

## Mary from Dungloe International Arts Festival

The story of the **Mary from Dungloe International Arts Festival** begins with a group of local businesspeople sitting around a kitchen table in Sweeney's Hotel in 1967, trying to solve a practical problem: how to give people a reason to come home. At a time when more people were leaving than returning, they wanted to create something that would bring the diaspora back to west Donegal, even if only for a short time each summer. What began as a local response to emigration gradually became one of the best-known festivals in Donegal and beyond, with 45,000 visitors over a 10 day period in 2025.



Photo courtesy of Mary from Dungloe International Arts Festival

CASE STUDY

What began as a local response to emigration gradually became one of the best-known festivals in Donegal and beyond.

Like many people locally, Gavin Boyle grew up with the festival. He first became involved as a teenager, when local lads were invited to act as escorts for the visiting Marys. From there, one role led to another. Over the years he took on more responsibility, hosting events, helping with organisation, and eventually becoming one of the festival's co-directors alongside Pat Connaghan. Three years ago, they decided it was time for a renewed approach. There was a feeling, as Gavin puts it, that the festival was “*slipping*”, and they wanted to bring it back to what it had been, something that gave younger generations the same sense of excitement and connection they had grown up with themselves.

Today, the festival is still entirely volunteer-led, and that remains one of its defining strengths. Gavin and Pat sit at the centre of a tight organising team of around eight people, but during the festival itself that expands to around 80 volunteers. Diaspora engagement still sits at the heart of all of this. From the beginning, the purpose of the festival was to reach out to Irish communities abroad and create a reason to return. Over time, that meant building relationships with Irish centres across the world and encouraging them to send a local representative, or “Mary”, back to Dungloe each year. At its height in the 1990s, there were nearly 30 Marys coming from around the world, each often accompanied by family and supporters.

Much of the work still depends on genuine personal relationships. The representatives of the festival travel to places like London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool and New York. “*We do feel that you have to be seen,*” he says, and being physically present makes a huge difference. But social media, newsletters and local contacts abroad now play a much bigger role in keeping those links alive throughout the year. Three years ago, they brought in a young digital marketing student, to take over the festival's social media on a voluntary basis, and Gavin is clear that it transformed their reach. The festival now also runs a fortnightly newsletter, keeping centres, supporters and subscribers updated not only on the festival itself but on wider local events.

The challenge, as ever, is capacity. The interest is there. In fact, Gavin says one of the most encouraging changes is that places are now coming to them, St Louis, Vancouver, Boston, Sydney and Perth among them, asking to become involved. But following up properly, staying visible and building those relationships all take time. For Gavin, the single most useful extra support would be someone focused on marketing and reach, a dedicated person, even part-time, who could help with promotion, visibility and contact-building, freeing up the volunteer team to manage everything else. As he says,

*“once people know what is going on and that this is happening, they will come.”*

