

LIFE

Ordinary people who do extraordinary things





caoimhe butterly the human rights campaigner

Caoimhe Butterly is a clever and courageous 27-year-old activist from Ireland who has dedicated her life to campaigning for human rights and social justice. In an age in which many feel frustrated and powerless, she is a living embodiment of the notion that ordinary people can sometimes make an extraordinary difference.

Articulate, passionate and often controversial, Caoimhe (pronounced "queeva") has worked with Aids victims in Zimbabwe, the homeless in New York, refugees in Guatemala, and separatist Zapatista communities in Mexico. She has also spent time in Iraq supporting trade unions and other grass-roots groups.

It was her time in the Middle East in 2002, however, that hardened her political resolve and brought her to wider attention. Working as an observer and medical volunteer in the Jenin refugee camp on the West Bank, she was shot through the back of the knee attempting to coax a group of kids down an alleyway to safety.

She funds herself through translation work, teaching English, odd jobs, the generosity of family and friends and bank loans and is in demand as a charismatic and gently persuasive speaker on the Middle East and other struggles. Recently, a documentary (*Visit Palestine*) was completed about her experiences in the West Bank.

The eldest of four children, Caoimhe was brought up by parents who travelled widely working on developmental aid and social justice projects mostly in Canada and southern Africa. Her mother is a psychoanalyst who has worked with victims of political violence and her father is a UN economist in Geneva. Her upbringing gave her, she says, "an early and very real sense of social responsibility".

Despite being detained, arrested and deported on many occasions, enduring hunger strike protests, and being shot, Caoimhe is in activism for the long haul. "In these times of heightened conflict, I want to demonstrate an alternative face of the West, based on solidarity, compassion and the idea that the common ground that unites us is greater and deeper than the things that divide us – or that we are told divide us," she explains. "It sounds clichéd, but I actually believe there is such a thing as brotherhood and sisterhood in this world."

*Caoimhe Butterly was photographed for LIV
by Marius WHansen at the South Bank,
London. Interview by Philip Watson*

