

Writer Barrie Peterson speaks to Kathleen O'Dwyer, who is now based in Sydney, Australia.

Episode Description: *This engaging episode showcases the easy rapport between Kathleen and Barrie. Through wide-ranging conversation, Kathleen emerges as warm, witty and endlessly curious, reflecting on a life that has taken her from Ireland to Australia, with stops in India and America along the way.*

Thoughtful narration and well-chosen music enrich the story, exploring migration, identity and the experience of belonging to more than one culture.

The Clonmel Exchanges Podcast Project is a partnership project with the Tipperary Museum of Hidden History.

.....

Hello and welcome to *Loving and Leaving Clonmel*. In this series, we share the stories of Clonmel natives who have moved away and are now living all over the world. We'll hear about their roots, what they miss most, and what life is like for them now.

In this episode, writer Barrie Peterson speaks to Kathleen O'Dwyer, who is now based in Sydney, Australia.

Kathleen: My accent causes a lot of curiosity.

Barrie: I bet you get the question, "But where are you really from?"

Kathleen: I know. They're like, "No, I don't believe that you're Irish." It's like, trust me, I am. [laughter]

I do feel like it's my home. I do. I do. My dog is there, so I do feel like it's my home. [laughter] No, I'm just kidding. My parents are there, and my aunt and uncle, and I have cousins there, and all my best friends live in Ireland. They're all scattered now, but they're all there.

Barrie: I'm privileged to be talking with Kathleen O'Dwyer, who has lived in many different countries. We'll be talking about motivations and expectations and the challenges and opportunities of moving from place to place.

But though at only 35 years old, she's very well travelled, Kathleen's roots are firmly in Clonmel.

Kathleen: My mom is Jeanette O'Dwyer. She's a teacher at the Presentation Primary School, or she was. She's retired. [laughter]

And my father is Martin O'Dwyer. He is a welder by trade and he has done many things over the years. Primarily, he started a business called the O'Dryer, which is an all-weather outdoor clothes dryer, and it was very successful.

And so I had two very creative parents and, yeah, that's my parents. They're amazing and they've allowed me and my siblings to lead a very interesting and very creative life. We all live a very creative life.

Barrie: So tell us your travel, when you went where and how long, just as an outline to provide a framework for our later discussion.

Kathleen: So I was born in Australia. My parents, my dad met my mother in Australia and had myself and my sister. And when I was 10, we moved to Ireland. And I did the rest of my primary schooling and all of my secondary schooling in the Presentation in Clonmel.

And when I left, well, I wanted to go to art school to become a milliner, but I ended up, my brother flew over and surprised me and brought me back to Australia to have a gap year. And during that gap year, I ended up studying acting at the National Institute of Dramatic Art.

And finding that I didn't enjoy my time there, I decided to go to America. So I think it was, I was sort of on and off in America and Ireland over the next four or five years, which explains that portion of my very strange accent. And then in 2014, I came back to Australia.

It's fairly safe to say that I'm based in Sydney, but I go where the work is. So, for example, I have taken jobs in India, and I've taken jobs in London and Ireland and America. So I just sort of go wherever the work is. And that's me in a nutshell. So yeah, in and out of Sydney.

Barrie: Okay, so you're a very cosmopolitan person, I suppose.

Kathleen: I suppose so.. I don't know if I, I think I'm a bit of a dork really, but yeah, I think I am quite cosmopolitan in the way I live my life. You know, I think that's most film people anyway, I'm sure this rings true to a lot of freelancers, but it really helps if you make sort of a home in whatever city you're in.

Because our jobs are so taxing mentally, emotionally, and physically, that if you don't really get to know the city and get to love it and appreciate the place that you're in when you're in it, then you don't have a really great experience on the job.

Barrie: As it happens, Kathleen's intuitive attitude toward making a new country feel like home is backed by research. Sociologist Alex Carter interviewed 1,200 North Americans who relocated to Europe. He found that two-thirds returned within two years. They had tried to maintain a Canadian or an American bubble and they felt lonely.

