

## A surprise trip to Ireland: unique group comes together by Tim Allen

It was a long drive from Ashford Castle in Cong, County Mayo to the familiar town of Dingle. We had started the day in the luxury of this timeless castle and would soon be wandering the streets of quaint, familiar and friendly Dingle town. What a first few days we had had - celebrating Yeats at Thoor Ballylee and Coole Park, watching sheep and eating scones at Rathbaun Farm, hearing traditional music in the pubs in Galway, walking the streets of Galway. Then visiting Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands and hiking to Dun Aengus, the ruins of a fort on cliffs overlooking the sea. Then on to Kylemore Abbey with brief stops at Connemara Marble and at a turf field. The visit to Kylemore Abbey with its buildings and gardens were a great prelude to arriving at Ashford Castle.

Then Ashford Castle. That's a story for another day. Our dinners had all been group style. Two had been previously arranged and then there was the late one in Galway. An absolute feast and party attended by almost everyone. Reservations at 9:30, eating at 10:30 - a little late, but who cares, we're on vacation. Yes, we are! The rules are different on vacation. Enough of the tour for now. For a trip to Ireland is about the people, not just the people of Ireland but the people on the coach. This group has its own story—a unique one for sure. Little did we know as we watched our daughters vie for playing time in the spring of 2000 on the Amherst College Women's Lacrosse team that eight years later we'd be traveling to Ireland together. The chances were



**Top to bottom: the lake and a view of the garden at Ashford Castle; Mary Allen standing in the bog and holding a piece of peat**

upset Middlebury in the National Championship Game to become National Champions.

A few days later, "We Are the Champions" was belted out at the graduation party. That song had never meant so much.

What a year, what a terrific ending to our senior daughters' competitive athletic years!

But life had a surprise in store for us. One family, the Schifters, hosted reunions every year and at the March 2007 reunion, my wife Mary worked the room and asked people if they would go on a trip



to Ireland with me as the guide.

Mary by herself is a marketing department.

On the ride back to Springfield, I got the assignment to start planning the trip. Three months later we were meeting again in Chappaquiddick. Almost all the families were there. People were asked if they were serious, if they would go. Yes! It was unanimous. What fun—I had a new group of friends to travel to Ireland with me!



pretty slim of that happening. I mean at that time, none of us even knew each other, never mind traveling to Ireland together. But life specializes in the element of surprise. Our eight daughters were sophomores in 2001 and some had cracked the starting line-up. Some freshmen had joined the team, and we befriended their parents. We lost a heartbreaker in the National Championship Game. The next year we lost in the Final Four, but in 2003 we

## Ireland honors Brockton firefighters by Lynn Coakley

In Brockton, Massachusetts in 1941, a disastrous fire occurred, now referred to as the Strand Theater Fire. It started out as a routine fire. However, it quickly took a tragic turn when the roof collapsed, trapping and killing thirteen of the twenty Brockton fire fighters in the building.

All of the names of the trapped fire fighters were Irish. Several of them hailed from County Cork. One of them was the grandfather of my friend Eileen. For the last several years there has been a movement within the Brockton Fire Department to build a memorial to these men. Now sixty-seven years later, it was finally unveiled on May 10, 2008. The Strand Fire is still listed as the third largest loss of life to firefighters from a burning building collapse (along with a Philadelphia leather factory fire in 1910).

Eileen came to Ireland for ten days while I was there on a two-month stay. Before leaving home, she compiled a few packets of information about the fire and the memorial project. She had thought it might be a nice thing if someone in the Irish government would send a letter of support for the Brockton Firefighters and the memorial. So one day we set off into Dublin City Centre. We went to Leinster House to see if we could get the packet into the Taoiseach's office in the hope that the office might send a letter. As you can imagine, we never made it past the reception

area, but we spoke with three very nice staffers who were deeply interested in the story. They said that the appropriate person to receive this information would be Minister of the Environment John Gormley. They took the packet and promised to send it on, and off we went to find the Dublin Fire Department. We found it on Tara Street, and spoke with the receptionist, a man named Noel who was a character. He insisted that we meet the Fire Chief himself, one Hugh O'Neill. We tried to say no, but we were escorted to the 5th floor of the Fire Brigade where we spent about twenty minutes chatting with Chief O'Neill. He promised a letter, and as we were leaving, he insisted that we take a tour of the Fire Brigade.

