

Interview between Meabh Harding [MH] and Margot [Person E]

[0:00]

MH: I'll just make sure it's working there, it's fine. We'll pretend it's not here. So I'd just like to give you the verbal agreement so as you know we're collecting family objects and stories of LGBTQ families in Ireland from objects your object history interview is going to be made available in the collection material which will be held on the website for the RIFNET project for a period of five years, so that's on the UCC website.

E: Sure.

MH: It will be available as a transcript, so we'll have a transcript of this interview where, you know, a written, kind of, script of the interview.

E: Perfect

MH: and as three minute short snippets, they'll pick a little bit to put on the website. Images of the website will be preserved by UCC for a further period of five years for their archival process and your photographs and memorabilia will also be displayed on the website and used in similar ways. The data collected will also be permanently held by the Digital Repository of Ireland. Is that okay?

E: Perfect.

MH: Do you have any questions?

E: No.

MH: Just to say that if you want to stop the interview at any time or if you want to have a break or anything, that's fine, you can just say.

E: Yeah, sure, no problem.

[01:05]

MH: So, we have this lovely item here today. For the benefit of those listening would you like to tell us, describe this object in your own words.

E: Sure, so in the not real silver but silver-esque type frame is a picture of myself and my wife Sarah and that is a picture of us on the day of our civil partnership on the 27th of June 2014 in Carrick-on-Shannon in County Leitrim. And I guess the reason that it's there and why it's kind of my main object today is that it's the culmination or the coming together or it's that moment in my life that where everything just came to that perfect moment, just perfect as life can be and, you know, after a lifetime of trying to I suppose fight for equality and find my way in the world, this was the time and the day in my life where just felt like, you know, everything was right.

MH: So who took the picture?

[02:05]

E: The picture was taken by a friend of mine called Louise Phelan, who is a great friend and Louise was there with her then husband Noel and they were really generous because they took the photograph and then they ran off to a.. somewhere and got it developed and literally about two hours later gave us the photograph so it was actually given to us on the day of our wedding and that's why I brought this particular one because the actual photograph is not fitting really well in the frame but they gave it to us in a kind of a funny shaped frame and we didn't like the frame so much that we put it – sorry, Louise – but we put it in this frame just and it's kept because it was actually given on the day.

MH: Oh, that's lovely.

E: I have nicer ones and I have more ones but that's significant because it happened on the day.

MH: Yeah, and can you tell me about that day?

E: Yeah, it was fantastic in so many ways and I think I was chatting earlier on with some your colleagues or friends and I was saying that we were probably the two of the calmest people that ever got married. It was actually a civil partnership and we latterly got married in 2017 but we regard that day [2014] as really the day we got married and a couple of things I would sort of probably call out on it is that, first of all, we did in a public building. So we had it in a place called The Dock in Carrick-on-Shannon which is an arts centre, kind of museum, art centre. I love museums. It's funny even being here [National Museum of Ireland] they're very... they're tactile for me and very real. We wanted to be very open and declare in our community because we're part of that community, that we had a public declaration and we actually wrote something together that we read out at our ceremony for people about how important it was to be visible in the... in a public space and that was incredibly important for both of us. And I suppose just to kind of... a few more details of the day.

[04:08]

So, as I said, it was the 27th of June. It was a Friday and we had, actually, the ceremony part at five pm and then we had a reception and meal and music after that so actually the whole thing went until about four or five am in the morning, into Saturday morning. We had a hundred guests. I was at that time in a different role to what I do now but I was the CEO of a company and we were food... a food service company so I had chefs come and cater and waiters and we had a fantastic bar and these are the periphery things but I remember being so nice and the people who did it were all people who work for my company and work for me so there was a real personal investment and the team who did it did a most amazing job. And then, we have a house in France, Sarah and I, so we brought beautiful champagne and wine from France so we had, I think, you know, we treated our guests to a really nice time. And we had a local musician provide some music afterwards, just something very instrumental but very beautiful and it was really... it was very special because we had a hundred people and, you know, I don't know if you're married or not, but you know, you think about it at the time it seems great a hundred people but then that's actually really only twenty-five guests each because everybody... most people come in twos so to actually choose twenty-five people was actually very difficult and I found it difficult and I'm the one from a much smaller family.

