

The angels of Oz who come to the aid of expats in times of need

In an Australian province the size of western Europe, a non-profit organisation helps emigrants in crisis, writes **Stephen Milton**

Nathan Slane remembers standing helplessly across the road from a building site in Western Australia's capital city Perth nearly 10 years ago. Blinded by the flashing lights of the ambulances, the then 24-year-old from Omagh, Co Tyrone, recalls being jostled by a gathering crowd as word spread that two labourers had been killed in a freak accident.

It was the same building site where, only hours before, Nathan had dropped off his best mate Joe McDermott.

"I was working nearby, and my supervisor got a call saying someone had been killed on a site in East Perth and was it one of us? And he goes: 'No, nothing's happened here.' And when he hung up, my supervisor says to me: 'You dropped your friend off this morning not far from here, didn't you?'"

Nathan ran to the site, arriving at the cordoned off scene. Searching for the friend he grew up with back in Omagh, he scanned the distraught faces of labourers slumped on the roadside, burying sobs into their chests. Finally, he met one of Joe's co-workers, pale with shock. "And he told me it was Joe," Nathan says quietly.

In November 2015, weeks after joining Nathan in Western Australia on a working holiday visa, 24-year-old Joe McDermott died alongside Gerry Bradley, a 27-year-old from Coleraine, Co Derry. On a break, the two Irishmen had been struck by falling concrete slabs which had toppled off a truck parked beside the site.

Panicking, Nathan's mind raced with thoughts of Joe's family. What about arrangements for the body? What about the funeral? Completely bewildered, he didn't know what to do.

And then, he noticed a rubber band on his wrist, which read 'Claddagh Association' with a phone number.

"I'd forgotten that I was wearing it – and weirdly, I'd only just heard about the Claddagh Association. The wristbands were being handed out at the pub the weekend before – and I took a few, never thinking that I'd need their help."

In Omagh, hours later, a grief-stricken Laura McDermott was grappling with the loss of her brother Joe.

"We were in a complete state," Laura tells me. "We didn't know where to start. We couldn't think straight."

And then Laura's phone rang. It was Tom Quinn of the Claddagh Association, who'd spoken with Nathan hours before.

"I can't describe how kind Tom was. He said: 'Don't worry about anything, we're going to sort everything out.' And they did. We just had to worry about our grief."

One of the founders of the Claddagh Association – a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to helping the Irish community in Western Australia – Tom and his fellow volunteers provided care and support for Joe's loved ones, both in Ireland and Australia. Liaising with the local authorities, they organised the logistics and had the cost of transporting Joe's body back to Ireland covered by the Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust, an Irish charity which helps bereaved families bring home the remains of loved ones who have died abroad.

They also ensured Nathan and Joe's friends from Ireland travelled on the same flight with his remains for the funeral in Omagh, 10 days after the accident.

"Without the Claddagh Association, I can't imagine what we would've done," Laura says. "But just to know them boys were on the flight with Joe and he wasn't alone – it meant the world to us."

Stretching from the central outback



● Nathan and Joe before the tragic accident on building site in Perth

to the Indian Ocean, across nearly 2.6m square kilometres of the Australian continent, the state of Western Australia is bigger than western Europe – but has a population of little over three million.

Of the more than 103,000 people born in Ireland and living in Australia as of June 2024, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), approximately a quarter live in Western Australia, colloquially known as WA.

Of those living there, more than 17,000 reside in Perth (based on 2021 ABS census numbers), the only city on Australia's western coast and frequently described as "the most isolated major city in the world".

As a young electrician from Belfast who emigrated to Perth in the early 1970s, Peter McKenna remembers the struggles for the city's then tiny Irish cluster when tragedy happened at home in Ireland.

"When somebody died at home and friends needed to travel, we'd have a whip around – because in my day, a return flight was a thousand dollars. A huge amount of money when you're only earning \$57 a week," Peter says.

The homesick young man joined the Irish Club of Western Australia, encountering an intense solidarity.

"You'd all be worried about losing family and having to fly back – and it was from that fear where the idea of the Claddagh Association came from."

