

News

Gerard was a 'light for the world'

MEMORIAL MASS

Norma Prendiville

TEARS, words, music and poetry flowed as the exuberant life and heroic death of Gerard McDonnell were mourned and celebrated in equal measure in his native Kilcornan last Sunday.

The specially-erected marquee in the grounds of Kilcornan Community Centre was packed long before the Mass began - and hundreds more stood outside or in the adjoining hall.

As 1.30 approached, Gerard's family - his mother Ger-tie, partner Annie Starkey, brother JJ and sisters Stephanie, Martha and Denise along with their partners and children - took their places in the front rows. There was no coffin - Gerard's remains lie still, and forever, in the high reaches of K2 where he died

on August 2. But the almost other-worldly sound of a bodhran playing, Gerard's chosen instrument, seemed to bring his spirit into the gathering.

A framed photograph of his smiling face stood at the foot of the altar, a candle beside it. "We light a candle to represent his presence," Fr Joe Noonan said. "Though his body is not with us, he is with us in spirit."

Symbols of Gerard's life - all that he loved and was inspired by - were brought to the altar - among them, his passport, representing his love of travel, culture and exploration, mountaineering gear, a family photograph, his father's watch, his camera, a bodhran and whistle as well as a small crucifix representing his faith.

His partner Annie brought a Tibetan prayer flag and a necklace. Other symbols included a Community Games trophy, a Kilcornan jersey, a



Members of the McDonnell family taking a moment of reflection

PICTURES: BRENDAN GLEESON

Limerick jersey, a book, a CD of Irish ballads. His school records, representing his thirst for knowledge, his binoculars representing his breadth of vision and eye for detail were also brought as was a DVD of

his 2003 homecoming. The last gift to arrive was a piece of wood to represent the Norit team and Gerard's success in reaching the summit of K2.

In his homily, Fr Joe Noonan said that while some people

leave monuments after them when they die, "others leave a legacy of integrity, of goodness, of care and concern, of friendship and love, of joy and generosity. They radiate happiness. They are what Jesus wanted us to be, a light for the world. That is the Gerard McDonnell I knew."

Quoting from a poem specially written by Gerard's former teacher Maura O'Sullivan, Fr Noonan told the congregation that climbing for Gerard was a very spiritual experience. "He even referred to it as being an honour to die on a mountain."

"It was on a mountain that Gerard achieved one of his life's ambitions and where he was called to meet his God."

Fr Noonan also said that it was in helping and caring for others that Gerard met his death - having spent three and a half hours trying to help

other climbers. People had come together to express their solidarity with Gerard's family, he went on. "We are not here for a solution or a cure for pain. We are here to share that pain."

"May we support each other in the expectation we will meet Gerard again when our hearts will be full of joy, the joy Jesus told us will never end," Fr Noonan concluded.

"I am not sure eternal rest would be to Gerard's liking. Eternal activity, eternal challenge would be more in his character - that for him would be eternal happiness."

During the Mass, relations and friends of Gerard, including band-members of Kila played and sang - and at the end, six white doves were released into the air, a symbol of Gerard's "eternal free spirit", bidding him a gentle good-bye.

The Mountain

To dare to be different,
To have the courage, wisdom and clarity of
Purpose to meet the challenge;
To put enough trust in God, to climb the
highest
mountain He created;
To be close to the stars,
Yet not lose sight of earth and the valley
below;
To pause for a moment, in a vision of perfect
peace;
To be a great leader, yet a humble hero,
To have a dream, to follow it to the end,
And despite all the hardships,
Make that dream come true;
That is truly living.

- Maura O'Sullivan

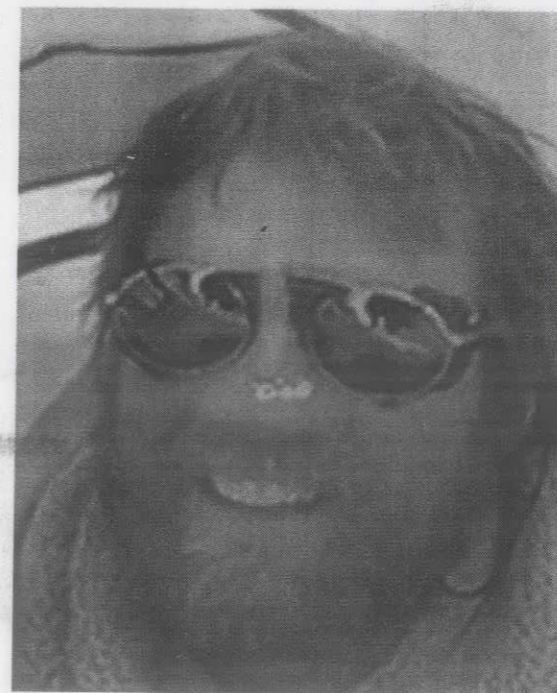
The poem written by Gerard's former teacher, Maura O'Sullivan

'He wanted us to share in his joy for life'

HIS words pinned us to our seats, writes Norma Prendiville. The simple eloquence of a man bidding a last farewell to his lost brother shot like a bolt through the heart. We were transfixed.