And if there was a tint of sadness in me was that my father was dead, my dad had died a number of years, he died in 2013 and my mum was very ill, my mum had Parkinson's and she was unable to be there but one of my aunts came which was lovely and, you know, it's a lovely memory. And Sarah's dad is dead and her mother was there, so we had... and her mother made the most amazing speech, so you know, it was a really special day and then surrounded by friends and family, people who were very dear to us and, as I say, we had to make choices and had I bigger space and bigger numbers, I would have had more but then I had everybody I really wanted to be there and a lovely ceremony and the ceremony was officiated by a lady from the HSE and she was fantastic and the whole process of arranging it in Carrick-on-Shannon had been fantastic, as I said, both of us are neither from there. I'm from Limerick and Sarah's from Dublin and yet they treated us so really well and then, you know, the place we had it, as well, meant something to us because we both participated at events there and we go to film club there and we've been to the, you know, we've done some art stuff there and everything like that, so it really is a nice space and we know the team who run it.

Maybe the last thing I think, was that also, on the day our neighbours and some of our friends in Carrick-on-Shannon were fantastic because we put up a marquee at our house. We live in a village called Keshcarrigan which is 10 miles outside Carrick-on-Shannon and our neighbours came and put up the marquee for us. We've another set of neighbours who do a thing called Leitrim Flowers and they did fantastic flowers, all Irish organic flowers and you know just the generosity of people was amazing and we were the two coolest people you ever knew. I was at home and I wouldn't say we're heavy into mega doing, you know, hair and nails, or anything. So, my mother-in-law was kind of saying 'are you not going to get thing' and we were like 'yeah' and we met in a café, Sarah had gone in to get, I think, get something done... toes or something done and we met in the cafe and had a nice coffee and wrote our vows together, that was about it, two or three hours beforehand. And we went to the hotel and had a glass of champagne and then just went on with the day. It was fantastic.

[07:56]

MH: That sounds like a beautiful day. Did you spend a long time planning the ceremony?

E: A couple of months but more sort of the logistics and I think, you know, it's interesting in all relationships, you have partners... well certainly in ours, one of us is better at some things than the other and Sarah was better, I think. I did a lot of the logistics of the catering and the food and the wine and all of that kind of stuff. And I think Sarah did more around the actual ceremony. But, actually no, we didn't because, to be fair, the State and the government gives you very clear directions what you have to do. We met the registrar lady from Sligo once beforehand and, you know, they're very clear, you can bring anything religious into it anything like that. We got a lastminute.com got somebody to take some photographs because somebody else was supposed to do it but there was... not a fallout with us but a marriage break-up so the person couldn't do it. And we got some friends who were traditional musicians to just come and just play a few nice tunes and you know and to be honest with you, without much planning, it turned out to be really lovely.

MH: Oh, it sounds like a lovely day. And what did it mean to you to get civil partnered?

E: Oh, I think just... I'll take, if you like, an analogy that on the day or around the day, my sister-in-law, Sarah's sister, went out and she collected a lot of wood and she built a heart, a big heart, probably about half the size of that big screen [projection screen] and put it up in the

room and she decorated the whole room and that heart was made from wood and, I suppose, like the longevity of wood I think my civil partnership, our marriage, our coming together, is just something so solid for me and sort of tangible and, you know, I suppose, it's the audacity to think that you can have something like that. I didn't have that kind of dreams when I was younger. I never thought I could have what was perceived as a normal wedding, a normal life. You know, I always felt I was going to be in the shadows so to have something come real like that was just... meant everything. It meant I walked tall, really.

[10.12]

MH: And the sense of community was really important to you?

E: Absolutely. I think for us because we are living in rural Ireland. We live in a kind of... up a lane, you know, it's farmers and, you know, we're in the middle of... really in the countryside and we wanted to really feel that we were part of that community and not that we are outside but being inside and not hiding from anybody.

MH: How did you feel about family on that day because choosing a guest list for wedding can be quite difficult in...