The ones that stayed are people who got involved in the local community. Kathleen deals with all kinds of people. Her naturally outgoing personality makes it relatively easy to adapt to new cultures.

Kathleen: Yeah. I think, you know, even in non-English-speaking countries, I spent a lot of time in India and during my time there, you know, I came across a lot of people that didn't speak English.

Even though in one of my interviews I thought, okay, well, am I going to be okay with, you know, is there going to be a language barrier? But the production company were like, "No, no, everyone speaks English."

But in reality, not everyone does. And in the way I like to experience a country, by speaking to the locals and, like, you know, I'm forever striking up conversations with people at farmers markets and the local food stand or whatever, you know, supermarket.

And, you know, unless you really push yourself, you're not going to. So I can imagine, you know, Americans being in Europe, it would be quite intimidating.

Barrie: Did you learn some Hindi Urdu when you were in India?

Kathleen: No. Do you know, I didn't. I was in Telangana State, which they speak Telugu, and every time I said, "How do you say thank you in Telugu?" they'd say, "Thank you." [laughter]

So yeah, so I did try, but no. I showed my love and appreciation for the culture in my love of their food.

Barrie: Are you more of a cautious person overall, or are you an adventurer?

Kathleen: I think that I have done adventurous things, and I think from an outside perspective I probably appear to be a very adventurous spirit. I might be doing myself an injustice by saying that I'm not necessarily adventurous and probably am more cautious, but I do the things even though I'm quite fearful.

So I'm cautiously adventurous.

Barrie: Do you plan way ahead, or are you more spontaneous in the moment?

Kathleen: I think if you look up spontaneous in the dictionary, my name will probably be underneath it.

Look, as much as I would love, it would be so satisfying, it would just be so great if I could plan any more than a week in advance in my life. But I'm weirdly fantastic at planning and organizing other people's lives around me. But I'm, I am possibly fearful of missing out on things and therefore live my life quite spontaneously and like to take opportunities wherever they arise, as they arise.

But from the moment I kind of go out the door in the morning, I don't come home until late at night. My friends, at least, you know, are extremely used to the way I live my life. And I could pop up on someone's doorstep for a cup of tea or announce to whoever that I'm at the beach and they have to come and join me. And, you know, sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

Barrie: I like that. It's sort of like being friendly and spontaneous and not having to be so formal.

Kathleen: I also think, you know, fantastic things happen when you are spontaneous. And I think that my job in particular has really trained me into this lifestyle, in that I have, for my career, I have never been able to plan ahead because I don't make money unless I'm working, and I don't work unless I'm hustling and if I'm available.

So when somebody calls, you have to answer that call.

Barrie: When you think about it, if you are venturing to make long-range plans, where would you like to visit?

Kathleen: I mean, Australia is a really beautiful place, and I have seen, I've been very lucky. I've seen a lot of it. My next port of call would probably be somewhere like Mongolia or the Stans, you know.

I say it semi-jokingly, but I really do would love to go and explore the mountains in Afghanistan. They're absolutely majestic beyond belief. And that whole region would just be unbelievable.

There's a fantastic documentary called '*Human*'. It's by a French documentarian, and he created this masterpiece of first-person short interviews about their lives in different countries all around the world. And it's intercut with the most beautiful scenery and drone shots.

Yeah, it's really, it's fantastic. I highly recommend it. But it has inspired me to go to that sort of part of the world.

Barrie: If you were to travel, would you do it solo or with friends or family?

Kathleen: With friends or family. Yeah. I've been really lucky. My family, I mean, I've been lucky to travel quite a bit. But I am not a fan of solo travelling. I don't mind it, but I prefer to experience anything with a friend or a family member.

Kind of makes it more real. You're engaging in a different way. You're talking about it. You're digesting it and discussing it.

