

{photo album}

Family Pictures

Mary's Gift

This is a photo of my maternal grandmother Mary Clifford, or Nom as she was always known to me. She was born in the rural picturesque parish of Cartron, Kilmore, Co Roscommon in 1913. Kilmore is a tiny townland tucked away between Dromod and Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim. At the young age of 16, Mary left the West of Ireland behind and set out for a new life in America.

As with all the Irish emigrants of her generation, Mary arrived on in the US with nothing but hope. Hope that must surely have dimmed when she found that she had left a poverty-stricken Ireland to arrive in America on October 28 – one day before the Wall Street Crash of 1929. A lesser person might accept that they were doomed from the beginning. But not Mary, she had determination and strength of spirit. Her ability to defy adversity and draw on inner hope and faith, inspire me and motivate me daily.

Mary worked hard and sent money home to Kilmore to help fund the passage of more family members. Later, she fell in love with Johann, a German immigrant, and married. Together they settled in Forest Hills, Queens and raised five children: Joseph, John, Francis, Patricia and my mother, Eileen. In order to educate herself, Mary joined a Jewish Women's Book Club and attended it every week for decades. She always credited her Jewish friends for the expansion of her knowledge. She was too busy and practical to be nostalgic for the Ireland she had left behind, but this did not deter her from passing her love of the Irish culture and language on to her children and grandchildren.

When I was growing up, every Sunday after mass, we piled into my dad's car and went to visit Mary "Nom" in Queens. We sat around the kitchen table and shared the stories of the week, our joys and sorrows. This was the same kitchen table that I was sitting under when I overheard a conversation between her and my aunt about an upcoming trip back to Ireland to visit Kilmore. Perhaps it was destiny, but for some inexplicable reason I decided I was going too. So at the tender age of five, too young to conceptualize what or where Ireland was, I embarked on a journey across the Atlantic Ocean with Mary and my Aunt Pat.

This visit turned out to be a very formative experience. I fell in love with Ireland, its people and its culture. In that small thatched cottage and its stony surroundings in northwestern Ireland, I was immersed in a sensory experience that has never quite left me. For many summers, I returned again and again to Granny Mary's cottage. I heard and saw Irish music and dance; through stories around the peat fire, I learned the troubled history of Ireland's past. How those few stony acres had been in my family since pre-famine times, and how my ancestors had sweated blood and tears to hold on to them.

On returning to the U.S. after that first visit, I assimilated back into life in Long Island. But I was a changed boy. With Mary's motivation, I excelled at school and in college, captained college lacrosse and graduated as a lawyer, but I had left a piece of my



Mary Clifford

heart back in Ireland and I go back every year to try to find it.

Although Nom passed away nearly 15 years ago, I still feel her influence. I have passed on my own love of Ireland to my children: Conor, Shannon and Alanna, who play Irish music, tin whistle and fiddle and participate in Irish dancing and Gaelic sports.

My Irish grandmother gave so much to me that I wanted to keep her memory alive on a daily basis to help fill the void of not having her tangible presence in my life. I created "Mary's Gift" a foundation that enriches the lives of the children of Ireland by enhancing their opportunities and experience with the Irish language.

When there are dark moments in my life, I think of those unpredictable showers in the West of Ireland where the sky clouds over and everything becomes grey, and then in an instant there appears a dazzling spectrum of colors when the sun breaks through. Mary's gift to me – her optimism – is eternal. And my hope for "Mary's Gift" is that it will become a ray of sunshine bringing hope and optimism to others.

– Michael Breen

Mary's Gift

Mary's Gift is 100% voluntary organization. All donations are redirected to Irish immersion schools in Ireland. Mary's Gift is not in anyway affiliated with any religious or political group. It is a non-profit corporation and registered 501(c) (3) public charity. For further information please see www.marysgift.org or contact Michael Breen, founder and executive director, at 201-745-3144 or email director@marysgift.org

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