by Judge Fahy as the worst nightmare of any young woman couldn't be argued with.

Joe O'Connor was not a pervert. He was a young man existing in a prevailing culture where access to worldwide communication at the push of a button, particularly at a time of high or mood altered emotions, can have unintended consequences for a whole range of people, principally the victim.

Speaking on behalf of her family, Laura O'Connor says they don't want anybody to go through what all who were touched by this incident suffered. "For any male or female who is experiencing hurt, abuse, or suffering, there are people who can help in ways a way out. If you know someone you fear is having suicidal tendencies, talk about it. What we've learned is that if they don't talk, they probably never will. Force yourselves through your most feel shame or fear is speaking. You have a right to be heard and every right in the world to live."

"I felt aggrieved with her from the break-up. I felt that there was rumours going around about me

"I cherished everyday with ye over the years. I always want ye to know how much ye mean to me, mam, dad, Laura, ed. The same goes for the *****. If you can pass on the message to Adam and Mary. I tried to treat every time I saw ye as the last. I hope I treated you all well while I was with you and I'm sorry for when I wasn't. I love you all very much. I hope I see you again some day. Joe."

Left: Joseph O'Connor outside the court in Galway; and right, one of the notes he left to be found in the wake of his death. He left two, one for his family, and one explaining what had occurred.

When Joe O'Connor was found guilty, the judge handed down a sentence of nine months' imprisonment. His solicitor immediately lodged an appeal.

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