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Local & National

Michael's legacy of peace, one year after his murder

Monday, May 07, 2007

By Ben Lowry in Ballymena

On the first anniversary of Catholic teenager Michael McIlveen's sectarian murder, his relatives have had a warm reunion with the ex-DUP mayor who attended the 15-year-old's funeral.

The meeting between Councillor Tommy Nicholl, the victim's mother, Gina, and his uncle, Francis, took place in People's Park in Ballymena, a neutral location in the divided Co Antrim town.

Michael, who lived in an area of Ballymena called Dunvale, was brutally attacked by a gang during the early hours of a Sunday morning as he was on his way home from a pizza parlour.

There was cross-community revulsion at the killing and, amid their grief, Michael's family hope some good has come from his death. It occurred, ironically, one year to the day before Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness take power at Stormont.

Tomorrow at 8.10pm, the time that Michael lost his battle for life a year ago, representatives from both sides of the community will release helium balloons in his memory from the basketball court in the Dunclug estate where he used to play.

Mr Nicholl's attendance at the Catholic funeral ? he was mayor at the time ? was a break with convention among the DUP in Ballymena. His visit to the family home and a similar visit by Ian Paisley, when the DUP leader prayed with the McIlveens, was interpreted by some observers as a key moment in reconciliation for the province.

This month's reunion between the McIlveens and Mr Nicholl, in Ian Paisley's heartland of Ballymena, was arranged for a Dutch film crew from a current affairs programme called Netwerk. The visiting TV team wanted to know whether the killing had become a turning point for the town and a symbol of reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Mr Nicholl told the Dutch crew that he wept when he heard of Michael's death.

"It was a very emotional time. I felt the killing brought the borough to a new low. As mayor and first citizen, I realised I had to show true civic leadership," he said.

Michael's mother, Gina, was present for the meeting with Mr Nicholl, but did not want to speak on camera to the Dutch team, such is her ongoing sense of trauma at the loss of her son.

His uncle, Francis, said that he was keen to see Mr Nicholl again, in recognition of the DUP man's unequivocal public display of support for the family at the time of the killing.

"It was nice to see Tommy Nicholl again, he is a great guy. He was at the house, he was at the funeral," Mr McIlveen said. "Mr Nicholl is an outspoken councillor on behalf of both communities."

Mr McIlveen added: "Hopefully, the sectarianism has calmed down a bit. My sister Gina and her daughter Jodi, Michael's sister, are still sometimes taunted."






Mr Nicholl is no longer mayor of Ballymena, but remains one of the DUP's most loyal members in a council where six out of a team of 14 councillors have quit the party to protest the DUP's power-sharing deal with Sinn Fein.

Francis McIlveen said that his family had no interest in politics, but they had appreciated the support from Mr Nicholl and Mr Paisley, as well as other politicians including Mark Durkan and Martin McGuinness.

"The police were also very good. Superintendent Terry Shevlin was out at the house several times," he said.

Mr Nicholl was appalled at the killing, which occurred months after he had launched the so- called Mayor's Initiative to combat what he believed was a sectarian crisis in the borough. Ballymena's reputation had been taking a battering on the international news, he said.


Speaking in support of Mr Paisley's deal with Sinn Fein, Mr Nicholl added: " I have great hopes for the future and would fully support what the DUP is doing at a higher level for our children and grandchildren."


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