

A birthday card first on his 73rd birthday

After 35-year search, 'Mr. Nobody' meets his family

Deirdre Kelly

ON his 73rd birthday in June, Tony Kelly got his first ever birthday card 'for a special brother'.

It came after a 35-year search to find out who his parents were, and finally the man who spent a number of years in a foster home in Swinford has met up with six surviving siblings.

Producing the card from a sheaf of documents and old photos - a jigsaw of how he has pieced who he is all together - Tony says it's one he'll treasure forever.

Finally, after a long struggle, he knows the warm embrace of his family. He knows where he comes from and that he belongs.

Tony is a regular visitor to east Mayo, meeting old friends in Kilbride, and dropping by on former employer and friend in Birmingham, Mikey Dunleavy, Charlestown.

Born in Dublin, Tony spent the first 16 years of his life in nine different foster homes and two institutions in the Dublin area. He came to Swinford aged 5½.

A veil of secrecy ensured the details of who his parents were remained hidden, but Tony kept fighting to find out who he was, alongside a campaign for people in care who suffered abuse.

Happily, he has managed to trace his father's family in the Enfield area and found himself in a warm embrace as he stood at his father's grave before, two months ago, crossing the Irish Sea to meet the rest of his siblings in Cricklewood. They are the Quinns - Peter, Molly, Finian, Sean, Eugene and James. Sadly, two other siblings, Michael and Margaret, are deceased.

Tony was fostered by the Tansey family in Carracanda, Swinford, and between the ages of 14 to 16 worked for various people, including Bill McNicholas of



A young Tony Kelly.



Tony Kelly, left, with some of his Quinn siblings, Peter, Molly, Finian and Tom.



The plaque Tony placed on his father's grave.

Logcurragh and Michael McDonnell of Kilbride, helping him on the farm.

"Michael McDonnell was one lovely man," he recalled. "He was like a father to me and maybe that's why I always remember him."

After turning 16, Tony left for the UK, 'taken by car by two lovely men from Rawbawn - one called Brian Lavin and a man called Mulligan'.

Arriving in Bury, just outside Manchester, Tony had a job with Tom Murphy, from Ballyhaunis, a civil engineering contractor.

"Tom Murphy picked me up in a white Bedford van with a sliding door and I will never forget it. He shook my hand and welcomed me and as he drove off he kept looking at me and asking me about Swinford. Tom Murphy was a grand man, a very strict man, but a fair man."

Later Tony moved to Birmingham, working for Mickey Dunleavy, who turned out to be a cousin of Tom Murphy. The Dunleavy brothers - Mickey and Seamus - were very involved in

wrestling and took Tony under their wing and so began his wrestling career, which saw him on stage in halls all over the UK and finishing up on ITV World of Sport most Saturday afternoons.

All the time there was a nagging to know who he was. All Tony had as identity was a letter with the heading 'Catholic Protection Rescue Society of Ireland' which confirmed he was baptised.

He received letters from CPRSI in 1967 telling him clearly that they had no information about his parents and offering 'no hope' of finding them.

In other correspondence it was pointed out that he appeared to have 'done very well' for himself and to move on.

Two court cases later it turned out they had 'three large files' on Tony. He also had five different dates of birth.

An ad in a local newspaper seeking information proved more fruitful, with an elderly lady writing to him who knew the whole story.

Following a freedom of



Tony and brother Sean.

information request to the National Maternity Hospital, Tony received correspondence that confirmed who his mother was.

The biggest shock about his mother was to follow: "I learned that I had in fact attended her funeral in Deans Grange Cemetery and didn't know it was my mother in the coffin."

His mother had gone on to marry and have other children.

From the information he received, Tony traced his father's family and wrote to one of his brothers and his wife who agreed to meet him. He missed them at Mass and so he went on to the cemetery, thinking they weren't coming.

"We met as I was standing at my father's grave in Longwood, Enfield. I could not believe it. I heard a woman's voice say, 'Anthony, is that you?' I looked around and said 'Yes'. She hugged me and said, 'Do you see that man walking up? That is Peter, your brother'."

"They took me back to their house for tea and I was given photographs of my father and all of the family."

The family, it turned out, knew about Tony. His mother had worked for the Quinns and as soon as her family found out she was pregnant a policy of 'total secrecy' was put in place.

Soon after his sister Molly came home from the UK with her family and then came the big reunion in Cricklewood in July.

Since then the family here attended the blessing of the graves and Tony placed a plaque on his father's grave.

"The first time I went, I went out of anxiety. I went back a few times and talked to him and just said 'I'm here'."

"I was Mr. Nobody. I had five different dates of birth. It feels good to belong."

UNITED SURVIVORS GROUP

Tony Kelly is a founder member of United Survivors Group, a pressure group that works in partnership for the common good of all survivors of State and institutional abuse. See www.unitedsurvivorsgroup.ie.