



- MEET A TOWNIE -



HOW SOME WINDOW SHOPPING BROUGHT KAPIL TO LETTERKENNY!

It was in many ways appropriate for someone who would become involved in the retail trade in his adopted town of Letterkenny that a pause to look into a window at a department store in Dublin, back in the late fifties resulted in Kapil Verma making a coincidental contact that would bring him to his ultimate destination and a new life.

A native of the Punjab in India, he had arrived in Ireland having sailed from Bombay to Marseilles – “I was sea sick the whole way” – before taking the train to Paris. “I had no French and very little English but I did not want to miss Paris.”

A flight from Orly Airport took him to Shannon for his first step-down in the country he would eventually call home. “I met people who were so good. The Customs Officers shook my hands and welcomed me to Ireland.”

Getting to Shannon was one thing, however, getting to his destination of Letterkenny, another adventure entirely. “I said, I have to go to Letterkenny but they told me there’s no way to get directly to Letterkenny.

“You have to go to Limerick and then on to Dublin. And so I stayed a night in Limerick and then took the train to Dublin the next day.” His father, already resident in Letterkenny, had advised him to stay in O’Brien’s Hotel in Parnell Street – “the McClaffertys from Kilmacrenan bought it” – and the young Kapil subsequently booked in.

Clerys Department Store

And it was while strolling down O’Connell Street that he stopped to have a look in the window of Clerys Department Store.

“Next thing I seen a man and he came up to me and asked me where I was from. I said, I’m from India, and he said ‘and where are you going?’ I said Letterkenny, and he said, I’m going there tomorrow.”

The man in question was none other than R.P. Meehan, well known for so many years in Letterkenny as the proprietor of Barr’s Newsagents on Upper Main Street and involved in the local retail trade. And well acquainted with Kapil’s father.

“The next day he took me to a warehouse in Dublin from where he was buying clothes and then he drove me to Letterkenny in his Volkswagen Beetle. Needless to say I was very happy he was going to Letterkenny and I was getting a lift with him.”

A coincidental meeting at a time when, Kapil points out, there were not too many Indians or Asians in Ireland.

They arrived in Letterkenny at around one o’clock in the morning and he recalls staying that first night at 77 Lower Main Street. “My father was there and he was delighted to see me and I to see him.”

His father, Pyarelal, known locally as Charlie – “he used to travel to places like St. Johnston, Convoy and Raphoe selling clothes and they called him ‘John’ there!” – had originally arrived in Letterkenny back in 1928. “He shared a boarding house in Church Lane with Mr Brown, who became manager at the Munster and Leinster Bank on Main Street, and with Mr McGinley who was from



Kapil Verma and his wife Margaret pictured outside their home in Letterkenny.

Derrybeg.”

‘Charlie’ had returned to India in 1937 and came back to Letterkenny the following year. His son, Kapil, was born on June 26th in 1938 in Punjab in the northern territory of the Indian subcontinent.

His father once again returned to the land of his birth in 1948 and started a knitcraft factory in Punjab, an ill-fated venture as it turned out. “The people took the stuff from him and never paid him.”

And consequently in 1952, he undertook the journey back to Letterkenny, staying in the same house he had left from on the High

Road. “He got involved in selling clothes again but then his health got bad and he took the advice to go back to India in 1963.” And it was there in 1980 that Pyarelal Verma passed away.

But, thankfully, not before being able to introduce his son to life in Letterkenny and the town he would marry and settle down in.

Local accent

For a period in 1959 when Kapil first arrived it wasn’t lack of work that impeded the 20 year old Indian native but lack of understanding! “The biggest problem for me for a while was the accent. I found it hard to understand the

accent.”

Though that was not related to the fact that within a couple of months he had headed off to England to find a job. Eventually working as a bus conductor in Wolverhampton. “I had cousins in England,” he explains.

But two years later he handed over his fare machine and made the decision to return to Letterkenny.

It was the late Kevin Shanahan who offered him advice on securing a tax refund from his time in England. “I wrote a letter and got £50 sterling as a tax rebate.” And a further £20 sterling a number of weeks later from the Wolverhampton Income Tax office. “That was 1961 – a lot of money at that time.”

Life went on in Letterkenny and his job as a driver and salesman kept him occupied. But in 1965 an accident left him hospitalised. “I’m driving the van from Mr Meehan’s house in Crievesmith and it hits a kerb and the door opens and I fall out while it is still moving and a small part of the van falls on me and I fracture my pelvis.”

He ended up in Lifford Hospital for a six to eight week period. “I was still sore when I got home.”

But home was to take on a much more comfortable meaning for him when three years later he married Margaret Hegarty from the Oldtown. They went on to have three sons and a daughter, Mark, Jason, Gavin and Sheena. He and Margaret moved into their home in McNeely Villas in 1970 and eventually purchased it in a buy-out scheme.

The retail business continued to occupy him – “I was selling clothes from 1962 up to 1976 or 1978” – with a job that would take him to the far ends of his adopted country.

In 1982, Kapil, a richly affable personality who wears a smile as comfortable as the clothes he once sold, took the courageous step of opening his own shop, ‘Mark Fashions’ in Letterkenny, located across the road from the old Dunnes Stores. “But things did not go right and about two and a half to three years later I had to close it.”

Out of work for two years, he was back in business thanks to the intervention of Brendan Delap who offered him a job with Coca Cola. A classic case of things going better....!

He worked for the company from March 1990 up to 2005 before finally bringing in retirement.

He and Margaret have returned to his native India on several occasions. “We went there in 1971 and I met a man at London Heathrow airport who had been a classmate back in India.”

Not the only coincidental meeting along the way. At Delhi airport, he noted a police officer who was checking passports. “When he seen my passport, he said I know you well!”. It turned out he was in the same class as me in Punjab. I could not believe it.”

And in 2011, Kapil and Margaret were returning from another trip to India and met a family in the hotel they were staying in. “And the woman says to me, are you from Punjab? I’m from there as well.

“She says, I’m from Musaphir and I know all your family.”

A life, indeed, of coincidental meetings, one of which quite literally brought Kapil Verma to Letterkenny and the place he is happy to call home.

“Next thing I seen a man and he came up to me and asked me where I was from. I said, I’m from India, and he said ‘and where are you going?’ I said Letterkenny, and he said, I’m going there tomorrow.”

Kapil Verma, O’Connell Street Dublin when he arrived in Ireland