

NOEL McPARTLAND

THE LEITRIM GUARDIAN PERSON of the Year Award 2020 recognises the outstanding contribution of Noel McPartland to his beloved Drumshanbo and to Leitrim.

Noel was born and raised in the town and has spent his whole life there, apart from a five year spell in the late 1950's and early 1960's, when he resided in the United States.

His late parents, Hubert and Bridie (Doherty), owned a grocery and confectionery shop in Church Street, while Hubert also ran a taxi service, doing local runs and the occasional load of pilgrims to Lough Derg. Noel had three sisters: Myra, who became a nun in the St Louis Order in California; Frances, who lives in New York and Rosaleen, who sadly died in 2017. He has two brothers, his twin Sean and the youngest of the family, Ronnie, who had served in the Irish Air Corps and then had a 30 year career as a pilot with Aer Lingus and now lives in Howth.

After studying in St Mel's College, Noel decided to emigrate to the US in 1958 and was just two years there when he was drafted into the American Army. His military training was done in Fort Dix, New Jersey and in Fort Harrison, Indiana. He is of the opinion that his five years in St Mel's made



Noel McPartland and his wife Margaret, relaxing at home in Drumshanbo

life in the army easier, though there was a difference in any break in discipline. This was the time of the Vietnam War, but Noel wasn't sent overseas and when President Kennedy forced Krushchev to pull the missiles out of Cuba, he was discharged from the army. Kennedy probably realised that a man like Noel was needed in Drumshanbo and Leitrim.

In 1963, Noel returned home, with the intention of going back to the States. But fate took a hand. While helping out in the family shop, he took a fancy to Margaret Cullen from Geevagh, County Sligo and also got an offer of a job from Raymond Laird

of Laird's Jam manufacturing company. Things were falling into place and America was forgotten. Margaret accepted Noel's romantic advances and Noel took up the job offer from a man he greatly admired, Raymond Laird, at first in the Sales Department and then mostly in the Export section, regularly visiting countries throughout the world and especially in the Middle East. He was with the company until it finally closed in 1996. To this day, Noel is very high in his praise of Raymond and the Laird family, and their contribution to the commercial life of Drumshanbo, describing Raymond as a "real gentleman".



Above: PFC Noel McPartland of the US army, pictured at Fort Harrison, Indiana. 1961

Right: Raymond & Mrs Betty Laird (centre), pictured with their family: Gary, Sandra, Shirley & Roger

Noel and Margaret married in 1966 and they had four children: Dermot, who lives in London; Fergal, who is Manager of the Drumshanbo Food Hub; Rory, who also lives locally and Karen, who lives with her husband and family in Annaduff, and who is currently the manager of the Leitrim People with Disabilities Centre, in Mohill.

Noel has been involved in community activities, ever since his return to Ireland in 1963, meaning that Drumshanbo has reaped the benefit of his leadership qualities, his foresight, his voluntary work ethic, his love for and his obvious pride in his native place, his optimistic approach, his charming personality that brings out the best in others, and the esteem in which he is held, not only locally, but far outside the confines of the county. A perfect ambassador for Leitrim!

While he was never considered

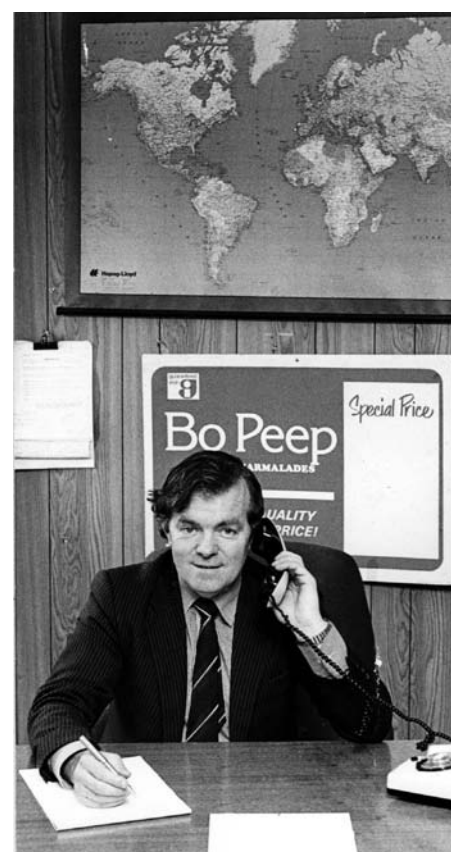


for a GAA All Star, he was, as he says himself, a rather handy footballer, and played a key role in bringing local club, St Francis, its first ever Leitrim Junior Championship title in 1963. He later became Secretary of the Park Committee, and together with people like Brian Cotter and Paddy Heslin, worked hard on the development, which is now known as the Shane McGettigan Park, one of the finest club grounds in the county. Noel took pride in helping out any local organisation and always admired the efforts made by Joe Mooney to keep the Tostal as part and parcel of the tourist attractions in the town. He is an ardent admirer of the many committees—many of them spearheaded by young people—who year after year provide so much social activity in the area, with consequent benefits to the commercial life of Drumshanbo.

