

The ties that bind

Shauna Kelly-Lefevre lives in Paris, but has also spent years in the Middle East so she knows the importance of connecting with your own. From her French home, she makes sure the Mná na hÉireann in France are never lonely

Words by
Mary O'Sullivan

Photography by
Tony Gavin

It's been the proud boast of RTÉ's flagship programme that many landmark Irish events "all started on the *Late Late Show*" – in its way it also changed many viewers' lives. It started the globetrotting career of Shauna Kelly-Lefevre, the eloquent founder of the burgeoning Paris-based social group Mna na hÉireann, which is proving a boon for Irishwomen already based in the city and for those just going to live there. Back in 1987, and Shauna was with her parents watching Gay Byrne when an Irish nun called Sister Elisabeth appeared on the show and spoke about a French school she was part of in Paris where Irish girls could stay until they got au pair jobs in the city. It was the catalyst for Shauna to get going, though in fairness to Shauna's parents, particularly her father who was well travelled, they were great believers in their children spreading their wings. At one stage all four Kelly siblings lived abroad. "My father, a chartered accountant had lived and worked in Germany for seven

years before he met my mother and he spoke fluent German," she says. "That was very inspiring for us as kids. Knowing he had lived abroad and spoken another language meant we could too." Before the *Late Late Show* epiphany, Shauna, who was born in Athlone but grew up in Dublin,

opted to move to the North after getting a secretarial qualification with French. "I lived in Derry for a year-and-a-half. My folks were not happy – it was the mid 1980s. My mother was always saying 'Shauna, the world is your oyster'." A trip abroad made Shauna rethink her idea of living full-time

in Ireland. "Some friends and I went off on a wonderful European holiday, when we came back I decided I wanted to explore the world more," she recalls. The family rejoiced when she opted to travel to Paris to Sister Elisabeth, who gave her a contact for a family in the city where she

au paired for six months. Shauna loved it. When it came to the French language Shauna was a quick learner and she felt absolutely at home in the French capital, so much so that after the au-pairing stint ended and she returned to Dublin, she decided to return to

France immediately and get a proper job there. As it happened, at the time banks and law firms were actively looking for English speakers with good French and after some time temping, Shauna landed a full-time job in a bank. She started in marketing but was soon trained »



Shauna Kelly-Lefevre outside the Paris home which she and her husband, Emmanuel bought after their years in the Middle East. The five-bedroom house, which dates from the 1900s has elements of Art Nouveau and Meuliere stonework, which has a sort of honeycomb effect. Other features include ornate ironwork and high ceilings. Shauna says family houses are rarely for sale in Paris. "They're not building any more so you have to wait for people to retire, divorce or die."

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My favourite room

» up in finance and became a banker responsible for certain corporations, looking after accounts and organising loans. It was through the bank too that she met her husband, Emmanuel Lefevre, in 1989. “We met at the office, then were properly introduced at the Christmas party. He invited me to lunch. He used the excuse that he was going to Dublin for the weekend for the rugby and he needed information from me. Then when he came back he had another excuse for lunch – he had to tell me about it,” Shauna recalls with a laugh.

Soon they became an item and got married in Ireland in 1991. They spent their first years of marriage working in the bank in Paris, then Emmanuel was offered a fantastic opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia. Both moved and while Shauna couldn’t work she did become pregnant shortly after and they welcomed their eldest child, Killian, in 1993. “I returned to Ireland to have Killian and two years later to have Alana.” In all, they were seven-and-a-half years in Saudi Arabia and loved it, though Shauna does describe the expat life as “the golden prison” – it’s a bubble where everything is done for you and, unless you make a great effort, you don’t really immerse yourself in the local life or culture.

Their next port of call was Thailand for a further two-and-half-years and where their youngest, Joyce, was born in 1997. “Thailand was really wonderful. The people are lovely. The culture is very interesting and the cuisine is fantastic. I even learned a bit of the language there, and I could converse with people,” she says. Thailand was followed by Singapore and after two years there they finally came home. Killian was seven, Alana six and Joyce two-and-a-half. The two older ones had started their education in a French international school so slotted in easily to the French school system in Paris. Shauna not so much. She had become a stay-at-home mum while abroad and intended to continue as such. However she



Above: Shauna in her living room with her adored toy Yorkie, Nya. The room is packed with mementos of home. The painting of the Bosphorus in Turkey was a gift from friends she had in Saudi Arabia. There’s a lot of glass and silverware, too, as Shauna and Emmanuel love to entertain



