

Fund-raiser to honour



Keith Espey, of Noblewood Landscapes, is doing a fund-raiser in memory of his brother, who died from SADS. They are encouraging anyone who is buying something from their online shop to make a donation and the company will match it.

Clive Espey was a fit 24-year-old when he passed away. His brother Keith is recalling the sibling he lost 20 years ago with a year-long fundraiser for CRY and the Irish Heart Foundation, writes ELLIE O'BYRNE

THE year 2001 started full of promise for Keith Espey.

The then teenager, from Minane Bridge, had experienced elation then disappointment when he had been signed by Leeds United football team a few years earlier. At 15, Keith had moved to Leeds to play on their youth team, training for two years alongside peers who would go on to become household names. "The youth team all stayed on the grounds of the training centre," Keith says.

"There were 25 of us, living together and playing football every day. A lot of the guys would have gone on to have big careers. Nicky Byrne from Westlife was my roommate for one year. Footballers like Johnny Woodgate, Paul Robinson, Alan Smith."

But in 1997, Keith had returned to Ireland to complete his Leaving Cert.

"I didn't make the grade," he says with a smile and a shrug. "I had to pack my bags and come home."

But all this was behind him in 2001: he was 20, and by the end of May, he had one exam left to complete the third year of his CIT engineering degree, then he was looking forward to heading off to San Diego on his J1 visa with a group of friends.

But on May 30, tragedy struck the Espey family, a tragedy that Keith says he still hasn't fully come to terms with to this day.

Keith's brother Clive, who was 24, "a big, strong guy and always healthy," was found dead in his home in New Zealand, where he was working as a mechanical engineer.

"There was no warning, no previous history of anything," Keith says.

"It was during the day, and his girlfriend was out working. She came back to the house where they were staying and found him there. He had been dead for a few hours."

"They said it would have been pretty quick and he would have just fainted, basically."

When Keith arrived home from college, the news was broken to him by his father and his eldest brother Cameron, who was then 28.

It was on the cusp of the mobile phone era and the brothers and their father had to wait until Mrs Espey arrived home from a shopping trip to break the news to her that her son had died.

"It's just sheer devastation," Keith says. "There is just no way to comprehend what you've been told. Clive was involved in soccer, hockey, mountain biking. He did surfing when he was in New Zealand. He was really healthy, really strong."

Clive was the middle of three boys, and Keith remembers him as a protective force in his life.

"If you ever got into trouble or if anyone ever gave you any hassle, he'd look after you and have your back," he says.

"He was a tough guy who wouldn't take any messing. He would defend you, he would really mind you."

"We wouldn't have hung out together, but we got on well. We did mountain biking together, we would have both worked together in our dad's business to help out. I think, as we got older, we would have got on even better. But it was not to be."

Clive's body was flown back to Ireland and his funeral was held. Keith backed out of his J1 plans.

"We buried Clive on the day I was supposed to fly out, so I didn't end up going," he says.

"I thought I might go out after a few weeks, but I just couldn't face it."

When a healthy young person dies of a sudden cardiac death, 95% of the time, coroners can find a structural problem with the heart or arteries. But in 5% of cases, no such cause can be found. This is known as SADS: Sudden Arrhythmic Death Syndrome. This is what had happened to Clive.



Clive Espey, who tragically died of Sudden Arrhythmic Death Syndrome, aged just 24.

For family members bereaved by such a cruelly sudden loss, the grief can be compounded by trying to make sense of the senseless.

"When there's an accident, as tragic as it is, you can get a handle on understanding what happened," Keith says.

"We were left with so many questions. The fact we hadn't seen him for six months made it even harder: it seemed so abstract and strange that it could happen."

"Sometimes I think I still haven't gotten my head around it. It's still shocking. You still end up thinking about what caused it, how it happened."

"When they did the autopsy, structurally, his heart was perfect. There was nothing that they could point to as being wrong. All they could come up with was that maybe some virus had hit the electrical signals in his heart and made them go haywire."

Indeed, Clive had mentioned feeling under the weather in his last conversation with his mother, days earlier. He had taken a couple of days off work, feeling fatigued. But, in a healthy 24-year-old, this is not flagged as a potential danger.

SADS is not something that many people will be aware of, forming as it does a sort of anti-diagnosis. Yet at least one person under 35 dies of SADS in Ireland each week, according to CRY (Cardiac Risk in the Young), a support group that offers free counselling services to families bereaved by SADS, as well as free heart screenings for families where a genetic heart condition is suspected. 75% of SADS cases are amongst young men.

The Espeys were supported by CRY after Clive's death: Keith's brother was given health screening and the family were invited to gatherings and events. Even though a genetic component is not suspected in Clive's case,

my brother who died from SADS



Keith Espey with his children Alan and Emma, from Minane Bridge, enjoying the sunshine at Fountainstown beach. He said having his own children made him understand what the loss of his brother really meant to his own parents. Picture: Eddie O'Hare

Keith takes the precaution of going for a heart check every five years.

Now a dad to three himself, he says parenthood has given him a fresh insight into exactly how difficult losing Clive must have been for his parents. But they responded with stoicism.

"You don't fully understand until you become a parent yourself," he says.

"But now that I have three children, it becomes even more shocking, to think about losing your child: it's not meant to be that way. My parents were quite strong, and they tried to keep going as best they could."

"Some families throw themselves into fundraising and are more outgoing than we would have been. We haven't really said anything publicly about this over the last 20 years."

But with the 20th anniversary of Clive's death this May, Keith decided to run a year-long fundraiser for CRY and the Irish Heart Foundation, who also run a SADS support group, through his landscape gardening business, Noblewood Landscapes.

"We thought it would be nice to do something to commemorate 20 years," Keith says.

