

GLENS CENTRE CELEBRATES 20 YEARS

Scott Coombes

THERE IS A picture of the official opening of the Glens Centre dated July 1995, in which Mary Robinson greets a large crowd gathered in front of the freshly rendered and restored building that had been the Methodist Church in Manorhamilton since 1830. It had fallen into disrepair, having ceased functioning as a place of worship in 1964 and by 1990 was in need of serious renovation. It is hard to believe that such a prominent, such a humble and beautiful building in the centre of a regionally important town could be in such a condition; but for those who have lived through times for deprivation, emigration, and unrest, maybe not so hard.

Mary Robinson, whose unexpected election as the first female president of Ireland symbolised the almost contrarian determination of people to be hopeful, to be dedicated to their own communities, despite everything. A hope, a dedication, a stubbornness that was already there, but which Mary Robinson's election validated and brought out into the public arena, much as she brought the people of North Leitrim out on that day in July 1995.

That day was a high point on a journey that started back in 1988. Nineteen Eighty-eight, the depth of the Troubles, the year Dublin celebrated its millennium, and Sean MacBride was laid to rest. It was also the year when the first meeting took place that led to the establishment of the North Leitrim



Glens Development Company and to the Glens Centre.

Look around you now in 2015 and even try to imagine what has yet to be achieved in Leitrim, let alone figure out how to achieve it. Now think of people doing that in 1988, when the obstacles were so much greater, when there had been an unbroken population decline in Leitrim dating back to the Famine and no precedent for its reversal. The end result was in no way certain, or even properly understood. What there was, was a vision - the cultural and economic regeneration that transcends borders, embraces the community, and builds self-confidence and belief.

Things started small, looking to the hills and rivers to spark tourism, and setting up training courses for women. From there, a wider group was formed from people of all the glens of Leitrim, and out of which the North Leitrim Glens Development Com-

■ **Culture Night 2015: Joni Crone (seated), Back: Paul Gibson, Treasa Nealon, Dave McEvoy, Cathal Ryan, Finbar Ryan, Orla Parkinson, Tori Lee & Sheila McNulty**

PHOTO BY PASCHAL O'SHEA

pany emerged. Of course vision also needs money and hard work, and with the early crucial support of the Integrated Rural Development Programme, the County Development Board, the Department of Social Welfare, LEADER I, and subscriptions from Sligo,

■ **Dee Armstrong, Carrie Crowley, Jamie Carswell, Sorcha Fox in Donal O'Kelly's "The Wet Senor", 2010**





■ **Taheny Academy Annual Showcase 2012**

Leitrim and Donegal, an impressive variety of projects emerged. It is not widely known, but some of the most successful projects to take root in North Leitrim can trace their origins to the support of the Glens Development Company:

- North Leitrim Hill Walking Festival
- North Leitrim Women's Resource Centre
- The Organic Centre
- The Glens Centre

By 1992 main focus was the development of an arts and cultural centre with tourist accom-

■ **Des Braiden, Bualadh Bos award winner 2012**



modation attached. Fortunately the funding was secured to acquire and restore the Methodist Church – the church where Gordon Wilson was baptised. Work began in 1994, and a year later the building was officially opened by Mary Robinson.

A proud achievement, but only the beginning. The new Glens Centre, with the guidance and support of the Arts Council, Pobal, and the Leitrim County Arts Office, pioneered the "performance laboratory" concept, in which the centre acts as a base for artists to develop and try out new work, to share their experiments with the local community, and to perfect what they have developed before bringing it to a wider audience.

Providing a home for new work was not so much the innovation, as the idea that artists would come and be a part of the community and that what they produced would be inspired by Leitrim.

Since then, the Glens Centre has established itself as a favourite of artists and audiences alike, hosting everything from jazz and world music to trad, classical, rock, and choral music, cinema, and amateur and professional drama. It has housed new and emerging artists, given everyone



■ **Russian Harpist Ramona Sakalauskaite, "Feel the Love, feat. Mabel Chah" 2015**

access to the arts, provided a conference centre and much needed office space, brought new life to the community, and borne witness to the life spirit reemerging from those dark days of the late 1980s.

Just this year, the band Kila played at the centre to help celebrate the centre's 20th anniversary. Joining them on stage were talented young graduates of the Glens' annual Rock School, which brings local musicians together with aspiring young musicians. Throughout this year, Manorhamilton Youth Theatre has been staging challenging and innovative work. Seamus O'Rourke has delighted and moved audiences with his original stage productions, Splódar and Beezneezy have brought work both popular and inventive to the people of North Leitrim. The vibrancy of the centre continues to grow thanks to those original visionaries, to all the work of staff and volunteers, and to people of Leitrim as they use the centre, take pride in it, and without whom it could not have been the success that it is.