Barrie: And your major moves. What was the most difficult part? Of course, when you were 10 years old, it wasn't you deciding. You were going with your parents. But as an adult, what was the most difficult part when you made a major move?

Kathleen: Yeah.

So many factors are really difficult in deciding to pick up your life and move.

You know, you have to process leaving people behind. And that's always hard and always makes me—God, I can't even talk about it. It does. It makes me really emotional, because, you know, you do leave people behind even though you love them and they, you feel like you're present in their world even though you're a million miles away.

But that's a hard aspect for me personally. Literally, packing is a really, really taxing thing. I like to collect things, you know, memories in objects and things, and I'm not a hoarder, but I do like things.

Barrie: Is there an item, an object from Ireland that you have brought with you?

Kathleen: Oh, I have so many things. Yeah, so many things. I mean, I have a Claddagh ring, which I never take off. And, you know, genuinely, people notice and they say, "Oh, are you Irish?" Because I maybe, I don't know. I think I look Irish because I feel Irish, but I don't maybe look as Irish as most people.

But I also have a ring that my dad designed for me, which is a hurley wrapped around my finger. That doesn't leave my finger. But they're easy things to carry with me.

And this is the thing, they're all small because I can't travel with them. You know, my life has to be small in a lot of ways.

Barrie: When you have contemplated a big move in the past, what's your biggest anxiety? Fear?

Kathleen: Yeah. I think, you know, it's interesting when I start to think about things like this. It really reminds me that I've been extremely lucky and so privileged with the moves that I've made.

For example, when I came to Australia at 18, I was lucky enough to have been travelling with my brother, who I then lived with. So I think, you know, housing is often something that people have a lot of anxiety about. And whilst I might have anxiety about that, it is easily solved because of the circumstances of which I'm moving.

So when I moved to India, I was moving with a job and it was the production company's responsibility to house me, which was great. Huge, massive load off your mind when you don't have to worry about that.

So that's great. Look, I know that a lot of people have anxieties about danger or things like that. You know, I lived in New York for four years and I definitely had experiences of danger, but it wasn't the forefront of my mind when I was travelling over there.

Maybe that's just naivety, but yeah, I didn't. I was young. But I think that would be a fear. But I had a cousin that I knew was there, so I had sort of a setup in a way.

So obviously between Australia and Ireland, I have family, so that's nice and easy.

Barrie: Chain migration is common. In fact, it's part of my own life. My Swedish grandparents immigrated in 1912, drawn by my grandfather's brother, who had already become a carpenter in Chicago.

My Scotch-Irish maternal forebears had come here from Ulster because a former leader in Ulster was then governor of North Carolina and was encouraging immigration.

Kathleen's mother's family had a complex journey to Australia.

Kathleen: My mom's family was living in Egypt and after the Battle of El Alamein, they, the British were kicked out of the country and they were told they couldn't return to Malta. They were forced to either go to Australia, England, or I think Canada. And by chance they chose Australia.

You know, I could be living somewhere on the prairies in Canada, living a very different life. You know, who knows? But yeah. Yeah, I think we're all, if we look back far enough, we're all children of migration.

Barrie: What do you miss most about Ireland?

Kathleen: I think the people mostly.

I miss the smell of the country. When I get off the plane, it just kind of floods my system.

And I get it when I go to Australia, too. When I land back, Australia just has a smell. And I don't know how it might sound weird to people, but it is.

It's, you know, it's a freshness. It's the rain on the tarmac. It's the moisture in the air and the grass. And, you know, the colours in Ireland, like the green that you have in Ireland is not like the green anywhere else. It's so, we know we curse the rain, but we don't have that lush landscape without it.

So that would be a really big thing for me.

The sense of community. I used to really, I used to get quite emotional about missing. You know, I think Clonmel is a small town. It's a really great community. And, you know, growing up there, you develop a whole bunch of expectations.