With fellow Irish Club members Tony Kelly and Tom Quinn (who passed away late last year), McKenna led efforts for those needing emergency travel – and by the late 1980s, as WA's Irish population increased, they established a travel fund. With a growing demand for support from the community, the Claddagh Association was formalised in the late 1990s as a charity, offering support and financial assistance to Irish people in WA who were experiencing hardship.

"It became this broader spectrum of demand. While we never give out cash, it can be a food voucher or a rent payment," Peter explains. "It could mean helping with an electricity or gas bill."

With their work supported by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Emigrant Support Programme, the Claddagh Association has since grown from the original trio to an army of supporters.

"They're pretty much all volunteers with full-time jobs, which I didn't realise at the time," says Pauline Mason, who lost her brother Brian in a motorcycle crash outside Karratha in WA's north-west Pilbara region in 2018. He was only 28.

"Eoin, a volunteer with the Claddagh



Pauline Mason with her brother Brian on holiday in Western Australia. Below, members and volunteers of the Claddagh Association



Association would say: 'Call me anytime. Don't worry about the time difference.' And I did call him all hours – and then I realised this was his side commitment, and I was blown away by that."

Coordinating with the Kevin Bell Repatriation Trust to return her brother's remains home, the Claddagh Association's logistical efforts saw Brian laid to rest in Broadford, Co Clare, less than two weeks after the accident. And in the years that passed, a bond remains between the Mason family and the volunteer group.

"I went out to Australia to visit the site where Brian had died and was staying with some of his friends in Perth. They had a barbecue – which Eoin came to, and finally getting to meet him in person was very special."

"A couple of months later, Eoin helped Brian's friends put a cross up at the site where he died and he sent me pictures with him and the boys at the cross, writing in the message 'Gone but not forgotten'. With Eoin, there's this connection forever."

While many relationships between the volunteers of Claddagh Association and those in need remain strong long after tragedy and hardship, for some just a brief encounter is life changing.

"I remember the woman was called Anne, and she literally saved me," Sarah*, a young Irish mum based in Perth tells me. In hospital years ago – after

Western Australia's thriving economy, bolstered by its mining and resources sector, generated over 50,000 jobs last year. It has fostered a vibrant and growing Irish community. But with it, comes an expansion in issues among the local diaspora. "The younger generations are coming with hardships we didn't used to deal with," Peter reflects. "We're encountering gambling and addiction, but the big thing is domestic violence."

The latest Women's Report Card published by WA's Department of Communities found that the state has the highest rate of reported family domestic violence offences against women in Australia.

With financial and societal factors cited as contributing pressures, research by WA Police also pointed out stresses of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) work arrangements operated by the state's mining and resources operations, a significant employer for the Irish in WA. Linked with increased rates of suicide and a decline in mental health, FIFO typically sees employees working two weeks on a remote site followed by two weeks off.

"Western Australia is so dependent on FIFO," Peter says. "That in itself has contributed to a high number of domestic incidents. Then there's the pandemic, lockdown and all the financial pressures – all these things contribute to an increase in domestic violence."

While her ex-husband didn't work under FIFO conditions, Sarah agrees WA's domestic violence crisis is getting worse.

"An Irish lawyer said to me so many Irish women in Perth are in the same situation that I'm in," she says. "And now that I've been through it, I realise how bad it is. It's an epidemic here, which is why the support and care from the people working at the Claddagh Association is so necessary. They saved my life."

**Sarah's name was changed to protect her identity. To donate to the Claddagh Association, visit claddagh.org.au*

Artists take to the road to reflect loneliness in rural Ireland

● Project that takes its name from a Beatles song breaks stereotypes

CARMEL Mc MAHON

In November last year, a group of three artist friends, Ronan Dillon, Peter Martin and Noel Feeney, sat down in a Sligo pub. They had just attended a workshop on how to access

funding for creative projects. They knew they wanted to work on a theme associated with rural life. "Loneliness" came up.

After a quick Google search, they discovered a disturbing statistic: Ireland has the highest levels of loneliness in Europe, according to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. Over 20pc of respondents reported feeling lonely most or all of the time, a figure well above the 13pc average.

