

Leitrim Guardian Person of the Year 2017

Hubert McHugh

The Leitrim Guardian committee is delighted to present the award of Leitrim Guardian Person of the year to Hubert McHugh, Lisgavneen, Drumkeerin for 2017. This honour is well due to this popular man who is at the heart and soul of every aspect of life that is of benefit to his local community and his county of Leitrim. Hubert is particularly well known for his involvement in community and parochial events and for his dedicated work in the mental health services. Not only is Hubert a person with a very positive and friendly attitude, he also is a man of great compassion and empathy who has dedicated so much of his life to helping others. He engages in tremendous amounts of voluntary work for the benefit of the community and is involved in many committees serving the needs of various local causes. Nothing is ever too much trouble and Hubert is always quietly busy behind the scenes, never looking to draw attention to himself. Such heartfelt dedication to the community is most admirable. Here we hear from Hubert in his own words:

TO BE HONEST I'm still trying to get my head around the fact that I have been honoured with the accolade of *Leitrim Guardian Person of the Year* for 2017. I'm humbled that people went to the trouble of nominating me and equally surprised that the judging panel felt that my life's endeavours in plodding the highways and byways of Leitrim in a number of different guises merited tonight's award

That said, we all like recognition and although I'm not one for the limelight I am accepting it with pride because I see it as much a recognition for my family, neighbours, friends and work colleagues as it is for me personally.

I love people. I love being around them, talking to them, helping them and working alongside them. That might sound like a cliché—but it's the truth. I can't help but think especially of my father and mother—

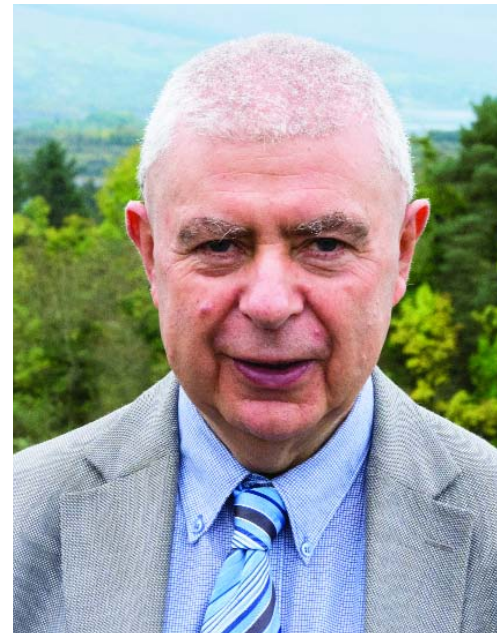
James and Margaret—and how proud they would be tonight if they were here with me and the rest of my family. They were the two people most responsible for moulding me into the person that I am.

My childhood was happy, carefree and wholesome. Kilavoggy was a magical place for me and my sister Mary and my parents laid the foundation of how to live a good life and we just followed the path. That foundation was built on respect for others and respect for God. It may sound like a fairly simple philosophy but they made sure we stuck rigidly to the plan and 62 years on I believe it passed all the 'stress tests' that life throws at you and it definitely set me up for the wonderful life I have had in my beloved Leitrim.

I was surrounded by wise and wonderful people outside the home too. Master John White was the principal of Kilavoggy NS and Mrs. Fallon was the junior teacher. Like every youngster at that time going to school was the first real challenge of life and I still have vivid memories of holding on for dear life to Maureen Hanrahan's hand as she took me to school on that first day in September 1961.

From the very beginning I loved school and everything about the adventures of education. Alongside the homework was the farm work. The era of modern farm machinery didn't arrive in time for me so the rake and the pitchfork were just as familiar as the copybook and the pencil. When we had all our own hay and turf saved there were always neighbours who needed help so being redundant never arose! The word 'bored' never entered our vocabulary.

Rural life brings many rewards and memories. Local shops started to mushroom and we'd share our custom with Brendan Keaveney, Mai McGoldrick, Mattie Dolan and Ownie Dolan's—making sure they all got a 'twist' at



the few shillings that were on offer. Each premises had its unique advantages. Mai McGoldrick had five sons and five daughters and we were always treated to the nicest things.

