



by **Shane McGrath**

WHEN Brendan McAnallen died, his heartbroken family made sure a lapel pin in the shape of a gold heart was on the suit he wore for his final journey.

It was the elegant symbol of The Cormac Trust, a force for good which sprang from the depths of unimaginable grief, and which Brendan, his wife Bridget and their family turned into a powerful legacy following the death of an icon.

Cormac McAnallen died 20 years ago today, at the age of just 24. He was a national figure, thanks to his pivotal role in the All-Ireland football championship won by Tyrone the previous September.

It was the first in the county's history, and Cormac was central to it. He had been named the team's captain for the following season, succeeding the legendary Peter Canavan, and a distinguished career on the pitch looked sure to continue.

Off it, his life was vibrant too. He had become engaged months before his death, to Ashlene Moore, and he was a well-regarded schoolteacher in St Catherine's College in Armagh.

But in the early hours of March 2, Cormac died in his bed, suffering a cardiac arrest.

It was estimated that 20,000 people visited the family's house

There followed an astonishing outpouring of grief and support, as sporting and other public figures across the island flocked to Eglisish, the small village in a peaceful corner of south-east Tyrone that the McAnallens call home.

It was into this unhurried idyll that overwhelming sadness arrived 20 years ago. The early-morning bulletins had the news, and it flooded the island.

Recalling it 20 years on, the vividness of the story's impact remains. Kieran McGeeney, the indomitable leader of the Armagh team whose age-old rivalry with Tyrone assumed operatic dimensions in the early to mid-2000s, reeled with shock when he heard it, he later recalled, unsure what to say or do.

Cormac was the type of man you wanted your daughter to bring to your home, he said.

Within hours, the McAnallen house was packed with neighbours and friends and then giants of Gaelic games from all over Ireland began to appear.

'That night, I never went to bed,' Cormac's older brother Dónal McAnallen recalls this week.

He found Cormac in his bed that awful night, and desperate efforts to revive his brother, the man he calls his best friend, were in vain.

'Sudden death is like that,' he says now of the frenzy of activity that followed. 'There's an ambulance, neighbours call, one thing rolls into another.'

'The news was starting to break first thing in the morning. It was probably 3am that he died, the ambulance was out at, say, four o'clock, then you're telling immediate relatives, the police were there, one thing rolls into

Potential: Cormac in action as a superstar in the making. Inset above, mourners at his funeral

Twenty years ago today, Tyrone footballer Cormac McAnallen died suddenly, shocking the nation. As his family wind up the Trust set up in his honour, they take solace in the fact that...

Lives have been saved because of Cormac



another and suddenly it's a whole new day. Then the news is out and everyone descends.'

It was estimated that 20,000 people visited the family's house during the wake for Cormac, and his funeral was both a deeply solemn occasion and a logistical wonder, as mourners were accommodated in overspill facilities and buses were used to ferry the crowds through packed roads.

Donal talks of queues of mourners snaking out of the house at 1am, as the wake became a reflection of Cormac's enormous

popularity, and also the fierce force of a young person's death. Legendary names filed to Eglisish to pay their respects, old stars of legendary Kerry and Dublin teams, as well as rivals of Cormac's from the white heat of Ulster football competition.

Then-Taoiseach Bertie Ahern was at the funeral. Mary McAleese, the President of Ireland at the time, was represented. It was an extraordinary occasion and within its vast dimensions, a family grieved.

Within months, as they reeled from the shock, the family had the

idea of The Cormac Trust. In the 20 years following his death, it raised hundreds of thousands of euro for research into the causes of sudden arrhythmic death syndrome (SADS), trained over 2,500 volunteers in the use of defibrillators and in CPR, and ensured that more than 300 defibrillators were either donated or subsidised for use by sports clubs, community facilities, schools, universities and emergency responders.

More than that, it found a good, powerful message in the ruins of a depthless loss — the death of Cormac made the reality of sudden, unexpected death better known. The effects of that have rippled out through the two decades since.

Now, on the 20th anniversary of Cormac's loss, the Trust is closing. Its work done, its purpose fulfilled, the message it spread will

'The Trust's main driving forces were a number of volunteers'



Legacy: Cormac McAnallen and, above, Mickey Harte, Cormac's mother Bridget, Prof. William McKenna of the London Heart Hospital and Cormac's father Brendan at the launch of the Trust website

circumstances. But Cormac's death forced a change, and then the death of John McCall was just a fortnight after,' he says of the 18-year-old who died of heart failure playing for Ireland at the Under-19 Rugby World Cup in South Africa within weeks of Cormac.

'The reporting of these things changed, so much more often when somebody young or relatively young died, particularly if they were out playing sport or in a public place. These were all being reported, and reported as front-page stories.

'This was happening regularly in the weeks and months after he died. Even after a couple of cases, it was clear to us that this was a phenomenon that we hadn't all been attuned into.

'If you look at the various issues that arose, we became aware that defibrillators might save people's lives, but where were defibrilla-

tors? How many of us even knew what a defibrillator really was before he died?

'So [it was about] provision, access, training, CPR training. The phone never stopped, sometimes with bereaved families who had lost someone in similar circumstances. Then you also had people ringing for advice on screening and how to get a defibrillator.

'There was huge goodwill from the public.'

