



- MEET A TOWNIE -



FROM A CHILDHOOD WITHIN ITS WALLS TO PSYCHIATRIC SOCIAL WORKER AT ST. CONAL'S – BARRY REFLECTS ON LIFE'S STRANGE COURSE

When Barry Ramsay delivered one of his first lectures in his then new role as psychiatric social worker at St. Conal's Hospital he did so in a familiar, if somewhat altered, setting – his old bedroom!

As a child he and his parents and siblings had resided within those once forbidden walls, his father, Bart, occupying a job as psychiatrist at the hospital on Letterkenny's Kilmacrennan Road.

"It was like living in a private estate," recalls Barry. "If we had friends into play, they had to be signed in through the gate. Very official."

Born in the Letterkenny District Hospital in 1941, the young Barry did have some ideas of his future career path from early on though the original family business had given no indication of that particular route. Bart's own father, Bartley owned and ran a drapery store on Letterkenny's Main Street.

"When the shop opened initially all they had in the window was a pair of socks which made people come into the store to see what else was there," laughs Barry.

Not the only selling technique under foot. "There'd be a packet of fags and a box of matches behind the counter which would be produced so a cigarette could be offered to a wavering customer and enable them to make up their mind!"

Barry's mother, Eileen, a nurse and a native of Limerick, had met Bart at the Mater Hospital in Dublin where he had been a junior doctor. The couple had six children, Barry, Ronnatt, Karena (who sadly passed away two years ago), Michael, David and Mary.

Barry attended the Presentation Brothers and recalls prize draws at the school where he invariably sold most of the tickets. "I sold them to the nurses and staff in St. Conal's – a captive audience you see. They just couldn't get away from me."

After leaving primary education at the age of thirteen, he was employed for a

spell with Sam Fleming on his farm at Windyhall. But life was to take a different turn for the Ramsay family. His father had been appointed Inspector of Mental Hospitals and they relocated to Dublin in 1954 where the teenage Barry attended Blackrock College.

"I enjoyed Blackrock and the sport that went with it. It was effectively a rugby pitch with a school attached!"

He played the oval ball game up to junior standard – "I still have the marks on my legs!" – and was also involved in soccer and athletics. "My best distance was the 300 metres – rarely run these days."

It was those childhood days living in the surrounds of St. Conal's Hospital that conceivably prompted him in the direction of social work studies at Trinity College.

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Barry Ramsay.

"Woman who had a baby, for instance, were bounced in and never got back out again," he offers a telling and stark reflection of the times that were in it. "It was just so obvious to me that there were people who should not have been there."

He spent three years from 1961 studying in Trinity College. "At the time, there were very few jobs for social workers in Ireland."

Consequently he took up a post across the water in Worcestershire where he was based at Powick Hospital, following that up with a secondment to the local County Council.

His childhood sweet heart, Eilis McGavigan, a

native of Ard O'Donnell – they met playing tennis and subsequently courted – continued to be a sweet heart in adulthood. She worked as a Civil Servant in Dublin and it was there that the couple got married, producing two sons, Bartley and David (or Daithi as the latter is better known).

"All the time we were wanting to come back to Ireland but then I got appointed to a senior job in Buxton in Derbyshire where I got promoted to area manager."

That eclipsed seven more years of that ambition to return home but it was nevertheless a rewarding period for Barry and his family.

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But more rewarding was to come. And one day he opened up the post to find a letter from his mother, informing him that a job for a psychiatric social worker had been advertised for St. Conal's Hospital. "Two days later, Eilis's mother wrote to us about the job!"

Two mums do make a right and Barry was quick to respond and in October, 1977, he was back in St. Conal's having successfully negotiated the process. "When I had been there previously, I slept in the place – now I was let out at night!"

"It was very strange coming back." And even stranger when he took that first lecture in his former bedroom.

His job took him into areas where agony and torment occupied so many lives and where his involvement in the alcohol treatment and sexual offenders programmes, alongside Hugh McBride and Tim McBride, forced him into the bleakest of corners.

Somehow in the evenings when work was done he managed to pull the shutters down. But there was always the next day.

He was appointed principal social worker for child care in the county – another area where darkness lurked.

Away from his job, and indeed after it, sport continued to be a positive draw with golf in particular topping the leaderboard. He vaguely remembers playing as a junior at the old Crievesmith nine-hole course but it was at Barnhill, both as player and administrator, that the game took off for Barry.

Honours on and off the course have followed – one of the most memorable moments being the club's success in the prestigious Pierce Purcell Shield in 2009 and victory in the Carlsberg West Coast Challenge among other triumphs. He has served as both Captain and President of Letterkenny Golf Club in the respective 75th and centenary years. And is also a stalwart in the Golfing Union of Ireland. Just last year he was made an Honorary Member of the local club.

"I still play golf" – this week he was battling fellow competitors and strong winds at Rosapenna – "but I have quit all administration," he insists. Apart from his involvement in running the North-West Alliance.

Away from tees and greens, Barry is a member of the Swilly Hikers group and travelled with them to Ehrwald in Austria at the end of May last year for some energetic hill walking. And in his mid-seventies, he will be flying to Italy with the Hikers in the summer to tackle part of the famed Dolomites.

And in the meantime, continuing to travel to Finn Park to see if his beloved Harps can climb out of the First Division of the League of Ireland.

Even a heart attack last year – "I initially thought it was a chest infection" – hasn't grounded him and the insertion of a stent has given him a new lease of life.

But as everyone who knows him would testify, time spent in the company of Barry Ramsay would do anybody's heart good.

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