Right: The master bedroom with arched windows opening onto the wrought iron balcony and its red walls. “Red for passion,” Shauna says



Right: The staircase with its curtains from Jim Thompson fabric brought back from Thailand. She and Emmanuel have a lot of paintings including one of the Spanish Steps as he was born in Rome. There’s a portrait of her late father. “I love having it,” she says

found it was much smoother for all concerned if she went out to work. “I discovered when I put them into national school if you’re not a working mum, the kids hadn’t the right to go to the canteen, even if I offered to pay. I had to collect them and bring them home for lunch. I tried it for a few days. So I was dropping them at 8.30am, picking them up at 11.30am, returning them to school at 1.30pm then picking them up again at 4.30pm. I’d spent the day to-ing and fro-ing. Then I’d have to clean the house and Emmanuel would swan home looking for his dinner. I said to myself, ‘It would be easier to work’. I went back and said, ‘If I get a work contract will you give them tickets for the canteen?’ and they said yes,” she says. “The French system, in a feminist way, is the best and taught me you can do it all”.

Her first job on her return to France was teaching English to professionals including at a bank and gradually she got back into banking full time. These days she has a busy full-time job at a British company, Avask, a firm of tax accountants where she is the head of business development. Then there is Mna na hÉireann, which counts more than 300 Irish women in Paris and other areas in France among its members. It’s amazing that there was no such group in Paris until Shauna started it, but these things need energy, enthusiasm, personality and drive. It’s only the rare person like Shauna who has these qualities.

“I started the first little group on LinkedIn in 2016. It was small and just really friends. Then, in 2018, I created our first WhatsApp [group]. It was growing gradually, but it was really with Covid when people were disconnected that I made a big effort to pull people in. And, as everyone at the time was trying to stay sane, we started sending each other jokes, and bits of information,” Shauna recalls. “Then we began organising events so we could meet online as no one was doing anything outside. And when we were allowed out, we started to organise picnics and people started to

develop close friends among the group.” While all these women may have networks among their work colleagues and neighbours there’s a great shorthand if you’ve come from the same place. “It went over 100, over 200. Now there are Mna in the regions. The practicality of WhatsApp made it work: either they need a plumber, a restaurant; a query could be very specific and it’s amazing what comes back. You’ll have, ‘I need my son’s shoes taken to Dublin – who’s flying over tomorrow?’, it’s so real time,” she says. “The common denominator is all the women are born in Ireland and living in France. We understand each other and have a laugh. Some have said it’s been life-changing.”

They now have several in-person gatherings a year. The Mna picnic was held this year at one of the Mna member’s country home, where members brought partners and children. They have a Christmas party in a restaurant and meet at the Centre Culturel Irlandais. While people are WhatsApp-ing all day, Shauna does her admin work for the group in her spare time after work at the home she shares with Emmanuel. The children are gone now: Killian is a corporate lawyer in Paris, Alana is an engineer in Munich and Joyce works as a music agent for Warner. But home is the detached house the family moved into when they returned from their overseas travels in 2003.

Shauna had been determined to get a house, something she says is extremely rare in Paris or in its outskirts. People don’t usually put up a “for sale” sign. “Houses for sale are extremely rare. They’re not building any more so you usually have to wait for people to retire, die or divorce. The owners hadn’t even given the house to an agent, but I heard about it and I was determined. The owners had three children also and there was a lovely atmosphere so I did my best to seduce the owners,” she says with a laugh. And she succeeded. The five-bedroom house dates from the 1900s and is on its own grounds. It’s made of a brick style



Shauna converted the adjoining garage and turned it into a light-filled space which connects to the kitchen through the hatch, making the spot with the stools ideal to chat with whoever is cooking

called meuliere, a sort of honeycomb brick. The house has a basement flat, which was handy when Shauna needed au pairs, and has high ceilings and interesting mouldings and ironwork. Shauna and Emmanuel did work on the house including rewiring and installing new heating. French kitchens are in general small so they extended it and built a television room and new deck, but they loved the original features and kept them where possible. It’s a very comfortable family home and is full of mementos of their travels – including antiques they brought back from Asia, Jim Thompson fabrics from Thailand and photos of their extended family including Shauna’s parents who have passed away. She heeded their advice about spreading her wings and surely they’d be proud of the way she gathered others as she did so. ●

The Mna na hÉireann website is to be launched before the end of the year Shauna can be contacted at kellyexpress@gmail.com

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