You know, when I walked down town I would go for a walk to bump into people, to have random, spontaneous conversations. You know, we used to go and hang out, you know, outside Superquinn and just bump into friends because their parents were also in town shopping, and then we would hang out.

And it was a lovely community in the whole town, that people would go into the town to meet other people.

And that I have noticed has changed over the years, which maybe has alleviated my longing for it, but that doesn't exist in Sydney or especially in New York and most certainly in India.

Barrie: Big cities make for a whole different kind of sociology, that's for sure.

What do you like most about Australia?

Kathleen: Hmm. I like that I get a lot of work here. [laughter] But I really like the beaches.

Yeah. Look, I'm a bit of an ocean, a water baby. Look, when I go home to Ireland, I will still swim. I'll swim all the time. I love an ocean swim.

And even if it's just, you know, a dip in, dip out in the middle of winter, I'll still do it. I do love that I can bring my laptop to the ocean and have that ocean therapy. It's really, really amazing and I feel very lucky that I'm so close to it and I can utilize it so frequently.

You know, there's so much about Australia. A lot of it is family. And I feel often like one of the biggest hurdles for me personally has been where I spend my time.

You know, as I get older especially, I desperately want to be in Ireland with my family and I desperately want to be in Australia with my family, and I emotionally find it very, very difficult to not get overwhelmed with the concept of time passing and missing out on things, you know.

Barrie: Well, you're holding that tension, and sometimes when you have a conflict like that, it's difficult to endure sometime, but maybe out of that can come some new understanding or a way to resolve it.

Kathleen: Yeah. I mean, I literally work so I can save to go back to Ireland. Like, I push - a percentage of my wages absolutely go into a fund so that I always have a safety net to be able to fly home. If I wanted to fly home tomorrow, that I could.

Barrie: You use the term "home".

Kathleen: I think when I'm in Ireland, though, I might say home for Australia. I think —

[laughter]

I don't know. I have a feeling maybe I've been called out by my friends. But yeah, no, that's, you know, that's a blessing and a curse, that question. It's like, you know, what's your favourite thing about each place?

It's my family or my friends and the community that I've built.

Barrie: The Irish diaspora is huge and far-reaching. Do you feel a sense of being Irish over there? And are there events, people, music, GAA matches where you can embody your Irishness with other Irish people?

Kathleen: Yeah. Yeah, there's so much happening here. Obviously, it's quite well known that Australia is a hotspot for Irish people.

When I'm in Australia, I tend to not feel a part of it when I'm around Irish people, but when I'm around Australian people, or just generally not around Irish people, I feel very Irish.

So that maybe is unfair to say, because when I'm in small groups around people that know me from Ireland, I feel my Irishness. But it's when I—and my accent, I think, changes, my sister would say into a terrible Irish accent, but I don't do it intentionally. It just happens.

Code switching. I code switch a lot between accents. I think it's a form of empathy. That's what I've been told. So anyway, I'm rolling with that. That's my story.

[Music]

Kathleen: When I first came back to Sydney, in 2014, I joined a local GAA club and they would say that I was the Aussie on the team. And it's, it sort of, kind of, it didn't hurt my feelings. That's kind of too strong of a term, but somewhere deep down it kind of hurts a little bit.

And, you know, my dad has done an excellent job of showing us our culture from a really young age. You know, he would wake us up every morning to music, and a lot of that music would be Mary Black or Clannad or any of them. Name any of them and they'd all be played on our radio.

Like, these are all the people that, from a very young age, I would have grown up listening to. So, I think that, you know, whenever I hear of an Irish music night, I'll try to gather my Aussie friends together, you know, not necessarily my Irish friends. And it's not by any intentional means. It's just that that's generally what tends to happen.

But there's so many things happening in Sydney that are, you know, culturally Irish and that people flock to.

