

# Success Clips Along for Irish Barber

By John F. O'Brien, Jr.

"If you fell in a river, you'd come out with a salmon in your mouth."

— Gerald Gormley, to his son, Sean

Good things have been happening to the Irish Barber since he first was selected to be a part of Project Children at 12 years old. Sean Joseph Gormley has built his success one day, and one client at a time...from apprenticing in Lensen's Barber Shop in Derry, Northern Ireland, at 15- years-old to now being owner of his own thriving business — The Irish Barber, in Rocky River, Ohio — as well as owning several land parcels.

Project Children is a non-profit organization that pairs Irish Catholic and Protestant children from the north of Ireland with a host family in the U.S., giving the children six weeks freedom each summer from sectarian related violence, turbulence and tension that is sometimes a steady way of life in the north of Ireland.

A secondary goal is to show the kids that Protestants and Catholics can get along perfectly well — once the bird-in-the-ear whisperings of peer pressure and deep-seated old grudges are removed. The host family usually has children near the same age as their visitor and individual activities are planned by the families as well as by the local Project Children organizers.

Gormley was born May 31, 1973, in Ballymena, Co. Antrim. His parents, Gerry and Mary (or Phyllis) Philomena Gormley, moved Sean and his older siblings; one sister and two brothers, back to Derry, when Sean was -year-old. Derry is about 70 miles northwest of Belfast on the border next to Donegal.

## Worked Part-time

After working part-time on weekends for three years while in high school, young Gormley then became a full time apprentice at the barbershop in Derry upon graduation. He started in the barbershop by doing all the cleaning and similar everyday duties before earning his way up in the trade to cutting hair.

In early 1985, Gormley was asked by a teacher, Eugene McGinty, if he would be interested in being a part of Project Children. The 12-year old youngster talked to his family about it, explained that there was no cost to the children. His parents then began corresponding with Tom and Maureen Daly of Elmira, N.Y. The Dalys had two sons; 11-year-old Daniel and Tommy, 14. The families exchanged letters, photos and phone calls. Gormley was



Shop Front

selected by Project Children in 1985 and joined the Daly family for his first summer in the States. He returned to the Daly family the following summer, as well.

Once Gormley got a little older, (for the next three summers after that visit), he came to the U.S. each summer with Project Children and stayed with Tom Daly's brother and his wife, Gerry and Liz Daly, also in Elmira. These trips not only gave Gormley a strong view of life in America but also a strong view of life as Irish-Americans. The Dalys owned an Irish gift store called Ireland's Own and traveled the East Coast to many fes-

tivals each summer. Gormley's strong Northern accent immediately drove up the Daly family's sales totals. He became another sibling in the Daly family and accompanied them on fishing and vacation trips and to Disneyland.

Five foot-ten and slim, Sean Gormley is now intense man of 31 whose wears his emotions on his sleeve. The seriousness his face and voice is contradicted by his relaxed body language, frequent laughter and dialog. He is clean cut — as a barber should always be. But the brown eyes soften when children hop up into the booster seat for a haircut. The intensesness is only outward. Quick to smile, Gormley is very good at getting young children to relax, not cry or to stop crying. Mothers love him for this.

Laughter and constant chatter battle the television in the shop, with copies of the *Irish Echo* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* newspapers, plus numerous hair fashion, and Irish and American magazines resting on a long church pew that serves as the waiting room seating.

## Photos on Walls



In the Shop

Framed Irish photos, Glasgow Celtic memorabilia and a picture of Gormley swimming with dolphins catches the eye. Postcards and money from Iraq with Saddam's picture on it, sent by clients who are friends serving in the armed forces are tacked to the wall in front of Gormley's work area. The timely items can't help but be noticed as client sits in the antique refurbished barber chairs facing them and a mirrored wall.

A refurbished tin-plated ceiling from 1914

that Gormley discovered while remodeling the shop adds to the bright, warm and comfortable feel. The kettle is always boiling as the shop bustles with clients leaving, clients coming and the phone never stopping with the constant pleas for Gormley to "fit me in."

The barber is the first Project Children alumni to become a U.S. citizen. His proudest accomplishment was when he was sworn in by the Honorable Donald C. Nugent, on Nov. 5, 1999.

From his very first trip to America in 1985, Gormley knew that he wanted to emigrate to the U.S. Over the years, he spent a lot of time with the Dalys figuring out how he could do that and what needed to be done. When he was qualified, at age 19, in 1992, Liz Daly entered Gormley's name into the lottery for a Morrison visa. His luck continued to run high and he was picked immediately. On St. Patrick's Day, 1993, Gormley and his father went to the American Embassy in London, England, and began the interview process. Gormley got his green card less than one year after Liz first put his name in the lottery.