Back in 1990, after the closure of Laird's factory and also the Arigna Mines, Noel could see that the town and hinterland was really an unemployment black-spot. With others who were equally concerned, they

set up Drumshanbo Community Council Ltd, to attempt to address a very depressing situation. Under the chairmanship of Pdraig McLoughlin, with Rosaleen KIELTY as Secretary, the council built the Childcare centre on the site of the old Laird's mill, which had been generously gifted to the commu-

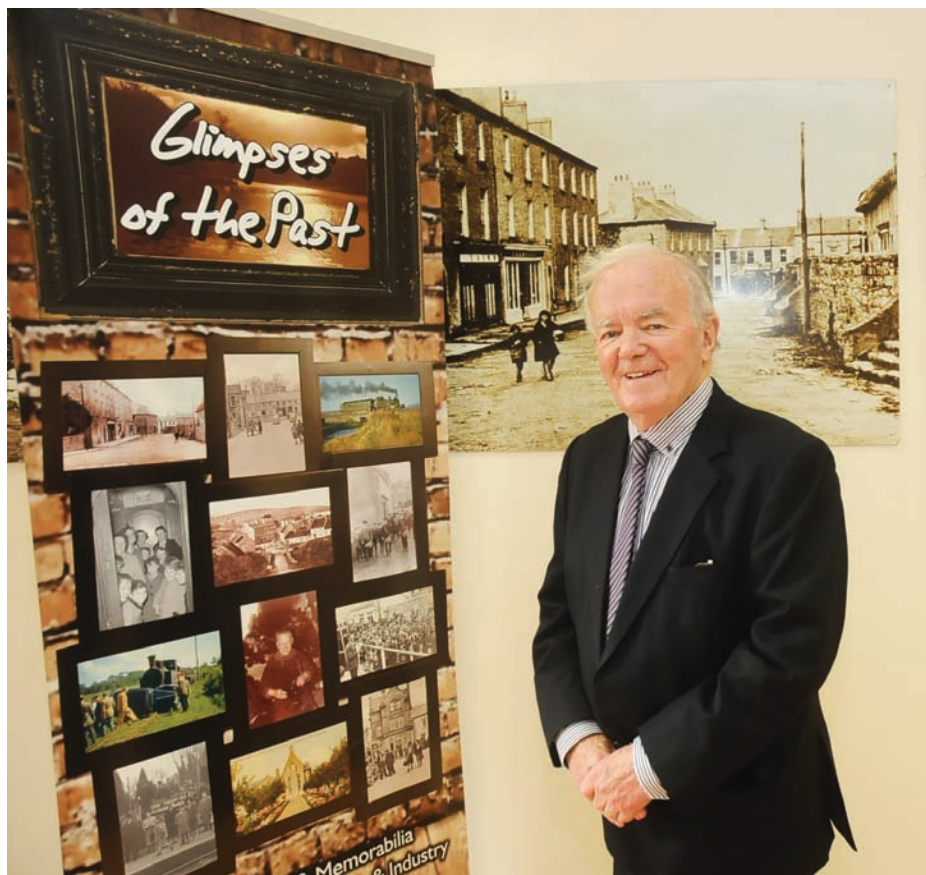
Noel McPartland preparing for a promotional trip to the Middle East. 1976



nity by Joe Burke, of Burke's Supermarkets, Tuam. This centre, appropriately named Bo Peep, is now thriving and has a facility for children with special needs on the ground floor.

The Community Council then looked at the possibility of developing the Lairds Factory, but first it would have to be leased from its owners, the Kepak Group of Clonee. After protracted negotiations, the McGuinness Group decided to purchase the entire factory and lands, which were then signed up on a long-term lease to the Community Council. This enabled the accessing of funding from various state agencies. The 32,000 sq ft building was divided into seven separate units and The Hub was born! The success of the businesses centred in The Hub is well known—Shed Distillery, McNiffe's Boxy, McGloin Cheeses, Chef in a Box, Bo Peep Preserves, Community Kitchen and Solas, with constant plans for extension, and also the building of a Visitors' Centre. The complex is managed by Fergal McPartland, who is also manager of Drumshanbo Credit Union and has been a star player and official with the Allen Gaels GAA Club.

Noel diverts any praise he is given to the others who have worked over the years to help make the town the thriving centre it now is. He has particular words of approval for the voluntary members of Drumshanbo Community Council: Enda McGloin MCC (Chairman); Geraldine Heron (Secretary); Joseph McManus (Treasurer),



Sean Nolan, Bea Cullen and Ronan Mulvey. Noel has a particular interest in local history and folklore and in The Year of the Gathering, in 2013, set up the "Glimpses of the Past" exhibition which featured a collection of old and many before un-seen photos and memorabilia from the surrounding areas. This exhibition can be now seen in the Credit Union premises and is well worth a visit.

The Leitrim Guardian is very proud to have Noel McPartland as its Person of the Year for 2020. We extend sincere congratulations to Noel, his wife, Margaret, and to all the McPartland family and indeed, to the people of Drumshanbo, who have helped facilitate Noel's ambition to make their area a delightful and prosperous one in which to live, work and rear their families.
Maith thu, Noel.