E: Yeah, I mean the family part was probably a bit harder. As I said, both my parents, one dead and the other not well. I would say my family were less accepting. I have one sister and my sister was... was great but probably... she lives in the UK and she's got... she had at the time two quite small kids, and she and her husband have busy lives and they were there and they were supportive and her husband was kind of almost our MC but, you know, I would say kind of they breezed in and breezed out. They kind of went away the next day again and that's just a reflection of her life but no lack of support but my brother kind of reluctantly came. And neither he nor my sister brought their children and I think we both felt that they had the opportunity to bring the kids because we would've fitted them in but neither of them chose to bring their children and that I think, for us, was hurtful whereas I would have seen on Sarah's family, her sisters, and she has one sister that has children, they and her sisters were just magnificent and the wider family I would suggest where mine... and I have a small family, you know, I don't have any first cousins alive and really, you know, it's my sister, my brother, and five nieces and nephews and that's it. So, I wouldn't say I felt a huge support from my family or at least my, you know, my blood family, so to speak but then my gay family and my friends were just fantastic.

MH: So, can you talk a little bit about your gay family at this point

E: Yeah, I mean I've had... I have friends there that some of them I'd known thirty years, some of them from school, you know, and they're all part of that gay family because they've been on that journey with me and now with us. So, there was the kind of the friends from both sides from the earlier part of our lives and now the friends coming together as our collaborative joined friends and I think, they're... they're sort of like... they're like a DNA in themselves, you know, I feel almost there's something there, there's a molecule that kind of interest me from them because their support has been unrelenting and just always there and never judgemental and you know there've been people who have been through so many different times, you know, from deaths of parents to... because both my parents are now dead and, uh, and various life stages – coming out and everything and hard times and they've always been there so I hold them very close and very dear.

MH: And you said that you felt it was like a culmination of a journey. Do you mean a personal journey, do you mean a national journey for Ireland, what do you mean?

E: I think probably both, Meabh, because I have... I had been both personally an activist for a number of years and I'd been involved in everything, like I remember coming back to Ireland in '91 or thereabouts from living abroad and you know having to find my way, to find a lesbian and a gay community and kind of knocking on darkened doors and go into, you know, the first couple of times in years that I ever was involved in anything and it was of an organisation called LOT, Lesbians Organised Together, you know, you literally had secret codes and went in darkened doors and, you know, we all found each other through either magazines or, you know, it was an illegal Ireland. I mean we didn't get decriminalised until '93 and people were deeply suspicious and uncomfortable, so there was that, the personal journey.

[14:19]

And then as someone who was a CEO and was very involved... I was the co-chair, at the time of Marriage Equality, of GLEN, so I was then involved on a level both personally but also professionally because I was CEO of a company and I was trying to get business leaders and the Taoiseach, and government and trying to get people involved, so my activism was both personal and professional and therefore over those years it was really working to bring this together and, I think it felt, in 2014, and latterly, in 2015 and in 2017 when we got married, you know, like it was a culmination of everything that I'd worked for.

MH: Wow, it must have been very intense. You mentioned you got married again then in 2017, so how do you feel about that day?

E: It was... it was a lovely day but not the same. We enjoyed it, we had a big party again, we're obviously party animals. We did it here in Dublin this time because I wanted to invite more people so we did a kind of an afternoon and canapes and some drinks and I'd about 150 people at it but it was... and even... and even the ceremony, whilst it was nice it wasn't... it didn't have the same heart space as the first one because I think the first one was just so... and everyone was also kind of like... it was the first for a lot of our guests it was the first time they were at a civil partnership. People were, you know, dying to find out... like when I sent invites out people who said 'oh God I wouldn't miss this, I'm really looking forward to this' so it was nice but it wasn't the same but it was still a very pleasant day and we had a lovely party and enjoyed it but without the intensity, I think.

MH: Without the intensity of the first one. So when we think about this object because we're obviously trying to tell stories through objects. You said this was a present from your friend on the day. What did it mean to you on the day, did it add to the sense of excitement?

