

Sound of the underground: Curiosity pushes cavers onwards despite the risks

A near-death encounter only made caver George Linnane more in love with his dangerous hobby, writes **Sorcha Crowley**

NOBODY could save him, the man on the rock. Not the RNLI crew, not the Garda divers, not the hardy fishermen of Co Mayo, not even the rescue helicopter crew hovering overhead. All were rendered helpless in the face of the seething currents that had sucked him into the back of an Atlantic sea cave. Clinging for his life to a jagged precipice, he was underground and out of reach.

However, they were coming, the men and women who would eventually save him. Answering the call that evening on September 17, they drove from all over the country until they reached the north Mayo coast sometime after midnight. Working through the night and into the next day, they inched their way down the cliff face at Downpatrick Head, Spiderman-like, until they reached the man and pulled him to terra firma the following evening.

These are the rescue cavers of the Irish Cave Rescue Organisation, a small group of 68 people with a very particular set of skills. Founded in 1961 following an incident in a cave in Co Fermanagh, members volunteer their expertise when called upon by An Garda Síochána. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's a life-and-death scenario.

"It's only cavers that can rescue cavers," says George Linnane, a Bristol-based caver and member of the South and Mid Wales Cave Rescue Team. "The other emergency services, the fire brigade, the police, the ambulance, even mountain rescue, they don't have that underground capability because they're not cavers. It's as simple as that. It's a very specialised, niche thing to be good at moving through a cave and certainly to be able to move casualties safely through a cave," he said.

The rescue at Downpatrick Head galvanised an entire community, garnered international media attention and gripped a public ravenous for a good news story. The rescue team led by John Sweeney included Jim Warny, a specialist cave diver involved in the world-famous rescue of 13 boys from a flooded cave in Thailand in 2018. The 40-year-old casualty is said to have recovered well from his 22-hour ordeal but has yet to share his story. His rescuers slipped away as quietly as they came. Who are these people who shun the daylight and the limelight? And what's it like to realise your survival depends on them? To hope and pray their strength and skills will save you? "People don't like to be held up as heroes, it's a team effort," says Linnane. He should know. The 39-year-old engineer was trapped in a Welsh cave for 54 hours almost a year ago. It took 10 cave rescue teams from all over the UK, about 300 volunteers and the longest cave rescue operation in Welsh history to bring Linnane to the surface after a fall at Ogof Ffynnon Ddu cave system, in the Brecon Beacons.

How might the man rescued in Co Mayo be feeling since his rescue six weeks ago?

"I would think a fair amount of gratitude, especially because it's cavers that rescue cavers. Particularly grateful because you know it's volunteers giving up their own time, all made possible by donations. It's not even like it's anyone's job to do this. It really is cavers doing it for other cavers out of the goodness of their hearts because if it was them in that situation they would hope that someone would be coming for them. It's that kind of togetherness and camaraderie that makes caving what it is really."

Highly experienced himself, Linnane would never have thought he could have survived what eventually happened to him. "The chances of something going wrong are quite small but when they do it can go very wrong and so I guess I always accepted that risk in going underground and I always knew that something bad could happen. But the reality is, that although we all pay lip service to this residual level of risk, we don't actually expect it to happen to us. Not really," Linnane told the *Irish Examiner*.

An hour into what was meant to be a six-hour excursion into the deep cave system, Linnane fell 8m through a hole, around lunchtime on November 6 last year. He was about 100m below the surface. One of his caving partners Mark Burkey ran back out to sound the alarm, while another, Melissa Bell stayed above him, peering down into the pitch-black darkness where Linnane lay screaming in pain.

"I wasn't sure I was going to make it for the first three hours," he said. "I was concerned that I might pass out and choke on my own blood from my jaw injury and not make it, but once rescue arrived I always thought I was going to make it."

In his darkest hours, Linnane felt the presence of his late grandmother, Flora Dawson, who was very close to him as a child. Lying there in the dark, with no idea of how long it would be before help arrived, it brought him comfort.

"It occurred to me that she was probably watching over me in some shape or form. I did actually feel it at the time. She had passed away just over a year previously so it was still relatively fresh," he said.

Luckily for Linnane, doctors tend to become cavers, and once the first rescue cavers reached him he knew he stood a good chance of survival. "I was probably more optimistic about my chances than the doctors were," he said. The doctors didn't tell him at the time but they feared he would have to have his leg amputated and even that he might not live at all, given his internal injuries. "It was only afterwards that I realised just how close I had come to dying or not walking again," he said.

Once the team got to work, Linnane's body and brain went from survival mode to shut down. He lost consciousness as his body temperature dropped. He has no memory of around 18 hours of his ordeal. Once he was stabilised onto a backboard, rescuers hauled him out of the hole but the size of the stretcher meant they could not take him out the way he had come in. They would have to take the long way home, a painfully slow but ultimately safer, circuitous route through larger caverns of the underground cave system that is known by cavers as "OFFD".

Teams of volunteers kept arriving to keep the operation going overnight — for two days and two nights. Linnane was at one point, floated along part of an underground river. "I remember the stretcher being converted for use in the stream way. They put floating panels on the sides and end of it, around the stretcher so that it would float on water, which is quite ingenious really. People were kneeling down in the streamway and I was passed along a sea of people's backs in order to keep me out of the water," he said.

