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LIMERICK POST special

ACCOMPANYING Tom O'Donnell to lunch, I realised what an impact the man has had on the people of Limerick.

Stopped on numerous occasions by smiling faces and warm greetings from everyone that passed, I felt like a celebrity by default. Tom has become representative of positive change in the city and in the Shannon region after 50 years of outstanding contribution to its development.

Despite his immense contribution to society, both local and national, this man has no ego. Instead he praises the people of Limerick for giving him the opportunity to serve as T.D., M.P.P and Government Minister and use his position to influence the political agenda. Tom is a very humble man, who feels that Limerick has done as much for him as he has for it. He has time for everyone he meets, whenever they may be.

I took this opportunity to chat to Tom about his daily life, and how he has coped with taking a step back. The truth is, of course, that Tom will never completely step back from his involve-

ment with the community. He is still actively involved with the well-regarded Peace Institute at the University of Limerick, of which he was once chairman. Under his chairmanship the Institute was instrumental in having a Peace Research Centre estab-

lished at U.L.

Despite his supposed retirement, Tom still keeps in contact with the NUI, partnership, of which he was once chairman and to which he gave his time on a voluntary basis.

Born into a family that were strongly associated with politics and actively involved in the War of Independence, Tom feels it was inevitable that he should venture in a similar direction. Speaking about the start of his political path, Tom says, "From an early age I listened to political discussions that took place at home. It sparked a natural interest in me, and as eldest of the family, I wanted to continue in the family tradition of political involvement."

Tom has lived and breathed politics and even met his wife Helen at the Fine Gael And Fianna Fáil in 1961. Helen is a founding member of young Fine Gael, as well as a former honorary national secretary of the party.

At home, Tom is a true family man. He joins his lovely wife Helen each day for lunch at DuCart's restaurant, at the Hunt Museum, which she runs. Here he enjoys the benefits of his wife's superb cooking.

He then collects his young son Thomas from Rosbrien N.S., where he attends. Speaking of his son's hobbies, Tom comments, "Thomas is a great sports fan like his father and mother and he loves music, too. He has tried several musical instruments, but of course, he had to settle on the drum!"

When asked if he feels his son may venture down the political path after his parents, Tom says, "Thomas has already had a taste of it. He attended the recent General Election count to celebrate the election of his cousin Kieran to Dáil Eireann and was there until three in the morning!"

Other than spending time with his son Tom likes to keep his mind stimulated by reading. He has a passion for reading biographies, particularly of political figures. A sure sign that politics was more than just a career for this man, he is also a dedicated follower of the press, and remarks, "I have always been a voracious reader of newspapers and enjoy watching current affairs programmes on TV and listening to discussions on local and national radio."

Tom admits that he also has a great interest in following the current American election. When asked to comment on whom he feels will clinch the significant position, he is tight lipped, but does feel that "it will be close!"

It is evident that although Tom is no longer professionally active in politics, it will always hold his interest, and among his pastimes he enjoys listening to the Dáil coverage on the internet. He finds this interesting and a great convenience.

Each year, Tom and Helen spend a week in France, but he finds that home is where the heart is. "I travelled so much over my career that I find I'm happiest at home," he remarks. "But we do get to spend time in Helen's family home in Sligo. It's a beautiful spot down by the sea."

Continuing the family tradition of politics, Tom's nephew, Kieran O'Donnell, is currently TD for Limerick East. The pair enjoy lively political discussions together on a regular basis.

Refracting on his remarkable career, Tom has innumerable stand out moments to choose from.

Among the most prominent and satisfying was the time he served as Minister for the Gaeltacht. Commenting on the important position that was granted him, Tom also acknowledges the challenges that were involved. Having come from a constituency devoid of a Gaeltacht, he had reasonable Ich, but was not fluent.

"Every bit of business that was conducted during my time as minister was conducted through Irish. It was daunting at first, as the various regional dialects are so different, but after some practice it all came back to me. I eventually ended up thinking in Irish," he recalls.

Having overcome this initial hurdle, he went on to make an outstanding contribution to the development of the Irish language and Gaeltacht areas.

Despite the numerous prominent positions that Tom O'Donnell has held, his county home was always foremost in his mind. He always put the people who put him in an influential position, and he used this influence to bring the issues that affected the constituency to the fore of the political agenda.

In 2005, Tom enjoyed the highlight of his political career when Limerick City and County Councils honoured him with a Civic Reception. In his address mayor Horgan acknowledged the one characteristic that defines Tom O'Donnell as a politician and a person. That is that he is never the politician who elected him.

When asked how he feels about Limerick today Tom responds "I got annoyed when I read or heard comments about the city that are unfair, unkind and untrue."

He sums up how he feels about his home city, "I am now and always have been passionate about Limerick."

Tom O'Donnell will never give up his involve-

ment. He can now reflect with pride on his long career, but still hopes to make a major figure in the economic development of the Shannon region and the entire Mid-West region.