

# THE SUNDAYTIMES

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## Ashling's father: I still visit her grave every day

As the second anniversary of the teacher's murder approaches, Raymond Murphy speaks about his pain

**Patrick O'Donoghue**

The heartbroken father of Ashling Murphy has said the loss of his daughter is still "very painful" and told how he visits her grave every day to feel close to her, ahead of the second anniversary of the young teacher's murder.

Raymond Murphy stood for a few minutes in quiet reflection against the winter sunlight at the graveside of his youngest child on a clear and bright afternoon last Friday at Lowertown cemetery in Mountbolus, Co Offaly.

His eyes stained with tears, Murphy described Ashling as "our little angel" and recalled time she spent at the family home during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"She was our youngest. No matter what was organised, she was in the middle of it. She organised it. Ashling came in and never left, she never left the house.

"She was with us really the whole time. Covid was in when she was in college and she had to study a lot from home. She never got a chance to go to America on a J1 like Amy [her sister] did or anything like that. She was hoping to go last year - [that] would have been her summer," he said.

There were fresh flowers and Christmas wreaths at Ashling's grave last week, which were nestled among the many smiling photographs of Ashling with her family and Ryan Casey, her boyfriend.

Other items - such as a sliotar, a hurley and pictures of her holding a fiddle, symbolising her passion for sport and music - remained a prominent feature, serving as reminders of her talent, her dedication and the legacy she has left behind in Tullamore's tight-knit community.

Murphy said his and the family's thoughts would be "particularly" focused on Ashling on Friday, which will mark two years since the primary school teacher and musician was attacked and murdered at the age of 23 by Jozef Puska while out for a walk on the towpath along the Grand Canal in Tullamore. Puska was given a mandatory life sentence for the murder in November.

"Of course we will go to the canal [next Friday] ... It's still painful, very painful for me and Kathleen, Cathal, Amy and Ryan," he said.

"What she did in her short 23 years - had she lived, what would she have done in another 23 years?" Murphy said that he visited his daughter's grave every day and that he felt closer to her there. "There's nothing, only pain and suffering, out there [at the canal]," he said.

As the winter sun began to fade and darkness drew in, Murphy remarked on the immense emotional impact of Ashling's murder on the entire country.

"It goes everywhere. We were down last night at the Fureys, who

were playing in Athlone, and they got to know we were in the audience. They played *When You Were Sweet Sixteen* - it's their song that they played in tribute to Ashling. It's a lovely thing to do and it just shows it affected everyone."

Murphy also said it continued to be "very difficult" to cope with his grief and paid tribute to his "marvellous" family.

"Kathleen [Ashling's mother] is of course at home and Cathal [her brother] will be home later this evening. He comes home every day," Murphy said.

"Everyone loved her. No matter where she went. Even when the King of England came to Ireland - Prince of Wales at the time - himself and his wife wanted to meet us and give their condolences because they had met her in the UK playing somewhere. Just they didn't realise."

Members of the community in Tullamore have also paid fresh tributes to Ashling and her family, and vowed to keep her memory alive.

James Hogan, principal of Durrrow National School where Ashling taught, remembered her as a "kind, caring young woman" with an "infectious" personality, as well as a "shining light" of the school, ahead of the anniversary.

"Ashling was in her first year as a graduate teacher working in Scoil Naomh Colmcille Durrrow. She fitted into the school culture as if she

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Ashling Murphy was murdered while out running along the Grand Canal in Tullamore two years ago

## Special unit to monitor immigration protesters

**Claire Scott, John Mooney and Michael McNiffe**

Gardai have put in place a dedicated operation at national and divisional level to police anti-immigrant protest groups which have formed around the country.

The groups, often composed of locals and in some cases infiltrated by far-right extremists and convicted criminals, mount pickets outside buildings that have been linked to the accommodation of asylum seekers.

The security services have been struggling to keep on top of a huge surge in attacks on some of the premises, which have been leased by the state, and on others simply rumoured to be designated as refugee centres.

There have been 17 such incidents in the past five years, with ten in the past year alone.

The Garda Special Detective Unit is now leading a "co-ordinated national and divisional response" to the growth of far-right extremists and their infiltration of the anti-immigrant groups, a senior security source said last night.

Uniformed officers are also stepping up patrols on any buildings said to be earmarked for asylum seekers. "Gardai are taking this very seriously. In some cases we believe there are violent right-wing extremists involved. Let's be real, it's too coincidental to have all these incidents of arson taking place," the source said.

"The burning down of these buildings is way beyond a peaceful protest. It's likely there are

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NEWS

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was there for years. Her bubbly personality and heartwarming smile enhanced the positive culture and atmosphere in Durrow School ... One of Ashling's dreams, which she never got to fulfil, was to set up a fiddle school in Durrow. However, Durrow has since set up a fiddle school in her memory and now more than 70 pupils are learning to play the instrument," Hogan said.