"So we're encouraging anyone who buys something on the online shop to donate a euro or more if they feel like it. Any donations they get, we'll match them as a company."

■ Noblewood Landscapes is at: www.noblewoodgardenstore.ie

■ For more information on SADS see www.cry.ie

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PERSONTOPERSON

Fitness studio owner Michelle McAteer-Doyle talks about her passion for health and fitness, spending quality time with family, and her love for Rathcormac

TELL us about yourself;

My full official title is Michelle McAteer-Doyle, but I'm known by almost everyone as Shelly Mac! I'm the owner and energy behind Max Fitness — a class fitness studio based in the heart of Rathcormac, Co. Cork!

I opened the doors to the studio eight years ago and it has been such an amazing journey! I have a class studio as well as a Spin studio (all within the same building). With all the restrictions that Covid has thrown at us over the past year, I have managed to bring Max Fitness online, which has been such a fantastic opportunity. It has allowed me to continue to do the work I love and give people the mental, social and physical outlet that so many of us need right now! I'm really excited to continue my online work, even when I re-open the studio.

My passion for health and fitness began many years ago. I started playing camogie from the age of seven and football at 14 and even have an All-Ireland (schools) medal to my name.

I went on to study my Bsc in Sport and Exercise Science in the University of Limerick and since then have also completed my studies in Neuromuscular and Physical Therapy, Pilates and just recently qualified as a Precision Nutrition Level 1 Coach!

I absolutely adore what I do and I love sharing that passion with others and inspiring them to make fitness simply a part of them and what they do.

Where were you born?

I was born in Cork, shortly after my parents moved here with my two older sisters and brother from London (yep — SURPRISE!!) My mother is from Mayo and my father is from Co. Down. They both moved to London for work which is where they met, fell in love, got married and started a family!

When returning "home" they settled on neutral ground in Cork — my mum had family already living here! I grew up in Castletyons and moved all the way (about three miles!) to Rathcormac when I was 11.

Where do you live?

I currently live on the outskirts of Fermoy after buying our forever home last year!

Family?

I met my wonderful husband Eamonn almost 12 years ago and we have two beautiful children — Jessie (aged five) and Keelan (aged three). I am the youngest of four kids and while my parents and one of my sisters live close by, I also have one sister, who is married and living in France with her hubby and their beautiful twin girls, and my brother has lived in Australia for almost 12 years and is getting married there at the end of next year!

Best friend?

It has to be my friend Maria — we met on the very first day of secondary school and she has been my bestie ever since! She was with me on my wedding day as one of my bridesmaids and I even waddled down the aisle at her wedding as her bridesmaid 11 days before I had my second child!

Earliest childhood memory?

Standing up in the cot in my parents' room and my dad coming over and lifting me out!

Person you most admire?

I don't think she even knows this, but it has to be my mum. My parents are both amazing and have worked so incredibly hard. But my mum is a fantastic entrepreneur (even though I guarantee she wouldn't describe herself that way) and ran a successful Bed & Breakfast for the past 23 years. Her work ethic has been such an inspiration and her support in everything I have done is incredible! I'm so grateful to her and all she has done for us.

Person who most irritates you?

Luckily there isn't too many on this list! I like to see the good in people, but when people are continuously rude or bad-mannered, that doesn't float my boat!

Where was your most memorable holiday?

The memories of my student summers spent in Spain, Australia and America will absolutely stay with me for life, but taking things a little closer to home one of my favourite holidays was actually to Westport with my (now) husband!

Favourite TV programme?

We are currently watching *Suits* on Netflix — yep, we are totally late to the show, we are only



Shelly Mac, who runs Max Fitness.

on season 3 but really enjoying it!

Favourite radio show?

Has to be Dermot & Dave on Today FM!

Your signature dish if cooking?

I'm known for my one-pot style of cooking, so a hearty stew of some sort!

Favourite restaurant?

At this stage I've forgotten what the inside of a restaurant looks like!

Last book you read?

Rewind by Catherine Ryan Howard.

Best book you read?

Asking For It, by Louise O'Neill.

Last album/CD/download you bought?

Out Of Nothing by Embrace — it's super old but I hadn't heard it in years! It's still as good as I remembered!

Favourite song?

I'm known for loving cheesy pop when I'm in the studio! But my favourite song is *I'll Never Let You Go* by Evermore.

One person you would like to see in concert?

I would absolutely love to go see the Foo Fighters in concert!

Do you have a pet?

Yes, we have a little Cockapoo called Honey! She's over six years old now!

Morning person or night owl?

Definitely a morning person — I'm up by 6.15am every morning except Sunday. I'm so much more productive in the mornings!

Your proudest moment?

From a business point of view, it was winning the Best Fitness Community in Ireland award at the 2020 Irish Fitness Industry Awards. It was amazing just to be shortlisted in the first place and we were up against such big places, mainly from Dublin, so when Max Fitness was announced I was floored!

I always say we may be small, but we are mighty! It is such a reflection of the amazing community of Max Fitters we have!

Spendthrift or saver?

Definitely a saver! I'm definitely a minimalist at heart — having too much 'stuff' makes me feel anxious!

Name one thing you would improve in your area in which you live?

I always consider Rathcormac the community that I am part of as that is where Max Fitness is, it's where I grew up and it's also where we are sending our kids to school.

There is currently a community field under construction which includes a 1km walking track, a 200m running track and so much more. Our area is so fantastic already, but when this is complete it is going to be such an unreal facility to everyone, young and old!

What makes you happy?

Slowing down when the opportunity arises, spending quality time with family, long lunches that run in to dinners with great friends, walking in woodlands and post-training endorphins!

How would you like to be remembered?

I would like to be remembered as someone who enhanced people's lives in some way. I want my time here to make a difference in the best possible way.