



Mixed Emotions

**Real stories of
mixed marriage**



LOTTERY FUNDED

Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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Our love encourages respect

Our love encourages respect

Stephen and Sharon live in a small village in the Fermanagh lakelands. They have been married for five years. Stephen, whose father was killed in the 'Poppy Day' bombing of Enniskillen, has suffered severe ill-health as a direct result of being in the same explosion. Sharon, whose Mum died only days before this interview, works in retail in the town. They make a strong team that faces the future with hope and humour.

"Mixed marriage is all about compromise", says Sharon, "we have learned to compromise and, hopefully, one day we will be blessed with children and will be faced with more decisions and more compromises about their upbringing." "Yes," says Stephen, "trying to see the other person's point of view helps us all to see that little bit better."

Sharon was born in Bantry in County Cork, but spent nearly all of her primary school years in Surrey where she had friends of different religions and races. "Those things weren't considered important in England, but we came to live in Enniskillen when I was about 10 and I learned that they do things differently over here. It was a culture shock."

Sharon lived in an all-Catholic street, attended an all-Catholic primary school and had no Protestant friends. "It took me a while to get used to this. I had always been brought up to take people as I found them and to treat

everyone the same, but when I went on a holiday to England and brought back little presents of pencils for my schoolmates, the pencils with the rubbers on the top, I found that I couldn't hand them out. They had Union Jacks printed on them and the local schoolteacher, a well-known Nationalist, would have had a fit. It's sad. Something so simple, taken so seriously. Petty really."

Sharon was lucky in that she was chosen as a 16 year old student at Enniskillen's Mount Lourdes convent to take a cross-community trip to America as part of the Ulster Project to the United States. "It was a life-changing experience", she says. "Six Protestants and six Catholics spending four weeks thousands of miles from 'The Troubles'. Our American host families were great and we all bonded. These people, who had been strangers to me, became like extended family within a very short time. I'm glad to say that we still keep in touch with all of them."

Sharon gave up the chance to go to university when her late mother suffered a heart attack, but has no regrets. "I chose to stay to help look after Mum and I'm glad. I went from my old part-time Saturday job in retailer 'Next' to full-time in the same branch. I had all the comforts of home, as well as plenty of money and my own car. And I got to appreciate my parents. What more could you ask?"

Stephen was born in Enniskillen into a forces' family. "My late father was a station sergeant in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, while my mother served in the Ulster Defence Regiment. Several other members of my family, who were also in the security forces, were killed during

‘The Troubles’.” As a boy Stephen had friends of both denominations. “We moved about a fair bit in the early days and lived in predominantly Protestant areas”, he says, “but, I didn’t choose my friends by their religion. I wasn’t brought up like that. In fact, my best friends, the Byrne boys, were Catholics.”

Stephen’s father retired from the force in 1985 and father and son grew closer. “I’m sure that my childhood had been overshadowed by the fear that something bad would happen to my father, my mother or my brother. They were all on the front line against terrorism at one time or another. That eased when dad left the RUC and life looked brighter than ever.”

All that ended tragically, when former sergeant Samuel Gault was among eleven people killed in the Provisional IRA’s bombing of the Remembrance Sunday gathering in Enniskillen in 1987. Stephen, who had just turned 18, was standing beside his father when the explosion occurred.

“Initially, when I came round, I could hardly see because of the dust and I still remember the choking sensation. My father was lying at my feet and I knew straight away that he was dead. For about a week or so I was in a daze, but my mother was fantastic. One minute, she had had a husband, next she had nobody. She was on her own, but she handled herself with dignity and helped us through those tragic and traumatic circumstances. I remember the wake and the Catholic people who came to offer their condolences. One man said to me, ‘These people didn’t do this in our name’. I knew he was right and listened

when my mother said, 'You can't get drawn into any sort of trouble or with any bad people in retaliation for what happened. You have to live your life'."

Two weeks after the bombing Stephen developed psoriasis which has since developed into psoriatic arthritis. "During the past 24 years", he says, "I have undergone every treatment available for both conditions. Sharon injects me twice a week with the latest of these drugs. It is not a cure, but it does give my joints a bit more freedom of movement."

Before Stephen started this treatment in 2006, he was unable to walk or drive and virtually bed-ridden. "Sharon had to dress and feed me and it was a dark time. I still suffer depression, sleep deprivation and anxiety after all this time and I know that what I am going through is a direct result of the bomb on 8th November 1987."

Sharon and Stephen met in Enniskillen Golf Club in 2003. "We got chatting", she says, "Stephen knew my Dad without knowing me and we realised that we had actually lived very close to one another when we were younger. We started going out together and that was it." "Yes", says Stephen, "there was no talk of religion. We liked each other and religion didn't come into it."

"Religion was never an issue for us", says Sharon, "but it was for other relations in our families. The funny thing is that it was the actual wedding ceremony, rather than the marriage itself, that caused the most 'concern'. Church or chapel, priest or minister? That kind of thing. To be honest, we believe that it was more to do with

‘what will the neighbours say’ and not the fact that we were about to become a mixed marriage couple.”

“Our mixed marriage is probably different from many others because Stephen’s family was directly affected by the violence and I am sure some people had a lot of reservations about Stephen marrying a Catholic girl from Cork.”

“We learned to deal with the disapproval of others”, says Stephen, “not friends or family, but from outsiders and strangers. And I’m glad we did. If you are lucky enough to find your soul mate, regardless of religion, colour or race, you shouldn’t think twice about marriage. Just go for it.”

Sharon and Stephen married in Rossorry Church of Ireland with both families attending and both clergy playing their parts. “An aunt from England had suggested we marry in Spain”, says Sharon, “I suppose she thought she was giving good advice, but, thank goodness, we ignored it. We had a great day to be proud of.”

Stephen says, “Advice is all well and good when it comes from the right source. I would urge couples to contact the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA), as well as their own clergy. Families think that they are doing the best for you by offering advice and support on what they think is right. However, it may be right for them, but not right for you. Go to the people who know about these things.”

“We were lucky with our family backgrounds and the way we were brought up”, says Sharon. “We were aware

of each other's religion and respect each other's beliefs. Our love encourages that respect and we now attend and participate in each other's church services regularly." "I think it's not about what church you go to", says Stephen, "but who you go with and the love you bring with you that really counts."



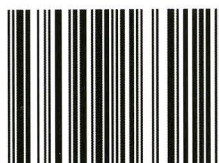
Sharon & Stephen



All love stories are unique and these ten accounts of mixed marriage are no exception. Each story is shared with openness and courage and, stretching back nearly seventy years, the collective experience on offer reveals much about the attitudes of the day, showing how society has changed and, yet, how it remains the same.

Their experiences show how relationships can be made to blossom, even when it is made most difficult and we should be thankful that they have also shown us how, in the face of adversity, we can aspire and achieve far beyond our common divisions.

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