



- MEET A TOWNIE -



Community activist Jim and his Annual treat!

There's a white-haired gentleman who helps put smiles on countless faces around this time of the year. Without fail he delivers and Letterkenny and its population, both here and abroad, have plenty of cause to salute him.

Step forward, Jim Lynch, editor of the Christmas Annual which just last week made its appearance to bring tidings of great joy into local lives.

It's one of several initiatives that Jim has been involved in over the years.

His father, John – better known as Jack – was a native of Longford who came to Rockhill during the Emergency. His mother Catherine (Kathleen) was a Mullen from Kirkstown.

The twelve strong family included Bridie (Keys), Brenda (McClafferty), Linda (Elliott), Catriona (Murphy), Jackie (Kelly), Fidelma (Gallagher), Patsy, Cathal, Frances (Kerr), Joan (Caplin), and the late and always lamented, Barry.

Their dad, Jack, would hold down two jobs – by day driving the Swilly lorries and by night, a caretaker at La Scala Cinema.

"I went to the Presentation Brothers. I think we were in Trinity Hall for a while," he recalls.

He has little memory of his primary school days other than the time he was running down the slope and glanced his head off the gate, a cut along the eye a permanent reminder.

There was also the time Duffy's Circus came to town. "But because it was based out at McLean's garage, my mother wouldn't let me go, dangerous and too far out, she said."

But, coinciding with his Confirmation day, Jim decided during the lunch break to make his way in the general direction. "Susie Dillons house was being constructed at the time and I wandered onto the site." But a cement mixer had other ideas and Jim lost the top of his thumb.

"I was taken up to the hospital and I remember the late Dr. McGinley dressed in a white apron from head to toe and sparks of blood all over it."

There were other more pleasant childhood memories. "Every Sunday, the Lynch family would go on safari up to Glencar via College Farm Road and across the fields to my grandmother Mullen's homestead."

And occasional visits to Ma Butler's well stocked sweet shop and all the treats to be found there.

With twelve in the family, there were many mouths to feed and Jim recalls the gener-



Jim Lynch.

osity of Joey Blake, Joe Gallagher, and the I.A.W.S. who provided the necessary on tick. "My mother would have twelve sliced pans on her list and they would last from Saturday to Tuesday."

And if she ran out of bread, she would dispatch Jim or any of his other siblings to go over to Jackie Houston, the bread agent. "And you'd ask Jackie and his reply generally was: "Go out to the van, son, and if there's a loaf in it, take it with you."

Jim was in his infancy when the family moved to Ard O'Donnell. "I'm a Burmah Apache and proud of it.

"But my mother never allowed me to go on the attack as she seldom let us out of the back garden!"

The generous nature of neighbours was another feature of life in the Burmah. "We had our own texting system back then. If you banged the poker on the Stanley range it alerted the neighbours who would come into the house!"

There was the annual trek to Rathmullan for the Regatta and a much longer journey to visit his dad's brother in Edenderry in a car Jack rented from Tommy Tease.

"And we'd pile into this small vehicle and head off. And my mum would be telling my father, 'you're going the wrong way', and he'd be telling her he wasn't, and every so often during the journey they'd be arguing about the directions."

And then they'd arrive in Edenderry and make their way to the Bank House – Jim's uncle was the bank manager there – "like the Hillbillies arriving in town with our legs sticking out the windows of the car.

"And we went into the house and up these marble stairs – these shy, timid kids from the Burmah overwhelmed by it all."

Back at home, like many of his peers, St. Eunan's College provided him with his secondary education. "The main thing I remember about that was the Prep Leagues. I couldn't kick snow off a ditch!"

Study hours ran from 5.p.m. to 8.p.m. and day boys did not escape this one hundred and eighty minutes away from normal boyhood pursuits. "And after the study I would go along to the cinema to help my father.

"I suppose I didn't get doing what normal teenagers do. My teenage years were very serious. I wasn't out chasing women and all that."

He did, however, pursue a week's suspension from the college. The late fiddler, Tommy Peoples was sitting behind Jim at study time and had catapulted an elastic band in his direction. "I looked around to see who it was and as I was doing so, Fr. Silke, the then Dean, came in and accused me of causing a racket."

