

Writer Suzanne Walsh speaks to Colm Breathnach, who is now based in Nebraska, USA.

Episode Description: *This episode reflects on what is lost and gained through emigration. Colm recalls his childhood in Clonmel, his love of the River Suir, and his journey from the heat of Georgia to the praries of Nebraska.*

Through a thoughtful conversation, he reflects on career, community and belonging, ending with a moving tribute to the town that shaped him.

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

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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 Suzanne Walsh speaks to Colm Breathnach, who is now based in Nebraska, USA.

Suzanne: What do you remember about your journey over to the States?

Colm: I remember, I distinctly remember landing in Atlanta. It's August 1989, so it's brutally hot there. I'd never been abroad other than to be in England. I'd never even taken a holiday in Spain, so I had no idea of heat.

And I remember stepping out, because I'd had to stay overnight in Atlanta, stepping out of that airport, you know, and it's 95° with high humidity in the Georgia summer, and going, "I have landed in hell."

Suzanne: Colm, I wanted to start with, if you could tell me a little bit about where you grew up in Clonmel.

Colm: I grew up in the Irishtown area, corner of Cantwell Street in upper Irishtown. Went to primary school at St. Peter and Paul's and then over to the High School.

You know, I have nine siblings and we all grew up around that area. My father was a school teacher. Mam was a stay-at-home mam, but she was also a school teacher herself. But when you have nine kids, other priorities take precedent.

You know, growing up in the '70s and '80s in Ireland, I honestly thought it was a great time and it was a great childhood. We were all involved in various things around town and whatnot. I played rugby for Clonmel Rugby Club. I rowed a lot for Clonmel Rowing. I was in the Boy Scouts, that kind of stuff, and joined the FCA. I think I did five, six years with them.

And then I went to Waterford, got educated at, I think it's called Eastern University or Southeastern University now. And then got a job in Waterford, and then I moved to America when I was 21 in 1989.

Yeah, it's a long time there. I go back and forth, you know. I go home every couple of years to see the folks and all of that kind of stuff. But yeah, my life is out here, out in the prairies, you know.

Suzanne: So, just going back to Clonmel, what's some of your earliest memories of the town?

Colm: You know, like all kids, I probably romanticise the town, but at the same time, it's like I remember Christmas time. And on December 8th there, the real Santa Claus came down and lit up the town lights.

And, you know, my recollection of Clonmel was the vibrancy of the town and going down town. Like, I'm from that era, you know. We did our grocery shopping at Besco's, but I remember those days, you know, the town being full of life. There were so many people out and about, always.

It was just a wonderful place to grow up and be involved in. And I'll be very blunt, I still kind of miss that part of Clonmel when I go home. It's a very different place now.

So, for me, those are the kind of the great memories. And it's not just Clonmel itself. It's that whole area, you know, being able to go out and run around in the woods out by Carey's Castle and things like that, and Dad piling all of us kids and the neighbours' kids, by the way, into the car on a Sunday and going down to Clonea or, you know, Whiting Bay or Ardmore or something, you know, on those summer days.

It was just a great place to grow up and live in back then.

Suzanne: Did you have a particular place in Clonmel that was especially important to you?

Colm: One of the things I loved to do was I loved to go fishing. And so, going up the green there by the Presentation Convent and fishing. And I'll flat out tell you, I can't tell you how many times I got in trouble with my parents for sneaking out of the house at all hours, even as a little fella, to go fishing up the river. It was just spectacular to me and I loved it so, so much.

But yeah, I have memories like that.

Suzanne: And is that something you did with friends or by yourself?

Colm: Both. Both. I mean, all the other young boys of Irishtown and Connolly Park and that, yeah, we all did it. But it didn't bother me to go up there by myself, and that's when I got in trouble, because going up the river alone, you know. And I would sneak out of the house, you know, at 6 o'clock in the morning to go do this, and next thing you know, Dad miraculously appears to get me back home.

So, you know, so it's probably part of my wandering issues to this day, you know.

So yeah, some great, great memories. But, you know, back then, you know, it was different in the sense of it wasn't cell phones. You didn't know where people were, but quite frankly, it was a lot safer too. And so it was pretty easy just to abscond out of the house and go up the street.

