

A weekly insight into the people and places
that make Inishowen great



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**Siubhan
is a
Global
Relay
For Life
Hero of
Hope!**



Siubhan Gillespie

A woman who inspires hope, courage and determination to fight and eliminate cancer

In June 2001, Siubhan Gillespie heard the three words that every human being dreads – you’ve got cancer. Ten days later, Siubhan had a Lumpectomy. Within two months she visited her local bank manager, annoyed that someone was questioning her application for a mortgage. And now, she is wondering why she has been selected as a Global Relay For Life Hero of Hope.

It probably wasn’t unusual, or indeed improper, for the bank official to raise an eyebrow on going through Siubhan’s application and being cautious with their decision. But Siubhan and her mother Mary were living in the original Gillespie homestead in Newtowncunningham which required demolition and rebuilding, and no-one was going to tell her that because of what she had experienced in the previous couple of months, her and her mum would be deprived of having a new home. Siubhan believes, and has done so from day one, that she has not been sick. She told everyone “I got rid of the dirt and I am taking medicine”. The ‘C’ word is rarely used.

Siubhan will admit that having received an early diagnosis worked in her favor. In 2001, cancer services in Donegal were very limited and after receiving a mammogram and a magnified mammogram nothing was detected. Referred to Derry’s Altnagelvin Hospital for a specialized ultrasound examination, Siubhan was unconcerned as 9 out of 10 women who have this examination walk out the door again without the need for any further investigation. But as she saw the ladies who were examined after her pass by to go home, she didn’t think anything of it as they were ‘locals’. After 50 minutes waiting, she was asked back in to see the doctor and he delivered those three words. Siubhan will always advise people to take a second pair of ears with them to such examinations because if you are unlucky to have to hear those three words, you hear

absolutely nothing else after them. On leaving the hospital, being Siubhan, her only concern was about telling her mother. Things moved quickly and within 10 days, Siubhan had her surgery and, again being Siubhan, she wanted to know when she could return to her employment with the VEC. After being told that stress can have a counter productive affect on her treatment, she decided to switch off and let things take their course. Siubhan returned to work 22 months later after chemotherapy



and radiotherapy and requiring further surgery in 2002, which thankfully was not as invasive or serious as the first time.

At this point in her life, Siubhan had 18 nieces and was very conscious that this was a subject that had to be talked about and an awareness created, but also that it was something that could be challenged.

With the support of a large family circle (who she had to constantly tell “I am NOT SICK”) Siubhan settled back into life, rebuilt the family home and got back to work. Did she wear a wig?

Siubhan explained, “I went and got fitted out, looked really well, an exact match, brought it home, wore it for ten minutes, took it off and put it away. Nothing wrong with the wig in any way, it and I just didn’t agree”. “So it was just me and my silk scarves or wee red hat from then on,” she said.

Not making a conscious decision to do so, Siubhan would quietly and discreetly listen to and offer advice to anyone who needed it. Someone who would know someone else would want to talk to her and be listened to by the person who has made the journey.

Fast track to 2010. Siubhan’s brother Brian was involved in running a Strictly Come Dancing fundraising event for Scoil Colmcille in

Newtowncunningham. In volunteering at the event, Siubhan befriended a fellow ‘survivor’ from west Donegal who had moved to the village in recent years, Ena Barrett. Ena had been telling Siubhan about this great fundraising charity which originated in America and was now operating in Ireland called Relay For Life.

Siubhan, Ena, Brian and two other friends set off to a Relay For Life event in Dundalk to investigate this charity.

Each year, more than 4 million people in over 32 countries raise much-needed funds and awareness to save lives from cancer through the Relay For Life movement. During a Relay event, participants and survivors celebrate what they’ve overcome. They remember people lost to the disease, and celebrate the lives of people who have fought or are fighting cancer. The event inspires Relay participants to take action against a disease that has taken too much. The organizers arrange for as many teams as possible to gather together at a venue for a 24 hour period and do just that while raising those much needed funds for the Cancer Society.

