

A few weeks ago, I was on the docks at the Port of Cleveland. I stood before a massive ocean-going container vessel that had carried the Johnny Kilbane sculpture to Cleveland. And I told my companions: “This all started as a plaque.” The journey from a plaque to an artwork of world-class significance was an amazing one. This journey took a family, two communities, a special artist of extraordinary sensitivity, and, now, all of you.

First, the family: Johnny Kilbane’s daughter Mary O’Toole lovingly tended the photographs and other mementoes of her father’s career as boxing’s longest reigning world champion. Today, 22 of the direct descendants of Johnny Kilbane---and Mary O’Toole--are with us. I’ll let Mary’s grandson, Kevin O’Toole, stand in for them. It took Kevin combing through those old photographs as well as public records to create a website in his great-grandfather’s honor and to embark on a quest to restore the rare nitrate films that his grandmother had so innocently saved.

Then it took the Irish American community: Let’s start with everyone who grew up thinking they were related to Johnny Kilbane—shirt-tail cousins, distant relations or no relations at all, no matter what your grandmother told you. And it took the fact that that that web of cousinship extends—let’s face it-- to all of the many Clevelanders whose family originated on Achill Island or settled in the Angle near St. Malachi’s—as Johnny Kilbane’s family and so many of our families did. It took Johnny staying in Cleveland rather than taking his talents to New York. It took him living in the same kinds of houses and neighborhoods that all of his Achill and Angle neighbors did and lending a helping hand when needed so that grandmothers, uncles, and family friends passed down the name of Johnny Kilbane as one of their own. So that when fireman Michael “Sporty” Kilbane began a few years ago to talk up the 100th anniversary of Johnny Kilbane’s title fight in 2012, he got the ear of Gerry Quinn and Colleen Corrigan Day of the Mayo Society and others. Or when another one of those distant Kilbane relations-- Galway-based filmmaker Des Kilbane—brought a documentary film about Johnny to the Cleveland International Film Festival in 2013, the screenings sold out many times over. The Irish American community had already supported the Famine Memorial in the Flats and the renovation of the Cultural Garden, and we were gratified to think they might support us as well.

This journey took an organization devoted to the history of the Irish in Cleveland—the Irish American Archives Society. It’s an organization that had acquired the capacity and community standing to lead the effort that Sporty had begun. So that when the Archives Society pitched collaboration on a display about Johnny Kilbane, the Cleveland Public Library and its chair Tom Corrigan were willing to say yes. Tom believed so strongly in the endeavor that he subsequently joined our board and now serves as our president.

But we also needed another community-- a neighborhood poised at the crossroads between old and new. Johnny Kilbane happened to have lived on West 74th and Herman, a few blocks

south of here, at the time of his first title fight. This is a neighborhood that's had a strong Irish presence since the 1870s and launched the first home of the West Side Irish American Club in the early 1930s. But it's also a neighborhood that has had many caring stewards—a proud succession of working class people—not just Irish but Romanian, Italian, Appalachian, and Hispanic. It's a neighborhood that has benefited from an incredible line of committed leaders who grew up here and loved their place—from Michael and Mary Zone to their son, Matt, the current councilman, with Judge Ray Pianka in between. And it's a neighborhood that once might have been counted out but is now on the rise. That's thanks in part to the Detroit Shoreway Community Development organization, which was launched by Judge Pianka and is now helmed by Jeff Ramsey. This has become a neighborhood of artists, entrepreneurs and urban pioneers willing to take a chance, such as the theater artists at Cleveland Public Theatre and Near West Theatre, Eileen Sammon and Pete Leneghan at Stone Mad, and Sean Kilbane with the Happy Dog Saloon. We found ready and willing partners in this neighborhood. In fact, the neighborhood upped the ante.

We're standing on the site of the former Ever-ready Battery factory. The complex had been shuttered and abandoned since the 1970s. In 2005 the Marous Family, owners of Vintage Development Group, led an extraordinary partnership of public and private resources to reclaim the brownfield and, in an incredible act of faith, started construction on the townhouse development that is taking shape around us today. The Marous brothers had always envisioned public art as part of their development plan, and I well remember the day that Matt Zone took us on a tour and challenged the Irish American Archives Society to think bigger. It also took intrepid homeowners who shared the developers' vision of an artful place and were willing to spend hours of their own time to hash out the goals for what was now evolving into the Johnny Kilbane Sculpture Project.

