

Tributes pour in for climbing hero, Ger

Preparations are underway for a memorial service, report Lorraine Carey

THE close-knit community of Kilcormac are in mourning following the tragic news that Ger McDonnell will never return from the treacherous K2 Mountain.

Standing on top of the second highest peak in the world last

a horrific fluke of nature".

After hearing the news on Saturday, Ger's older brother JJ, who works as an architect in Limerick City, flew home from Lanzarote where he was on holiday, to be by his distraught mother's

After speaking with authorities in Pakistan, the family confirmed at a media conference on Sunday, that they believe their son and brother to be dead.

His body has still not been recovered and Pat Falvey explained

life and soul of every trip, he was happy go lucky and was a great story-teller with a legendary wit."

At a media briefing in West Limerick on Sunday, Ger's brother-in-law, Damien O'Brien, said: "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 Irishman to summit K2 on Friday. The last few days have been a rollercoaster of emotions as we celebrated with joy, his historic achievements, and now must try to come to terms with the untimely loss of a great son, brother and friend".

Ger, a computer engineer who has been working for an oil company in Alaska for the past 11 years, is survived by his mother Gertie, his brother JJ, sisters Martha, Stephanie and Denise, and his long term girlfriend Annie Starky, who lived with him in Alaska.

He is predeceased by his father, Denis, a dairy farmer, who died 17 years ago. In an interview with the Post last week, his mother Gertie spoke of her son's 'spiritual experience' when he stood on the summit of Everest.

"He felt a great closeness with his father at that moment" she said. She also spoke of her fear for her son's safety, particularly on account of the fact that he sustained a serious

head injury in his first attempt at conquering K2. The Co. Limerick woman said that she felt "very relieved" whenever she received a text from her son to let her know he was okay and that she would continue to pray and worry for his safety until she received the news that he had arrived safely back to the base. In what was to be one of his final dispatches, Ger thanked his mother for the sweets and holy water she sent to him.

Said his brother-in-law, Mr. O'Brien, "The last few days have been a roller coaster of emotions as we celebrated with joy his his-



toric 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

to Islamabad earlier this week, where they met with Ger's climbing colleagues and the Dutch team captain who is recovering from severe frostbite. Mr. Falvey said that preparations for a memorial service for Ger are underway and "his belongings from base camp are being packed up to be returned to his family in Ireland".

Tributes have poured in for the Irish climbing hero, led by

President McAleese who said:

"My thoughts are with the McDonnell family as they come to terms with their great loss. Following so closely on their righteous pride, and that of

the country, at Gerard becoming the first Irish person to scale K2, it is heartbreaking they must now contemplate the loss of a beloved son and brother".

The Sports Minister, Martin Cullen, said that Ger was an inspiration. "The joy experienced by the McDonnell family at Ger's extraordinary accomplishment in reaching the summit of the world's second highest mountain is now very sadly mixed with one of great concern. A man familiar with challenges who had previously summited Mount Everest, Ger's drive, courage, bravery and ambition are an inspiration to us all".



Friday, Ger rang his mother Gertie, in celebratory form, having fulfilled his lifelong dream of conquering K2 and becoming the first Irishman to do so.

Just hours later, triumph turned to tragedy, when what has been described as an "horrific fluke of nature" happened as Ger made his perilous descent in the early hours of Saturday.

A 40 ft slab of ice swept at least nine climbers off the peak in the Bottleneck part of the mountain known to climbers as 'the death zone'. The cascading ice slab tore away the climbers fixed lines, leaving some climbers stranded in oxygen starved air and wiping others off the face of the mountain. At least 11 climbers are understood to have died on K2 and more are still classified as missing, including 37-year-old Ger, who was presumed dead on Sunday.

Fellow climber and close friend, Pat Falvey, who summited Everest with Ger in 2003, said of Ger, "He was one of the strongest and safest climbers I knew. He and the others were victims of

er's side.

Kilcormac parish priest, Fr. Willie Russell, said a special mass at the family's County Limerick home on Sunday morning, attended by Ger's friends and family. "The entire community has been hoping and praying for good news" said Fr. Willie.

that "at a high altitude of 8,000m, it's too dangerous to mount a rescue to retrieve the bodies.

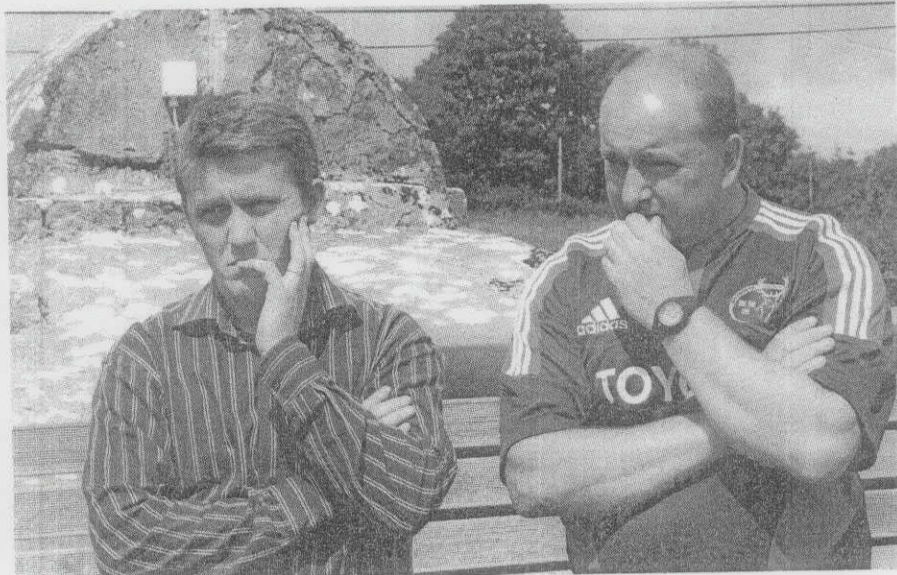
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'His family are still in shock - all of us are - and struggling to come to terms with his untimely death and the fact that his body may never be recovered. Ger lived his life to the full, known as the life and soul of every trip, he was happy go lucky and was a great storyteller with a legendary wit'

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

Ger's brother and girlfriend flew



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