

Life

‘My story puts Philomena’s in the shade!’

Tony Kelly, seen by millions on ITV’s Saturday wrestling in the 1970s, tells David Hennessy about seeking his parents but finding them too late.

It was a very long hard road to come down with every kind of an obstacle against me,” says Tony Kelly of his long fight for any information about the family he came from. Tony spent his childhood in St Teresa’s Mother and Baby Home in Blackrock before being fostered out with ten families eventually sent to stay with a family in Mayo. Although he has been searching for decades for information on the family he came from, it was only last year that Tony found out anything about his parents who have both passed on. He is still searching for a sister Jane of whose whereabouts nothing is known.

At the age of 16, Tony left Ireland for Manchester, remaining in the UK for twenty years where he had a successful wrestling career, appearing on ITV’s *World of Sport* many times as both wrestler and referee. He then returned to Ireland with his only aim to find out about his identity and origin.

A cruel twist in Tony’s story is that he attended his mother Bridget Kelly’s funeral in 1984, hoping someone there could shed some light on his family. Tony says he was “shocked beyond belief” to learn this. It was on that day that he overheard a man say to a woman of Tony, ‘Go on, talk to him’: ‘I believe the girl who was looking at me was my aunt, Jane Anne Kelly. She was a priest’s housekeeper so the thing was cloaked in secrecy. You must understand that the Catholic Church ruled with an iron hand. Their idea is: ‘Look, you’re a fine man, you’ve done well’. No thanks to them, you’ve done well. Their idea is forget about it and move on. You need to know your heritage, you need to know your culture, you need to know who your people are, no matter who they are or what they are. Everybody has that wish in life. It’s not nice to say to somebody move on.”

In 2013, Tony was provided with his mother’s address, 29 years after her passing: “It was information that was withheld from me by the CPRSI (the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society of Ireland) from 1967. They knew everything, they had everything. It’s not right (to hold on to and not share such information for so many years) because everybody is dead

and gone by then. It’s morally wrong. You wouldn’t hold access from that kind of thing to anybody.”

Tony had been informed and believed another woman by the name of Bridget Kelly was his mother. For years, he sent that Bridget Kelly money, Christmas cards and mass cards. He even tended to this woman’s grave when she passed on. But the death certificate showed this Bridget died at the age of 70, making her 40 when Tony was born while hospital records showed his mother was 29 when she had him. The woman he was told was his mother was the “totally wrong Bridget Kelly altogether four miles away”.

Republican father

In one exchange Tony had with the CPRSI while searching for the truth about his parentage, the secretary said, “Tell me did you investigate that family?’ ‘I did as best I could’, I said. ‘Tell me were there any Micks or Dicks in that family?’ Of course, I thought she was taking the piss out of me. I said, ‘I don’t know, I only know what you are telling me but there seem to be plenty of Dicks in it anyway’. The relevance didn’t mean a thing until late last year, my uncle was uncle Michael and my other uncle was Richard.

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Tony pictured outside a house in Ennisceoe where his mother Bridget Kelly worked



Tony (right) pictured with his adoptive mother and sibling



“That’s the thing that I hate about this, they’re sitting on your identity and they’re giving you the run around, knowing that you’re knocking on wrong doors, trying to get information from here, there and everywhere. It wasn’t about looking for money for anything like that. It was trying to put a family link, chain together.”

It was also last year that Tony found out about his father although, unbeknownst to him, he had seen his image in both picture and video before. He had actually carried a memory card of his father around for years without knowing its relevance. His search for his relatives took him to Killenale in Tipperary that turned out to be his father’s home place: “That was a mystery in itself, a total mystery: To find my father.

“Nobody knew him, they knew the family’s name but nobody knew him. All of a sudden, this fella said, ‘the last we heard of that man, he was on television’. I said: ‘How is he on television?’”

Tony’s father Joseph Nolan was a prominent member of the IRA and was deported from the UK after an attempt to blow up Ham-

mersmith Bridge as part of the 1939-40 bombing campaign. Tony had seen him speaking on a documentary about the IRA’s split in 1969 with the formation of the Provisional IRA: “He was a strong Irishman, a very strong Irishman and he got into trouble in England with Hammersmith Bridge. I think at one time they were trying to reorganise the bridge for want of a better word.

“There was a question raised in Dáil Éireann about him. Oliver J Flanagan raised a question about him in Leinster House with the Minister of Justice of the time who happened to be minister Seán Mac Eoin. He got deported from England and then he breached the barring order and came back and he was arrested at Holyhead. The question Oliver J Flanagan was raising with the minister was how come the detectives in Holyhead knew about this man’s political career. The answer back from Seán Mac Eoin was that he could assure the deputy that nobody released that information wherever they got it from.

“I do not know why I kept that (documentary), honestly. I am interested in history any-