But as word followed word, what we heard above all was a story of great love. Gerard McDonnell loved greatly and he was loved greatly in return. That was his ultimate truth - and his ultimate legacy.

Gerard, his brother JJ said at the memorial service for him on Sunday, would have been humbled by the depth and sincerity of feeling that had been shown to the family since his death. Just as he was humbled by the outpouring of joy that met him in Kilcornan after his successful scaling of Mt Everest in



entered. "He had a passion for life that made all our lives brighter and fuller. Gerard saw the best in all situations and in all people. He wanted us all to share in his joy for life."

There will be no more phone-calls from Gerard, organising a party or a music session, he went on. "What all of us will miss the most will be the big hugs, especially when he visited home at Christmas and, for me, that firm handshake."

Gerard's sense of humanity, his mental and physical being, will also be mournfully missed, he continued before recounting the story of the day his brother went to post a letter in Askeaton and ended up in Doolin in Co Clare where he playfully teased a few old-timers there who found it hard to believe he

wich and a pint and it is said the three men are in Doolin yet with their mouths open," JJ said.

"No matter what Gerard could do to help you, he would," his brother continued. And it stemmed from his great love of his family, his friends, his parish, county and country.

He was 100 per cent Irish in his love and passion for his Irish culture and language.

"You can pick them, you can pack them, you can stack them, but there will only be one Gerard McDonnell. Gerard, you are our hero. Gerard, we will miss you and we love you."

The future will be difficult to face without you. There is a void left which we have only our happy memories to fill - and each and every one of us have

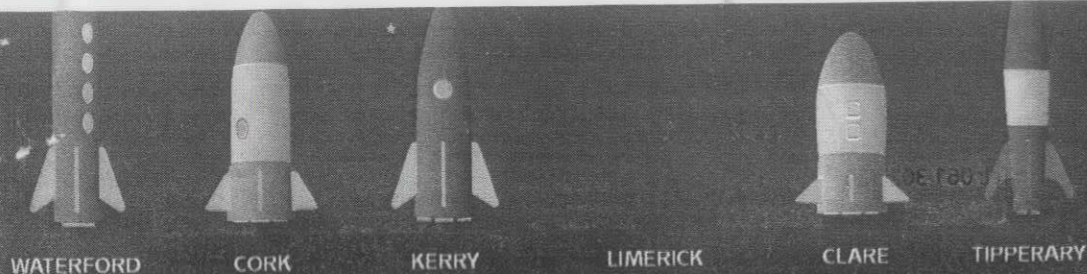
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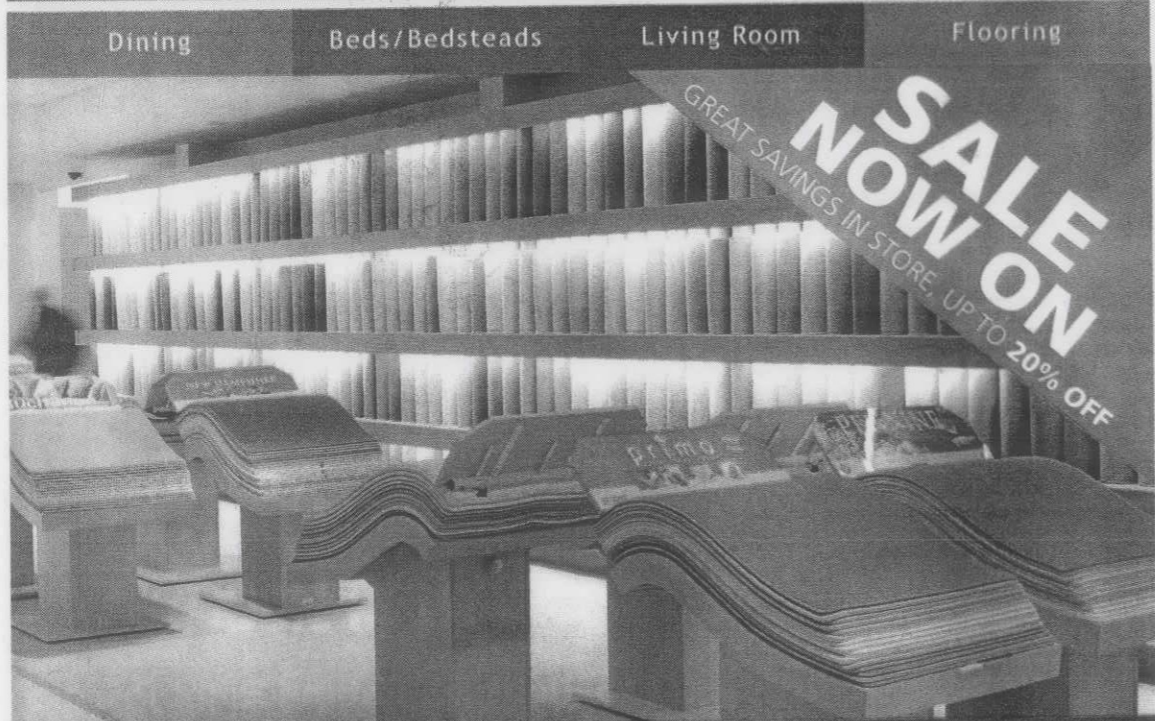
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of feeling that had been shown to the family since his death. Just as he was humbled by the outpouring of joy that met him in Kilcormac after his successful scaling of Mt Everest in 2003. "He was an inspiration for us. He had a smile that lit every room he