You know, there was Dillon's garage — garage, sorry, I'm too long in the US, I suppose — but Dillon's garage was there and we were constantly... that would shut down in the evening times and we'd be playing soccer there, out the front of his place. And that's what we used.

And God bless that man, he put up with us, you know, with kids running around, playing soccer on his property. You know, different era back then. We got away with it anyway.

Suzanne: When did the idea of leaving Clonmel for the US come into your head first? When did it first become a possibility or an idea of something you might do?

Colm: Probably when I was 8 to 10 years of age. I had a sister who'd gone out to the US already, and you'd hear the stories and she'd send stuff back to us.

And economically things were not good in Ireland growing up. The '70s and '80s were not, you know, that's before the Celtic Tiger and all of that kind of stuff. You looked at the US and you saw this very, very large country with this very powerful economy, and there was jobs there. So it was always kind of, even as a young person, in the back of your mind.

For me, I was very lucky in the sense of I did have the opportunity to go to college. I did have a good job in Waterford, but I also knew that the ceiling was very low, and I wanted to give myself a shot at something else.

So that was always in the back of my mind — that ability to maybe just stretch myself a little and see if there was other opportunities. It wasn't necessarily coming to the US.

You know, I know a lot of the young people now go to Australia and whatnot. And in fact, I have a niece and nephew living down there and one that just went back to Ireland, and Australia seems to be kind of replacing the US that way.

Probably better weather, let's be honest.

But as a young person, you're looking for that opportunity to not just put bread on the table now, but for the future as well. So it was always there.

Suzanne: So, do you think it was a sense of, like, in the broad sense of ambition? I don't mean purely work ambition. I mean in the sense of an ambition about having a bigger life.

Colm: Yeah. Yeah, very much so.

And I came to Nebraska because not too many of my generation of Irish people went to Nebraska. You know, most of them went to Boston, New York. They hung out in bars in Boston and New York with other Irish people. You never really got to know America as such.

So coming out to Nebraska was a risk. But luckily, it's kind of worked out for me.

But I still miss Clonmel. Clonmel is still home. You know, when I go back to Ireland, I say I'm going "home home".

It'll always be that way for me. But yeah, I wanted to take the risk and see how I'd do, you know.

Colm Breathnach was just 21 when he first set foot in the US. Although legions of Irish had emigrated there before him, he didn't take their well-trodden paths to Boston and New York. Nor would he be staying in Atlanta. He was drawn to a far more remote part of the US.

Suzanne: Do you remember your family's reaction when you said you were going to go?

Colm: God, yes. And this is a testament to the Christian Brothers and the education they gave us, because I said, "Yeah, I'm going to Nebraska."

And I remember siblings going, "Alaska. Why would you go to Alaska?"

And they go, "No, no, I'm not going to Alaska. I'm going to Nebraska."

They go, "Where's that?"

And I said, "It's in the middle."

And one of them said, "Kansas is in the middle."

And I'm like, "No, no, it's above Kansas, north of there... that's the Dakotas."

So, the Christian Brothers did a really good job at teaching us some really good geography lessons, but at the same time, they kind of missed out on that one state in the middle.

But yeah, people were a lot... it's not just my own family. A lot of people were going, "Why? Why are you going there?"

So, I think, yeah, I came out here and it worked out.

And, you know, we actually had a tourism slogan out here in Nebraska: "It's not for everyone."

It really is not for everyone. But, you know, that's not to say I don't miss home.

I think one of the great things that technology has for me now is being able to watch RTÉ here on a Sunday morning. I love nothing more than to get a cup of coffee and sit down and watch Tipperary hurling live.

When I came here first, there was no news from home. You didn't know what was going on back there. And I had a subscription to a New York City publication called *The Irish Voice*, and I'd get that every couple of weeks, and it was the only way to really pick up on what's going on back home.

Now I watch on GAA Clubber, and Clonmel Commercials play. That's crazy, you know. So, in a lot of ways, I think I'm more connected back to Clonmel now than I ever was, you know.

Suzanne: Yeah, because you have the ability to be.

Colm: The ability, or to talk to siblings or whatnot. You know, back then, to make a phone call was a big deal and it was expensive. When I got here first, I called Dad, told him I was here on a two-minute conversation, and the next time I spoke to my father was Christmas. So, six months later.