He rounded up Gerard Flynn, a young firefighter who we teased as having drawn the short straw when given the chore of showing these American women around. He told us the reason he loves being a fire fighter is that he gets to do all the things his mother always told him not to do – drive really fast, not a problem; climb tall trees, ho hum. It's all in a day's work to jump into the Liffey to rescue all "the eejits" in their boxer shorts who leave the pubs in Temple Bar and think they can swim across at 4 a.m.

When we were leaving, Noel gave us a package of what they must



**Pictured: Eileen Kelley and Chief O'Neill in Dublin**

give to visiting school groups. We have pens and a little cardboard piggy bank in the shape of a fire truck. We laughed so hard.

When Eileen returned to work a week later, she found waiting for her a letter of support from Chief O'Neill along with a book about the history of the Dublin Fire Brigade. A few days later two letters from Leinster House arrived; one from Minister Gormley and one from the Taoiseach's office and signed by Bertie Ahern's personal secretary just a few days before we heard about his resignation. I never thought that we would get anywhere with this endeavor, but we did and splendidly! On May 10, during the dedication of the monument, the beautiful letter of support from the Irish government was read before the hundreds gathered on the site of the Strand Theater fire.

Have you ever wanted to learn to play the tin whistle? Now is the time to begin. Terrence Ezold will offer weekly lessons to anyone interested. The lesson will last one half hour and is a bargain at \$10 a session. Call him at 244-0620 and he will order the

whistle for you, as well as give you the time and place of the classes. Ezold received his degree at Berkeley Music School, Boston and plays several instruments. He participates in the monthly sessions with other local musicians at the Elms.

## Journey of the Soul offers unique experience by Kathryn Gallivan

In celebration of the upcoming Tenth Anniversary of the Irish Cultural Center at Elms College, the Center is sponsoring its fourth Journey of the Soul tour to Ireland exploring Ireland's Scenic Southern Coastline in Beautiful Springtime from April 19-29, 2009.

If you've always wanted to experience the best of the Emerald Isle or follow your ancestral trail, this is the time—visit Kilkenny, Kinsale, Killarney, Dingle Peninsula, Cliffs of Moher, Bantry Bay, Wicklow Mountains, New Ross, Blarney, Midleton, Limerick, Bunratty and more.

This is the real Ireland you dreamed about visiting that embraces the warm hospitality of the Irish people and the beautiful countryside. Indulge yourself for eleven magical days as we visit the medieval town of Kilkenny and its castle, step back in time at the sixth century monastic site of St. Kevin in Glendalough, stroll through Avoca—the setting for the PBS-TV series "Ballykissangel" and home of Ireland's oldest hand-weaver's mill, kiss the Blarney Stone, cruise along historic Kinsale Harbour on the Spirit of Kinsale, and follow in the footsteps of famine emigrants as we step onto the Dunbrody Famine Ship in New Ross—the ancestral hometown of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

This year also celebrates the 45th anniversary of President Kennedy's



**Above: Danny Sheehy reading from the book of one of the authors in the ruins of one of the houses on the Blasket Island.**

visit in 1963 to New Ross when he was the first United States President to visit Ireland. We will also visit Cobh—the single most important port for emigration where over two and a half million departed between 1848-1950 and where the Titanic made its last port of call. Travel along the coastal towns of Clonakilty and Skibbereen to the beautiful gardens of Bantry Bay, watch as sheep dogs round up the sheep on the panoramic hillside of Moll's Gap and cuddle orphaned lambs at the Kisansheep Farm—a fifth generation traditional working farm. Hear the Irish language spoken in the Gaeltacht region of West Kerry on the Dingle Peninsula where we will drive along the breathtaking Sleat Head Drive to visit the Blasket Centre and learn about its strong connection to

Springfield, Massachusetts.