And if all that wasn't enough—it took an exceptional artist. Archives Society board member Tom Scanlon had challenged us to include an Irish artist in the mix of those we were considering. By some miracle we found our way to Dublin-based sculptor Rowan Gillespie, and something about our plucky undertaking appealed to him. After an interview process, we gave Rowan an impossible design brief—a very long list of everything we hoped that his work would express. We wanted a single sculpture to convey the story of a man's life, and also the story of a neighborhood, of a community, of an entire city. We urged Rowan to take in the urban skyline in the distance, —and the ore ships on the lake and the freight trains that provided Johnny with his first jobs and are still the engines of our city's industrial might. We reported that Cleveland was the 5th largest American city during Johnny Kilbane's prime, but insisted that though it has plummeted to 45th in size we still have the foundations and aspirations of a great city. Johnny was able to reinvent himself several times in a life filled with losses as well as achievements and we wanted Rowan to link that personal story with the story of a

neighborhood and a city in the process of reinvention and transformation. Tell a story that's emblematic of the Irish American experience we said. But also tell a broader story that speaks to a city of immigrants from all over the world.

And Rowan has our everlasting gratitude for listening patiently, observing keenly, and reflecting deeply. He responded with three figures that trace the arc of an individual life but also speak to everything else we had asked for. He worked with unfailing care and attention to detail, casting the bronze himself, crating the sculptures himself, driving them to Antwerp so that they could be shipped on a direct route to Cleveland --a service that our Port Authority had just launched this summer. It also took the tradesmen here who matched Rowan's concentration as he worked among them to install the sculpture a few weeks ago. Laborers from Local 310, and the Bricklayers Local 5, from Norris Brothers Company, and MK Masonry who all gave unstintingly of time and equipment. A cement contractor told me that this project was one of the proudest experiences of her working life.

Throughout this journey, I have been struck by how often people expressed personal motivations for their involvement. Whether it was Matt Zone recounting how his mother told him to leave the neighborhood a better place. Or Chip Marous describing his Czech immigrant forbears. Or Jack Kahl who spoke about growing up in the projects in the Angle and the Irish grandmother, Mary Cusack Kahl, who helped keep his family together when they fell on hard times. And by the way—our journey really needed Jack and Sherry Kahl—Jack Kahl was the first person who stepped up with a substantial gift and challenged others to step up as well. Jack, Ray Murphy, Judge Pianka, and so many others gave us confidence that we could actually see this project through.

For me and my family, that inspiring person was my grandmother, Beatrice Gallagher Lynch. My grandmother grew up in the Angle. She was about ten years younger than Johnny and was one of those kids who looked up to him and saw him as one of their own. My grandmother was a wonderful storyteller. Her storytelling—about the Angle, about Johnny Kilbane, about our family-- gave me a love of history. And I saw honoring Johnny Kilbane as a way to honor her and also my parents Tom and Margaret Lynch. My parents have also valued and protected our Irish heritage and passed the responsibility and the privilege on to me. I want to thank my parents and my extended family for their wholehearted support of this project.

Apologies for the literary folks among you—I'm about to quote an American, not an Irish poet. The poet Walt Whitman once said, "I am large, I contain multitudes." We are here today because the skillful hands and large heart of Rowan Gillespie have brought to life an individual story that contains multitudes. Those multitudes now include all of us—all of our hopes and aspirations, our sorrows and our joys. And now we all need to become stewards of this eloquent work of art. A work of bronze that is strong enough to stand thousands of years but is

nonetheless fragile and exposed. I never knew how awesome a responsibility a sculpture was until Rowan handed it over to us.

We hope you will come back here often and listen to this sculpture's many voices—to the lonely yet defiant boy who will not be defeated by a mother's death or a father's blindness, to the young boxer with something to prove, ready to take on the world, to the older man who knows that in the measure of a long and full life the sweet can outweigh the bitter.

In a 100 years, none but perhaps the very youngest of us will still be alive. But it is our hope that those who come after us will sense the multitudes who have been involved in the placement of this sculpture here. We hope that they will care for it as we pledge to—just as so many have tended this place before us. It is not only our hope but our belief that the stewards of the future will recognize our faith in them by the preciousness of the gift that we give them today.