

William “Liam” Hegarty was part of a generation that his friend, Donegal native John McDaid, describes as “the last off the boat.”

McDaid was talking about the fact that fewer and fewer Irish immigrants are taking that well worn path to the United States, even during the last worldwide recession. “The next generation won’t be Irish in the same way,” said McDaid, former secretary of the Delaware County Gaels youth Gaelic sports program, during this summer’s Continental Youth Championships (CYC) which was dedicated to Hegarty, chairman of the annual international event

Liam Hegarty tragically died of a heart attack on Dec. 3, 2018, at the age of 51.

Liam, said McDaid, wanted to make sure these children of immigrants never forgot their Irish roots. “He said the more *we* stayed involved, the more *they* will be involved.”

Those who knew him say Liam was more than involved. They say he bordered on obsessed. Arguably, what was most important to Liam Hegarty can be found in the hashtags that accompany his Twitter account: #Dad #Irish #GAA #CPA

Liam Hegarty was one of the founding members of the Delaware County Gaels, the oldest and largest youth Gaelic sports club in the region. He was active on the Philadelphia Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) youth board and with the US Gaelic Athletic Association, the governing body for GAA sports in the US. At his death, Liam was vice chairman of the USGAA, which administers more than 130 adult and youth clubs across the country. As chair of the Association’s Youth Board, Liam helped develop new clubs and foster the growth of existing clubs around the US.

Liam was instrumental in helping start the Continental Youth Championships, an international competition that reflects the growing popularity of the Irish sports of football, hurling, and camogie in the US. It was also his idea to start The Liberty Bell Tournament—now named for him—in the Philadelphia area to help get east coast teams ready to play the CYCs every year.

“This whole youth sports organization is basically his design, not just in Philadelphia but around the country,” said his friend, Tom Higgins who was a player, with Liam, on the Philadelphia St. Pat’s Donegal Gaelic Football Club.

Since 2015, Liam served the CYC as a presidential appointee to chair the CYC Steering committee. He also launched the CYC Circle of Honor Award to recognize those who put their passion and time into this growing international competition.

But the Gaels were his baby. His four sons--Billy, Patrick, Kevin, and Michael—have all played for the Gaels. “Our Gaels club isn’t a club, it’s a family and Liam was the godfather of that family,” said former Gaels’ president, Jim Simpson, at the recent CYCs, held in July this year at the Greater Chester Valley Sports Association complex in Malvern, PA. Gaels families have parties together (including a New Year’s Eve do hosted by Liam and his wife, Maureen), go camping in the Catskills, and are part of the fabric of each other’s lives.

Liam, say his friends, was the brains, the creative force, the hustler, the single-minded sheep dog nipping at heels to get things done, all while telling stories and laughing and, as the large photo posted in his memory at the CYCs illustrated, keeping things rolling from his golf cart.

“Liam was one of the go-to guys on a Gaelic field,” said friend Fionnuala Porter McBrearty. “He was often on a golf cart with a radio answering what seemed like never ending questions. Yet in between answering questions he would lift his head and say hello! He would know children’s names and ask them how their game went—because they weren’t just team members they were part of the Delco Gaels family.”

His presence was felt everywhere at the 2019 CYCs, from photos to his name stitched to the uniforms of the Gaels’ junior team and his initials on the other club jerseys. “It’s weird not having him here,” confessed Simpson, taking a break in the food tent between officiating games. “We have saddened hearts but we’re also celebrating because we know that Liam is up there still running this from his cart.”

The Gaels were never far from his thoughts and heart. Brian Cleary, his friend and fellow Irish Immigration Board member (Liam was its first chairman), recalled sauntering up Grafton Street in Dublin with his friend, talking about the contributions the Irish made to the world, when they ducked into a little pub. Someone was selling chances to win 10,000 Euros and Liam bought four. “On each he wrote his American phone and address and in the name column he wrote ‘the Delco Gaels,’” recalled Cleary. “That’s how he rolls.”

As Irish as they come, Liam Hegarty was actually born in the US. When he was very young, Liam’s Irish-born parents, Billy and Betty Hegarty, returned to Ireland to live, first in Billy’s native Donegal, then in Kells, County Meath, where Liam grew up. Liam was involved in the local Gaeil Colmcille club before leaving Ireland and returning to the US as a college student in the late 1980s.

Philadelphia was his destination—and his destiny. It was a logical choice: He had an uncle from Donegal and a raft of cousins already living in Philadelphia. He found work painting houses and decided to transfer his college credits from Ireland to St. Joseph’s University from which he graduated with a degree in accounting. One of his cousins introduced him to his best friend’s sister, Maureen Murray, whom he later married. A champion step-dancer, Maureen Hegarty is a director of the award-winning McDade-Cara School of Irish Dance.

That last hashtag in his Twitter bio--#CPA—reflects the other passion of his life. He was a partner, with his friend of more than 20 years, Paul Maguire in Maguire Hegarty, a tax and accounting firm with offices in Norristown and Springfield, Montgomery County. There, Liam found his niche in transatlantic business services, combining his business acumen and his Irish roots—not to mention irrepressible personality--to help the firm’s Irish clients with outsourced chief financial officer and other vital services as they entered the US market.

“Liam’s personality was perfectly suited to this role and he was welcome in business communities not only in the USA but throughout the length and breadth of Ireland and the UK,” said Maguire.

Like his friends and admirers in the world of Gaelic sports, his business clients spontaneously reached out after learning of Liam’s death. One, noting that Ireland’s GAA All-Stars had just arrived in Philadelphia, wrote “It is fitting that the GAA All-stars are in Philadelphia this week, a visit that I am sure was a triumph of many years of work that Liam gave to the Philadelphia GAA. If Saint Peter has any sense, he will keep the bar in heaven open until Philadelphia’s All Star, Liam, arrives to allow him to toast his many friends and family he leaves behind.”