That part of the rescue operation was hugely complicated, with water levels surging to several metres deep in places. Sections had to be rigged with ropes and other equipment so that rescuers and the stretcher could pass across them safely. "It's not simple. Nothing in a cave is simple," said Linnane.

It took the hundreds of volunteers until the following Monday evening to get Linnane to the mouth of the cave, passing his stretcher along a human chain of hands. When he started regaining consciousness, the first thing he noticed was a friend from a Gloucestershire. Then a caver he knew from Somerset. Then another caving pal from the Peak District, yet another friend from Yorkshire.

"It became obvious that people were coming from all over the country, which I felt a little bit of guilt to start with and then a whole lot of gratitude. I don't know why. I suppose I felt like a bit of a pain in the arse. I basically ruined everyone's Bonfire night."

Finally emerging out into the fresh air of a rainy Welsh sky was "pretty triumphant".

"It felt really good. It was evening. I think it was raining so it very definitely felt like Wales," he laughed. He had suffered a broken leg, broken ribs, a broken jaw, missing teeth, a dislocated clavicle, lacerated spleen, pneumothorax (air outside his lung, where it shouldn't be) and a broken scaphoid in his wrist.

A year on, Linnane has almost fully recovered but it was long and slower than a man of his temperament would have liked. He spent November in hospital, December learning to eat whole foods again. He started walking in January. The things that caused him the most problems however were not the big obvious injuries. His body has had to readjust to a dislocated clavicle that "is never going back in". His broken wrist needed an

operation in January which set him back by two months.

"When I had the operation done to screw the bones of my wrist back together, I thought that having had an 11mm titanium rod installed all the way down my lower leg and multiple plates in my jaw, I thought this would be an absolute doddle but it really wasn't," he recalled. It was May "at the earliest" before he was able-bodied again. He has spent the summer getting fit but his "cave fitness", he said, is such that no amount of working out through different sports can train the body as much as caving excursions can. "It's such a massive variety of movements. You need to be a well-rounded caver. There's vertical stuff, there's small crawly stuff, there's big stompy stuff," said Linnane.

The physical scars are the ones we can see, they say. How about the scars we can't? Linnane is "fairly confident" he doesn't have post traumatic stress disorder but admits he didn't escape entirely unscathed. His first night in the poly-trauma hospital ward, when the drugs were wearing off, was a troubled one. "I didn't sleep a wink because every time I closed



George Linnane fell through a hole in a Welsh cave last year. He was about 100m below the surface. Despite the inhospitable conditions, fellow cavers rushed to help. Pictures: George Linnane

my eyes I could feel myself falling. I could feel the legs whirling around in mid-air. I could hear rocks moving, all that kind of stuff. I thought "here we go, massive PTSD".

"But actually, it never happened again. The following night I got some sleep and it never came back," he said. Linnane's theory is that PTSD is



Linnane's rescue was a complex operation. It took hundreds of volunteers to get him to the mouth of the cave, passing his stretcher along a human chain of hands.

"essentially a failure to process" and because he has spoken about it so much with news crews to BBC documentary makers to friends and family, he "couldn't fail to process it. And that's a good thing". He singles out his partner Julie for being "incredibly understanding and incredibly helpful" throughout the past year.

What Linnane loves most about caving, the people and the camaraderie between team members, has brought him back. He's gone caving again and even joined the first rescue crew that came to his aid, the South and Mid

Wales Cave Rescue Team. "I've done a couple of easy cave dives and I've also done a couple of easy caving trips. I'm not able to perform at the level I was performing at a year ago which was a reasonably high level but I think I will get there. I think I do bring something to the table, yeah," he said.

Most of us spend our lives trying to stay above ground. For many of us, going down into a dark hole is the stuff of nightmares. What exactly is the appeal of caving? For Irish Cave Rescue Organisation warden John Sweeney, it's the exhilar-

ation of going where you've never gone before. "It takes people out of their comfort zone. It's amazing the conversations you have with people when they're out of their comfort zone," he says.

Catherine Ryan tried caving with John and a group in north Clare for the first time a few weeks ago. "Terrified is probably the wrong word but I was sure this was definitely not for me," she said. Having overcome her reservations, Ryan found herself "pleasantly surprised". "The most amazing thing was at one point we came to an area and sat down and turned off our lights. Just to listen to the bubbling of the waterfall in the pitch black, when you're nothing else to distract you. It was very exciting and yet calming," she said, "sure it was beautiful down there".

Linnane too, is lured by the unknown. "It's a human urge to explore and human curiosity to always want to know what's around the next corner. I get this thing cave diving, where if I'm swimming along a passage, and I haven't reached the end of it and if I have to turn before I reach the end of it, I really, really want to know what's around the next corner. It's that. I will come back with more gas later on so I will do a larger dive in there safely so I can find out what's around that next corner."

"The same thing that makes people cave is the same thing that makes people want to scuba dive or go to the Moon. It's another planet down there. It's not like the surface. It's an urge to go to new places and see new things. I suppose exploring is a different version of that again. It's curiosity on steroids."

As the first anniversary of his accident approaches, a quiet evening at home with Julie is surely on the cards. "This is going to make you laugh but I'm intending to spend it caving in OFD. It hasn't put me off, no," he says, with a mischievous grin.

Care home boy's tireless search for a fellow resident



Nazareth House, which was known as a 'pauper's refuge' for children and older people.

