



- MEET A TOWNIE -



ANNE'S TIDY APPROACH TO COMMUNITY AND LIFE IN LETTERKENNY

A sense of place; a sense of belonging. When Anne McGowan reflects on her home town of Letterkenny and the community in which she plays such a prominent role, she returns to those phrases on several occasions.

"I have a very strong sense of place in this town. The memories I have concern that sense of place. And that sense of belonging.

"I suppose it comes from a knowledge of the history, geography and geology of an area, its flora and fauna, its folklore and a growing sense of the land and its history having lived there."

The sense she doesn't mention is the one that ensures time in her company is never short of laughter – borne from a happy upbringing and the surroundings that helped define her.

The daughter of John Cunningham, a nursing officer at St. Conal's Hospital originally from Loch Eske, and Mary McElhinney from Creeslough – "a strong woman and a strict disciplinarian but also influential and encouraging" – Anne was born, in Rosemount, as she emphasises, in the "shadow of St. Eunan's Cathedral." She has three siblings, Brighidin, a teacher residing in Fanad; Maria, a nurse resident in Kerrykeel; and Martin who serves as parish priest in Drumoghill.

She describes her childhood as "idyllic", reflecting on days in Glencar that were "always long, sunny and filled with laughter". And winter days bringing their own particular joys.

She remains in regular contact with many of the close-knit peer group with which she grew up – significant milestones reached together, hobbies shared along with walks to school.

Those walks brought them initially to Scoil Mhuire gan Sma, opened in 1956, and an establishment Anne insists was way ahead of its time.

"It was just the most wonderful educational facility, centrally heated with parquet floors, ten well furnished classrooms, cookery room and medical room. And then there was the state of the art concert hall which was one of the last of its kind to be sanctioned for any national school in Ireland."

The Loreto nuns and lay staff worked very hard, she points out, in the education of each child. She recalls the dedicated singing classes under the expertise of Peg O'Donnell. "I wasn't much of a singer but I have nothing but great memories of the choir and being involved in those classes."

And when the final notes echoed at primary school level, it was a short jaunt to the Loreto Convent school to pursue their secondary education while basically singing from the same hymn sheet.

"We got a very good education there, too, under people who took a great interest in you. The Mistress of Schools at the time was Sr. Canice who was so tuned into us. It seemed to us that she even knew what we were thinking!"

"Students at Loreto were imbued with a sense of belonging and were held in positive regard. The notion of social justice and personal responsibility were high on the priority list."



Anne McGowan.

Anne recalls involvement in drama productions at the school under director Meryl Head and, for twelve years, learning speech and drama with elocution teacher, Kathleen Sadler, who hosted students initially at her home in Lower Main Street before relocating to New Line Road.

"I couldn't sing or dance but I had an aptitude for speech and drama and I probably didn't realise how much Mrs Sadler taught me.

"She took dedication to her job to a whole new level and was completely devoted to her students and had an unwavering commitment to their progress and achievement. To her I will always be grateful and indeed to my mother who ensured that I attended!"

"Mrs. Sadler was certainly a big influence on my life." An influence that would see Anne become involved

with drama groups including the Letterkenny Vocational Players and the 71 Players in Derry.

In those youthful days, Anne and her friends – and indeed their peers of that time and other times – would spend their free hours playing at what she terms the "little kingdom" at the locally named Rocks at Sentry Hill very much under the shadow of the Cathedral. "We never went to Rogers Burren because that was completely forbidden!"

Following her Leaving Certificate, the young Anne McGowan – or younger edition! – was accepted to study at the Mary Ward Teacher Training College in Nottingham, England. "I spent three truly inspirational years there and went on to continue my studies at the N.U.I. and later at the University of Ulster."

And ultimately returned to take up a teaching post at

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Scoil Cholmcille in her native town in July 1974. "A new building allowed the school to enrol all the infant boys who had up to then attended Scoil Mhuire gan Sma for junior and senior infant classes," Anne explains.

The expansion necessitated the employment of five additional teachers and consequently she chalked up her opening day at the school in the company of Maureen Keogh (Slevin), Patricia Fahey (Sheridan), Brid Ferry (O'Halpin) and Tom Redden.

She would go on to spend thirty-eight "happy, healthy, productive and fun-filled years" in Scoil Cholmcille before retiring in 2012. The school continues to have a very special place in her heart as she remembers with fondness a "distinguished community of teachers and learners."

On a personal level Anne got married to Detective Garda, Paudge McGowan, a native of Kinlough, County Leitrim, in 1976 and the couple went on to have four sons.

Her return to Letterkenny began an extensive involvement in the local community and she continues to serve as chairperson of the Board of Directors of the An Grianan Theatre Management Company and as chairperson of Letterkenny Tidy Towns.

In addition, she is a director of the Friends of Letterkenny University Hospital, a director of Donegal Hospice, while also sitting on the National Council of An Taisce.

As Tidy Towns chairperson, she oversaw that momentous year in Letterkenny's history when the town achieved the ultimate honour by claiming the overall title in the National Tidy Towns competition in 2015.

"That was one of the most joyful experiences of all. It's a bit of a cliché but I was bursting with joy. I was there along with the members of the committee who had travelled to the Helix in Dublin for the announcement and was sitting open-mouthed when the word came through. Here we were in a competition that had attracted over 900 entries and coming out on top."

Anne had joined the local Tidy Towns body in 1998. "At that time I was working with May McClintock, now sadly gone from us, to bring the Green Schools programme to Donegal. My father had a great love of the natural environment and from a very early age I was growing in environmental awareness."

She describes the passing in 2011 of another personality who had contributed so much to the Tidy Towns initiative, Jim McCormick, as "an unspeakable loss". The former chairperson's legacy and that of all the members who had served on the committee was that success at national level three years ago.

The Tidy Towns committee has built a strong relationship with the Council and other local agencies with Anne stressing that the 2015 title was not an end to the initiative but another beginning.

"As the largest urban centre in the county all eyes look to Letterkenny as representative of the best we have to offer."

Meanwhile, Anne expresses herself as "very grateful" to the town of her birth for all that it has given her and continues to give.

"Blooming," she says, "in the place where I was planted...!"

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