

this week's Conversation with Deanna Conheeny

By Colleen McGrath

Deanna Conheeny says her Irish heritage was inclusive in everything her family did growing up. When she visited Ireland in 1985, she saw similarities in the way the Irish lived and the way she was raised, from the décor to the cuisine.

After living elsewhere for several decades, she returned to Newport and wanted to reconnect with the community, so she joined the Museum of Newport Irish History. She now serves as president of the board.

Conheeny loves how walkable Newport is, but you can often find her in the ocean, swimming routes from Gooseberry Beach to practice for the annual "Save the Bay" swim. She has also participated in swim trips all around the world, finding it is a great way to immerse oneself in the local culture, meet new people and quench her sense of adventure.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up on Hammond Street. My father grew up down the street and my mother grew up on McAllister Street. My father (better known as Boo) was a postal worker for 44 years. He was the first carrier to wear shorts on the job. My mom was a teacher, first at Witherbee School. She'd take the bus to One Mile Corner and walk down the hill in her high heels to the one room schoolhouse. Later, she was a teacher at Cranston Calvert for 38 years.

What was life like while you were growing up in Newport's Fifth Ward?

It was a lot different. We had gangs of kids to play with on the street. I didn't venture further than a two-block radius. I met people from Carroll Avenue when I went to Carey School. I never met anyone who lived past Lenthal School until I went to Thompson [Middle School].

How did you first get involved with the Museum of Newport Irish History?

I returned to Newport after 30 years of living away and wanted to get involved with the community, so I started going to their meetings. I became treasurer in 2004 and president in 2022. The organization was grown out of a dream that Bob McKenna and Vince Arnold had. They were both Irish and wanted to preserve Newport's Irish history. The museum is truly com-



prehensive. It celebrates how the Irish play, pray, live and work in Newport.

The mission of the museum is to tell the story of the Irish immigrants and their descendants in Newport County. Is there a story you've heard that surprised or awed you?

There were all of these communities of Irish in Newport that I wasn't aware of: Fort Adams, Kerry Hill, the mill workers, and those that worked at the gas company. The Portsmouth coal mine brought people from Ireland to work. The Irish came to build things.

How many members does the museum have?

There are 900 members. We have very dedicated, engaged and generous members. We are very, very fortunate. The membership is really the strength of the museum. Our board is also very engaged. Every board member has a purpose and is active. Kathy Papp chairs the fundraising and Carol Lepley is the treasurer. Ann Arnold and Rick O'Neill promote the lecture series.

John Quinn is our historian and Steve Marino heads the interpretive center. Peg Murray is our secretary. Donna McCarthy headed up the refresh at the museum.

What was done to refresh the museum?

We restructured the interpretive center by moving the exhibits around and painting. The annual campaign will support digitizing our archives and getting new exhibits. We'd like to have some interactive exhibits, but will need fund-

ing to do that. The interpretive center is open four days a week in the summer. In the winter, we host a lecture series. We are trying to keep people engaged all year long.

What is in the museum's collection?

We have a lot of artifacts given by families that we are scanning into the computer, like a photo we recently received of a group of men and boys behind a sign "Faithful 5th Warders 5th Annual Clambake Field Day." We are trying to identify people in the photographs. The other day, I recognized my grandfather in one of the photos of the Newport Police Department. Once we get all of the photos scanned, we will ask the public to come by the museum and see if they can help identify people.

How do you find the speakers for the lectures?

Ann Arnold and John Quinn do that. They research ideas. John is a professor at Salve Regina University and an author, so he has a lot of resources. We get recommendations from members, too. Cheryl McCarthy was very interested in the Great Famine, so her friend Virginia Pittsley sponsored the Sept. 26 talk by Dr. Christine Kinealy in her memory. We also have local experts like Mike Slein and Steve Marino. Steve gives lectures and tours of the Irish cemeteries.

What lectures and tours are coming up?

There is a tour of the Barney Street Cemetery on Oct. 8, a lecture on the Irish Musicians of Newport on Oct. 16 and one on the Surprising U.S. Roots of Ireland's Tourism Industry in November. People can visit NewportIrishHistory.org to

find out more.

You're always on the go, what else do you have happening right now?

I'm going to swim in the Oman fjords of the Arabian Peninsula with 14 other swimmers. There is a company in the U.K. that organizes the swim trips. I will fly into Dubai and spend five days there, then they take us to the coast and dump us in the water. We swim, then eat and rest, and swim some more. The best thing is you are with people who are absolutely in their happy place. The swimmers range in age from 28 to 72. The company sets the routes we swim and provides a kayaker. There is also a boat you can board if you get tired or in trouble. The trip is very safety conscious and well organized. Last year, I swam 15 miles in five days on a trip to Vietnam with them.

How about travels to Ireland? How many times have you visited there?

Nine times and I'll be returning in April for the 25th reunion of the Newport Kinsale sister city exchange. It is like going to visit family when I go to Kinsale.

What do you like to do in Newport?

I do a lot of walking. We're lucky to have the Jane Pickens, great lectures at the Redwood Library and Salve Regina University's Circle of Scholars. Their courses are incredible. I feel very fortunate to live in Newport. I love being back in my old neighborhood and going to St. Augustin's Church. There is a certain warmth you feel when you see generations of families like you do at the church or Gooseberry Beach.

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