Mattie Dolan, on the other hand, had the attraction of a television and we were glued to programmes like 'Tolka Row', The Virginian and of course 'School Around The Corner'! When the first Tuesday of the month came around our attention turned to Ownie Dolan's as we went along to collect the monthly family allowance and to this day I can still remember the excitement when Geraldine would slowly make her way to the freezer and treat us to the most delicious ice-cream imaginable!

Throughout my teenage years I got to experience so much. I witnessed wakes, weddings and ceilí's. I saw great card-players, wonderful storytellers, women who baked mouth-watering soda bread, astute men bargaining for the best price at the fairs for their cattle and young men wear their parish jersey with passion. Church was a second home and the faith was palpable. I can still see the glow of the lantern as we'd walk the



■ **Top: Hubert and his wife, Christina on their wedding day**

Below: Hubert and Christina on their daughter Deirdre's wedding day 2006

fields to the 9 o'clock Sunday morning mass hoping I wouldn't be late to serve mass for Fr Dan Kelly.

I watched men gather around old radios to listen intently to every word Michael O'Hehir said as he commentated on the big games every Sunday and then when all that was over we hoped that our neighbours Jim and Nell Feehily wouldn't forget to call for their weekly visit and the handing over of the two bars of chocolate. I could go on and on...great memories of great times.

Like many other families in the parish we were fortunate to have had relations living abroad. In my case it was my aunts in America and in particular my Aunt Ann in Canada. She emigrated at 17 and never married. Every Christmas without fail the parcel of goodies would arrive and we knew that things were sorted! There was rarely a hitch with what she sent with one notable exception—1965!

Aunt Ann decided to treat us to the latest craze in Canada at the time—namely a box

of teabags. We had never heard of teabags let alone seen them until that year. They caused quite a stir in the village and they were forensically examined by all. The general consensus was that if you poured boiling water on the bag it might explode and that if you drank it there was the possibility of being poisoned! After a lot of deliberation it was decided to cut the bag and pour the tea into the pot! Suffice to say Aunt Ann didn't send teabags after that!

I mention Aunt Ann deliberately as she was the person who sent home the money that allowed me to gain second-level education. I will never forget her for that. Having completed NS. In Killavoggy I did the primary cert in St Joseph's NS, Ballingar under the watchful eye of Master Mulhooley it was off to the Marist brothers in Athlone and a whole new world was about to unfold.

I did my Leaving Cert in 1972 and moved on to the Mater Deil Institute and then to the communications college in Booterstown. In 1975 I began my nursing training in St Colomba's hospital in Sligo and it was there I met my wife Christina whom I married (thankfully!!) just two years later.

When I started working in mental health services I thought I wouldn't stick it a week but 42 years on I'm still there and I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. The people I engaged with are inspiring individuals and their families are loyal and courageous. I have always been treated with the utmost of respect by all of them. Thankfully the taboo around mental

■ **Outside the family home are Hubert's parent's James and Margaret, with Hubert's and his sister Mary**



health has almost disappeared and with hand on heart I can say that these people have given more to me than I have given to them.

Whilst they may struggle from time to time to cope with life they still possess amazing resilience. These men and women have taught me so much and I am eternally grateful to each and every one of them for allowing me into their 'space' to try and lend a helping hand.

I truly believe that the rewards I have reaped from my working life was the catalyst for getting me involved in other projects. If I could help these vulnerable people to a better life then surely I could help others too and so I became involved in numerous projects in my own area on a voluntary basis.

It's easy to be the 'hurler on the ditch' and leave everything to someone else but it is my view that it is equally as easy to roll up your sleeves and do something that will better communities around you.

I was delighted to be part of the team that started the care of the aged in the 1980's and around the same time I was involved in the youth employment scheme that took us from Cinderella's nightclub in Carrick-on-Shannon to Birmingham, Manchester and London as we set about fundraising for this very important initiative over a considerable period of time.

