

Alphonsus and Mary Celine McNamara O'Leary



Alphonsus and Mary Celine O'Leary are longtime stalwarts of Cleveland's Irish American community.

Despite his soft brogue, Al O'Leary was born in the United States almost 100 years ago—though he crisscrossed the ocean a few times before landing in Cleveland to stay. Both his parents were born in Ireland; his father, George O'Leary, hailed from the Ardfert district of County Kerry, while his mother, Bridget “Delia” Gantley was born outside Lorrha in County Tipperary. The couple met and married in New York in 1925. When the tough times of the Depression hit, Delia O'Leary took her only son Al back to Ireland, where she bought a farm in

Curraghglass, near the Gantley family home in Lorrha.

Though raised in Ireland, O'Leary enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1944. After discharge, he found his way to Cleveland, where several of his mother's relatives lived. His mother joined him in Cleveland, and they lived on E. 91st Street. He quickly became involved in playing traditional Irish music and sports, helping to form a Gaelic Hurling team in 1951 and an Irish Musician's Club in 1958. He played the accordion for local and regional dancing competitions for decades.

His wife, Mary Celine McNamara, arrived in Cleveland in 1952 from the village of Pollagh on Achill Island in County Mayo. Her parents were Michael and Mary Burke McNamara. Celine was the first of several of 13 children to immigrate to Cleveland, and she's the last who is still alive in the US. Her five youngest siblings still live in Ireland.

Al and Celine met at the West Side Irish American Club on Madison Avenue. Al was on stage, playing the accordion. As he would later beam, “The first person she saw was me.” The couple married in 1955 and celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary last year. Celine managed the family—which would grow to nine children—and their participation in music, Irish step dancing, sports, and church, while Al worked at the Ford Motor plant in Brook Park. The house was always full: McNamara siblings stayed with the family when each came to Cleveland in turn, as did Al's mother Delia toward the end of her life. (Al inherits his longevity from his mother, who lived to the age of 104.)

For several decades, the couple spearheaded an annual St. Patrick's Day dance, co-sponsored by the Musician's Club and three other affiliated groups—often called “The Four Clubs” dance. Celine also found time to serve as an LAOH division president along the way. Al was the first to bring the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann touring shows to Cleveland, with Celine hosting performers at the family home. Both Al and Celine have been longtime, faithful members of the Pioneers Total Abstinence Association. They have each represented various clubs on Cleveland's Parade Committee over the years, and Al is the only founding UIS delegate (in 1958) who still participates in the management of the annual Parade.

Al O'Leary was honored as Grand Marshal of Cleveland's St. Patrick's Day Parade in 1993, and Celine O'Leary as Irish Mother of the Year in 1997. Al still leads a weekly traditional Irish music session at the Plank Road Tavern most Thursdays. The Akron Celtic Guards hurling and camogie club runs an annual Al O'Leary Tournament named in honor of the O'Leary family's longstanding commitment to hurling and other Gaelic sports. Al was still refereeing hurling matches in his early 90s, running up and down the field with the players.

The couple lives in Strongsville and were founding and still active members of St Colette Catholic Church in Brunswick, where they have served as Extraordinary Ministers for many years. They are the parents of nine children: Maire, Una, Michael Colm (deceased), Brendan (deceased), Sheila Annie, Celine, Siobhan, Erin, and Deirdre, and the proud grandparents of 14 grandchildren and an ever-growing number of great-grandchildren.