

Charmaine's Diary

15th March 2010

Monday

Attend the Annual Southwark Pensioner's Association lunch, kindly hosted by Millwall Football Club. Meet some fascinating characters amongst the 200 in attendance and hear the most intriguing tales. One man tells me that he got married on a Thursday and by that evening he and his new bride were on their way to England. We joke that it has been a long honeymoon. He still tunes into RTÉ Radio One to keep an eye on what's happening back home. Some of these Irish pensioners have been in England longer than the fifty years that the Rose of Tralee festival has been in existence and for some, I have to explain what it's about. A brilliantly fun lunch with the most active group of pensioners I've ever come across. Michael Keavney from the Irish Embassy describes the breath of activities in which they are involved – line dancing, karaoke, bingo, yoga, daily lunches and there is even a hairdresser who comes into the club once a week – incredibly vibrant. Regrettably feel too unwell to attend the reception at the Irish Embassy on Grosvenor Place.

Tuesday

Fly from Heathrow to Washington. Once boarded, I sit on the plane for almost five hours before it takes off which means that this Cinderella misses a black tie ball. Am terribly disappointed as I was truly honoured to be invited to the Annual National Gala of the American Ireland Fund at which the Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Taoiseach Brian Cowen, First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland would be present, to name but a few. Instead I tuck into my airplane dinner and watch a George Clooney chick flick. I hear the next day that Bill Clinton even made an appearance at the ball.

Wednesday

Attend the Northern Ireland Business Breakfast. First Minister of Northern Ireland Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness kindly extend an invitation to visit Stormont before the end of my reign. Take a tour of Capitol Hill organised by Senator Mark Daly from Kerry through the office of Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania. Lunch at the National Press Club and meet John Cosgrove who tells me of a visit to Áras an Uachtarán – as he walked through the hall that is lined with the busts of all the Irish presidents since the foundation of the state, he realises that he has met all but one – not many can boast of that. Attend the St. Patrick's Embassy reception hosted by the Ambassador of Ireland to the US, Michael Collins and his wife Marie. Taoiseach Brian Cowen and his wife Mary, Minister Micheál Martin and his wife Mary, and Mary Hannifan and her mother are in attendance. Eclectic mix of people celebrate together – Irish business people visiting to promote their programmes, Americans with no Irish heritage but who play GAA in Washington, media personnel, politicians who take time out from the Health Care Bill debate, and lots more.

Thursday

A trip to the US wouldn't be complete without having a breakfast of blueberry bagels with my uncle who lives just outside DC. He is the uncle who had always teased me as a child that I would become a Rose of Tralee and he would wear a bright leprechaun-green suit in the Dome to embarrass me. He made it to the Dome in August but behaved himself appropriately. We laugh at the memory. Take the 3.5 hour train to New York.

Friday

Hang out with a childhood friend who works as an attorney in the New York County Defender Services and with whom I'm staying. Take a stroll through Central Park and stop at The Boathouse, a famous icon of Central Park that overlooks the Lake, for a refreshment. Meet with some of the 2009 International Roses later in the evening – Alexis Hodel (Arizona), Bree Kelly (Southern California), Meaghan Murphy (Boston), Emer Cunningham (San Francisco) and Sinéad Lynch (Georgia). The girls were in New York for the St. Patrick's Day parade – about twenty 2009 Roses had travelled from all over the US, the UK and Ireland to participate in one of the world's largest St. Patrick's Day parades.

Saturday

Spring out of bed to meet up with some more of the Roses for brunch – Karen McGillicuddy (Kerry), Amy Moran McGirr (Cork), Helen McMenamin (Sandwell) and Sinéad Lynch (Georgia). Watch the rugby in McCormack's Irish bar with a friend from Suas Educational Development, the Irish charity with whom I travelled to India with a fortnight ago. Disappointing result for the boys in green. Hang out with two other Irish lost souls whom I only met that day who are in New York for the weekend. We enjoy taking a stroll on the High Line. The High Line is a 2.33 km park built on a section of the former elevated freight railroad along the lower west side of Manhattan - such a clever use of space in a city that is forced to think vertically. Visit the Irish Hunger Memorial, a landscaped plot which utilises stones, soil, and native vegetation brought in from the western coast of Ireland and contains stones from all of the different counties of Ireland as well as an authentic rebuilt Irish cottage. It is dedicated to raising awareness of the Great Irish Famine that killed hundreds of thousands in Ireland between the years 1845 and 1852. Later on, we go to the Bowery Ballroom, a famous gig venue where the Irish band The Coronas were playing and finish up in a jazz club on Bleecker Street.

Sunday

A slow start after a very late night. Go to the movies and watch Alice in Wonderland for a good dose of escapism.