In 1987 I was delighted to be part of a committee that set up St Bridget's hostel that allowed 14 people from the area reside locally rather than have to travel to other services. I am proud to have been a founder member of the '99 Club' which is now known as the Friendship Club that has evolved beyond our wildest expectations and benefits so many elderly people in the area. Without the commitment of Dr Rosaleen Harkin, Angela Flynn-Evans, Antoinette McGowan RIP and Sherry Mahon this would never have happened. They were four inspired individuals who delivered the goods in spades and they became my role models.

I also look back with satisfaction on my involvement with the Leitrim Citizens Information board and of course the Rowantree complex which was opened by John Hume in 2002. This



■ A family gathering on the occasion of Hubert's 60th birthday.

complex is a great example of what can be achieved when communities work together. All of these projects have helped so many individuals and communities and to have played a small part in all of them is incredibly rewarding.

Our future rests with our young people and I have learned so much from my years of involvement with the Killenummery and Killery parish pastoral council as well as being on the boards of St Mary's NS, Ardvarney NS and St Joseph's NS in Kilenummery. I saw, first hand, the work and commitment of teachers, parents and community leaders in putting strategies in place that will make sure our young people get the best possible education in the best facilities imaginable. This is another example of a community working together for the betterment of all.

■ Outside Killavoggy National School 1966, Hubert is in 5th class.



I must also mention Fr Vincent Connaughton who has rejuvenated the area since his arrival in 2008. He took us by the scruff of the neck and has had made a lasting impression on all of us. Apart from his community work he has also revitalised our churches and our faith. I've thoroughly enjoyed helping to organise the annual novena to St Therese of Liseaux as well as being group leader on our now annual trips to Medugorje.

There are other bits and pieces I've done along the way but enough about me! As I mentioned earlier this award wouldn't be possible without the amazing people around me. My wife Christina leads the posse! She has always encouraged me in whatever it is I want to do and in a word she is my ROCK. This year will be her 39th year in purgatory (being married to me!) and I want to say a huge thank you to her for her patience, loyalty and love.

My two daughters Deirdre and Gráinne are my backbone. They are always there — quiet and unassuming — but always there. I'm delighted to say they both secured excellent husbands in Martin and Danny and our grandchildren Conor, Chloe, Seán, Aaron and Killian light up our lives and I know they will carry on the McHugh and Duggan name — and all that we stand for — with pride.

My sister Mary also holds a special place in my heart. There was only the two of us so

we have a special bond and I know that will continue for the rest of our lives.

A slice of this award also goes to my many work colleagues in mental health services over the past 42 years. Sadly, some are now deceased but many others continue to do a professional and caring job in Leitrim and beyond. I want to particularly mention my colleague Valerie Cogan. Valerie is a true professional and her attention to detail is second-to-none. If I ever have a problem, I just lift the phone to Valerie and she can always help me solve it. As I enter the autumn of my working life I can rest easy in knowing that there is a nurse of the calibre of Valerie who is so professional, caring and such a good listener to carry on the good work with the people of Leitrim.

I often think that it's time to slow down, take a back seat and hand over the torch to younger and more dynamic people to continue the work I've been part of. If that time is now then so be it. On the other hand I still hope that there might be a few more years left in me yet! Perhaps this award tonight is a sign that my work is not yet fully complete.

As Leitrim Guardian Person of the Year I will fly the Leitrim flag in whatever way I can provided I do so in a way that will enhance the best county in Ireland. We have come a long way and against all the odds we have achieved so much. However, we must stop the never ending flow of young people leaving our beautiful county to head either East of the Shannon or further afield and we have to lobby hard to convince those in power that Leitrim deserve a bigger slice of investment in the areas of infrastructure and employment opportunities.

As always, I will do whatever I can. It may not be much but I will definitely try. I can promise those who deemed me worthy of this award that I will leave no stone unturned in fighting the fight and helping Leitrim become an even better place in the future.

Leitrim Lives On...