

Death of Ger McDonnell

Triumph turns to tragedy as climber Ger is lost on K2

■ Memorial service to be held for adventurer

KILCORNAN

Norma Prendiville

FIRST there was triumph. But then as the weekend unfolded and news filtered through of an accident on K2, that triumph became, first, prayerful hope, then hope against hope and finally, the stunned acceptance that tragedy had struck.

Ger McDonnell, Limerick's most intrepid, most daring sportsman, was lost to the mountain he had scaled just a day or so before. Worst of all, a fine human being, a man with a heart big enough to embrace the world, was gone.

There was confusion. Reports differed. Websites tracking the tragedy seemed to carry contradictory versions. Who was right? Who had got it wrong? And was there any hope?

Meantime, people in Limerick, in Alaska, in other countries, marked the slow dripping away of hope, and in its place came grief.

Early on Sunday afternoon, a statement from the McDonnell family acknowledged that grief, that Ger was unlikely to return.

It was a dignified, loving and caring statement. They forgot no one, even in their own grief. It was their way of coping. But they

asked, too, for privacy. And it was given.

Some of the facts are established. More, sadly, are to come.

And Pat Falvey, spokesman for the family as well as friend and fellow mountaineer, has strongly cautioned that people should wait until all the facts are known, until the investigation is complete.

Mr Falvey has already stated that conditions on K2 are such that retrieving Ger's remains is unlikely. It would be too dangerous to attempt it.

For Ger's family and community in Kilcornan, this is a double blow, an ache that will never go

away. Bringing him home would have been a consolation.

Instead, a memorial service is to be held on Sunday, August 17, to celebrate his life and to mark the great void that his death has brought.

Ger's partner, Annie Starkey, and his mother, brother, sisters and other family members will be joined by neighbours, friends and public representatives, as well as musician friends and friends from the mountaineering community. The band, Kila, and Hothouse Flowers frontman Liam O'Maonlai are among those who have already indicated they will attend.

Family make appeal for privacy

THE following is a statement issued on behalf of the family of the Gerard McDonnell:

"We are extremely proud of the many heroic and brave achievements of our son and brother Gerard.

"He brought honour not only to us his family, but the whole country when he became the first Irish man to summit K2 on Friday last.

"The last few days have been a roller coaster of emotions as we celebrated with joy his historic achievement, and now must try to come to terms with the untimely loss of a great

son, brother and friend.

"Gerard's love of mountain climbing was surpassed only by his love for his family and friends. Our thoughts are with his long time girlfriend Annie in his adopted home of Alaska, where he lived for the last 11 years.

"We are sure like us, Annie will miss most of all Gerard's warm and caring smile that brought light and joy to all he met.

"Gerard was a kind and loving son. He had a great love of traditional Irish music, and despite living away from Limerick for the past number of years he

was a true and proud Irish man.

"We would like to take this opportunity to thank our many friends and neighbours for their support at this sad time.

"We would like to acknowledge the bravery and selfless acts of his Norrit team mates and the members of all the other teams, who risked everything in an attempt to rescue Gerard. We will forever be grateful to them, and the support and information we received from Maarten - the web master for Norrit expedition.

"Thanks also to Pat

Falvey for his hard work and perseverance in keeping the line of communications between base camp and the family open.

"We would like to sympathise with the many other families who lost loved ones to the unforgiving elements of K2 this weekend. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

"We now ask for privacy from the media as we come to terms with the news that our beloved Gerard will not be returning home.

"We will not be making any more statements at this sad time and thank you for your co-operation."



Limerick climber Ger McDonnell, from Kilcornan, who was killed in an ice avalanche on K2 in the Himalayas last weekend

More details of Ger's final hours emerge

Alan Owens

WHILE the family members of deceased mountain climber Gerard McDonnell get ready to travel to Pakistan in the hope of glean some information about the final moments of the Kilcornan man's life, more details are slowly emerging from those who were present at the time of the awful accident near the top of K2.

The Limerick man was caught at the top of the most dangerous mountain in the world sometime in the early hours of last Saturday morning after becoming the first Irish person ever to reach the summit of the "savage mountain", as it is known among climbers.

At some stage on the treacherous descent a large serac - or ice column - detached itself and tore through the "bottleneck" area near the summit, removing the safety ropes the climbers needed to descend.

It is believed Mr McDonnell was not one of those caught initially in this movement of ice. The Limerick man and his fellow

climbers Dutchman and team leader Wilco Van Rooijen and Italian Marco Confortola spent the night together in exposed conditions. Mr Van Rooijen confirmed this to rescuers, as has Mr Confortola, both of whom survived the ordeal.

Fellow climber, American Nicholas Rice, who turned back from the summit due to the onset of frostbite, has remained on the mountain and in an attempt to separate fact from rumour, "decided to clear this up by asking direct witnesses exactly



The plaque left on K2 in Ger's memory

what they knew about each of the victims" when they returned to base camp.

He writes on his personal website (www.nickrice.us) that "Gerard McDonnell - Confirmed Dead; Refused to descend because he was helping the others that were injured".

The young American climber also claims that after the avalanche: "the Italian, Marco, and Irish, Gerard, had apparently made a bivouac (sic), and then in the morning, had headed the opposite direction from each other. Marco made it back down to Camp IV with severe frostbite on his hands and feet. Gerard had been sighted heading toward the Chinese side of the summit."

Mr Confortola, who spent over five days on the mountain after the ordeal is believed to have told rescuers that sometime after the men made the attempt to descend he saw the Kilcornan native fall. "I saw my friend Gerard's boots falling among the blocks of ice and snow," said Marco. "That was the worst moment."

Mr Rice, who is still providing updates from the mountain, has stated that he erected memorials to some of the fallen climbers, including Mr McDonnell, at the Gilkey Memorial on the mountain itself.

Friends remember a man who loved the craic

Norma Prendiville

THE world has lost much more than a daring adventurer, a modern day hero. It has lost a fine human being, a man with a big smile and an even bigger heart, a lover of songs.

He came from the lowlands of Limerick, but he fell in love with mountains. And the stories are told that when he was on the expeditions that were his life's work, he sang Irish songs.

He brought his bodhran. On one famous occasion in 2003, when he scaled Everest, he even brought a ream and sliothar.

11 years, drawn there by the challenge of its mountains.

But he was also a musician, a bodhran player and singer who had his own band, Last Night's Fun, in Anchorage, where he was well-known among the Irish community.

"He was a gem," friend and fellow musician Richard Gelardin said in Anchorage at the weekend. "Very funny. He was a philosopher, a great storyteller, and just a wonderful, warm, kind, loving person."

"He loved to have the craic, as we'd say in Ireland," fellow band member

to the full and was a man very much full of the joys of this life. He was gregarious and happy-go-lucky."

Nora Hawkes, who was manager at St Mary's Secondary School in Askeaton where Ger did his Leaving Certificate, recalled him as a student who "never caused hassle".

"He was a very good student, always co-operative and helpful, wonderful with students and teachers both."

"He was more interested in the sciences than in languages," she said.

Ger, she added, was keen on sport and was a "good enough hurler".

Happier times: after Everest