Venture out on an optional tour to the Great Blasket Island for a rare opportunity for a guided tour with our friend Danny Sheehy, a local historian and writer. Travel through the mountains of Wicklow called the Garden of Ireland and Kinsale the Gourmet Capital of Ireland. Join in song and dance at Kate Kearney's Cottage in the Gap of Dunloe and feast like Lords and Ladies at a fifteenth century medieval castle banquet in Bunratty. This is truly a Journey of the Soul to savor and enjoy! Come to a one-hour informational meeting and slide presentation to learn more on Sunday, September 7, 2008, at 2:00 p.m., Elms College, Dooley Center, Fontbonne Room. So that you will not be disappointed, we kindly ask you to be prepared to make an initial \$300 deposit per person to secure your reservation. An optional travel protection plan (highly recommended) is also offered at \$152 and must be paid at the time of your initial deposit. Our spaces are limited and we will take reservations on a first come, first served basis.

We look forward to welcoming you to join us on this tour and together planning an unforgettable journey to beautiful Ireland! For more information please contact Kathy Gallivan at (413) 536-9709 or the Irish Cultural Center at (413) 265-2537 or visit our website for updates and pictures of our past tours at [www.irish-cairde.org](http://www.irish-cairde.org).



**Ruins attached to the back of the white house on the Blasket Island: Cathy Pickul/Mary Ellen and Mike Garvey's mother's house (She was a Kearney and grew up in this house). The white house is the Dunleavy homestead, which they have restored and visit frequently.**

## Children's programs an integral part of the ICC

In the last issue I wrote about the importance of the Irish language classes offered at the Irish Cultural Center and through the Elms College. The study of language is a unique feature we offer. Every year we add new students to our roster; many of these students become enthusiasts and continue studying for years and become fully engaged in the program.

In this essay, I will focus on the programs offered for children. Remarkably, one of our most popular and longest running program is Celtic Adventures for Kids during the last week of July. One of the important components of the week-long camp is the teaching of the Irish language. Since the students are grouped according to age, the younger children begin with the basics: numbers, parts of the face and simple greetings. As they return year after year, Kathleen Gilhooly, long time language teacher teaches them more difficult sentences and expressions.



In addition, the Camp offers lessons in Irish dance, singing Irish songs and playing the tin whistle, hearing the stories of heroes and legends and working on wonderful craft projects. At the end of the week the children demonstrate what they learned before an audience of proud parents, family and friends.

In addition, several of the children return to entertain our audiences for several of our other programs throughout the year: Christmas with an Irish Touch, the Irish Tea and the Big E. They and their teachers volunteer their time and talents to add to our programming. We are especially grateful to Mary Ellen O'Brien and Mike Rancitelli for the help they give in dance and music.

Two years ago we offered a one-day introduction of the language work-

shop for young people. For three years, the center hosted a party at Holyoke Heritage State Park, where the central part of the program was the awarding of prizes to three essay winners. The essay contest for middle school students has been conducted since 2002 with three money prizes awarded each year. Some of the topics have included: how to make peace, examining the Irish Famine in light of hunger in our world today, and looking at the contributions of Irish immigrants. Hundreds of area school children have submitted essays over the years.

In 2006 two wonderful entertainer, Debbie and Tom O'Carroll presented a magic and music show for children. Debbie wowed the crowd, both young and old with her magic tricks, and her husband Tom delighted the audience with his singing, especially because he invited everyone to sing along.

We are always looking for new programs, especially for children. Our motto is "keeping the Irish arts alive." There is no better time to do that than with young people. We welcome ideas and ways to expand our offerings. If you can offer help or suggestions, please call the Center.



Photos of happy campers taken by Mike Dialessi in 2008