The group applied for a grant and

began working on their project. It evolved into Where do we all belong?, a socially engaged art exhibition that addresses loneliness in Co Sligo. The title comes from the refrain of The Beatles' song *Eleanor Rigby*: "All the lonely people, where do they all belong?"

Dillon is an artist, designer and curator from Dublin. He moved west eight years ago and is wary of overly idyllic or romantic depictions of country life. It was he who conceived of a way for the group to reach out to

people in remote areas. Drawing on the tradition of rural mobile vehicles such as travelling shops, libraries and health services, they decided to drive a box van around Sligo. It would be fitted with a desk where people could fill out an anonymous survey.

They would use the six-item Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale, which asks respondents how often they might feel a certain way – lacking companionship, feeling left out, isolated. Response options range from "never" to "always".

The group was disappointed to learn their funding application was rejected, but the project had already taken root. Over a sunny week in May year, they set out on a road trip. Their white van, with "Where do we all belong?" written on its sides, could be seen stopping along the back roads, small villages and towns of Co Sligo.

At each stop, they invited people to fill out the survey and to share, if they wished, their personal experiences of loneliness. What they encountered affected them deeply. One woman spoke of an acquaintance who posted letters to herself, just so she could see the postman coming.

"We didn't really know what to expect," says Martin, the photographer and film-maker who documented the trip and made a deeply affecting short film, an integral part of the exhibition that resulted from the project. "People were often reluctant at first, but then they would open up and tell us things."



● Peter Martin, Noel Feeney and Ronan Dillon. Photo: Gavin McGoldrick

experiences of loneliness while living through addiction, loss and grief. One mentioned he had never spoken of these feelings before and how it felt good to open up about them.

From the quiet exchanges gathered all over the county, the project grew to include visual elements. Signs with text fragments and phrases were affixed to farm machinery, aluminium field gates and derelict properties. You might happen upon one that reads: "I just feel like I never really fit in anywhere." Or: "Evenings and the winter when the nights are long."

There is an incongruity between the places and the signs, causing the momentary realisation that others might feel like you do.

The exhibition just finished a run at Abhainn Studio in Enniscrone. It comprises the film, photographs of the film being made and the signs being installed, along with original artworks.

On opening night last month, 140 people showed up to watch the film, which was projected on to the box van parked outside the studio, and an estimated 200 walked through the gallery to view the art inside. In offering the community a space and an opportuni-

ty to connect, the exhibition, in effect, becomes an antidote to the problem it addresses.

While the exhibition focused on Sligo, its message is universal. Loneliness is not restricted to rural areas and none of us are immune to it. Traditional socialising centres such as pubs are in decline, families and individuals are dislocated by migration, spouses die.

People are lonely and looking for new ways to connect. In the places where they might once have had a chat, as one survey respondent says: "Everyone is looking at their phones."

Perhaps it is down to their individual experiences of living in rural Ireland, or their relationship to Co Sligo in particular, but the alchemy between Dillon, Martin and Feeney has produced works of tenderness and clarity that speak, in a quiet way, to the moment we are living in, where the threads that connect the old world to the new can feel, at times, frayed and thin.

One leaves the exhibition altered, more aware, perhaps, of when opportunities for connection present themselves, even if it's just through some small-talk, a little eye contact, a smile.

Where do we all Belong? is touching a nerve. It has invited many discussions for development. There is a book in the works, the film may do the festival rounds and there may be a template for other communities. It is clear, though, that the three artists are blown away by the reception to their project.

"I think we are just processing it at the moment," Martin tells me.

What began as a conversation about loneliness between three friends in a Sligo pub a year ago continues along unseen threads that are reaching beyond them into their local community, into the future and out into the wider world.

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Ireland has the highest levels of loneliness in Europe, according to the European Commission Joint Research Centre

The stereotype of rural loneliness might be the old bachelor living alone on a farm, but having grown up in Sligo himself, Martin knew the picture was more nuanced. He recalls two young men walking past the van. They were invited to participate, but they said they were not interested.

To his surprise, they returned about 20 minutes later. They shared their