"This is a testament to Ashling and it shows that Durrow was very lucky that Ms Murphy had such a natural influence on all the pupils in the school. As a young teacher, Ashling excelled in every way and inspired so many."

He added that Ashling's family would be in the "thoughts and prayers" of everyone connected with the school as the anniversary date approached.

"They should be ever so proud of Ashling, of what she achieved and the strong legacy she has left behind. Although she is no longer with us, we will always remember Ms Ashling Murphy for who she was, the great legacy she left behind and we will continue to keep her name alive," Hogan said.

In a statement issued yesterday by the Ashling Murphy Memorial Fund, the committee said it had been "overwhelmed" by the "generous" support the fund had received since its launch a year ago and that it had organised almost 30 fundraisers over the course of 2023.

"From marathons to parachute jumps, from organised community walks/races to climbing 23 of Ireland's highest peaks, from tractor runs to table quiz nights, from music sessions to raffles and everything in between. No matter how big or small the fundraiser, we are eternally grateful for the generous support of those continuing to hold Ashling and her memory close to them," the statement read.

The committee also appealed for further donations to assist the fund in pursuing its objectives. "These objectives, compiled along with the Murphy family, are deemed close to Ashling's heart and represent the many interests she had in her 23 years. The charity's overall aim is to support the development of the traditional Irish arts, culture and heritage for young people by providing an environment to continue and enhance the culture in which Ashling grew up and was very much part of," the committee said.

Friends and fellow musicians who knew Ashling through the Ballyboy branch of Comhaltas last week said they continued to grieve her loss.

Separately, women in Tullamore said last week that there was a need for a broader conversation about measures that could be taken to ensure their safety.

They also expressed their disappointment with the lack of implementation of recommendations that emerged from a community engagement survey about



“As a young teacher, Ashling excelled in every way and inspired so many

Ashling Murphy, pictured on her graduation day just three months before she was murdered, with her parents, Kathleen and Raymond, her brother, Cathal, and sister, Amy

# 'We will keep Ashling's name alive'

gender-based harassment and violence in public spaces, which was presented to an Offaly joint-policing committee.

Olive Davis, the founder and chairwoman of Tullamore Women's Shed, who lives beside the canal, said that 40 to 50 women interacted with the service each week to share stories of issues they were facing, experiences they had and to be part of a support network of other women in the area.

"Before Ashling died, I had stopped going up the town and around by the new road - which is a walk I would take at night-time - because I was nervous," Davis said, adding that many areas and roads in the town were dimly lit and did not have cameras.

Davis said she had a recent conversation with her 20-year-old son about the

safety concerns that women have. "I was telling him, 'You're a man. You don't know what it's like to walk downtown on an evening and wonder, what is that guy doing behind me? You will never have that fear that if your skirt is too short, does some guy think that it's OK to flirt with you or put his arm around you because you're wearing something that might be inappropriate.' I said, 'You as a man will never have that feeling,'" Davis said.

Gina Condrón, a volunteer at the shed, said it was important that women and others continued to reclaim the canal as a community space and to ensure that fear did not prevail.

"It's up to each and every one of us as individuals [to ensure] that it belongs to us. It belongs to the people of Tullamore.

It belongs to the people of Offaly and Ireland, and it's really important that you know you can go down there. There will always be a little bit of fear but you can't allow him [Puska] to have that power over you," Condrón said.

While the murder continues to cast a pall over Tullamore, Condrón said the unity and empathy the community had shown in the wake of the attack proved there were "great people" in the town.

"We're not a negative town. We are a positive town because we've got great people in this town and it's important that people know that," Condrón said.

Brigid Britten, a nurse who is also involved with the shed, said Ashling's murder had caused her to worry about the welfare of her 21-year-old daughter, who is also named Ashling, as well as her

niece Róisín, who is in her mid-twenties. "They [young women] should be able to live their lives as they choose and be free to go where they want and when they want, and not be curtailed by fear or anything like that," Britten said.

Earlier in the afternoon, a young mother of two called Denise, who works locally and did not want to give her surname, was out for a run in Lloyd town park in Tullamore as the sun shone and parents played with their children.

She said Ashling's murder had caused her to reflect on her own safety while exercising in public. She added that many local runners had either stopped running or joined running groups in the wake of the tragedy.

"I have two kids at home, so I would be running first thing in the morning or at

night-time, depending on when I can fit it in and when they're in bed. You wouldn't think about it before this, but you kind of are a bit more aware of where you are going, what times you're going at and not really doing the same route too often at the same times, so it's not predictable," she said.

However, she said that despite the "horrific" nature of Ashling's murder, female runners should not allow the attack to "dictate" their lifestyle.

A second anniversary mass to celebrate Ashling's life will take place on Thursday in St Brigid's Church, Mountbolus, at 7pm.

The family said: "We wish to invite you to join us in remembering and celebrating Ashling's life at her second anniversary mass."

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