

DREAMS COME TRUE

Ballinamore Community School

Padraig Leyden



'DREAM BIG DREAMS' declared Taoiseach Enda Kenny, quoting President Barack Obama's advice to the youth of Ireland as he officially opened Ballinamore's long awaited new Community School on October 6th. And why not? With an average age of fifteen the young people present that day were and are entitled to believe that all things are possible. And all things are possible. At one time President Obama's country was considered the 'land of opportunity'. As if nowhere else was. Communication, travel and the internet have taken care of such boundaries. Now all things are possible and from almost anywhere, including Leitrim—and it will only get better.

Dreaming big dreams was certainly a million years away or so it must have seemed in 1941 when Leitrim VEC opened Ballinamore Vocational School in a rented premises in Church Street. Forty nine children, 24 boys and 25 girls dared to dream on September 1st of that year and so began the odyssey of second level education in Ballinamore that culminated in the opening of our new state of the art facility. Nine years later in 1950 at the start of a decade of emigration and despair the Mercy Sisters started their 'Secondary Top'. This quickly blossomed into Meanscoil Fatima girls secondary school which opened in 1954. The third of the Ballinamore schools, St Felim's

College for boys opened in September of 1962 in a building vacated by the recent closure of the Cavan-Leitrim Narrow Gauge Railway. This arrived at possibly the lowest point in both the economic and social history of Ballinamore when big dreams were hardly an option. Collectively though all three little dreams, which had emerged at times when dreaming at all required vision and courage, were coalescing.

Possibly the time of greatest vision was the period leading up to 1968. In that year the Principals of the three schools at that time, Mr. Christy Gallogly of the Vocational School, Fr. Francis McKiernan of St Felim's College and Sr. Mary de Lourdes Sharkey of Meanscoil Fatima, with the consent of their respective trustee bodies agreed to pool their students and teachers in a unique system of 'common enrolment' as it was called by the Department of Education. The major advantage that it conferred on Ballinamore students was that it opened a much broader range of subjects and levels to those students than either of the three school could offer on their own. The disadvantage that it brought to all was that the students and teachers had to move between the three, well separated sites in the town. And so began the daily trek that was to last for forty six years. However as one who

either walked or drove that journey for most for those forty six years I can say that for the most part it was a happy journey—sometimes cold, often wet but always a welcome change of scenery that relieved the routine. To compensate for time lost in transit, staff and students worked a longer week than most schools without either complaint or recompense—a tribute to the loyalty and dedication of all concerned. The appointment of Fr Francis Duffy as Principal of the now amalgamated Fatima & Felim's in 1996, brought a fresh insight. He immediately posed the tough question 'Why not a new single site school?' to the Department of Education. Advances were slow. Each step a battle, with the hardworking Parents Association leading the way, ably complemented by our Public Representatives and the local population supporting huge public meetings. A commitment in principle to a Community School in 2000, the procurement of a site in 2008, inclusion in a Public Private Partnership bundle in 2010, building commencement in November 2012, 'move in' in February 2014 and official opening by An Taoiseach Mr Enda Kenny in October.

And the dream is done? Well no—definitely not. The dream goes on. Wonderful facilities—spacious, bright, comfortable and colourful. Canteen, Laboratories, Computer Rooms, Art Room, Sports Hall, Fitness Room, Lecture Halls, Basketball Courts and Sports Field. Demonstration Room, Engineering Room, Construction Room, Drama & Meditation Rooms. All of this combined with a committed staff, wonderful students, supportive parents and an appreciative community have brought all our dreams to life. So we dream new dreams. We dream big dreams because so many worked so hard to make little dreams come true. We thank those who have gone before us for their dreams and wish those who come after us many years of happy dreams, big dreams—of big happy dreams.

■ **Diarmuid McCaffrey, Ruth McNiffe, An Taoiseach Enda Kenny TD, Ronan Maxwell & Padraig Leyden.**