Stepping into the unknown, a turning point for Siubhan was when she and Ena were handed the purple ‘Survivor’ Tee shirt on arrival at the Dundalk



The Relay for Life Committee presenting over €150,00.00 to the Irish Cancer Society which was raised at the Relay For Life Pic: Clive Wasson

event. She said, "I don't know what exactly it was but I got very emotional. It was probably the realization that, along with all these people around me, how lucky I was." It was after witnessing the event in Dundalk that Ena decided that Donegal needed an event of its own. Anyone who knows Ena will agree that she perfects the art of gentle persuasion, and before long, people were gathering and the Donegal Relay For Life Committee was born. Groups were set up all over Donegal and the inaugural Relay For Life Event was set for the end of May 2012. On that beautiful sunny weekend, 72 teams had formed and enrolled for the 24 hour spectacular at the playing fields of the LYIT in Letterkenny. Amidst all the side events, fun, laughter, tears, and of course walking and walking and walking..... there were two very poignant moments. At the beginning, when all the 'survivors' proudly paraded around the track to the cheers and admiration of all that surrounded them. The second moment was when dusk fell and the hundreds of candles sitting in the centre of the park, each bearing the name of a loved one who had lost the battle, were lit. Prayers were said, songs were sung and tears were shed. Where was Siubhan? Well, after taking part in the 'Survivors' parade, she returned to her team's stall to provide tea and coffee all night for those who stayed in vast numbers to walk the walk. And of course this was no ordinary tea stall, this was 'Central Perk' for Friends and Family. Relay For Life in Donegal had certainly got under way and as a result, over €300,000 was collected for the Irish Cancer Society. In 2013, Siubhan was asked to join the committee, which she gladly did and another very successful event was held

and likewise in 2014.

Following this year's event, the Chairman of the Donegal Relay For Life, Robert O'Connor, put Siubhan forward for the 'Irish Hero of Hope' award which she joyfully accepted at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin recently. The award was given to her in grateful appreciation of her work, passion and support in fighting cancer through Relay for Life and the Irish Cancer Society. The Presentation Night for Relay For Life Donegal on Saturday 27th September, unknowing to Siubhan, while publically presenting her Irish Award to the gathering of team representatives and volunteers, word had just come through mid afternoon of an even greater award – a Global Relay For Life Hero of Hope. Hot off the press, the announcement had just filtered through from the International Relay for Life conference. On being told of the award, Siubhan

received official notification which partly read:

Congratulations on being selected as a Global Relay For Life Hero of Hope! Cancer survivors like you inspire hope, courage and determination to fight and eliminate cancer. You are a beacon of hope to all other cancer patients and survivors in your country. As a voice and ambassador of your cancer organization, you have the power to increase awareness of your country's cancer organization, its mission and to grow Relay For Life participation. Your role is so important in leading other survivors to step up and make a difference in this fight against cancer. You have the power to save lives by sharing your story and demonstrating many ways to fight back. On behalf of the Global Relay For Life, welcome to a network of Heroes of Hope determined to make a difference in saving lives by sharing their story and leading the fight against cancer. We are grateful for your volunteer efforts and support of your country's cancer organization. Volunteers like you can make a difference. Volunteers like you will give those in their cancer journey the opportunity to celebrate more birthdays.

Siubhan says that she humbly accepts the awards on behalf of all doctors and medical staff who help patients, but most of all, on behalf of all those people who hear those three words – You've Got Cancer!

Why did Siubhan receive these awards? Because she does exactly what it says on the tin! She inspires hope, courage and determination to beat cancer. Ask her Bank Manager.



Siubhan receives her Irish Hero Of Hope award at the Aviva Stadium recently. From left - Matt Lewis (Irish Cancer Society Relay For Life Co-ordinator), Yvonne Jones (Carlow), Noelle Clancy (Tipperary) and Donald Buggy (Irish Cancer Society Head of Services).