



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## DESSIE SINGS THE PRAISES OF HIS HOME TOWN: "THERE'S NOWHERE LIKE IT"

It was the late Johnny Gallagher, one of the founding members, who persuaded Dessie Kelly to link up with the Letterkenny Reunion.

"Johnny lived across the road from me and it was him who got me involved." And consequently, back in 2000, nine years after the Reunion came into being, Dessie was co-opted onto the organising committee. "And the following year, I was chairman!" Dessie declares.

For a man who savours committees and meetings that was no surprise. And for a man who has chaired many a committee, equally not unexpected. But it's his passion for his home town that meant there was no arm twisting required to persuade him to sign up to an organisation that continues to provide a bridge linking emigrants with the place of their birth.

It's a town that has held on firmly to Dessie Kelly. Apart from going to Scotland where he had vague intentions of remaining on – he returned after a week – he has never wanted to leave Letterkenny. "There's nowhere like it. Nowhere. I've travelled to many other places but to my mind, Letterkenny is the best of them all."

Those who have departed over the decades return, periodically of course, but the Reunion, as Dessie points out, offers them the opportunity to come back and meet up with, not just the townspeople of today, but those who also emigrated.

"It also gives them a chance to see the progress Letterkenny has made over the years since they went away."

### 10th Letterkenny Reunion

The 2018 event will represent the 10th Letterkenny Reunion and Dessie is quick to acknowledge the three men who met one day back in the early 1990's and helped initiate the whole concept.

"If it wasn't for Jimmy Sweeney, Johnny Gallagher and Johnny Joe McCollum, there might never have been a Reunion," Dessie insists, acknowledging the efforts of all the committees over the past thirty years who have helped keep the pot boiling.

There have been many stories of townies linking up after years of separation. "During the 2015 Reunion, I met up with May Hegarty from the Burmah who I hadn't seen since 1962. That's what the Reunion does and continues to do," Dessie offers an example.

Born at Rosemount, his family had relocated to the Burmah when he was two years of age.

His father, Frank was a carpenter by trade while his mother, Bella, toiled as a housewife. She passed away in 1952 and Dessie was reared by his aunt, Rosie, who had resided in the Market Square, and brought him up in Ard O'Donnell.

Ten years after the passing of his mother, Dessie's

Dessie Kelly (left).



father went to his eternal reward.

The young Dessie would eventually go to reside with his uncle, Willie John Kelly, at Lower Main Street.

He attended the boys national school and recalls involvement in the choir which performed at the official opening of Scoil Mhuire gan Smal in 1958.

"I'm more prepared to listen to singing now rather than sing," he smiles.

But those who were on a Reunion committee outing to Gortahork a couple of years back will know there's a voice there still prepared to give it a go – and the range to go with it.

No record on whether or not he sang during his two and a half years at the Tech but he is quick to sing the praises of some of his teachers there. "Paddy McGeehan, Liam O'Donnell, John Byrne – three very good teachers.

"And then there was Marie Gillespie who taught Irish. I loved Irish. In fact, I found it easier to learn than English."

Loved Irish but not so fond of the time he served as a mechanic at the Donegal Service Depot. "I hated it, every single minute of it."

In 1967 Dessie took up a position of storeman with the Ford Dealership after the local company McClean and McLaughlin changed from their previous dealership with Volkswagen. "It was based where Benny Sweeney's place is now.

"I won the best young storeman from Ford one year. And P.J. Lockhart got the best young mechanic."

But ultimately there was another calling for Dessie – as a telephonist with the then P & T. "It went through three phases from P & T to Eircom and then Telecom.

"I was there until I retired in 1995 – I was a supervisor at that stage. It was a time of change and I saw the demise of the old switchboard system to automation."

One thing that never changed over those years is Dessie's passion for football, both as a player and administrator.

In the early sixties, he turned out with the Letterkenny Rovers youth team and also played netminder with Swilly Rovers. "There were great times during the Summer Cup era."

Dessie also lined out with Glen Rovers in the Donegal League – a team managed by Finbar Glackin and Hugh Kelly. "Oh, and Joe Kelly as well," he sneaks in a cheeky grin. "A good goalkeeper though he's a G.A.A. man at heart!"

The story of Dessie's involvement with Letterkenny Rovers and with football in the North-West would require space the size of Leckview Park (and you'd probably have to throw in the Bonagee Showgrounds in addition) but in these confined quarters he is keen to signal the influence and efforts of such notables as Dick Duffy, Charlie Collins, Snr., Billy Doherty, Dan McLaughlin and Robert Johnston, among others, for helping to keep the game alive in Letterkenny.

Dessie has served, and continues to in most cases, with the Donegal League, the Ulster Senior League, the Ulster Football Association, and with both the F.A.I. Junior and Senior Councils.

In recent weeks, the talk – certainly across channel – was of that famous day in 1966 when England won the World Cup (okay, not just recent weeks), but Dessie prefers to reflect on a much more momentous event from that year, his marriage to Annette Boyce from the Back Road.



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A year later, there was the little matter of Glasgow Celtic's participation in the European Cup Final – an occasion long time fan, Dessie recalls not just because of the result (2-1 to the Hoops in case you were out that day!) but because his new wife acquired a television for their home in Rosemount so they could watch the game.

The couple went on to have seven of an offspring, including Mary (Forde), Elaine (Maguire) – the latter two prominently involved with the Reunion – Linda (Doherty); Yvonne McBride; Frankie; Damian; and Antoinette.

"We have twenty grandchildren and one great grandchild," Dessie proudly proclaims.

Meanwhile, of equally pressing concern is the forthcoming Letterkenny Reunion.

"I'm hoping that Seamus McManus from the Lower Burmah, who is living in Philadelphia, will be there but I'm not sure if he's coming. And Phonsie O'Donnell who is in New York. He never missed a Reunion up to 2012.

"But I suppose that's the thing about the Letterkenny Reunion. While we know quite a few who are confirmed, there's always the surprise element and you run into somebody who you haven't seen for ages.

"That's the real joy of the Reunion," its chairperson enthuses.

And the other message he wants to get out? "The Reunion isn't just for people who were born and bred in the town. Everybody's welcome no matter what connection they have with the town."

Though few of them might possess the passion Dessie Kelly has for the town of his birth.

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