

RESCUE

CHARITY HELP PEOPLE IN DESPAIR



MEMORY
Anne stands by a dramatic photo of Chris, who is also pictured, left

» KEVIN McALLION

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NO judgments, no labels, no blame. Just love.

Those eight words perfectly sum up Chris's House, a charity set up to help those feeling suicidal or those affected by suicide.

And that feeling of love becomes clear the moment you walk through the doors of their Airdrie base.

The first thing that greets every guest to this house is a hug, a small but significant gesture to those reaching out in their darkest hour.

In Scotland, an average of two people take their own lives each day yet suicide is stigmatised – a subject few people want to talk about.

But guests at Chris's House can unburden their worries and speak to people who know just how they feel.

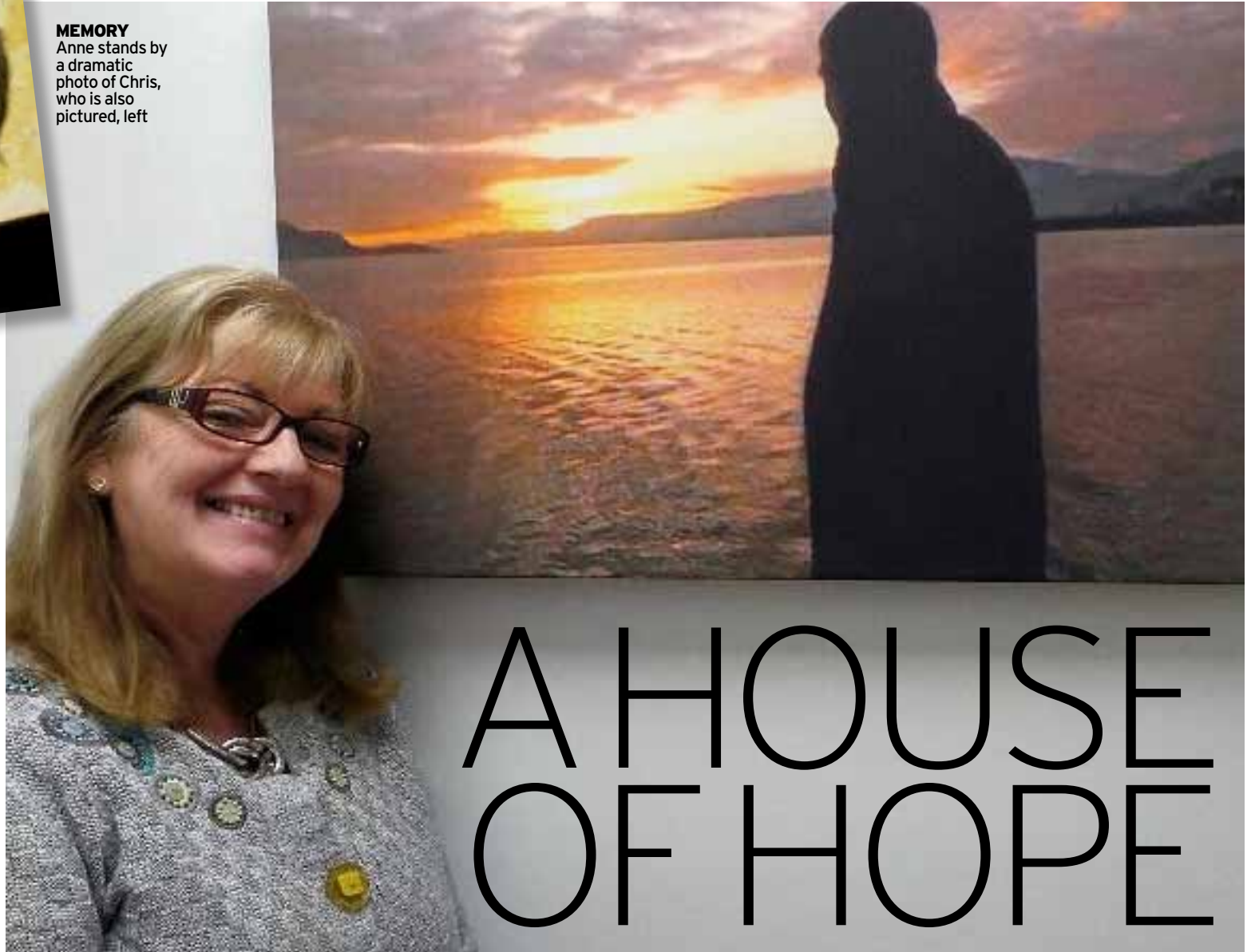
The service there can often be the difference between life and death, something that becomes clear as I sit to speak with one of their guests.