The recently passed Birth Information and Tracing Act will allow adopted people and their biological parents guaranteed access to information and records about their birth and early life but there is currently no facility for peer tracing, writes **Sorcha Crowley**

MY NAME is Sean..." began the stranger's email which popped into my inbox last April. It ended with "Could you help me find her?" I hit reply.

Sean* was a "home boy", reared by the nuns and staff of Nazareth House care home — often dubbed a pauper's refuge — for children and older people in Sligo town in the 1960s and 1970s. He still remembers the day his mother left him there at the age of five, lots of children around a long table, and the special tray of tea and china Sr Fintan would lay out for his mother when she came to see him. He was boarded out to a farmer briefly, sent to an institution in Galway, then returned to Nazareth until he was 14, whereupon he moved to Munster with his mother. He is an only child.

Sean settled down, married, had children of his own, and tragically lost a child. Now in his late 50s and a grandfather, his parents both deceased, his childhood still haunts him. He wants to reconnect with someone who shared his past, a girl we shall call Angela, but his search yielded nothing. She wasn't on social media. He then found previous articles online I had written about former Nazareth care home residents and reached out.

After a couple of days of fruitless searching online myself, I turned to Sr John, archivist and special information officer at Nazareth House. She has been curating records on the 1,915 children who spent time in the home between 1910 and 1993 for almost 30 years. Now in her 80s and frail after a few falls, Sr John is nonetheless determined to finish her work. "I'm passionate about it. I have about 100 left to do," she tells me over tea in the little visitors' room at Nazareth House. I wonder was this where Sean's mother sat 50 years ago.

"It's been an ongoing process since the Residential Redress Board — the floodgates opened then," she says. The flood of inquiries has since slowed down to a constant "dribble" over the decades since.

"You're giving them knowledge really, because you can't rewrite history. Then at least they know, I always feel that everybody is entitled to know where they belong, their bloodline if they can get it," she says.

She remembers Angela and Sean. She agrees to write to whatever address she has for Angela on his behalf.

Sr John was our biggest hope of finding Angela because there are no formalised networks for past residents of care homes to trace each other in Ireland or the UK. The old informal networks of voluntary church workers and the likes of the Legion of Mary have all broken down and don't exist in the local parish form they used to, which might have helped peers trace each other.

The recently passed Birth Information and Tracing Act will allow adopted people and their biological parents guaranteed access to information and records about their birth and early life, but there is currently no facility for peer tracing.

"The system is geared up to block that happening," says author, historian, and former social worker Michael Murphy. He has spent years managing child protection and institutional abuse investigations in England. Many of his

clients were former residents of Irish religious institutions.

"The barriers are tremendous for anybody attempting to make such contact because of privacy. The access to information, even about your full-blood siblings, is difficult. The authorities can't just give information out and the problem is even greater for former care home residents," he says.

Peer tracing is crucial in helping people round out their often distorted memories and perceptions of childhood, Murphy believes. He cites the example of one former resident who used to return to Nazareth to meet the yard man and the cook and reconnect with them.

"They were the only family I had," was the phrase he used. He drew support from that contact with the people who knew him as a child and weren't the direct authority figures," he says.

Murphy describes a "memory reservoir" that people like Sean are trying to fill with two things: "Information to fill in the gaps of what life was like for them but also the reconstruction of their care family."

When those older care homes figures are not there, reconnecting with peers can help in that process, the people with shared childhoods.

In Murphy's view, there should be a duty on the State, which should be responsible for people like Sean, to create "information contact networks", not social media, where people, subject to relevant safeguards, can find a way to trace each other.

"That would do a tremendous amount of good for the psychological wellbeing of people who were there because they would be revisiting, like you would with old school friends, and help them share," he says.

Wall of silence

Childhood bonds are lifelong bonds that shape us, according to Ian O'Grady, a past president of the Psychological Society of Ireland and himself a former resident of St Patrick's Guild.

"People will desire connection. If residents are in an institution and they grow up with people there, they form bonds. It's very understandable from a psychological point of view why they would go looking for these people, similar to why people look up old school friends on Facebook.

"The people around them in their formative years, they're as close as siblings, I'm guessing. I think the difficulty that they're going to face is that there's a wall of silence around a lot of these things which is maybe understandable for families. Unfortunately, in Ireland there's a shame and a stigma about this," he says.

Like Murphy, O'Grady believes the adoptive register about to be launched next month should include a facility for safe peer tracing.

"There should be some facility where former residents can also indicate that they would like to meet other residents. There's a huge amount of sense in putting something like that together where people have a choice of opting in or not. Because there's going to be a huge desire for that connection, similar to people who will meet biological siblings and they'll feel a connection, they'll feel a closeness," he says.



Sr John: 'It's been an ongoing process since the Residential Redress Board — the floodgates opened then.'

Several weeks pass and we hear nothing back from Angela. Sean travels up to Sligo to hand in a letter he wrote himself to Sr John to post to Angela, which she again agrees to send, despite our joint fears she may have moved.

I decide to approach Tuam historian and mother and baby homes activist Catherine Corless. She jumps into the search with gusto and digs into Angela's home county, turning up vital pieces of historical information on her ancestors.

"The way I search for people is I'll always work backwards first of all, on the generation before and maybe back to grandparents because you can work forward then," she tells me from her home in Tuam, Co Galway.

