She was lovely and fair...

LEITRIM'S ROSE OF TRALEE

Martha Gilheaney

IT'S NOT TOO often in life a person gets the chance to take part in what can only be described as a truly magical adventure. And it's not too often that this magical adventure can encompass all that is important in a person's life. But I was one of those lucky people and this is what the Rose of Tralee experience meant to me.

It all began in the spring when I had the honour of being selected as the Leitrim Rose. The following morning I felt great pride, happily bouncing downstairs with my Leitrim Rose sash around my shoulder. Little did I know that the reason for this pride and skip in my step were only beginning.

In June I took part in the Rose of Tralee regional finals in Portlaoise over a weekend in which 28 other roses from all over Ireland also competed. Out of this group, 6 of us were to be selected to go forward to Tralee. My family and the 'Inner Circle' the designate given to my unbelievably supportive group of friends, relatives and neighbours were behind me all the way. They hoped and they cheered and they insisted that I was a sure thing, definitely getting through to Tralee. But then again they were just doing what all loyal supporters do, and what the other 28 rose's supporters were doing for them. So I never even dreamed.

I'll never forget the moment the MC on the night, Will Leahy announced 'Representing Leitrim.' I didn't hear much after that. I glided up on stage to join the other five roses, accept a bunch of flowers and have the famous Rose of Tralee song serenaded to me, all the while catching glimpses of the excited reactions and the pride on my friend's and family's faces. I later learned that some of my crew who were located in the overflow room were actually asked to calm down after I was announced! Such support had I! Forever will I be grateful that the words 'Representing Leitrim' had been announced rather than my name. Because my name meant me alone and this journey was not purely about me. This journey which had already begun and was now stretching out before me was about so much more. It was about my family, my friends, the support that enveloped me, the goodwill, the flowers, the cards, the phonecalls, the parties, my hometown of Ballinamore and my Lovely Leitrim.

And so the wonderful summer of 2010 unfolded. It will forever be cemented in my memory as a beautiful and perfect summer. One in which the excitement and the rose appointments steadily gained momentum in the run up to Tralee. It began with the heart warming homecoming parties in Bornacoola, Edentenny and Ballinamore. It involved numerous visits and countless cups of coffee with dress designer Eileen Abbott, one of the most talented women I've ever met, in order to design and fit my Tralee stage gown.

Meetings with hat designer Wendy Louise, who is responsible for igniting my love affair with the merriment of hats! Doing the honourable job of officially opening Ballinamore and Carrigallen festival, presenting awards to the Leitrim Bar of the year winners, taking parting part in a glamorous photoshoot for VIP magazine, travelling to the Galway races for a fun photoshoot with Daithi O Shea and to Tralee for one in the sea!

Finding out I was Paddy Power's favourite to win when the booking officially started, judging Ladies night fashion during Ballinamore festival, watching Daddy gradually build up the number of banners in the shed in preparation for the dome, doing countless interviews with *Shannonside* and the *Leitrim Observer*, attending several fun

Martha & Daithí on stage in Tralee

meetings in Jackies and KT's Bar—deservingly named the Leitrim Rose headquarters as through here all the locals dome and accommodation tickets were booked, going shopping with my sister for the most beautiful dresses we could find, being presented with a bunch of flowers from my local primary school of Ballinamore during their school concert, raising the green flag in a school in Tarmon, opening the constant stream of cards that arrived every day and being blown away by the support I received at my fundraiser.

The memories are endless and looking back, the sun is always shining. Probably a fallacy, but such is the way with glowing memories.

And what of Tralee itself? It was a zillion times more than I had anticipated! We toured the country on the Rose tour bus and everywhere we went we were treated like royalty, we ate like kings and we dressed like queens! Once we arrived in Tralee the pace sky rocketed and the memories became even more precious. The ones which I am particularly fond of are arriving by bus into Tralee after a week on tour, when we arrived at the hotel we were met by a brass band and champagne reception. We also met our Rosebud and our Escort for the very first time. Everyone was clapping and cheering, snapping pictures and asking for our autographs, it was so exciting! This day was also my 26th birthday and one that will never be beaten. That evening we attended the Rose Ball in the dome and I was overwhelmed by my third cake of the day and the whole crowd singing me happy birthday!

The next day was the big parade and probably my favourite memory of the two weeks. It was dusk when we headed out in our evening gowns to pick our floats. It was hard to choose because they were all like something out of a fairytale. The music from several different bands was drifting in and out of earshot, the sky was a beautiful colour, the excitement and emotion in the air was palpable.

We started our procession into town, taking the longer route and all the way through the streets we were met by smiling faces, people waving and shouting their loyalties, tons of autograph hunters and photographers. I'll never forget the moment I saw the 'Leitrim Rose Supporter's HQ' banner stretched across a large building just before the main stage and our destination point. It was also completely decked out in Leitrim flags, balloons and further banners. The family, the inner circle and the new band of Leitrim supporters had been very busy! And once they spotted me coming down the street on my float they went crazy cheering. It still gives me shivers to think about and I'm not a bit ashamed to say it brought tears to my eyes. I couldn't believe this support and this love was for me!! It is an indescribable feeling.

Other brilliant memories are of course my nerve wrecking although utterly adrenaline pumping stage interview with Daithi O'Shea in front of 2,000 Dome attendees and a million live viewers. I felt particularly at home once my dance began, that is until the strap of my shoe broke! I was over the moon when my escort Robbie Costelloe won escort of the year, a most deserving winner as he had treated me like a princess. I also loved the fact that my whole family and all the people dearest to me were having a holiday together. Mainly I will never forget the pride in my parent's faces.

There will always be sceptics. The Rose of Tralee boasts its fair share. They say it's an old fashioned, out dated, business model. It's true it's a business and a very efficient one at that, but how often does a business have the heart that the Rose of Tralee has? And how can ideals of elegance, poise, talent, education, grace, Irishness, heritage and family ever go out of fashion? I certainly don't think they can! Others scoff at the claimed friendships between the roses but they'll never understand. These people are only seeing the surface of what we go through both individually and as a group. Nobody except for us roses truly understand and so we are bonded, drawn together forever, part of a unique family who will forever crave to meet and to reminisce.

For me the Rose of Tralee was a huge achievement which I will forever be extremely proud of. I went through countless stage interviews, group interviews, individual interviews, I was judged on my behaviour, the way I held myself, the way I dressed, how I interacted with others, my talents, my education, my future ambitions, my knowledge on important issues and my connection to Ireland. To sum up it was about my personality. The Rose of Tralee was not only about my personality though, but about my Irishness, my heritage, my Irish dance, my family, my supporters, my hometown and my county. And these are the most important things in my life. It's not too often a person gets to bring all of these elements together, represent them and wear them with pride. But this is what the Rose of Tralee did for me.