Whereas now, I talk to my siblings all the time via WhatsApp and, you know, it's free. You just, you know, you're connected into your Wi-Fi or whatever and it's a piece of cake.

It's very different now, thank God. For the better, by the way.

Suzanne: By the way, was there anything that surprised you about American life there at the beginning? I guess before you were used to it, was there anything they did or said or behaved that you felt, "This is just alien"?

Colm: I will tell you, most Irish people who haven't been to this country don't understand the scale. And as somebody who's lived here, you know, it is just ridiculously how big this country is.

So scale is one thing, and particularly here in the Midwest, on the high prairie, it's nothing here to get in the car and drive four hours.

There, it's a whole thing. Here, I can't tell you how many times I've gotten in the car and drove to Chicago, which is seven hours, 400-and-something miles.

Ireland goes and plays rugby at Soldier Field in Chicago. I go to every game they do. So I'll just get in the car, drive there, catch a game, and I may or may not stay the night. I might just drive back anyway.

You know, the scale is one thing that you have to experience.

And the other thing here is probably their choice of foods and learning to deal with that.

I remember telling my wife when we were dating and whatnot, and she asked, "What's it like?"

And I go, "It's the same but different."

And she goes, "I don't get it."

And you have to go and experience both countries to realise it's the same but different.

Like, you know, I still eat it and love it. I love salad cream on a sandwich here. And there's a store here in town I can get salad cream. I love it.

Yet here, particularly — I don't know, maybe on the East Coast it's not the same — but God, they love ranch dressing on stuff here. And you don't get that in Ireland.

Some things in Ireland are better. I will tell you that straight up right now. The dairy in Ireland, there's no competition. I mean, the milk, the butter, all of that kind of stuff.

But I will tell you, and probably I'll get hung for this, there's nothing like a Nebraska steak.

Nobody does beef like Nebraska, you know. We're known for it, the scale of it, and how we produce it here.

And I love my beef out this way.

Suzanne: Okay. What would you say were your biggest challenges the first few months you were here?

Colm: Oh, I live in Nebraska. It is not a commuter city and we don't walk anywhere. Everybody drives. You have to have a car.

And out this way, we don't like small cars either. So all our vehicles are big. All of them, because of the winters we have. They're either all-wheel or four-wheel drive.

And adjusting to life here that way is a big adjustment. And you have to learn certain things, like you've got to learn how to drive in the snow, because in the winter times here we will get snow, lots of it.

And so that was a huge adjustment for me.

You know, yes, can you get the bus? You don't want to get the bus here. They're few and far between, even in the city. And you don't want to be standing out there anyway.

So, it's an adjustment to get around.

Suzanne: So, you mentioned earlier that Nebraska isn't the kind of place that attracts a lot of Irish immigrants. Did you make a conscious effort to kind of avoid that, or did you go to Irish pubs, or was your attitude, "I'm in America, I just want to integrate with Americans"?

Colm: I don't think it was a conscious thing, in part because back in the '90s in Omaha, finding another Irish person was like finding a unicorn. They were not around.

So yes, there was Irish pubs and, you know, 100 years ago, there was a huge Irish community in Nebraska that came because of the packing plants, the railroad, that kind of stuff. But that all died away. So there were very few native Irish here.

In fact, there's more native Irish in Omaha now than there was back then. And we have a kind of group. So there's a lot of native Irish. We all know each other and we schedule going to a couple of Irish pubs here in town for drinks.

And, like, last summer for the All-Ireland Hurling Final, I had a full house and I had a big breakfast hosted for everybody. And there was black and white pudding and all of this kind of stuff, and Irish coffees.

And the deal is you have to be native Irish to be at this event, which was very different from the '90s and starting off here.

That's not to say that I don't lean into the Irish-American community here. I'm heavily involved with the Ancient Order of Hibernians. I'm actually president of the Sarpie County division here. We're the guys that organise the St. Patrick's Day parade and all of that kind of stuff.

So, I didn't shy away from being Irish or my Irishness. Just there was nothing here when I initially came.

So, we've created that ourselves, myself and some other lads.

Suzanne: So, when you first were over, had you an idea of what sort of work you wanted to do, or were you open to trying different things because there was that possibility?

Colm: So, when I came here, I went to college again. I got a degree in civil engineering, and I was prepared to do anything when I got out.