On Irishgenealogy.ie, birth certs only go as far as 1921. Marriages go up to 1947 and deaths are recorded up to 1970. The census of 1911 is useful also. But what Corless finds most useful is the Irish newspapers online archive. "They were very good at reporting in the earlier decades, say the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, especially court cases. It could be very trivial things like car tax but you will get a name and a place so that's really helpful. I intertwine them all and eventually you get the information," she says.

Corless, a tireless researcher as well as campaigner, gets calls all the time from people trying to trace parents, sometimes four or five different people at the same time, but Sean was the first time she was asked to help find a friend. It usually takes just a few weeks for Corless to turn up a blood relative. "I find a fair bit of information for people and if I can't get it all, it gets them halfway there," she says.

"I'd find the mother's grave for them alright and they're satisfied with that if the mother did pass on, just to have the grave to visit."

Unlike other former care homes, an informal network of past residents sprang up in Tuam in the aftermath of the babies' burial ground scandal. It has been a therapy for them, says Corless. Former residents have gradually been able to openly admit they lived in that home by meeting at her house over a cup of tea.

"There's a few groups, some of them have broken up and gone their own way or gone to other groups, but as regards myself, I was just there for everyone. All I did was bring the survivors together and they formed their own groups. I brought them together be-

“There’s a wall of silence around a lot of these things which is maybe understandable for families. Unfortunately, in Ireland there’s a shame and a stigma about this

cause they were anxious to give their story and that turned into documentaries being made and they were always willing to speak on documentaries. We'd always meet here at my house, I facilitated that because I was so delighted to help them in coming forward," she tells me.

Has Corless got any advice for someone thinking of tracing a former care home resident?

"Facebook. You go there and you see who's online, quite a lot of older people, especially people abroad. There are different groups online, adoption groups online that you can contact and they do a bit of research for you. Put the message out there, put a letter in the paper or something. It's amazing, when people come to this age, they like to make contact again," she says.

Like others, Corless would be supportive of a formal peer-tracing facility being set up.

"I could see that happening, that

people would be interested in joining a network. Maybe they feel that there isn't a hope yet," she says.

Armed with the new information from Corless' search, we keep searching for other clues online, until bingo, one day Sean comes across a photo online. He thinks it's Angela. I think he might be right. I act on the hunch and approach a third party. They agree to put me in touch with Angela. The days go by and still we wait. Nothing happens. We have to accept Angela may just not want to be found.

Call from the blue

"What you need to consider for the people being contacted," says O'Grady, "is that whilst repressing issues is not the most beneficial psychological strategy in the long term, many people will have done that."

"Many people will have experienced abuses there and will not want a call from the blue, albeit from someone that they liked and cared for. But if it's a reminder of where they were, people may struggle being brought back into that aspect of their childhood that they spent a lot of years looking to overcome and forget about."

This is the risky side of tracing a long-lost friend. This is where the aforementioned two-sided opt-in with the new birth information register would "make sense", according to O'Grady, both in terms of people feeling safe and vis-à-vis the people who want to connect.

"You always have to worry about the idealised versus the reality. If a lot of hopes are pinned on meeting people who would have shared this care home experience in childhood and think 'it's going to give me meaning' or 'that's going to give me purpose', it may, but it may not," says O'Grady.

Anyone coming to see him about prospectively contacting either a biological parent or non-biological sibling or a child who shared an experience with them in a care home is urged to consider all of the eventualities prior to doing it and then if it still feels like a good idea, to go ahead but accept the challenges that will come up afterwards.

He says former residents could be in "very different places".

"It can be very hard to understand why someone wouldn't want to meet yet they might have very valid reasons. That's where an intermediary makes total sense," he says.

"There certainly should be some

Contacts

- Tusla: +353 818 44 55 00 www.tusla.ie
- BITCounselling@tusla.ie
- Irish Newspapers Archive: irishnewsarchive.com
- Birth Information and Tracing: www.birthinfo.ie
- NCS National Counselling Service / HSE www.hse.ie/ncs
- BITCounselling@barnardos.ie
- Information on overseas support: www.gov.ie/MBHCounselling

scheme similar to the adoption register where they will have a thought-out stage process where people can think about do they want to flag themselves as wanting to be told; if yes, do they want someone to contact them, what kind of contact do they want that to be, etc."

The rights of people who don't want to be contacted needs to be represented also, he warns. "What's really tricky from a psychological point as regards the situation you describe is neither of those children wanted to be in the situation they were in. But the choices that they've made since they were 18 may have moved them further away from those memories or closer. They need a choice around how that pre-18 information is shared and accessed because that choice was denied to them before the age of 18.

"There's no right way of doing this but there's absolutely wrong ways."jk

It's her

"Hello Sorcha," begins the stranger's email which pops into my inbox on 21 August. It's her. I quickly send on phone numbers and wait. Several hours later, my phone rings with a number from the other side of the world and my heart jumps out of my chest. "This is Angela," says a soft voice.

She left Ireland decades ago, built a new life abroad, got counselling in her 20s — "best thing I ever did". She readily admits she would not want to be part of any former residents group. Nazareth House is now "water under the bridge". She remembers Sean and I pass on his number. Later that night, I get an excited text from Sean to say Angela had rang him. It went OK. They spoke for almost an hour. He's delighted.

