

Mary receives Presidential award



Waterford's Mary Allen accepting her Presidential Distinguished Service Award from President Michael D. Higgins.

Waterford's Mary Allen was honoured at a special reception at Áras an Uachtaráin recently in recognition of her contributions to the Irish community in Britain.

President Michael D. Higgins presented Mary with a Presidential Distinguished Service Award under the category 'Irish Community Support'.

Mary has been active in the Irish Community in London for over 60 years.

She has been a hugely successful fundraiser, primarily for the London Irish Centre and the Council of Irish County Associations, of which she is now President.

Mary has always been a proud ambassador for all that is good about Ireland and for a number of years she was heavily involved in celebrating Irish culture through the London Irish Festival.

In its final 5 years, she was the lead co-ordinator of the festival.

All of her life in England has been spent supporting her family, promoting a positive message of the Irish nation and its people, and undertaking many works of community support.

Originally from Blacknock, Kilmeaden, Mary (née Aulsberry) emigrated to the UK in 1948.

Arriving in England on 5th May, she began work on 6th May and worked until she was 75.

She had travelled to England with a family from Oldcourt, Kilotteran to look after their child in their home in Somerset.

She then moved to London and worked in hotels.

In 1950 she married Billy (originally from Dunhill) who worked in many jobs including on the railways, in the aircraft industry and for an optical company.

Mary has been a key community worker for the Irish since she arrived in London in 1948.

Throughout the London Irish Centre's (LIC) 60 years, she has been involved in fundraising for the centre's welfare work, as a member of the organisation's Administrative Committee, and as a trustee.

She is one of the few people who have been an active part of the LIC since it was founded in 1954.

In addition to her dedicated work for the LIC, Mary has also supported the Irish community through her work as a member and officer of both the Waterford Association and the overall 'Council of Irish Counties Association'.

Both organisations, with Mary's support, have raised thousands of pounds over the years to help vulnerable Irish people and others in need.

Mary was the only British based recipient of the Presidential Distinguished Service Award and travelled to Dublin to accept her award at a special ceremony held on October 30th.

She was accompanied by her daughter Jacqueline and nephew Daniel.

Also in attendance were Chair of the Irish Counties Association John Conroy and his wife Sally and Chief Executive of the London Irish Centre David Barlow who had originally nominated Mary for the prestigious award.

Mary was in esteemed company as Hollywood actress Fionnula Flanagan also received an award while An Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Tánaiste Joan Burton were also in attendance.

After what Mary described as a marvellous time at Áras an Uachtaráin, the award recipients and their guests were treated to a special dinner at Farmleigh House.

"I'm grateful that I was nominated but I did everything without ever thinking about awards. I did it to help people," she said.

"I accepted the award on behalf of every volunteer," she added.

The Presidential Distinguished Service Award was established by the Government following the 2011 Global Irish Economic Forum as a means of recognising the contribution of the Irish Abroad to Ireland and to the country's international reputation.

Commenting on the awards, Minister for Foreign Affairs Charlie Flanagan said: "We owe a huge debt of gratitude to these

remarkable people for what they individually contributed to Ireland, to the Irish abroad and our international reputation. The Presidential Distinguished Service Award acknowledges the many ways in which our diaspora contribute to Ireland. Whether through their charitable work, their support for Irish communities, or their contribution to the arts, their service and commitment to this country is a shining example to us all."

However, Mary is not just a proud Irish woman but a proud Waterford woman as well.

She regularly travels back to Waterford and enjoys time spent catching up with family and friends.

Earlier this year, she became very interested in the story of boy soldier John Condon from Waterford who is believed to have been the youngest Allied soldier killed in the First World War.

Mary was incredibly touched by the story of the young Waterford man and last week her daughter Jacqueline visited Westminster Abbey Field of Remembrance on behalf of the family where a cross was placed in memory of John Condon.

Mary also felt extremely proud during the visit of President Michael D. Higgins to England earlier this year.

Prior to the historic visit, she was present at a special reception in honour of the Irish community hosted by Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace.

Mary was featured on RTE's Six One News that evening as she prepared to make her way to the special event.

She was also in attendance at the special 'Ceiliúradh' event which was held at the Royal Albert Hall.

Speaking to The Munster Express shortly after the State visit, Mary said it was a very special occasion.

"It has brought the two countries closer together, and not before time," she said.

"It's time to put things to bed. It will take time for things to heal but this is a turning point. It's time to look ahead to the future."

Mary, who greatly admires Queen Elizabeth, praised her efforts in relation to Irish-British relations, saying she had "opened the doors".

After such an exciting year, Mary described the special event Áras an Uachtaráin as the "the icing on the cake" and is looking forward to another trip to the Déise in the New Year.