And in the early '90s, the economy in Nebraska wasn't great either. Yeah. So I'm two for two on picking bad economies.

But I was prepared to do anything. And in fact, my first job out of college here, even though I was a civil engineer, I worked for a drywall company and I got my start there on things.

No different than going to London and some guy saying to you, "Are you looking for a start?" Well, I got my start and worked from there.

So, I was prepared to do anything to make a living. I think that helped me in a lot of ways because, you know, I went from drywall to engineering to, for a long time, I was vice president of a very large precast concrete firm here in town.

And when I was 40 years of age and with 300 guys, I walked away from it and I got into commercial real estate instead and didn't know how to do it. And that was 17 years ago and that's kind of worked out.

So...

And that's the problem. See, yeah, I am licensed. There's two levels of licensing. There's agents and 99% of the people out there are agents, and then there's a level above that called brokers.

And I have a broker's license for both Nebraska and Iowa.

And I hate shows like '*Million Dollar Listing*' because everybody thinks residential real estate is like that. And in my case, I do commercial real estate. I don't do residential. And they think our world is like that too.

And that is not reality. It's not close to that.

But that's all I've done is commercial real estate. I do brokerage and development work. So we're known for building apartment complexes from the ground up.

Like, currently, we're working on 350 apartments on the west side of the city. We've got three more developments behind that as well.

So, things have kind of worked out.

But, yeah, when I came here first, yeah, I had steel toe caps on, a hard hat on, and I'm out on job sites, and people are going, "But you're a civil engineer."

And I go, "Yeah, and I have rent to pay, you know."

So you got to do something, you know.

Colm would have a lot to learn before he felt at home in the vast, snowy plains of Nebraska, but at least he had somewhere familiar to start.

Colm: I lived in the basement of a house. I actually had a sister out here. She had come out here on a Rotary scholarship.

She's the first PhD ever out of University of Nebraska Omaha, because they normally didn't do that. You had to go to Lincoln for that, to the big flagship university.

So the kind of path was paved for me, and I lived in a basement and that kind of worked out.

And from there, I actually went from that basement to bought a house when I got out of school. And I had no furniture, and I had a house.

So I had a mattress in the corner upstairs with two lawn chairs in the living room. I look back and I go, "Oh my God, that's crazy."

Yeah, I had two lawn chairs and this basically piece of plywood for a table. But it worked out, you know.

We kept going and got married and had kids and everything.

I don't live in that house, by the way, now, but, you know, it's kind of a situation where, again, ignorance and the confidence of youth, and you just keep going.

I never truly feel, "Hey, we've made it. This is good enough. And I'm settled." I don't think that way.

So I never feel truly settled.

That's not to say I don't love living here. This is my home and I'm very lucky to have made a life here. And there are parts of my life here that would, in some ways, feel very alien there.

But it's my life and my lifestyle.

But I never feel truly settled.

Like, I love to shoot. I'm a member of a club here. It's a very, very nice shooting range, a beautiful restaurant and wine bar and everything.

And I own multiple handguns. In Ireland, that's found to be very weird.

I love to hunt pheasant. There is nothing more peaceful than hunting pheasant out in the Nebraska countryside with your dogs, and it's -25 Celsius out, and just the peacefulness and the stillness of the countryside.

It is, it's wonderful.

I live on the edge of the city now. My wife and I, we've land out on the edge of the city and a very nice property, and there are corn fields right next to us.

And in the autumn, when the corn is turned, as we say here, and it's ripened, and getting up in the morning and you can hear the breeze rustle through the corn, it's...

And then the weather is just low humidity and it's beautifully warm, and.. There's no place on earth like Nebraska.

So I love it.

And it is, it is very different than, you know, looking out on the Comeragh Mountains, which are gorgeous, and I still miss them.

It's an adjustment, but I'm never satisfied. So it's just who I am.

Suzanne: So when you make your trips back to Clonmel, how do you feel it's changed?

Colm: Clonmel is a completely different town now.

You know, some of it is very disheartening, by the way, and shocking. Going down O'Connell Street and Gladstone Street and it's all closed up, and there's no vibe into the centre of the town at all.

When I was in my late teens, going out to the pubs like Longergan's and Max Taverns and McCarthy's and that on a Saturday night, there was... there was no place you wanted to be but there, you know. The craic was just fantastic, you know.