A spokesperson for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Equality, Integration, and Youth confirmed that 2,153 new preferences have been registered on the new contact preference register since it was set up on July 1, including 29 preferences for 'no contact' from parents. All 14,460 entries on the previous register transferred to the new one, with total preferences of adopted children and parents now standing at 16,613. However, only relatives may trace each other under the new birth information and tracing legislation. The register is still open to applications as the new information and tracing services start in early October.

No provisions have been made yet for peer tracing. Sean and Angela are the rare few to have reconnected. Murphy believes it proves the need for a wider network to be created in the current "vacuum".

"The greatest need for the vast majority of the people who have been in care are networks where you can revisit people you used to have contact with, your care family. Throwing money at people doesn't go anywhere near the needs these people have," he says.

■ *Names have been changed to protect their identities.

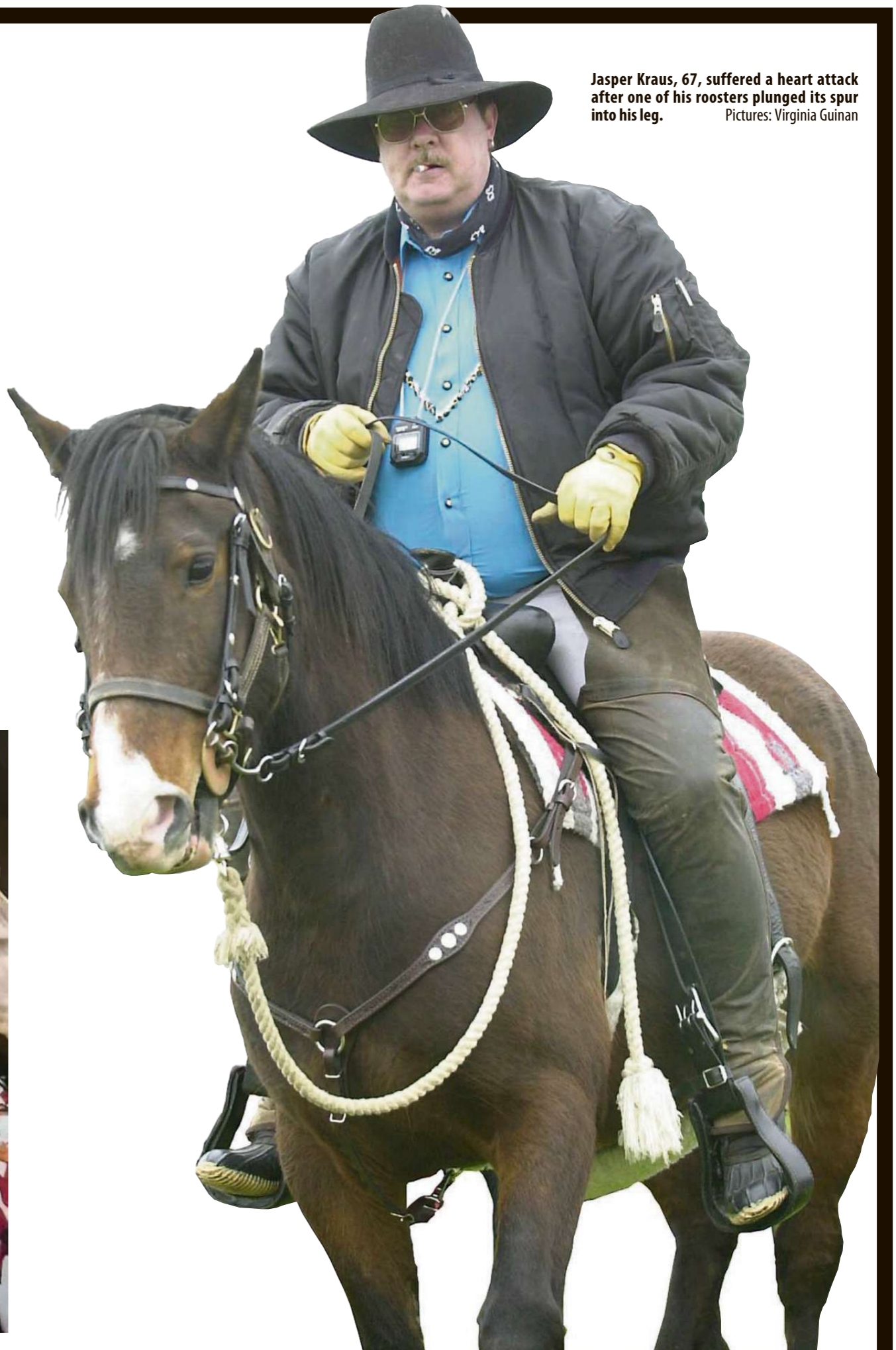
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Jasper Kraus was killed by a rooster at his home nearly a year ago, leading to stories around the world. His daughter tells of the 'insensitive' headlines and reveals the tragedy of his life as well as his Hollywood and animal glories. **Sorcha Crowley** reports



Jasper Kraus and his daughter Virginia Guinan in hospital. He had beaten cancer and sepsis in the course of his life and survived heart and renal failure a month before he died.



