

PATSY ROONEY – 2003 IRISH PERSON OF THE YEAR

Writing in the award-winning *Sceal Chluain Daimh*, PD Kearns made reference to the contribution to the development fund made by the emigrants from Clonduff when the purchase of Clonduff Park was first mooted – “All club members and many more besides, joined in the great project. Even those who had gone to live far from their native haunts – Brendan Doyle in Dublin, Patsy Rooney and Jim Bradley in Canada and Sean Spiers in San Francisco, joined hands with those at home in a wonderful work of cooperation and brotherhood”.

The aforementioned, and many other Clonduff emigrants were to make their marks in their adopted homelands, none more so than Patsy Rooney, who was born and emigrated from the houses on the Rostrevor Road, now known as ‘Dana Place’.

The extract below reports a singular honour bestowed on Patsy Rooney in his adopted homeland:

It was with great pleasure during the week that we learned Pat Rooney, recently acclaimed as President of the Irish-Canadian Aid and Cultural Society, for a second term of office was chosen as ‘The Irish Person of the Year’ for 2003.

Congratulations on his great achievement were received from President Mary McAleese, An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, Martin Burke, and Irish Ambassador to Canada Jean Chretien, prime Minister of Canada Eddie Eves, Premier of Ontario and the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario James K Bartleman.

In 1947, Pat emigrated to England, having won a couple of Senior Football Championships with Clonduff, and became a professional boxer. He met his wife Betty in London and they were married in 1951. Daughter Jennifer and son Brendan were born in England before Pat and his young family came to Canada in 1957 where daughters Jacqueline and Monica were born.

Pat began working for Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) in their Transport Maintenance and Repairs Department in 1960. It was here that Pat would start on the path towards a new career. At the OPP garage, he became very active in the shop union, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). He led the drive to activate otherwise inactive members of the union and was elected the first Shop Steward for civilian employees of the OPP. He was instrumental in organising the first local union of OPP civilian employees and was elected the local union president.

In 1975, Pat earned a scholarship to study at the Canadian Labour College in Ottawa. Shortly after graduating, Pat had a change of career when he was hired away by OPSEU as a union Staff Representative and worked out of the Regional Office in Whitby. Betty says that “despite the unusual hours of work and extensive travel, Pat just loved that job.”

Though now settled into his life in Canada, Pat remained interested in all things Irish, as a member of the Emerald Isle Social Club. He was also responsible for the Easter 1916 Commemoration held annually in Toronto, where he brought many distinguished guest speakers over from Ireland to help make the commemorative festivities.

After Pat’s retirement from the union in 1992, then-premier Bob Rae, and fellow New Democrat, congratulated him on his retirement and tireless support for the party and the trade union

movement with a special letter. The premier wrote: "Somehow, I cannot imagine a person like Pat Rooney retiring. New Democrats do not retire, they just fade into the public service. OPSEU's loss will be the NDP's gain as I'm sure that Pat will be using his extra time constructively. Thank you, Pat Rooney".

While he missed the trade union movement, Pat saw that as he had reached retirement age himself, he recognised that he could be helpful to society by helping out the elderly in the Irish community. "I saw the danger that social isolation posed and decided to do something about it," he remembers.

After a series of meetings with retired members of the Irish Community, the Emerald Isle Seniors Society (EISS) was born in November 1994. The organisation started out with 14 seniors, but now boasts 200 members in its ranks.

"The EISS is now a thriving organisation in our community. Our purpose is to provide recreational, social, cultural and education activities and programs, geared to the needs of senior citizens and to address the problem of social isolation/" he adds.

The new seniors drop-in centre is located at the Knights of the Columbus Hall at 582 Sherbourne Street, in the centre of Toronto.

As though all of these duties were not enough to keep him busy, Pat is also the President of the County Down Association, though he is quick to advise that he could not do it without his wonderful assistant, Christina Corsini. "She is my right arm. She does all the organising for the County Down Association." Pat still has many dreams he wishes to see fulfilled, including the establishment of a retirement home for Irish people, possibly called Ireland House, and the establishment of an Irish Community Centre somewhere in downtown Toronto.

Today we present the 'Irish Person of the Year' award to Pat Rooney, who is truly a credit to our community.