"I would say that Chris's House has helped me to stay alive over the last couple of months," she said.

"A lot of the time, you need to hold yourself together. I do, for the sake of my family, my children.

"But the minute you walk in the door here, you can fall apart. If you need help, they get you in straight away. There's no, 'Wait until I assess your risk or wait until you fill in these referral forms or tick this box'.

"Places like this are crucial. Everyone knows mental health services are stretched beyond capacity and you will wait four to 16 weeks to see a health professional you really need to see whenever you are contemplating suicide. When



A HOUSE OF HOPE

Anne Rowan coped with her son's death by creating sanctuary to prevent others taking their lives. After reading of Record man Kevin McAllion's novel Moristoun - about suicide victims' afterlife - she asked him to visit and hear from people it assists

you are in that place of despair, you don't have that time, you really don't."

Nobody knows that more than Anne Rowan, the founder of Chris's House, who lost her son five years ago. She can't help but wonder what might have happened if a place such as the house was about when Chris was struggling after a dark period.

"His friend died by suicide then his cousin died in a car crash," Anne recalled. "It was shocking, a grenade into our family.

"Within 16 weeks, we had lost Christopher as well."

Christopher sought help from the doctor but he was merely prescribed drugs and told to return in three months. Anne said:

"He said, 'What do I need to do? Do I need to cut my wrists in front of him to get him to realise how bad I feel? I can't sleep, I keep getting flashbacks'.

"We lost Christopher to suicide, probably about a month after he started taking the tablets."

She was a "complete wreck" for about two years. Her life began to turn around when she made contact with Irish charity Pieta, a crisis centre for self-harm and suicide.

She learned about their Darkness Into Light events, 5k walks that take place during sunrise, and brought the event to Scotland last year. Within a few months, Chris's House was open.

Although Anne is the founder and driving force, she is the first to admit it's a team effort and there's no way the charity could function without

those who offer their time free. Volunteer Patricia Spencer, a retired mental health nurse, is proud of the work Chris's House does to help people across a spectrum of society.

"You get people from all walks of life," said Patricia. "Somebody said to me, 'Why would somebody from an affluent family experience that?'"

"In their mind, they link it to social deprivation, alcohol and drugs.

"Some people believe the person has a choice – but they are not in the right state of mind to choose."

Another guest said visits helped him come to terms with his brother's death. "As soon as you come in, you

know everyone here knows what pain you are going through," he said. "They are interested in how you are coping. You don't get that in some of the big organisations."

Anne-Marie Gallacher runs weekly reiki sessions that have helped him. She endorses Anne's dream of having a Chris's House in every town.

"There's a ripple effect after suicide and it affects the whole family," she said. "If they had places like this all over Scotland, the ripple would stop."

For now, Anne and the team can take comfort from the difference to the lives of many people, all for free.

"Chris's House is somebody's hope in their darkest day – the fact they can call and instantly get to speak to somebody," said the guest who credits the centre with saving her life.

"There are people who care and will help. So reach out and ask for it."

● Chris's House is at 10a Saline Street, Airdrie. For help, call 01236 766755, email info@chrisshouse.org or visit facebook.com/Chriss-House-387877624740201/



INTO THE LIGHT Anne and committee member Lorna McBreen on memorial walk



MESSAGE Anne, with patron Phil Boswell MP, says every town needs a Chris's House



RELAXATION Chris's House has a massage and reiki room