Jasper Kraus, 67, suffered a heart attack after one of his roosters plunged its spur into his leg. Pictures: Virginia Guinan



The life story behind man killed by rooster

JASPER KRAUS'S death was pure clickbait gold. Or rather, chickbait. When the international press got wind of a man killed by a rooster in Ireland, it was open season on the headlines. Lurid variations of the "crazy chicken kills man" news alerts lit up phones from Arizona, to New York, to Australia and India. It neatly slotted into the strange but true corners of social media, gobbling up clicks and likes. Funny guys on TikTok chuckled about how "hilarious" the story was.

"It's unbelievable how viral it went. Even ... Fox News had it on," Jasper's only daughter, Virginia, tells the *Irish Examiner*.

"The weird thing is, if you go on YouTube and TikTok, and you type in my dad's name, you want to see some of the videos they have up. There are people putting their makeup on, doing a full face of makeup while reading out the whole inquest. 'Freaky Friday News'. That's what it's called. It's so insensitive," she says.

We are sitting in Virginia's home in Roscommon where she has agreed to share her father's full story, and the tragedy behind "Freaky Friday News". She's trying to make sense of the media attention while still processing her grief at losing the only parent she loved.

In truth, those headlines give slightly more credit to the rooster than he was due. Already severely

weakened from heart failure and renal failure and a man who also had diabetes, 67-year-old Jasper didn't stand a chance when the rooster dug his 1.5in-long sharp spur into the back of his left calf, by chance puncturing a vein and causing enough blood loss to stop his heart within minutes.

Virginia arrived on the scene in time to see the paramedics working frantically to save her father. She hadn't seen so much blood since the stabbing of her baby brother Kevin in 1995.

Back then, it was Jasper who sprang into action. On May 21, it was almost exactly a year to the day since the Dutchman had arrived in Ballinasloe from the Netherlands with his Irish-born wife Anne and their two young children, four-year-old Virginia and one-year-old baby Kevin.

Virginia still has memories of their life in The Hague where Jasper worked in a radio station.

"My dad was a very big music person and I always remember bands and stuff in the house, drum kits and guitars and all sorts. When he worked in the radio station he met a lot of rock bands, interviewing them. He organised concerts and did sound work. He knew the Dutch member of the Eagles. He was happy there," she says.

But Anne had been homesick for her native Galway and struggled with her mental health, which had seen her hospitalised after Kevin's



Virginia Kraus with her brother Kevin: Their mother stabbed the two-year-old boy in the middle of the night in 1995, and he was later pronounced dead in hospital.

birth. Jasper had spent three years recovering from a cancer diagnosis in 1991. A move to Ireland would be a chance for a new beginning, a "second life" for all of them, as Jasper told the then-*Connacht Tribune* reporter Harry Casey in 1995.

"I wanted a new start, a second life. It was one of the reasons we came over to Ireland," he said.

The Kraus family settled in a rented house at Bracknagh, on the outskirts of Ballinasloe. Jasper got a job as a security guard in Salthill and was working nights. They started to make friends, to build a new life.

Anne's mental health, however, continued to deteriorate. She became suicidal on occasions. In one instance at the end of April 1995, she took a meat knife, placed it against her breast, and said she wanted to die.

A change in her medication and attendance at a day care centre led to a brief improvement before another episode where she again told Jasper she wanted to die. She told her doctor she had difficulty in coping with the children.

"My mother was even more mentally unstable at the time," recalls Virginia.

"She didn't have much support from the mental health services here. They kept changing her medications. My father was trying his best to tell them to put her back on what she was on. The reply he got from the doctor, which I read from the inquest, was basically, 'I'm the doctor. You're the

husband. I decide what happens.' My mother begged to be kept in hospital. She didn't trust herself. My father cried for help for my mother and it was not there. And they let her home."

THAT fateful Sunday morning in May 1995, Jasper was in bed with the flu and Anne was making lunch for the children in the kitchen when the unspeakable happened. For reasons that will never be fully known, Anne stabbed two-year-old Kevin in the chest in front of five-year-old Virginia.

"It was surreal. She actually picked up a knife and stabbed my brother. And I witnessed this. She went and got dad out of bed. He got injured in the process as well," says Virginia.

Jasper's statement, read out at his son's inquest in Gort in 1997, describes how his wife woke him up with a knife in her hand. "I stabbed Kevin," she said to him.

He jumped out of bed and saw blood on the knife. He rushed into the kitchen where he found little Kevin blood-soaked, half on a chair, half on the ground. He picked him up, put him in the car, and drove him straight to Portiuncula Hospital.

"My son was alive and talked all

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Jasper Kraus as a boy in the Scouts in the Hague.



Two young boys sitting on a car, likely Jasper and his brother.



Above, The house in which Jasper's son child was killed by his mother in Bracknagh, Ballinasloe. Below, Ken Kelly, a local journalist who had grown up in the house. Pictures:Ray Ryan



CONNACHT TRIBUNE
AN CHUAD CONNACHT

Father's dream life has been shattered by death of his son

By Gerry Garry

The poor old man had just been notified that his son had been killed in a car crash. He was in a state of shock and grief. He had a dream life that had been shattered by the death of his son. The man's name was Jasper Kraus. He was a father who had a dream life that had been shattered by the death of his son. The man's name was Jasper Kraus. He was a father who had a dream life that had been shattered by the death of his son.

An article from the Connacht Tribune in 1995 detailing the family tragedy.

Judge imposes three months jail sentence because of child threat allegations heard in local court

A Dublin man whose two-year-old son died under tragic circumstances in Ballinasloe last year, told Circuit Judge that he had been subjected to abusive and racist remarks by his neighbours.

