

Echo Arts & Lifestyle

Seeing beyond Brooklyn's rooftops

By Pat Fenton
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On the morning of Jan. 20, I received a phone call with the news that Tim Lee had died in his apartment in Manhattan. He was 79 years old, a good friend who belonged to the same New York City Press Club that I did, the Society of the Silvers.

When he was working as a night rewrite man at the New York Post he was asked to write one of the first obituaries of the writer Jack Kerouac: "Jack Kerouac, 47, the beat generation writer who more than anyone else gave the literary and lifestyle phenomenon of the late '50s its characterization, died early today at a hospital in St. Petersburg, Fla., where he had moved recently to care for his ailing mother...."

Some years ago he sent it to me. It was full of detail with an interview with Dr. Kenneth Baker who was with Jack Kerouac when he died on the operating room table in St. Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg.

Timmy Lee was one of those rare New York City individuals who seemed like they walked out of the pages of a James T. Farrell novel. He attended St. Thomas Aquinas parochial school on 8th Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn. He later went on to become a boxer in the Golden Gloves who was one fight away from being the champion when he took a loss. He was the son of Irish emigrants, his father from County Cavan, his mother from County Kerry. His father worked as a conductor on the IRT subway line, his mother as a domestic cleaning rooms down at the YMCA on 9th Street in Park Slope.

Mammy gets out of comfort zone

By Irish Echo Staff
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Ballycoogue, Co. Wicklow native Nancy Ashmaw, a 71-year-old retired nurse, has lots of hobbies: baking brown bread; playing scrabble, doing quizzes and crosswords, going on walking tours and waltzing.

Her son, the brash RTE presenter and daredevil, Baz Ashmaw, has other ideas for her, though, believing that getting out of your comfort zone keeps you young.

That is the basis for the Sky 1 series "50 Ways to Kill Your Mammy." On this side of the Atlantic, it's been rebranded as "50 Ways to Kill Your Mother" and airs Thursday nights at 10 p.m. eastern time on the Discovery Life Channel, itself newly rebranded.

Included on the long list of activities planned for Nancy Ashmaw are skydiving and bungee jumping, high-stakes gambling in Las Vegas and tarantula hunting, scuba diving and stunt-car



Tim Lee, left, pictured in Dublin in 1964 with Pete Hamill, Hamill's daughter Adrienne and uncle Maurice Devlin. COURTESY OF KATHY HAMILL

With all this hard work they somehow managed to grab onto a piece of the American Dream and got together enough money to buy a brick house at 499 10th St. in Park Slope. To help offset the costs, they ran part of it as a boarding house for single men who rented on a weekly basis.

Growing up in Brooklyn, he worked as an ironworker walking the narrow high steel beams of Manhattan buildings as they rose above the city. He was the only ironworker or boxer I ever knew who had a college degree in philosophy. A few weeks ago, in my last conversation with him we spoke about what

we always did, the old neighborhood, an Irish working-class enclave that forged you into who you would eventually become in life. Somehow that neighborhood became the burning room for several Irish-American writers, among them Tim Lee, Pete Hamill and the late Joe Flaherty, a longshoreman who wound up writing for the Village Voice.

We talked about the Windsor Terrace Irish street gangs of the '50s we both knew, the Tigers, the Gremlins, the Jokers, the Skid Row Boys, the Bartells. We talked about the old movie houses in the neighborhood, the Globe, the 16 Street, the Minerva, the Venus, the Avon, the Sanders, places we all went to on cold winter Saturday afternoons in the '50s and paid a quarter to dream away the day.

And we talked about the Irish saloons that we came of age in, saloons that were just about on every corner of the neighbor-

hood in the 1940s and '50s, Rattigan's, Roche's, Lenihan's, McNulty's, Kerrigan's and Farrell's, places our fathers drank in, places we would drink in later. The saloons were also places dreamed in as the jukebox played Joni James and Roberta Sherwood and Tommy Edwards on Saturday nights. And he would have detailed stories about every one of these places.

The last time I saw him was in October up at Rosie O'Grady's in Manhattan at the Eugene O'Neill Award for Pete Hamill, who he grew up with. Once, the two of them were two young Irish-American guys who early on could see beyond the rooftops and the pigeon coops of the Irish tenements of the neighborhood. And they wanted to go off and see what was out there.

Pete Hamill remembers a long-ago Saturday night in the '50s when he and Tim Lee were drinking in Boop's Bar on the corner of 10th Avenue and 17th Street in Windsor Terrace, and he told him that he had plans to try to enroll in Mexico City University on the G.I. Bill, and he wanted Tim to go with him. Tim had just been discharged from the army. At first he told him, "Are you nuts, Pete?" But then as the night went on and the beers went down easy, he turned to him and said, "Yeah, Pete, why not?"

The two of them were accepted, and when the summer ended they hopped on a subway train out of the neighborhood and were soon boarding a Greyhound bus in Manhattan headed for Mexico City via Brooklyn. They would be on the bus for six long days, sleeping on it, and all they had with it was a paper bag full of sandwiches, less than 100 bucks in their pockets, and a 100 Saturday night dreams that were born in places like Boop's Bar on 17th Street and the Caton Inn down on Coney Island Avenue. Pete Hamill's account of their Mexico City days appears in his book "A Drinking Life," and it rates up there with anything that the Beat Generation writer Jack Kerouac ever wrote about his road days.

In some ways, like Kerouac, the road ended for both of them at Mexico City. But their dreams went on. Those dreams took Timmy Lee far. Glasses up to you, Timmy. I'll drink to you in Farrell's Bar.

driving.

In tomorrow night's episode, the Irishman, who is half-Egyptian, takes his mother to the Kingdom of Morocco. Nancy Ashmaw worked for 10 years in neighboring Libya, but that may not be sufficient preparation for the challenges her son has prepared for her on this trip.



Nancy Ashmaw and son Baz.

The Irish Echo Quiz Answers

1. California
2. Tom Jones
3. 1969
4. Dublin, Ireland
5. The Philippines
6. Tennis
7. August
8. Greystones
9. Neptune
10. "Gone Girl."

Questions on Page 19.