Stirring tributes were paid to the late Gerard McDonnell

'Hard to believe he will not come home'

GERARD revelled in the beauty of mountains, mountaineer Clare O'Leary, told a hushed congregation as the memorial Mass for him ended. And she counted herself lucky she said that she had shared three expeditions with him. The friendships born out of expeditions run deep, she continued - where you are living with one another 24 hours a day, working towards the same aim and experiencing the same hardships. In Gerard, she said, you knew you had a friend for life.

Gerard loved the simplicity of expedition life, she continued and he was an exceptionally fast, strong, competent and safe climber. "It seemed to take so little out of him."

In all the photographs she had looked at over the past weeks, she went on, "It is amazing how happy he looks all the time." He was a really genuine person, full of life, energy and fun. "He knew how to enjoy himself and drew people to him."

She was always particularly



Pat Falvey, mountaineer, said Gerard knew how to live life

struck by the love he had for his family and friends. "He always spoke about them a lot, in a very natural but touching way," Ms O'Leary said. Gerard's death has had a profound effect, she



Claire O'Leary, mountaineer, said she was to share Gerard friendship

continued. "He was a very special person. His strength and honour in spending over three and a half hours attempting to rescue three other climbers while well aware of the risks to his own life make

the story of the day his brother went to post a letter in Askeaton and ended up in Doolin in Co Clare where he playfully teased a few old-timers there who found it hard to believe he had come all the way for a pint and a sandwich.

"Gerard had his sand-

you and we love you.

The future will be difficult to face without you. There is a void left which we have only our happy memories to fill - and each and every one of us have those."

"May God have mercy on your brave soul."

him stand out as a real hero. It is hard to believe Gerard will not come home again."

Another climbing friend Pat Falvey said Gerard knew how to live life and he made the most of it. "Sadly, the Gods of the mountain, K2, have taken him from us."

Mr Falvey said when he first met Gerard, "I was blown away by his passion for mountains and wild places, for people and most of all for his family and his mother. Gerard was a dreamer. His dreams were infectious and he wasn't afraid to live them."

Martin Van Eck, who was part of the Norit K2 communication team, told the congregation that during the night of an ascent or descent, "I always light a candle."

During the fatal events of August 1 and August 2, he again lit a candle - and this candle he presented to the McDonnell family, saying: "May the light of this candle bring comfort in your lives for loss of your son and brother."

Community rallies around for service



A number of volunteers helped the McDonnell family prepare for the service, which was attended by hundreds of people

A SMALL army of volunteers from Kilcormac, supplemented by many from outside the parish, helped the McDonnell family pre-

pare for the memorial service. For days before, help was unstinting. Extra chairs and tables arrived, a marquee was sourced,

neighbours volunteered back-yards or fields for parking. Enough food was prepared for thousands of people. And nothing was



Stephen Downey signing the book of condolences



Anthony O'Neil giving his condolences

left to chance. Every detail was considered and dealt with.

On the day itself, the Gardaí, backed up by dozens of volunteers dealt with traffic and parking. Outside and inside both the marquee and the Kilcormac Community Centre, men and women acted as stewards or directed people towards the books of condolence.

An altar, bright with white flowers, was specially constructed. A Mass

leaflet was produced.

Every aspect of the memorial Mass - every reading, every prayer, every poem and every song - were carefully selected to reflect Gerard's spirit and to reflect what those who love and mourn him felt about him. Enormous thought and care also went into a pictorial collage of Gerard's life, tracking him from his first days, through school, early triumphs and later achievements.