Forty-year-old Jasper Kraus of 75 St Mary's Park, Ballinasloe, who has been in the local court last week for a breach of the peace on April 2nd last, at Hyman Park, was stated to have "performed" by Jasper Kraus. There should have been some more families represented in court but they were afraid. The complaint about the matter is that the car around the estate. To be, he was stated to have been in the car around the estate. To be, he was stated to have been in the car around the estate.

Jasper was convicted in 1996 of a breach of the peace. He never served the sentence because he successfully appealed the case.

the way to the hospital. He kept saying "Papa, Papa," Jasper told the *Connacht Tribune*. He handed him over to two nurses and the child lost consciousness.

Nurse Ethel Leonard was one of the nurses on duty that day. She told the inquest that a man burst in at 1.50pm carrying a child whose upper clothes were saturated in blood. A year later, he was pronounced dead and was baptised by the hospital chaplain Fr Costello.

In the meantime, Virginia was left alone with her mother in the house and witnessed her self-harming. Her memories of that day are still crystal clear and the trauma and PTSD have never left her. "I had an internal fear of her. I always had as a child growing up. Everyone in my home got injured that day except me. She got injured, my father got injured, and Kevin got severely injured. I had a fear — what if I was next?"

The fact that Virginia alone was unscathed that day strikes her as "unbelievable".

Garda Theo Hanley took the call from Jasper at the hospital and was first on the scene at Bracknagh. He recalled two dogs barking and seeing young Virginia standing at the front door. He went into the kitchen and saw the knife and blood on the floor. Garda Hanley told the inquest that Anne pointed to the floor and said: "There's the blood."

She was shivering and stamping her feet. Her hands were shaking. Her left wrist appeared to be slashed. It is a day the now retired 71-year-old will never forget. "She was in an awful state, the poor woman, you'd feel sorry for her," he tells the *Irish Examiner* when we meet at the former Kraus family home in Ballinasloe.

The windows of the 1950s-style three-bedroom bungalow are all boarded up, the front garden completely overgrown. It is frozen in time.

Traffic whizzed past on the busy road in front, oblivious to the dark tale of horror seen within its walls almost 30 years ago. Hanley is deeply uncomfortable even speaking about the tragedy to this day. "It would knock the heart out of anyone looking at what happened," he says.

In his 23 years in the force up to that particular day, he had never encountered anything as sad, despite witnessing the bloody aftermaths of several shootings and murders while he served on the border during the early years of the Troubles.

"It would bring tears to a stone. It was just terrible, the poor child. He was only two years old. 'Twas just shocking. It shook a lot of the fellas below in the station, so it did," he says, his voice breaking with emotion.

"You didn't talk about it. The family had enough to contend with." Surveying the scene that day, Garda Hanley realised that Anne needed medical attention too, so both mother and daughter were brought to the hospital, where Kevin had just been pronounced dead.

'My brother was gone'

"I saw dad in tears coming down the stairs. I knew something was wrong and I knew my brother was gone. Then he was only two. I was five. That was a hard time," says Virginia. Once in the hospital, Anne said she was sorry for what she had done and wanted to know if he would go to jail, the inquest heard.

A heartbreaking scene is painted of the distraught couple, Jasper, even in his deep distress, kissed his wife on the forehead and put his arms around her.

She told him she was sorry for stabbing the child and asked him if he had forgiven her. He told her they would have to be strong and for her to go to the hospital and get better.

Garda Hanley was present when Anne was taken to St Brigit's Hospi-

tal, then the main mental health hospital in East Galway, where she was detained. In the blink of an eye, Jasper's family was reduced to two.

That same day, Ken Kelly, a local reporter with Galway Bay FM, was driving past the Kraus family home on his way into Ballinasloe when he spotted the Garda squad cars parked outside.

"Being a journalist, my suspicions were raised straight away," he tells this newspaper. In a bizarre twist, the house was also his childhood home.

"It came as a huge shock to me because I knew exactly the spot in the house of where it happened. A brother and sister of mine were born in that house. There was quite a friendly atmosphere in the place amongst neighbours, so the shock of this tragedy reverberated completely."

"It was one of those things we did not expect and certainly from our point of view, the Kellys, to say that it happened in our house," he recalls.

"That was an awful tragedy, actually. But it garnered a lot of support for the father and mother involved. The whole community will tell you their sympathy went out to them; it was such a horrific thing."

Far away in The Hague, Jasper's father took ill when he heard of the death of his grandson, which featured on Dutch television that evening.

Jasper's mother, who had escaped the Nazis during the Second World War by hiding in a monastery, travelled alone to Ireland for her grandson's burial.

The jury returned a verdict in accordance with the evidence of State pathologist Dr John Harrison.

With his young son dead and his wife in hospital long term, Jasper had to begin to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives, one by one, and

face into rearing Virginia by himself, in a foreign country.

Anne was Jasper's third wife, but after Kevin's death, he never remarried. He devoted the rest of his life to Virginia and animals.

An abiding memory of that period for Virginia is returning home some weeks later, just Jasper and herself, and watching her father having to clean up his son's blood stains.

"I remember seeing my father scrubbing the ground, scrubbing my brother's blood off the ground, and that there was nobody there. To have to do that then was detrimental to his mental health," she says.

