



ILLNESS: ALZHEIMERS CHANGED PENSIONERS PLANS

'Don't let dementia define you – live life to the fullest'

by ROSE BARRETT

WHEN SEAN MACKELL retired in 2016, he had big plans and so many things he wanted to do. But those plans, he feared, were dealt a blow in 2018 when he was diagnosed with Alzheimers.

His working life spanned years with the Ordinance Survey in Phoenix Park where he was a trade union representative for the workers. Sean worked for 30 years with Guinness at St James's Gate and in 1990, he became general secretary of its staff union.

Rather than let the onset of dementia hold him back, Sean married his partner of 18 years, Mary Cunningham, two weeks ago at the age of 67.

He told Dublin Gazette: "I'm an avid walker and golfer. I tackled this diagnosis much like I handled my work as a trade union rep, with positivity and planning.

"Despite Covid and freezing temperatures, we had a great day celebrat-

ing our wedding. Between us, we have six children and 11 grandchildren but only five of each could attend on the day. The rest joined in on Zoom – from Brazil and the US – it was still a very special day!"

Sean is one of 64,000 people in Ireland living with dementia. Routine, pre-planning and keeping busy are all key factors for him to lead a full and stimulating life.

"I walk an average of three miles per day and once a week, I do a six-mile walk," he said. "I'm into current affairs, with a keen eye on Covid and Brexit, an absolute disaster at the moment."

'Dementia does not define me'

The dementia diagnosis was a shock at first for the couple but then Sean's positive attitude and acceptance kicked in.

"I'm still the same person, the same Sean. Mary is a great support to me, and my friends are wonderful. I've been very open, and I would suggest

to anyone who has Alzheimers to be open – people are very kind and supportive. Put it out there and they will help you.

"Some people are afraid to speak out, they are afraid this disease will define them. But you just have to keep doing what you normally do, for as long as you can."

He added: "Alzheimers Society of Ireland, they're a marvellous support and do great things. They've given me the opportunity to use my voice to raise the issues of the condition."

Sean is now chair of the Irish Dementia Working Group. He encourages oth-

ers with dementia to avail of every support so they can contribute to society and keep living life to the fullest.

He revealed how simple yet practical changes helped him and Mary.

"Firstly, we have a large calendar in the kitchen and everything is written onto it. I also have a clock designed for people with

dementia. It tells you the day, the date, time of day - morning or afternoon - it's a very simple, basic tool that helps me.

"It's better to be open about the condition. If I forget something or my train of thought, family or friends just laugh it off. That's better than making a big drama out of it and causing embarrassment."

Sean and Mary survived lockdown by keeping fit

and active. But the banning of visitors to nursing homes is an issue of concern to Sean, especially those with dementia.

"Despite the risks, I believe people should be allowed visitors," he said. "The busier one's life is, the more stimulated the mind is. I would have nursing homes opened up, and encourage more family communications via zoom in lockdown.

"I have fought for justice, fairness and people's rights all my life - I'm not going to stop now despite living with dementia."

Alzheimer National Helpline is open Mon- Fri, 10am-5pm; Sat 10am-4pm on 1800 341 341. E: helpline@alzheimer.ie or via Live Chat at www.alzheimer.ie



Sean Mackell married his partner of 18 years just two weeks ago