

One year after he was of Robert McCartney



EXCLUSIVE

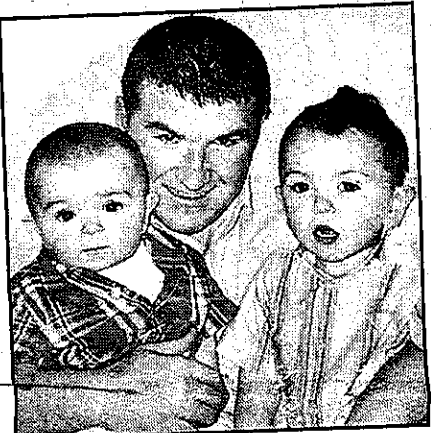
By ANTONIA HOYLE

IT MIGHT have gone down as just another brutal killing in the blood-stained annals of Northern Ireland but for what happened next.

Six brave women banded together to spread the name of Robert McCartney - mercilessly murdered by known IRA men in a Belfast bar a year ago today - across the world.

His five sisters and heartbroken fiancée fought relentlessly for his killers to be brought to justice.

Along the way, they shrugged off intimidation and were shunned by so-called friends who feared reprisals if they broke the



DAD: With Brandon and Conlaed

conspiracy of silence surrounding the murder. Today they are still fighting - because despite their desperate attempts to uncover the truth no one has yet been convicted of killing Robert.

So for his sisters Gemma, Catherine, Paula, Donna and Claire anger still cannot give way to grief.

"I still can't bring myself to visit his grave," says Paula, 39. "Even looking at pictures of him is too painful. I couldn't even be there when Robert was buried and I still can't go there now."

But traumatised Bridgeen Hagans - the mother of his sons Conlaed, five, and Brandon, three - visits Robert's grave every week.

"For his anniversary I've ordered a special hand-made arrangement of red roses to go on his grave," she says. "But I still can't believe he's gone."

THE grief is all-consuming. Some days I can't stop crying - at home, when I pick the kids up from school, everywhere. Everything reminds me of him.

The couple should have been married for six months by now.

"I wanted a big white wedding with all the family. We were both really excited about it," says Bridgeen, 28. "As the date came and went I forced myself not to think about it. Instead I focused on getting justice for Robert."

"I couldn't have done this without the support of his sisters - I didn't have their strength. I'll always be grateful to them."

As they talk exclusively to the Daily Mirror, the women's strong

individual characters shine through. From Catherine's softly spoken reserve to Claire's quiet confidence, it's not hard to see why they melted the hearts of hardened politicians as they carried their campaign to London, Europe and America.

They still can't believe they have lost the man they all loved.

On January 30 last year, truck driver Robert, 33, had been enjoying a drink with his friend Brendan Devine in Magennis's Bar in Belfast city centre.

After a confrontation in the bar Devine had his throat cut and Robert was battered with bottles and stabbed through the heart.

Devine survived but Robert was left bleeding in the street. His attackers, local IRA men, locked the doors of the bar, confiscated the CCTV tape and warned everyone present to keep quiet about the horror they'd witnessed.

"I'll never forget getting the call to say Robert had been attacked," recalls Bridgeen. "I rushed to the hospital and stroked his hand as blood poured out of him."

"It was a terrible sight, but I wasn't going to leave his side. When the doctor said there was nothing more they could do for him I screamed the place down."

The senseless murder sent shock waves through the city, but still witnesses didn't come forward.

"Acquaintances of ours were in the bar at the time, but even they were too scared," says Catherine, 37, a teacher. "Friends we thought we could rely on suddenly disappeared. We felt utterly betrayed."

And despite there being 70 potential witnesses - many of them leading Sinn Fein activists - it looked as if his killers were going to get off scot-free.

But they badly underestimated the strength of the McCartney

There

killed by the IRA, the fiancée and sister still cannot rest until they find the truth

FIGHTING:
FIVE: From
left, Claire,
Paula,
Donna,
Catherine,
Gemma

Picture:
ALAN LEWIS



HELP US: With US Sen. Edward M. Kennedy

would have cowed weaker souls just made the sisters stronger. "We were determined to be silenced," says Catherine.

When they talk about their love for him shines on was a devoted dad and loyal friend - we called him Bert," smiles Paula.

"He loved his weightlifting action, but he was a bit too. He'd ply all of us with protein and drop by for tea."

"He was planning Valentine's just before he was killed. He and Paula were going to a ball do but he refused to wear a tux. It wasn't his style. But he wanted and bought one on the sly to surprise her. He never got to wear it."

And although sadness is etched on Paula's face she still hasn't been able to sleep, eat or function properly. "I spend every waking second thinking about my brother," she says.

"But I won't shed tears - not now. The other day I found myself kicking a bin in sheer frustration."

LAST April a man was arrested over the killing. He is not expected to go on trial until early next year.

Paula says: "We see him on the street, hear about the holidays, see the news on, even the takeaways. It makes me feel sick."

Bridgen adds: "And I remember him in the newspaper. I tried to look at him in the eye but he turned away. I found my wallet and keys lying on the way, feeling sick."

After being threatened with petrol bombs and forced to live in bullet-proof glass her windows, Paula finally moved to a town in County Wick. Bridgen, too, was forced out of the area. She happily married Robert. The fight continues.

Last month she went to Downing Street to meet Tony Blair. "He seen kind," says Paula diplomatically. "But at the end of the day no pressure has been applied on Fein to reveal who's responsible."

The sisters believe 15 others were involved in the killing cover-up and are still calling witnesses to come forward.

Police want to question the driver of a large blue car seen fleeing away from Magennis's Bar at 11pm on the night of the murder.

The sisters would like to meet and even talk of emigrating until the murderers are brought to justice they will stay in Belfast. They won't rest until we get answers, says Catherine.

"It's what Robert would have wanted. It's not about politics about our love for him. That drives us on."

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● If you have any information about the murder of Robert McCartney, call on 02890 700311.

WILL be justice



BESOTTED: Bridgen was set to marry Robert



THREATS: Bridgen has been forced to move out

sisters. As pressure mounted, Sinn Féin suspended seven members. The IRA expelled three men - and even offered to shoot those involved. But for the sisters that wasn't the answer - they simply wanted justice. They organised rallies and roused the local community.

Their campaign snowballed, and on St Patrick's Day last March, they were invited to present their dossier on the case to US President George Bush. Through their doors.

"It was surreal," says Claire, 27, a trainee teacher. "We weren't looking for celebrity status. But if it helped our cause we were prepared to put up with it."

But then came death threats, hate mail and pictures of their dead brother covered in excrement. Witnesses were told to keep their mouths shut. Sinn Féin chief Martin McGuinness warned the women to stay out of politics.

Such intimidation