Result – suspended and a lot of explaining to do to parents.

Years later, Jim got married in Rome to Mary and he received a telephone call from the same Fr. Silke who was then working at the Irish College in the Italian city. "He offered to take me on a sightseeing tour of Rome. I wasn't too enthusiastic but decided to go in the end and we became friends after that."

That was then but before that life appeared

to be taking the young Jim Lynch in a completely different direction.

Having been born in St. Eunan's Terrace, there was the belief among his family and neighbours that here would be yet another priest from the estate and in 1966, after many conversations with Fr. Dinny McGettigan on the subject, Jim was destined for Maynooth and study for the priesthood.

There were a number of requirements for students including a walking stick and a hat. "Tony McCaul's mother bought me a Foxford rug and I still have it to this day." But the academic side to Maynooth was not what Jim wanted and he went on to spend three years in the seminary in Carlow. "I was more keen on the Pastoral experience and I enjoyed Carlow better because of that."

There was a stint, too, in one of the Calvary seminaries in New York where Letterkenny natives were never far away. "Celine McCaul was married to an Italian policeman and one night he invited us a few of us along to a Playboy Club."

Not quite what the authorities back in Ireland might have been envisaged for a clerical student!

But life's pathway was going to take him into the teaching profession and he ended up in Worcester in England as a teaching assistant at a maladjusted school where he spent a year.

In 1974, Jim applied to the teacher training college at De La Salle in Manchester, completing the course after three years. "Niall McIvor from Letterkenny was in the same class."

Jim was in Dublin when his father, keen to have his son back at home, kept scouring the local papers for potential jobs and drafted off his C.V.'s to a school. "And that was how I ended up in Cloughfin National School. I hadn't known a thing about it

"What's more it was for a job as Principal and I had been offered a job in Raphoe at the same time."

But Cloughfin it turned out to be – taking up the post of Principal in the then two-teacher establishment and remaining there for thirty-five years. "At one stage, I was on my own when it became a one teacher school.

"I always felt passionate about rural schools. The local school is the focal point in a rural community and I fought to keep it open and to help keep the community alive.

"I look now at the closure of local post offices and it annoys me. They're trying to dredge the life out of these communities."

In 2012, Jim retired but, as a community activist, there was, and is, plenty to keep him occupied. He has served on various

committees over the years including the Community Centre, the International Folk Festival, the Tidy Towns, and the Letterkenny Reunion. And then there was politics.

"My mother was fanatical about the political world and, specifically, about Neil T. Blaney and the Independent Fianna Fail party. In fact, she ran for the party in 1974."

Jim would transport her to meetings and on one occasion decided to venture in to see what it was all about. He ended up being elected Cumann secretary but 1985 saw him involved in a more public capacity in the local elections of that year.

The I.F.F. party had two outgoing members on the Urban District Council in Letterkenny, Hugh Dorrian and James Larkin, and they were keen to pick up an extra seat through the emergence of Tadgh Culbert.

The meeting to finalise candidates was almost over when Rose Harvey stood up and proposed that Jim Lynch be added to the ticket. "Eamon Harkin seconded it and that's how I got involved initially.

"I ended up running my own campaign and helped by my family got elected."

In 2009, he quit the party and ran as an independent, again successfully. It took twenty-five years – "my electorate was disenfranchised" – before he was to secure the chair on the Council. It's a position he recalls with no small measure of pride.

He remained on the Council until it was disbanded in 2014 along with the other local authorities around the country, "A bad move as far I was concerned. A town the size of Letterkenny needs a Council."

It also requires a publication to detail its history and for thirty-seven years has had it in the form of the Christmas Annual. "I've served as editor for most of that time apart from two years when Noel Slevin took over."

Apart from boosting funds for the Community Centre, the annual provides a nostalgic social history of the town complete with pages of photographs and articles. "We have a small team involved in it, including Liam O'Donnell, and there's a lot of work goes into it but it's always rewarding.

"People send copies to relatives and friends the world over – it's a real link with the Diaspora and hopefully long may it be so."

Father to Crona (Ramelton), Riana (Limerick), and Fionan (Letterkenny), Jim Lynch is a true testimony to what can be achieved on behalf of a community.

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