



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## THE LETTERKENNY COUPLE WHO HAVE HELPED ADVANCE THE CAUSE OF THE COMMUNITY GAMES

**Put the terms Community and Games together and you get an event that has inspired and promoted sporting and cultural activities for thousands of our young people since its formation back in the late sixties.**

Put the names Michael and Mary Crossan together and you have a couple who have done more than their share in helping to promote and organise a movement that has been a mainstay in their home town of Letterkenny each and every year since the mid seventies.

As even the briefest time in their company will testify, their enthusiasm for the Community Games initiative reaches beyond the normal passion found in your average supporter.

Not something they might have discussed after they first set eyes on one another in Ballybofey's Butt Hall back in the late sixties – but certainly a topic that has been a frequent visitor to the Crossan household since. Their paths may never have crossed had Cavan born army electrician, Michael, not been drafted to Donegal and specifically, Rockhill but fate was steadying itself on the starting blocks.

Born into the family of John and Cassie Doherty at Correnagh on the outskirts of Letterkenny, Mary recalls primary schooling at Lurgybrack and the stirring influence of her teacher, Mary Russell. "Anything that I learned, I learned from her," she says.

### Solicitors Office

Two years followed at the Tech at Ard O'Donnell before she subsequently starting earning her bread at O'Donnell's Bakery shop where she was employed for seven years. "It was a small shop but busy with a lot of regulars."

And then a complete departure – going to work in a solicitor's office in Strabane for a further six years. "And then I met His Lordship and the rest is history," she smiles.

His Lordship arrived into the world in the year of what he calls the 'Big Snow' in 1947 in a place called Maudabawn located between Cootehill and Shercock. Michael attended his local National School, Dernakesh, before taking up his secondary education at the Tech in Cootehill.

After three years there he was eager to pursue an apprenticeship in electricity and applied for a number of roles in C.I.E., the E.S.B. and the army. It was 1963 when he commenced that apprenticeship in the army school in Naas, County Kildare. "I served my five years and was assigned to a number of barracks."

There were spells in Cork in Athlone and a stint overseas in Cyprus in 1968 under attachment to the engineering section of the army.

His connection with Donegal was forged with an initial decampment to Fort Dunree before the Troubles erupted and the then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, urged additional troop deployment in the



Michael and Mary Crossan

border areas and the establishment of field hospitals in Letterkenny and Ballybofey.

"I was requested to report to Rockhill House and I remember arriving in Letterkenny in my Volkswagen, registration number MZE 92. I went down Lower Main Street and stopped to ask where precisely Rockhill was."

Upon his arrival, he was met by caretakers, John Hanlon and Johnny Bradley from Bomany and recalls the sights of wooden huts and the rumble of lorries arriving in the early hours of the morning and soldiers landing with their military gear from Athlone.

"And bus loads of refugees coming from Derry and Belfast on their way through to Finner Camp."

It was a stressful time for all concerned but there was also entertainment for the troops at home. And ventures to the Fiesta Ballroom and the Golden Grill. "Soldiers would put their tunics under the chair when they arrived in. And indeed a number of relationships were formed."

And one of them in the Butt Hall in Ballybofey saw a young Letterkenny woman and a soldier from Cavan meeting up for the first time, getting engaged at Christmas 1970, and ultimately heading to the altar rails in St. Eunan's Cathedral in 1971. "Canon Carrabin married us," Mary recalls. "A very nice man."

### Honeymoon

The newly linked Crossans honeymooned down around the West of the country, Mayo and Galway. "We did the Wild Atlantic Way before it ever became the Wild Atlantic Way!"

They resided for a period in a cottage on the High Road at Sprackburn close to the fire station and in 1974 built their current home at Correnagh. "That put an end to the overseas tours in the army," Michael reflects.

As they settled into their new home, sport was forever lurking in the background – and often in the foreground.

"I didn't play but I always had an interest," Mary reveals.

For Michael, the arenas of Gaelic football, volleyball and basketball offered a sporting outlet. "And then a number of injuries set in and I started coaching." And students of volleyball in St. Eunan's College, Loreto and the Technical School all availed of the Cavan native's expertise. Along with local personalities such as Hughie McKay and Sean Tourish, schoolboys soccer also got the benefit of his experience. As did Bonagee United who nominated him for a Civic Reception honour. But it was a man by the name of Joseph Connelly from Dublin who would help inspire the couple's involvement in what became known as the Community Games. Thanks to the aforementioned, the first ever Games took place in Santry in 1968 – it has become a major fixture in the sporting and cultural calendar since.

Michael got involved in the late seventies while Mary remained in the background up until the eighties. Both have contributed hugely to the initiative not just in their home town and county but at a national level.

"It has been a fantastic journey and we've made a lot of friends over the years," Mary maintains.

Adds Michael: "To this day we meet people who performed as kids at Mosney and are still carrying the memories."

From those early years in Mosney where the National Community Games were then staged, it has indeed been a journey of joy for all concerned and even if you didn't return home with a medal there was the memory of meeting up with fellow competitors and friendships born and fun all the way.

"I suppose some people believe that the Community Games is a sporting event but, of course, it's not just that. It's sport and culture and so many children and teenagers have benefited from their involvement over the years," Mary insists.

Letterkenny has contributed richly to the Games both in terms of participation and in relation to

coaching and administration. Among those involved in the late sixties were Dick Duffy, Leo Cullen, Declan O'Carroll, Sue McCormack, Liz Crumlish, Eddie Gibson, Joe King, Nuala McGinley and Phil McCauley.

Many more have followed in helping to promote and encourage the youth of the town, and indeed of the county, since those infant years and continue to do so.

### Community Games

And when you mention Community Games in Donegal, two names inevitably stand out – Michael and Mary Crossan.

They have helped inspire countless young people to take part, not least their own immediate family members including sons and daughters, Sean, Michael, Helena, Brian, Ann-Marie and Karol, all of whom competed at the National Games in Mosney. And have been followed at subsequent National competitions in Athlone by their own children.

Michael and Mary have held varying roles in Community Games at local, Ulster and National level and both have been recipients of National Volunteer Awards.

Michael has served as county P.R.O. and county area P.R.O. – and anyone who has read his reports will know just how capable he has been in that capacity. In 2015 he received the National Overall Media award for his coverage of all competitions. He's the current chairman of the Letterkenny Community Games and has also served on the National Appeal Committee, has sourced vital funding in his role as chairman of the Sponsorship Committee, and has coordinated a number of events at national level. Both in Donegal and at Ulster level, he has toiled tirelessly in various capacities.

This year he received the national Golden Jubilee award marking the fifty years of Community Games and ten years ago was honoured at a Civic Reception hosted by Letterkenny Town Council.

Mary has also held a number of posts including county secretary and assistant area secretary in addition to the role of joint treasurer.

She, too, continues to inspire the youth of the area through her unstinting work and six years ago received the National Volunteer award for her never relenting efforts in advancing the objectives of the Community Games.

She believes now is the time to let the younger generation come on board but will continue to remain involved.

As indeed will her equally enthusiastic husband. "It has been a really rewarding experience. You see these young kids enjoying themselves and that's what it's all about."

"There'll be medals won but the main thing is competing in it and getting that enjoyment out of it," Michael points out.

And thanks to this affable couple and their commitment to the cause, the youth of Letterkenny and beyond will continue to reap the benefits and the buzz.



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