



The Thomas Francis Gallagher, Sr. Scholarship
The University of Notre Dame

Written by Joan Killian Gallagher, Honoree
For the Donor Recognition Weekend, February 23, 2008

I would like to share with you what brought me here this evening by telling you the history of our commitment to the University of Notre Dame. It's a story of faith, family, and fight.... the good kind of fight...the fight of the "Fighting Irish" that makes things happen and dreams come true.

My brothers and I established the Thomas F. Gallagher, Sr. Scholarship to celebrate my father's 80th birthday in June of 1992. Creating the scholarship was the greatest gift we could have given him. The fact that it honored his father meant the world to my Dad. His father's name would live on and succeeding generations of students from Pennsylvania would have the benefit of a Notre Dame education.

Thomas F Gallagher, Sr. was a coal miner. He was born in Buck Mountain, Pennsylvania in 1876. My grandfather was a simple man with clear vision, fierce determination and a real twinkle in his eyes. He had faith in God, faith in his family and faith in himself. Thomas was the fourth of eight sons born to Peter and Catherine Burns Gallagher. They left Ireland with their siblings at the height of the potato famine, met and married in Pennsylvania.

Life was hard in America for the Gallagher family. Children died at very young ages and good, strong men lost their lives in mine accidents every day. Peter's brother, Patrick, was killed in the mines and Peter died just six months later. Catherine and her young sons were forced to fend for themselves with no means of support.

My grandfather was nine when he left school to work in the mines as a "bucket boy", carrying loads of slate that weighed more than he did. In the true spirit of the fighting Irish, he rose to the rank of mine engineer as he entered adulthood. Thomas, Sr. married Bridget Gallagher in 1904 and they welcomed three boys of their own into the world, Peter Joseph in 1906, James Bernard in 1908, and my father, Thomas Francis, Jr., in 1912.

But their hearts were broken when their mother died in 1919. As his young wife lay dying, Thomas pledged to her that their boys would be educated...somehow, some way he would keep them out of the mines. My father was seven years old when his mother died. He and his brothers united with their "Pop" in keeping the family together and laying the groundwork for their future. The boys excelled in their studies despite having to work every day after school and all summer long. Every penny was saved and given to "Pop" for their college fund.

In 1924, after graduating as Valedictorian from St. Ann's in Freeland, Peter was scheduled to leave for Temple Dental School in Philadelphia. Fate was about to intervene in the form of Sister Miriam Gallagher, a Sister of Mercy. She was my grandfather's cousin who had taught Peter while he was at St. Ann's High School. She had spent that summer in South Bend working on her master's degree. She knew as soon as she got to Notre Dame that it was the right place for Peter and the younger Gallagher boys.

Peter qualified scholastically, so Sister Miriam arranged to have him start in the fall semester, less than two weeks away. The unexpected change required more money and greater effort on everyone's part, but Thomas trusted his cousin completely, so the new plan was set in motion. Peter was in a state of

shock...he had only been out of Freeland once to go to the dentist in nearby Hazleton...and now he was heading halfway across America to a place where he knew absolutely no one.

After traveling for more than twenty-four hours, he arrived in South Bend. Lost and lonely, he stepped off the train. No signs greeted him and there was no one to point him in the right direction. With his guardian angel hovering over him, he said a quick prayer, took a deep breath and followed the crowd. Sister Miriam had instructed Peter to find a Father Mc Bride, who had agreed to help the incoming freshman find a job. So, he asked the first priest he encountered where he might find Father McBride. The kindly cleric put his hand on Peter's shoulder and said, "I'm father McBride, son." Prayers were answered once again.

The two younger brothers followed in rapid succession during the Depression years. Peter graduated with the class of 1928, James in 1932 and my father, Thomas Jr. in 1935. Their father had had successfully guided them out of the mines and into a new and challenging world...an unbelievable achievement for a man who could not read or write.

My grandfather, who died before I was born, could never have imagined that his simple life would bring such honor to his descendants. At Notre Dame this evening, we celebrate his life and his faith, his family and their fighting Irish Spirit, that, against all odds, kept their dreams alive.

In closing, I would like to share a blessing, written by Brian O'Higgins, that my mother, Mary Ann O'Shea, passed onto me. It was sent to her by her aunt, Sr. Mary Ignatius Killian, to commemorate her graduation from Hunter College in 1939.

It somehow communicates the all-encompassing love for God and for one another that these Irish families shared. They had no material wealth, but they had the treasure of each other's love and the strength of their faith in God. It is comforting to know that we are not alone...we will never be alone...the spirit and love of these good people will always be with us. Here is the blessing, from my family to all of you here tonight:



God Bless You Forever

*God bless you in sleeping
God bless you in waking,
God bless you at eve
And when grey dawn is
breaking.
God bless you in gladness
God bless you in sorrow,
God bless you today
And God bless you tomorrow.
God bless all your hoping
Each deed and endeavour,
God bless you this moment
God bless you forever.*