

## **Social justice campaigner and Focus Ireland founder Sister Stanislaus Kennedy dies aged 86.**

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The death has been announced of social justice campaigner and homelessness advocate Sister Stanislaus Kennedy, known to many as Sr Stan.

Sr Stan died on Monday morning after a short time at the St Francis Hospice, Blanchardstown. She was 86.

“Sr Stan was a powerful voice for compassion, equality, and systemic change throughout her life. She will be greatly missed by her family, friends, co-workers and the Congregation. While there is a deep sadness, we are confident that her legacy of a life dedicated to the service of others in need, will continue to inspire us and generations of activists and social innovators in Ireland,” said Sr Patricia Lenihan, Superior General of the Religious Sisters of Charity.

“Sr Stan joined the Religious Sisters of Charity in 1958 and devoted her life to helping others. She was a leading advocate and activist for change, working tirelessly to support the homeless, immigrants, and those in disadvantaged communities throughout Ireland and beyond. “Throughout her life, Sr Stan was a courageous force for social change. She challenged the status quo and consistently voiced her informed views to influence policy and promote justice.”

Born Treasa Kennedy on June 19th, 1939, near Lispolie, on the Dingle Peninsula in Co Kerry, Sr Stan was one of five children growing up in a farming family. At the age of 18, she joined the Sisters of Charity and was professed in January 1960. She was based in Co Kilkenny initially, where she spent 20 years developing social services. She went on to earn a Bachelor of Social Sciences and a master’s in social policy from University College Dublin, graduating in 1969 and 1980 respectively.

The nun released her latest book – Gratitude: Unlocking the Fullness of Life – in 2024. The project contained more than 100 contributors, hailing “from all walks of life, some of them public figures, some of them not so public, not known at all,” Sr Stan told The Irish Times last November. Sr Stan became the first to study homelessness among women in Dublin, uncovering a then unknown population of “hidden” homeless. “People thought at that stage that there weren’t women homeless, because they were invisible, there were only men,” she said. She spent a year with a group of eight young women who were homeless, living with them on the top floor of a building that she had rented out on Eustace Street in Dublin.

In September 1984, her study was published and heeding the women’s advice she established Focus Ireland (then Focus Point) at the end of the following year as “a point in Dublin for homeless people, a point where people could get their life together”.

Sr Stan worked with architect Gerry Cahill to redevelop the former Sisters of Charity convent at Dublin’s Stanhope Street, into 80 apartments and 10 terraced family homes. Following the success of this endeavour, she sought permission and funding to repurpose several other religious buildings to accommodate the capital’s homeless.

In 1998, she established The Sanctuary, self-described as a meditation and mindfulness centre for social change, on Stanhope Street. In response to the injustice and challenges she saw faced by some asylum seekers and refugees entering Ireland, Sr Stan founded the Immigrant Council of Ireland in 2001 as an organisation that would promote and support the rights of the immigrants. Throughout her time in the Sisters of Charity, Sr Stan has been unafraid to go against the grain at times in her progressive advocacy. In 2015, the nun announced her decision to vote in favour of same-sex marriage in the referendum that was upcoming at that time.

“I have thought a lot about this,” she told The Irish Times at the time. “I am going to vote Yes in recognition of the gay community as full members of society. They should have an entitlement to marry. It is a civil right and a human right.”

Speaking in a personal capacity at a time when leaders of the Catholic Church were calling for a No vote, she said “I have a big commitment to equality for all members of society. It’s what my life has been about.”

Sr Stan also pioneered Social Innovators Ireland, which grew into the Young Social Innovators of the Year (YSI).

Chief executive of Focus Ireland Pat Dennigan said the charity was “heartbroken” at the death of its “beloved” founder and Life President.

“We would like to express our thanks to all the medical staff who showed great care for Stan in recent times,” he said in a statement.

“Sr Stan, as she was affectionately known, was a visionary, a tireless advocate, and a compassionate force for change whose legacy will forever shape the heart, soul, and values of Focus Ireland,” he said. “We will not see her like again that is for sure.”

Chief executive of the Immigrant Council of Ireland Teresa Buczkowska said Sister Stan was “a courageous and intrepid woman”. “Sr Stan understood how important it is for every human being to have a sense of home, and the challenges facing migrants in a new country.” “As a migrant woman myself, I am immensely proud to continue her legacy through the work of the Immigrant Council, but we will miss her guidance, courage, and strength. I will miss her.”

Sr Stan made “an immeasurable impact on Irish society,” said Tánaiste Simon Harris in a tribute to the social campaigner on Monday. Mr Harris reflected on an “inspirational” meeting with Sr Stan during his time as Taoiseach, in which they discussed Ireland’s “ongoing housing challenges”. “She continued to display all the same passion and determination as she had for all of her long years of service to those in need, and most particularly women,” he said of their conversation.

The Tánaiste described Sr Stan as “a formidable force in public life” who “devoted her life to tirelessly advocating on behalf of the most vulnerable people in Irish society”.

Sinn Féin Leader Mary Lou McDonald said she is “deeply saddened” by the passing of the campaigner. “Sister Stan led a truly selfless, inspiring life centred on giving help and hope to those in need,” she said. “For decades, Sr Stan was a tireless and compassionate advocate for the homeless, those inflicted by the scourge of poverty, and the welfare of vulnerable immigrants. She was a true champion of the poor.”