



Mixed Emotions

**Real stories of
mixed marriage**



LOTTERY FUNDED

Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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**A little tolerance
goes a long way**

A little tolerance goes a long way

Roley and Jo live on the outskirts of the quiet village of Ederney in the beautiful Fermanagh countryside. "Close enough to walk to the shops and far enough away from the neighbours not to hear me guldering at the kids", according to Jo. Roley is a civil servant, Jo works in a local school. They have been married for more than 25 years and have four children.

"Getting into a mixed marriage has proved an education for both of us", says Roley. "Previously, we knew nothing of each other's church and very little of each other's culture. We have learned a lot and, perhaps more importantly, found that love, when it has to, can really break down barriers and overcome all opposition." "We learned to share and to be tolerant", says Jo, "and that a little bit of Christianity goes a long way."

Jo, don't call her Josephine, was born and bred in the predominantly Roman Catholic village of Ederney. She was the baby of the family. "I didn't have Protestant friends when I was growing up", she says. "It wasn't a conscious decision, there just weren't any around. As a result, I suppose that I had no reason to think about religious differences. They didn't exist for me as a child in that environment."

That changed when, after school, Jo took a job at Desmond's clothing factory in the nearby town of Irvinestown. "It was all new to me, like it is for any

teenager starting work, but, for the first time, I found myself in a place that was truly mixed. And I loved it. I made friends from both 'sides', we went to mixed dances and had boyfriends of both religions just like normal people. Changed times! My best friend throughout the best part of my life has been Allison, a Protestant."

Jo continued to live in the village and cared for her father in the family home.

Roley was born a couple miles from where he now lives, in the Lower Lough Erne village of Kesh, which was mainly Protestant. "I was Church of Ireland", he says, "and lived with my mother and grandmother. My grannie was like a mother to me as my own mother had to go out to work to support us. It was a happy childhood in a home that had an open door for everyone, regardless of religion. In fact, religion was something that was practised on a Sunday and never mentioned again during the week. I had friends of both persuasions, went to 'tech' with them as well and had a first hand knowledge of mixed marriage through my aunt who was married to a Catholic. I never saw a problem or heard a word of trouble."

Roley joined the Northern Ireland Civil Service in 1972 and swapped the rural idyll of Fermanagh for a Belfast steeped in sectarian conflict. "I shared digs on the Lower Newtownards Road in the city near a notorious interface and got my first taste of bigotry. It stank."

Roley spent three years on that CS posting, a stint that included the infamous Workers' Strike of 1974. "Those

were hairy days where we were living in a tight working-class Protestant area and we had to walk up and down the disused County Down railway line, to and from Stormont, to avoid road blocks that would have prevented us from going to work. For me, it was a culture shock. I just wasn't used to living on that sort of frontline."

Roley returned to Enniskillen in 1975 to find that the impact of the 'Troubles' had spread. "There was increased division back home", he says, "I think mainly down to the IRA campaign of targeting members of the UDR, which lead to suspicion and mistrust."

Roley also worked in the Department of Social Security on Belfast's Falls Road for a period during the 1980s. "It was a difficult time", he says. "The ordinary people were the best in the world, just as I had found in East Belfast, but paramilitaries ruled the roost and violence was commonplace." A man was shot dead in Roley's workplace and because he was a trained counsellor, he was able to lend support to traumatised staff. "It was truly terrible in the real sense of the word and I will not forget the fear, disgust and horror that I and my colleagues, many of them young girls, were forced to experience."

Roley's return to work in Fermanagh brought bad news from his local GP. By now his weight had crept up to 42 stone and the doctor's advice to the then 29 year old was 'don't look forward to your 31st birthday – you won't be here'. That stark warning and the support of his family, particularly his grandmother, led to a dramatic change in lifestyle that saw him lose 29 stone, but he is quick to credit Jo's contribution to his survival.

"I met Jo about a fortnight after my grandmother passed away", he says, "and already I was heading back into the old ways of eating and drinking. I was on a slippery slope until Jo and I got together and I found that I now had a very special person in my life."

"I can honestly say that religion didn't come into it when Roley and I started going out together" says Jo. "We liked each other and took it for granted I suppose. Roley's family were fine. I was in his mother's house many times before we got engaged and was welcomed warmly and genuinely, while my father, after he had been reassured that I was not going to leave him on his own, became like a father to Roley. We were lucky in that respect." Roley interrupts, "It was a privilege to help look after Johnny, Jo's dad, who lived with us after we got married. He was a decent man and the only father I had ever known."

Others, outside the family, didn't approve of the couple's decision to marry. "Some friends, boys that I'd known for years, boys that I would have shed blood for, made it clear what they thought of a 'fenian lover'. I got Mass cards and sympathy cards through the post and a lot of silence as I was shunned by former mates. It was sad certainly, but I'll take love over ignorance any day and, anyway, most of the same boys have mellowed with time." Surprisingly, even one local Church of Ireland clergyman was less than helpful when Roley went for his Baptism lines. "Ach, he was obstreperous and ignorant and all because I was getting married. Stupid man."

The couple were married in the local Roman Catholic church, St Joseph's. "A beautiful place", says Roley,

“and my own minister stole the show at the reception with the best wedding speech I’ve ever heard. I’m glad I have it on video.”

Jo and Roley went to both churches in the first ten years after they married. They had four children, fostered nearly two dozen more and it was Roley’s wish to be totally involved in the lives of his children, including their communion, that led him to convert to Catholicism about 15 years ago.

“I always said I would like to take communion with my youngsters and I am very proud of the fact that I converted. I retained my great faith in Jesus Christ, I still read the bible everyday and I have thrown myself into my local church.” Roley has also become the first lay person to chair the Board of Governors at his local Roman Catholic primary school, while he and Jo still attend the Church of Ireland for festivals like the Harvest Festival.

“We celebrated 25 years of marriage this year”, says Roley, “so we must be doing something right. We have a great family and have done our best to teach our children, who have benefitted from secondary integrated education, to take people as they find them and to respect other people’s points of view. In the end, it is all about respect.”

“Yes”, says Jo, “all obstacles can be overcome by love, commitment and actually caring about the other person as much as, if not more than yourself. A little tolerance goes a long way.”

“We have been very lucky in our lives”, says Roley, “and we do our best to try to put something back. I hope that this book will make people see, particularly young people, that love doesn’t have a denomination.”



Roley & Jo



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.

ISBN 978-0-9571669-1-2



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