E: Oh, yeah, I think because my friend brought it along and, as I said to you, quite rapid you know it was like within about two hours. She and her husband ran off and found somewhere that develop photographs. I think it was that it was a couple of things, it was the fact that she met that effort. It meant so much. Louise is a lovely warm woman and you know just her strength and her and her, you know, her own sense of just generosity to go and do that. Then to see it and to actually look at the photograph ASAP, you know, it was just so amazing. Because you can see it on phones but it's not quite the same. And I think the fact it came in a

frame, as I said, it's a different frame but it was wonderful and I kinda looked... and also I'm probably somebody who's, you know, I've put on a few pounds since then but I looked at it on the day and thought 'that's not bad', you know, that's... I'd be quite critical of myself and don't particularly like having my photograph taken but I look at it and think 'that was actually quite nice', we looked well and I know how fantastically happy we were and are, so yeah it means so much in that sense.

[17:27]

MH: So you see the joy in it?

E: Yeah, I see the joy. I know that that was nothing but joy.

MH: And how did your friend give it to you?

E: She had wrapped it... she'd wrapped it in some nice paper, soft paper and I think she came when we were sitting at the meal and she came up by us where we were sitting. We did kind of a slightly top table although we weren't over keen on that idea but just to kind of give some formation and it was long tables, family style kind of thing and she came up and she handed us that and we opened it, and we were kind of going 'what's that' and I think we were overjoyed to see something like that and it was such fun and we were passing it around to people going, you know, and I think we put it up on the table and so it was a joyous thing to receive.

MH: And what did you do with the photo after that?

E: We took it home and it's literally sat since in the main room in our home in Leitrim and yeah you know wherever we kind of we are I think about that photograph and for a long time my mother-in-law used to joke that we had no photographs. We were really bad but we did have this one but we hadn't got... we got... the guy gave us a CD, the guy who did take photographs on the day gave us a CD of photographs and some family members had some and stuff and it wasn't until my sister-in-law awhile later went and got a load of them actually properly done and put in an album. We were like, we were like 'we'll get that done someday' and we hadn't done anything so, this was the main photograph [laughs]. So somebody would say 'have you a photograph of your wedding' and this was the only one we had to produce for a long time.

MH: So has it come to mean something different to you over those years?

E: I think it's come to mean that this is the real evidence of it. It's a memento. It was physically there on the day. It's, you know, as you grow older as well, you know, so that was 2014, so that's six and two, that's eight years ago, you know, I was forty-something, I'm 54 now. That's, you know, it's a different phase of my life and this means that we have something very solid together and I think the photograph is obviously just an object and the frame but it represents something that's very solid and foundational in my life.

MH: Yeah and is that why you've chosen it to illustrate your view of family?

E: Yeah because right now and all along but really now I'm very strong that you know, Sarah is my family, this is my family, and my birth family, whilst, you know as I said, my sister is

super supportive, my brother is on a journey but getting better, both my parents are dead. The ties are lighter whereas this really feels like family and I was commenting to somebody when we were outside earlier on that, you know, my brother pass remarked to me about a couple of years ago and said something [like] 'you wouldn't understand family life' because I think he was... his view was that because I didn't have children I wasn't married in the way he was. That I wouldn't have an understanding when I do understand family life and you know through the death of both my parents, Sarah and I have been a very strong unit and as a unit we're very strong and I've seen that that unit is a unit that's holding other people up and supporting it's own...now my mother-in-law on Sarah's side, we helped my mum enormously, I have aunts that need help with things and same brother and sister often look for help. And we're also in community and so we're active in community, we're both Christians, I wouldn't say practising Catholics but we're both Christian so we kind of take that sense of community strongly and therefore family for me is about us as a unit being together and being a force for good.

MH: Well, that is a very lovely... really thank you for bringing this in and talking about it. Is there anything else you want to say?

E: No, no, no, I mean I would just say thank you to you and the team because I think this is a fantastic process or, you know, project that you're doing whatever term you want to put it on it and I was reflecting, I had the opportunity recently to give some feedback on the Catholic Senate as an LGBT person about life in Ireland and I think there's been so much change in my lifetime that you know now coming today and through the process and even talking about this I feel really you know I feel listened to and heard and I think this is this is very nice so I think there's a real value of what you're doing so thank you for that as well.

MH: Well, thank you Margot, this is so wonderful that you can come and talk so freely about such a personal and important object, so thank you. I'll turn off the recording.

E: Great, cool.