Saturday night now in Clonmel down town, it just ain't there, you know. And that's sad, and it's sad to see it that way, you know, and that's disappointing.

And don't get me wrong, there's a lot of great things that have happened in the town, you know. Boston Scientific and all these great biomed companies in town and providing jobs to people.

I love it. That's fantastic.

So that's the upside, but there is some things that just seem to have gone away, and I think Clonmel is worse because of it, you know.

And I will tell you, and this is kind of off topic here, I'm 58 years of age. When I was 50 years of age, they put four stents in my heart and they were made in Clonmel, those stents.

And my sister was an engineer at Boston Scientific.

So that's the great thing about Clonmel right now, and its global reach.

The other end of it is you don't seem to have the craic like we used to have back then, you know.

Suzanne: Do you ever have a sliding doors moment where you imagine your parallel life? Not necessarily if you stayed in Clonmel, but if you'd stayed in Ireland, about the life you would have? Or do you just concentrate on the here and now?

Colm: I think every emigrant thinks that way, because we all think, well, what if I had stayed? What would I have done? Would my life be better off there or here?

I don't know. And I don't have a good answer for you.

And that is honestly a question, like, I think I mentioned earlier that, you know, there's a group of us and we call ourselves the natives. We talk about that.

And, you know, there's guys from Cork and Dublin and, you know, what would our lives be like? And it's an odd question.

And it's not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. It's just a deep philosophical conversation about stuff and how our lives would have changed.

Like, the lad from east Belfast went from Belfast to Bermuda to be a butcher, because that's what he was. That's what he did. He worked for a butcher shop in Belfast, and he ended up running all the Applebee's and Smashburger restaurants in this area.

That's about 30 restaurants, and he was in charge of all of them here in town. You know, that's a long way from being a butcher in Belfast.

A friend of ours, Mick Doyle, here in town, he's world famous in the MMA world. And you watch UFC fighters and all of that.

Some of them are trained out of Omaha by Mick, and that's a long way from Dublin.

So, we all have different paths and different time scales here.

I don't know how things would have worked out for me in Ireland. I don't know, maybe I'd be married and living in Clonmel or Waterford or something, or even in Dublin.

Who knows?

But it has worked out for me here and I'm very grateful for it.

Suzanne: And so I guess allied to that, what is the biggest thing you think you've got from living in the States that you wouldn't have been able to get living in Ireland?

And I don't mean materially. I just mean, is it a personal attribute that gets developed that wouldn't have happened in Ireland?

Colm: Oh wow. Wow. That's a really deep question there.

I think one of the things that you have to learn to do to survive here, out in some place like this, is, you know, if you're living in Ireland, in my particular case, I had nine siblings, so you have always family to depend on. You always have safety nets.

If things aren't going your way, you can sit down, have a cup of tea with one of your siblings and just vent.

I had no safety nets.

So, you learn to have a little bit of faith in yourself and keep trucking and surviving.

Believe me, I've had my setbacks here. I think what it does is it forces you to have a little bit of faith in yourself, to keep going and realise where you're coming from.

I come from Clonmel and I think we produce some pretty great people in that town. I think that stands to you when you go abroad, because you can always think about where you came from.

And we were really lucky. I had a great education from the Christian Brothers. There's no stupid people in Clonmel.

And I think when you're abroad and you're trying to get by and you realise you come from some pretty stout stuff, and that's what Clonmel gave me.

Suzanne: If you could speak to your younger self on the day that you left for the States, what would you say?

Colm: Oh wow, that's another big question, right?

I think I would tell myself to relax a little more. You know, you're fine. It's going to work out. Just keep going.

Because I have a tendency to stress and worry. But if I hold true to myself, it will work out. It did work out.

And despite all the ups and downs, it's easy for me to say this now, but maybe have a little more fun along the way, too.

Suzanne: When you picture Clonmel today, what's the first image that comes into your head?

Colm: Standing in my front yard, looking over at the Comeragh Mountains, in Irishtown. It's still stuck in my head.

That's my image of Clonmel. It's Upper Irishtown and it'll always be in my head, you know.

I love it. I love the River Suir and the green and just... it was just wonderful growing up there.

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 McMahan.

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

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