Besides the Daly family, Gormley also had support in the U.S. through the local Hibernians. The John J. Lee Division #1 in Elmira had already lined up a job for him, doing maintenance and general work at a local car dealership when he arrived in the U.S., on May 13, 1993. Gormley subsequently learned how to drive an automatic.

Although he had more than enough qualifications to get a New York state barber license, he had to wait for the paperwork to be accepted. So he worked at the car dealership through the winter of 1993 to 1994. Then, upon receiving his license, he took a job at the Arnott Mall Barbershop in Elmira.

### Found Second Cousin

Soon after, Gormley found out he had a second cousin, John Zeucher, living in Rocky River, Ohio. Gormley came to for a visit and loved the city and the area of Greater Cleveland, discovering there were more opportunities and a more vibrant life there. He knew that if he ever left Elmira, it would be to come to Cleveland.

In July, 1995, Gormley made the move. Once he did, he again had to wait, this time for the New York barber license to be accepted in Ohio. In the interim, he worked as a waiter and bartender at a country club. In January, 1996, started as a barber at Johnny's in Fairview Park, when his license came through. He continued to work at the country club on weekends.

On March 11, 1997, Gormley left the country club to bartend at the newly opened Flannery's Pub in downtown Cleveland, with friend John McKenna. A few months later, Dennis Flannery, one of the owners of Flannery's, offered Gormley and another Irish-born manager, Declan Synnott, the opportunity to purchase another pub that Flannery owned. The two men took ownership on Feb. 1, 1998 and were partners for six years.

Gormley's dream of his own barbershop finally took root at a small duplex that he had had his eye on for more than four years. He initially leased the building for eight months, then



At work

purchased it outright on Dec. 1, 2002. Soon after, he purchased the adjacent building and property, as well. He sold his interest in Parnell's in May of 2004 to concentrate on building his barbershop and other businesses.

The Irish Barber currently has a client base of more than 800 customers each month, served by appointment only. A second barber was added to handle overflow and walk-ins. His first client was Charles Sullivan, whose family originated from Co. Cork. Sullivan and Gormley became close friends, with Sullivan taking Gormley to his first St. Patrick's Day Mass – at St. Coleman's Church, on West 65th Street in Cleveland.

### Married at St. Coleman's

St. Coleman's was also the site of another big event in Gormley's life, his wedding to Julie Hanratty, on Oct. 13, 2001, performed by Fr. Thomas Flynn. The couple met at Stamper's Grill Pub on Nov. 11, 1999, where there is now a dedication brick laid in Stamper's new patio, detailing when they met. Julie is an account manager with MBNA. Her mother's family hails from Thurles, Co. Tipperary, and Julie's father's family is from Crossmaglen, Co. Armagh.

Gormley is still a member of the John J. Lee AOH Division #1, Elmira and is an avid fan of the Glasgow Celtic Football Club. He joins other fans at a local pub called The Blarney Stone each Saturday or Sunday morning to watch games.

He was delighted to meet the whole team and his favorite player, striker Henrik Larsson, when Celtic played in Cleveland Browns Stadium in 2003. Thanks to Julie's pushing, Gormley got pictures and autographs while the Celtic players sat around drinking coffee at the Radisson Hotel in downtown Cleveland.

Gormley also has Cleveland Browns season tickets, courtesy of his wife. "No comparison, they don't sing enough ... (in American football)," Gormley states when asked about the Dawg Pound fan area versus Celtic mania. He has also been practicing karate for almost five years and is just about ready to test for his first-degree black belt.

The Irish Barber is closed on Sundays and Mondays but this is not a time of rest. Gormley spends many Mondays providing in-house barber services to handicapped and elderly men in nursing homes. The men spent their lives going to a barber but had to use the services of a beautician since they entered a nursing home. Gormley thus became a welcome sight, whose visits were appreciated by the male residents.

"If it wasn't for coming over when I was 12, I wouldn't be here today," Gormley states unequivocally about his new life. He is grateful to Project Children, the Daly families and the Hibernians for all their support and love. He is proud of his Irish heritage and loves Cleveland for having such a good mix of all Ireland, whether it be Mayo, Roscommon or Clare.

The Irish Barber has successfully brought an additional piece of Ireland to the city and solidifies another part of the American Dream.