Back then, there was no such thing as support for men's mental well-being. It "didn't exist".

Virginia, who was mute for months afterwards, received counselling and talk therapy all through her primary school years. But for men like Jasper, well, they had to find their own way.

And for Jasper the way always led back to the same things — the great outdoors and horses.

Horses of Healing

The wide-open lowland pastures of The Hague in the Netherlands were the childhood idyll for Jasper, who grew up working with majestic jet black Dutch Friesian horses and professional dressage rides.

The eldest of three children, Jasper bucked the trend from the start — while his younger siblings moved into nine-to-five office jobs, Jasper gained his exotic animal licence and literally ran away to join the circus.

He travelled around Europe with the German circus Circus Busch Roland and Circus Krone. He would hold up his forearm and regale Virginia with stories of daring-do.

Once, a mountain thunderstorm spooked the animals inside the circus ring, including a tiger. Even when the tiger had him pinned against a wall, Jasper stood his ground.

Men frantically sprayed fire extin-

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guishers at the big cat, allowing Jasper to eventually escape. He survived but would forever bear the scars of the attack on his forearm.

Three lines of tiger claw.

Hollywood beckoned after that and Jasper spent almost a decade working with trick horses on film sets, stunt riding in westerns such as *The Electric Horseman* starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda in 1979.

He got married twice — Virginia has a half-brother in Germany — but he never settled down. He moved on to Belgium, then back to the Netherlands where he met Anne in an Irish pub and that was that.

By the time he reached the Ballinasloe of the mid-'80s, the Jasper as recalled by Ken Kelly was, it's fair to say, a man who stood out. The sight of him striding into town or riding a horse was a sight to behold.

"He dressed as a cowboy, he had the leggings on, a big sombrero hat, he was nearly John Wayne when he walked into town."

"The wife was small, walking either behind him or in front of him, but really, never together so the whole town knew them. People were wondering why he adopted the horses but the sight of him astride a horse was quite unusual."

"Then after this tragedy, he moved on to horses and he attempted a world record for riding a horse a few miles outside Ballinasloe," says Kelly.

He was in the right place to indulge his love of horses — Ballinasloe has the oldest horse fair in Europe, 300 years old last October.

"Way back, the Russians bought horses here. Even last October we had them from Belgium, Germany, the UK, and France. It's one of the biggest in Europe in terms of main quality and trade," says Kelly.

The horse-trading goes on for the entire week. "I remember going to school and the streets of the town were lined with horses. It was said that you could walk on the backs of horses the whole way down the three

main streets. There were thousands of them. The Ballinasloe horse is renowned because it is reared on the land where the limestone is so good. We've had great showjumpers that were bought in Ballinasloe, at the fair."

Jasper could appreciate the unique breed of local horses — they reminded him of the Friesian horses of his childhood.

Six months after Kevin's death, they moved to a house in Hyman Park, a local authority housing estate in Ballinasloe itself. Kelly remembers seeing him "up there with two ponies and there was a grazing area close enough to the soccer pitch. I saw these ponies grazing there and no one took any objection to it."

"Jasper found his niche working with anxious or young horses and quickly gained a reputation as a horse whisperer, working in yards all around the Midlands and the West."

Virginia says: "In nearly every yard in Ireland or race yard, people around here got dad to come in to work on horses. He had a very good reputation for problem horses."

He worked on all levels, from top-breed showjumpers to abused rescue horses, breaking in horses and mucking out stables. Owners knew that by the time Jasper placed his own daughter on a horse, the problem had been solved.

"He was very gentle and he was good with the horses, his calmness came across to them," says horse trainer Parac Geraghty, who has worked at the highest echelons of the Irish showjumping world, acting as assistant to chief of equine Robert Splaine and then rising to chief d'equipe of the Turkish team.

"He remembers Jasper well. "It was seen as a shame on my family. That hurt him," says Virginia.

Tensions arose in their new neighbourhood after swastikas were written on their door.

"That was comical because we were Dutch, we weren't German. Eggs would be thrown at the house, turf, and eggs."

Gardai attended the scene along with an ambulance, but like with the tiger years previously, Jasper stood his ground.

"I remember his neck was swollen but he refused to leave. Obviously the young lads grew up and copped on but it was terrible at

first," remembers Virginia.

He was convicted in 1996 of a breach of the peace and sentenced to three months in prison, which he never served because he successfully appealed the case.

World record

Before they left Hyman Park some years later, Jasper attempted to break the world record for the longest time spent continuously on horseback to raise money for Children in Need.

A hand played, a famous jockey fired the starting pistol, a priest even blessed the horse, and the crowds cheered for Jasper.

It was showtime.

Every hour he switched to a new horse. People brought their horses from miles around for him to ride.

For 72 hours — three entire days and nights — Jasper rode around the green in Hyman, "living off coffee, cigarettes, and rollers" from local bakers.

A doctor ordered him off for fear he could beat the 127-hour record. While Jasper succeeded in raising money for charity, a massive blood clot developed on his leg.

It would be the beginning of a long litany of health problems, prompting them to move out to the countryside in south Roscommon where he'd have space to continue his work with horses.

According to Kelly, Jasper and Virginia enjoyed widespread popularity afterwards but the town never forgot the tragedy because Jasper was "a constant reminder of it" with his presence around town and his world record attempts.

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