[Music]

Kathleen: I would probably want to raise my family in Ireland. Like, I had an amazing childhood and most of my fondest memories, all of my adventurous memories, are of memories in Ireland.

You know, when I think about—I said to someone just the other day, you know, we passed a field with a bull in it and it reminded me of going to my grandmother's house and, you know, we'd never tell our parents, of course, but there used to be a quarry kind of out the back, in Ballinunty somewhere, and we used to have to cross this field with this bull and we would absolutely risk it for the biscuit every single time.

And then, you know, I think about my childhood stories in Sydney and they're sort of, they sort of go like, I rode my bike around the block or I went to my grandmother's house and, you know, circled the house or I, you know, or I went to the beach and sat on my boogie board and went over the waves, which sounds lovely and I do have great memories.

But the really spontaneous and the stories that really kind of made me who I am, I think, are the experiences that I had in Ireland.

[Music]

Kathleen: Yeah. And so this diaspora, I think that a lot of people moving back are probably people with a similar viewpoint, that they would love for their children to have that same experience.

These cities are wonderful and I love living in Sydney, but that's not the best parts of life often. They're great. They're great. It's just different.

Barrie: And incidentally, it should be noted that you have both an Australian and an Irish passport.

Kathleen: I know. I'm so lucky. Yeah. Yeah, I really am. I know that there's a lot of Irish people here that desperately want to stay longer and they really, they have to fight for it, and I feel for that struggle.

But I'm so lucky. [laughter] I'm so lucky.

Barrie: Just to move toward a summary, is there anything else that you would offer that we haven't covered or any kind of a final conclusion or statement that you might share?

Kathleen: Up Tipp. I'm just kidding.

Look, I'm sure I could, and I probably would talk for hours about the things that I love about Ireland. Clonmel is a beautiful town and, you know, there are so many wonderful things happening within the town.

I have so many dreams. You know, like, this is so crazy and I can't believe I'm going to voice this out loud, but, you know, I have a brain that fantasizes about making things better.

So whenever I go home, I get upset that I see them cutting down the trees on the main street, you know, because what? They're not the right kind of tree?

I do wish that they would care for the small things in the town, because I think the small things will make a big difference.

[Music]

Kathleen: You know that watermill on the Suir Island? I'm sure it has its issues, but wouldn't that make a beautiful bed and breakfast or youth hostel for hikers? Or build a balcony bar and have live music overlooking the River Suir with that glorious sunset that we get in the valley and the light hitting the water, and, you know, you can see the Pres bridge from there.

It's a stunning town that we have, and I really hope that, you know, people remember how to notice the small things.

I know it's hard to see through, you know, the rain and the cold and the often very depressing grey that just never seems to leave. But I think I'm somebody that really notices the little things.

And I think when I'm home, I take in those things maybe more than others because I'm trying so desperately to form memories that I can bring with me back to Australia.

Barrie: Very interesting. Well, thank you. I'm glad you're using the term "we" and "home."

Kathleen: I'm so grateful that you asked me to come on and chat, because I find it a really fascinating subject to talk about.

[Music]

Kathleen: I love that so many non-Irish people love Ireland. I love that so many people have adopted Ireland as their home, as a culture that they resonate with.

And I think a lot of that is because of our history. And I think we're generally very welcoming people, and we know what it's like to travel because so many—I mean, I don't think there's a single family in Ireland that doesn't have an experience of somebody leaving home for another country.

So when people come to Ireland, I think we have that inbuilt empathy in our DNA.

That was an episode of 'Loving and Leaving Clonmel'. A project by the Clonmel Junction Arts Festival in partnership with the Tipperary Museum of Hidden History.

It was created by Artistic Director Rebecca Lenehan, with podcast consultant Siobhán McHugh and Tipperary Museum curator Marie McMahon.

Technical production is by Michal Durik, with original music composed by Eamon O'Malley.

Clonmel Junction Arts Festival is principally funded by the Arts Council and Tipperary County Council.