



- MEET A TOWNIE -



A JOURNEY WITH JAMES VIA THE SILENT DISEASE

For Letterkenny native James Sweeney and others who have travelled similar journeys, Relay for Life Donegal offers an opportunity to share. To share stories and experiences that have touched lives and defined them in many ways.

It was around 2005 when James, after undergoing various tests, discovered he had prostate cancer. Treatment followed in Letterkenny Hospital and in St. Luke's Hospital in Dublin. And consequently, the Relay event is one he eagerly anticipates and will join with the hundreds of fellow survivors who will gather in Letterkenny over the first weekend in June. Now resident in the Ballybofey area, James, a former insurance broker with Lloyds of London, recalls a mainly happy childhood in the town he grew up in. "I was one of the Burmah Apaches," he laughs, his family hailing from Lower Ard O'Donnell. Son of the late Hugh and Mary Sweeney, they raised ten children. "There are only four of us left," he reflects poignantly on the loss of five siblings.

He attended the Christian Brothers school before making the equally short journey to St. Eunan's College for his secondary education. "I went through the traditional initiation ceremony" – for generations of College students it involved a ducking in a container of water – "and got christened 'Ginger'".

"Most of the family had red hair – all different shades so that's how that name came about. I had to sing a song before the initiation – I knew it well then but I can't remember now what I sang!"

Dr Cunnea, he recalls, was the President of St. Eunan's at the time. "And those were the days when physical punishment was handed out.

"One morning there were twenty-four of the lads late for Mass and each one of them got four straps on the arse. That's 96 straps in total. The priest was fairly sweating after it."

And the students, no doubt, fairly raw. Fortunately for James, he wasn't one of them. "I just managed to get into mass in time or I would be on the end of the strap as well."

Back in those days, sport was very much restricted in the Letterkenny college. "We weren't allowed to play soccer – only Gaelic football. Of course, there was also the handball alleys – I loved handball."

Unfortunately, all history now – the bulldozers coming in eventually to knock a part of the school's heritage to the ground.

There were, of course, other activities outside the school environment, James remembers, not least when the snows came, and the hills of Letterkenny were put to good use.

"We'd travel up to the Mountain Top and sleigh all the way down to the bottom of the town. Fun times." But school days complete, it was time for pastures

Letterkenny man,
James Sweeney.



new and in the Ard O'Donnell native's case it was to the bright lights of London. "I went over there with Kevin Larkin from Lower Main Street."

And ultimately worked with the famed Lloyds Insurance group at their outlet in Lime Street. "I was there for thirteen years working as a broker."

"It was a bit of a shock to say the least but I have to say the treatment I got and the medical staff who treated me were first rate."

James Sweeney

He recalls one particular day when royalty arrived in the shape of Prince Charles. "He was being shown around and asked me what I was doing. He was very friendly."

Having emigrated to the English capital in 1965, James returned to home soil in 1979 and moved between Meath and Dublin where he worked for a U.S. company in the financial centre.

He came back to his home county in 2003 and undertook a degree course in environmental engineering at the Letterkenny Institute of Technology. He relocated to Curraghmore in Ballybofey around 2005/2006 but it was then that his life took an unexpected twist.

The symptoms weren't clear though he had experienced elements of lethargy and lifelessness. It prompted him to go to his doctor where blood tests and further investigations including a biopsy revealed he had prostate cancer.

"I had no pain and no other symptoms – I suppose that's why they call it the silent cancer.

"It was a bit of a shock to say the least but I have to say the treatment I got and the medical staff who treated me were first rate."

He undertook twelve months of chemotherapy in Letterkenny Hospital. "I had it in the form of injections, one every three months.

"What happens is they virtually castrate you. Thankfully I don't have to have them anymore."

James spent ten weeks in St. Luke's Hospital in Dublin as part of his treatment, receiving radiation therapy. "That was an unbelievable experience. There is this lodge and you have your own room with a little kitchen and a bathroom. The staff were great too.

"And you could go out any day and walk around the city centre if you wanted."

And not only that but there was also a craft centre at the hospital where patients could involve themselves in various pastimes. "I started to paint, and I've been painting ever since."

Cancer is no stranger to Donegal as evident by the statistics and James has one theory why it's so prevalent. "I buy all the water that I drink. I don't drink tap water and wouldn't drink it if I was being paid for it."

Meanwhile, he's warmly anticipating this year's Relay for Life which is being staged at the LYIT on the weekend of Saturday and Sunday, June 2nd and 3rd.

"I've been at a couple of Relays and you realise just how many others have been affected by this disease.

"But it's a powerful event and I have to pay great credit to those who organise it and take part in it. It gives a great boost to those of us who have come through cancer and those who are going through it or about to," he insists.



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