

• THE BERKELEY TRAGEDY - REFLECTIONS •

San Diego Irish Community Pay Moving Tribute

by Stephen Aherne, Executive Director of Irish Outreach, San Diego

ON SATURDAY, JUNE 20, THE IRISH COMMUNITY of San Diego joined in solidarity with our visiting Irish J1 Summer Students for a Memorial Mass at St Brigid Parish in Pacific Beach for the victims of the Berkeley tragedy. An incredibly poignant service was attended by over 800 people who squeezed into every corner of the church to pay their respects.

The huge turnout was a telling indication of just how deeply the visiting Irish student population in San Diego were touched by this tragedy. Many were the closest of friends to those lost and injured, many were friends of friends, and for many it was just a deep sense of connection that those that had been taken were, just like them, coming to California for



the summer of a lifetime. From the wonderfully apt sermon of Irish Outreach chaplain, Nick Clavin, to the gift giving and the words of remembrance by the friends of those lost, the

entire mass was marked by the tenderness of the occasion and sense of community that prevailed.

Frank Bonner, a Galway native now resident in San

Diego spoke of his feelings of pride: "It was the most heartfelt and touching service. Fr Nick Clavin spoke beautifully, with some timely comedic moments, in typical Irish fashion! The choir, who consisted entirely of J1 students accompanied with a moving performance. Friends spoke about their loss with such grace and poise. It was an unbelievable showing of support and community that makes me so proud to be Irish."

A reception followed afterwards with music by Irish Trio Ciarrai, ably assisted by Brendan Kennedy on percussion and Jillian O'Malley on flute. Irish fayre to feed the masses, kindly donated by our local pubs and restaurants, was served by our volunteers as everyone shared memories and stories in the best Irish

tradition. Thank you to all at St Brigid in Pacific Beach for their hospitality to the Irish community during this difficult time. Thank you to all our Irish priests who concelebrated, to our community and student volunteers, and to everyone who played their part to bring this memorial together in such a short space of time. Thank you also to Brian Buffini of Buffini & Company, a proud Dubliner, who got in touch on the day of the memorial to underwrite all costs associated with the memorial. All of this is proof again, that the Irish in America are a community quite unlike any other. While we wish a speedy recovery to all those injured, those lost in the Berkeley tragedy will remain in the hearts of our community forever.

I Thought I Couldn't Be Prouder, But I Was Wrong

by David Lally

LEAVING IRELAND WAS SORT OF accidental. It began on a J1 visa (a student summer work exchange program) with my younger brother. We arrived in New York City like so many before, but quickly fled the Irish-heavy streets to meander west in search of authentic America. 36 hours on a Greyhound bus later, we found it in Wisconsin—a glorious, eye-opening summer. Later, a green card lottery win meant I would remain while he returned home. The first of many bonds were broken.

I adjusted to American life and quickly fell for my new home and its people. You seemed so open and interested. I was hooked. Chasing Americana, eccentric friendships, strange and varied jobs, and traveling the byroads culminated in finding home in the paradise of San Diego.

That first bus trip was more than twenty years ago. One day I was crisscrossing the country chasing Kerouac, Steinbeck and the A-Team; the next, two

decades had passed in a blur, punctuated by a stream of transatlantic check-ins with the family at home. I had never wanted to recreate Ireland in Madison, or Fort Atkinson, or Berkeley—where I lived for a time. It was natural for me to remain closely connected to family and friends at home, but I went out of my way to avoid the ex-pat scene wherever I landed. I was judgy: "Why would Irish people come to another country and just reproduce home?" Truth was, I was young and opinionated. Today, just one of those two still applies.

Years passed. I met some "Paddies," began to play Irish music, and found myself celebrating that which I had left behind. It wasn't an overt Irishness; more a "stubborn, still-sound-like-my-brothers-despite-20-years-here, debate-politics-and-the-craic" Irishness. Nights of tea, whiskey and sessions with talented traditional Irish musicians began to have an effect. Today, I work

for a company owned by an Irishman. I play in a band called Brogue Wave. We play in Irish pubs and if I have a drink, it's likely a Guinness. My wife, Jamie, and I savor the odd Irish breakfast on a Sunday morning. Sometimes we even break the seal on a jar of marmalade from home!

I hadn't intended to stay forever. Then again, I hadn't really intended to go home. But I've embraced the contradiction. The word "home" has always meant Ireland—occasionally confusing for passing conversation here—and while there's so much to love about my adopted country, I've always been a proud Irishman. Honestly, I thought I couldn't be prouder.

But last month I found out I was wrong.

Irish Outreach, an immigrant support group in San Diego led by Limerick man, Stephen Aherne, called to see if I could play at a memorial for the J1 students who lost their lives in Berkeley. We spoke

about the tragedy, and about the Irish community. "There's nothing like it in the world Stephen. We're so independent and resourceful, but when we're needed, we come together. And show up."

And that's what happened Saturday night at St Brigid's Church in San Diego. J1'ers, Irish Americans, newbie emigrants, old dogs and young, sobbed, applauded and nodded in unison as one Irish student after another took to the altar and did themselves, and us, proud. They were fantastic. Vulnerable in what they said. Strong and sensitive in how they said it. Fiesty and funny. But more than that, wise. They revered their six friends so we could mourn them as our own.

Afterward, Jamie and I drove in silence. We had been taken off-guard. There to pay our respects, we left heavy with sorrow. But we were also filled with pride, and totally inspired by these young people. I wish you could've been there.

Halfway around the world from our little country, you might as well have been in Kerry, or Galway, or Ringaskiddy. From the Irish priest skillfully wading through the devastation with tact and humor, to the selfless musicians who had just met in an anteroom before the service began, to the "hang sangwidges" and stew from local Irish pubs to feed the 100s of hungry J1'ers, it had so much of what I love about home, and everything those who love Ireland see so clearly when sometimes we can't.

The night changed me. I grew up a little, not just for the reminder of how fragile life is, but as a kick to do more, appreciate more, love more. I'll never forget it, and I do know this; Ireland has some very sophisticated young people waiting in the wings. And we should be thankful for them.

Next week, my daughter will touch down in Dublin for the first time. I'll be that much prouder to show her "home."



IRISH J1 BERKELEY TRAGEDY FUND

EARLY IN THE MORNING ON JUNE 16, 2015, SEVERAL IRISH J1 STUDENTS IN BERKELEY

WERE INVOLVED IN A BALCONY COLLAPSE WHICH RESULTED IN SIX FATALITIES AND SEVEN SERIOUS INJURIES.

DONATIONS ARE GREATLY APPRECIATED TO SUPPORT & ASSIST THE FAMILIES & STUDENTS AFFECTED BY THIS TRAGEDY



CHECKS CAN BE MADE PAYABLE TO 'J1 BERKELEY TRAGEDY FUND'

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