A sign of the Trust's effect, and how it benefitted from the power of the GAA community, is that its chair is Kevin McCloy. He was a legendary defender for Derry, fierce rivals of Tyrone, and he was renowned for his uncompromising style and toughness.

But he has also suffered serious heart problems, and was saved on one occasion by a defibrillator provided by the Trust.

Conor Gormley, a teammate of Cormac's on the Tyrone team, has also spoken about a Trust defibrillator saving his father's life.

Dónal adds a poignant detail about the Trust's work. It helped, he said, to explain to the public what had happened to his brother. SADS was not commonly known, let alone understood, and in Cormac's case, the precise cause of his fatal heart attack was not discovered.

'There was probably a need to clarify for people that although we don't know exactly what triggered Cormac's sudden cardiac arrest, it was that: it was a natural cause,' he says. 'It was necessary to

amplify that message to the public: that these things happen to ordinary, healthy people, or ostensibly healthy people. That wasn't a primary motive, but it was necessary to amplify that.'

He is at peace with the decision to cease the Trust's work. Much of this stems from knowing the part it played in spreading understanding of sudden cardiac death, and training volunteers in the use of defibrillators and life-saving techniques.

'I would say you would struggle to find many voluntary charities — we never had any statutory funding — that are essentially family-driven, that keep it going in a meaningful way for 20 years,' he says.

Cormac was, in his sporting life, the embodiment of a brilliant, impatient generation of Tyrone footballers ready to make their names in a gilded history.

Before his mid-20s, he had won everything the game could offer: All-Irelands at minor, Under-21 and senior levels, an All-Star award, and representing his country in International Rules against Australia. The latter series is now discontinued, but its trophy was named in Cormac's honour.

He also captured the brilliant essence of youth, and the promise of tomorrow. That lent his death much of its wider force.

Mary McAleese, then into her second term as President of Ireland, gave the inaugural Cormac McAnallen Leadership Lecture, in St Catherine's College.

'It starts with a vision for the self but it ends up being a vision for community and for country,' she said on that occasion, speaking of the virtues he represented, and how they inspire others.

It was a strange symmetry that saw his death occur on the 25th anniversary of the death of Christy Ring, the Cork hurler who is the game's lodestar. Cormac seemed fit for that kind of status too.

As it turned out, his name has endured and will do as Ring's has done, but in a different way.

The death of the young can be frozen as a sorry story of what might have been.

The pain of all those possibilities ended by his death will persist for those closest to him. But there is also some consolation in knowing just how much he was loved and how the regard in which he was held inspired a Trust that has saved many lives.

Dónal is a father now, too, and his youngest child is a son called Cormac.

'He looks just like Cormac did at the same age,' he smiles.

Last year, the grounds of Eglishe St Patrick's GAA club, the place where Cormac's love of the game was tended, were officially opened after being renamed Páirc Chormaic some years earlier, in honour of their departed hero.

'It was only really when we had that opening that it dawned on me, the permanence of it, even though it was there and well used,' reflects Dónal.

'Then we presented the 1998 minor final ball that Cormac had as captain. We gave that ball and his 2003 All-Ireland senior jersey. We haven't been giving things like that away over the years, but whenever you have a permanent facility, it's named after Cormac, and it felt the right time to give something permanent like that.'

'Over the years, how could you auction or give away anything?' he asks. 'When it came to things that he had won, or special mementoes like those, you could never get them back so you were reluctant, you always sensed there might be a right time but you never knew what it was.'

Then they did, entrusting them to the club that was such a big part of Cormac's life, and theirs, too. Twenty years on, his memory is treasured, and the good done in his name has saved and changed many lives.

He will never be forgotten.

endure. 'When my father took ill and died 18 months ago, it sort of brought us to thinking about where we are now,' says Dónal.

'It might have been heading there anyway, but it certainly clarified matters. We were down a very significant figure there. It's just the right time.'

The pride Dónal takes in the work of the Trust is palpable. It was driven from the start by the family, with the support of the Tyrone County Board as well as Club Tyrone, fundraisers for Gaelic games in the county, and a roll-call of dedicated helpers.

'The main driving forces were a number of volunteers,' he recalls. 'There was the minimum of staff and it requires a huge amount of dedication.'

'These aren't easy subjects. You are dealing with families who have

lost someone in tragic and often confusing circumstances, wondering what was the cause of death? There will still be sudden deaths, and it's very hard to thwart them all, but it was about trying to make sure that people have that opportunity to avoid dying prematurely.

'In terms of the work the Trust has done, it does provide consolation. It does provide solace that lives have been saved directly and indirectly.'

Brendan and Bridget were powerhouses, but Brendan's death in August 2022 was a personal devastation as well as a landmark moment for the Trust.

'Daddy had been so central to that and so many other projects,' says Dónal. 'He wore the heart of gold pin that the Trust had as a symbol, he always wore that on his lapel, and it was in the coffin with

him, on his suit. The family dynamic always changes after a great oak falls.'

Brendan was buried beside Cormac in the family plot in Eglishe, and Dónal mentions that Brendan had helped map out that graveyard many years before.

It is a small detail that speaks to an undying truth about Eglishe and the hundreds of other places like it all over Ireland, small villages made vital by the sacrifice of their people.

What was equally vital was the light the Trust shone on sudden adult death.

'Cormac's death, even though we'll not know all the answers, it pointed up a whole vacuum in this area,' Dónal says.

It quickly became apparent to us that other people had died, and would continue to die, in similar