

Muireann Brennan Memorial Minute

Muireann Brennan, MD, MPH, 62, died on November 5, 2022, at home in Atlanta Georgia. Dr Brennan was due to retire at the end of January 2023 and had plans to return to live in Ireland at the time of her death. Following a Quaker funeral in Dublin, she was buried in the Friends Burial Ground in Temple Hill, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. Family members joined Atlanta Friends Meeting for a memorial celebration of her life on December 10, 2022.

She was born in Dublin Ireland to Louis and Dimphne Brennan on November 21, 1959. Muireann earned her MD from Trinity College Dublin and MPH from Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health. She managed a hospital in northern Kenya and implemented public health programs in Bosnia during the Balkan war before joining the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1996 with the National Immunization Program.

She had over 25 years of experience with CDC responding to complex humanitarian emergencies across the globe. She led an evaluation of the emergency health system in Darfur, responded to flooding and a cholera outbreak in Pakistan, supported humanitarian response activities in northern Syria, and strengthened epidemic disease surveillance in Jordan. She also coordinated vaccination campaigns in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Somalia, South Sudan, and the most austere settings where she would travel by boat to ensure that even the most underserved were reached. Muireann evaluated and strengthened mortality surveillance in refugee camps in South Sudan and Ethiopia, conducted surveillance for gross violations of human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and served as medical coordinator for over a million refugees in Syria and Sierra Leone.

From 2015-2018 Dr. Brennan became an epidemiologist and medical officer at the UNICEF Office of Emergency Program in Geneva, where she lived for three years. This job involved communications between the United Nations, the World Health Organization and UNICEF to mobilize the best response in emergencies.

Her colleague at the CDC, Richard Garfield, said: “When there was a tough place to be and a difficult job to do, we’d send Muireann. She was a physically small Irish woman who was tough, brave, and presented herself unambiguously. Irish people in this work are seen as neutral but engaged and demanding respect, and she was like that.” Her lifelong friend, Dr Mairead McGovern, said she was a pioneering spirit who spent her life challenging injustices. “She would physically put her life on the line for people she cared about. And, as the eldest in her family, she was always looking out for her younger siblings.”

After moving to Atlanta, Muireann attended the Atlanta Friends Meeting with her Friend, Dr. Sharon McDonnell and became a member in 2006. Friends remember her service on Care and Counsel, and Ministry and Worship committees, participation in a Spiritual Nurture Group and as a loving, compassionate Friend. She attended Adult Religious Education Classes at Meeting and kept up with the reading schedule even when traveling. In 2010 and 2012 she spoke about her spiritual journey from Catholicism to Quakerism drawn by the belief of God’s light in everyone and the challenge to live a life of equality, community, and integrity. One of the few assignments at CDC that she declined was a program in Iraq that she saw as being simply for show, without integrity. She described her love of walking through refugee camps, buying coffee, or boiled milk from women and connecting in spite of language differences. Muireann’s wisdom and compassion are best exemplified by her advice, “How will people believe that you care about 500,000 people if they cannot see that you care about one!”

Throughout her life, Muireann was always in touch with her family, visiting regularly and always reserved the month of December to be in Dublin. Family members recall her great sense of humor and her

sense of adventure: she would bring her nieces and nephews to see the latest disaster movies and dystopian dramas and on ice-skating expeditions when back in Ireland at Christmas time.

She is survived by many dear friends and her beloved family including daughter of Dimphe and the late Louis Brennan, and sister of Seumas, Seosamh, Dan, Bríd, Lúghaidh, Ailbhe, Dimphe, the late Ita Brennan and cousin of Gráinne, and devoted aunt to her nieces and nephews.