

Hands-on medicine

Irish faith healer treats modern ills with ancient methods



PHOTO/SEAMUS MURPHY

As the seventh son of a seventh son, Danny Gallagher (above), according to Celtic tradition, has the gift of faith-healing; he treats maladies ranging from skin rashes to cancer.

By Charles M. Sennott

GLOBE STAFF

MURMOD, Ireland — On his website and promotional video, Danny Gallagher looks like Hibernian kitsch personified: all black curly hair and Leprechaun smile and a lilting Irish brogue. But even if he seems like a cliché of the Old Ireland, he says the sickness and diseases he treats are very much the symptoms of what ails modern Ireland.

Gallagher is the seventh son of a seventh son. Ancient Celtic tradition says that gives him the gift of faith-healing.

Men who are the seventh consecutive son of a father who is also a seventh consecutive son — with no girls interrupting the male progeny — are becoming harder and harder to find in this New Ireland. Gallagher, 64, is one of the few still alive, a

last link to an ancient tradition in a contemporary Ireland where big Catholic families are a thing of the past.

He says he heals conditions from skin rashes to stomach ulcers that often result from stress in the high-pressured, hard-working world of the Celtic Tiger, as Ireland is called after a decade of unprecedented economic growth.

He treats clients with complex cancers often connected to Ireland's decades of industrial pollution, which have given it one of Europe's worst environmental records. He relies on his own Catholic faith and uses a small crucifix as part of his ritual, and says he sees many men and women whose physical and mental anguish stems from sexual abuse they suffered from Catholic priests.

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Faith healer relies on ancient ways to treat disease, sickness

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Gallagher's birth order is so coveted and his perceived powers so mystical that his following stretches from Ireland to America to Australia. Thousands have flocked to his practice in Ireland or visited him at hotels across the United Kingdom and abroad when he holds conferences. Hundreds come back with stories that testify to his ability to unlock healing powers in the sick, to calm those who suffer mental torment, and to comfort the afflicted.

Finding the way

The journey to find him starts in the new Ireland, along the recently widened N-3 highway that courses out of Dublin like a gray river of asphalt through the modern emerald isle's drab strip malls and shiny car dealerships and prefabricated housing developments, onto a side road in County Cavan where hand-painted signs nailed to trees and fixed to stone walls proclaim "D. Gallagher this way." The path ends in the village of Murmod, 65 miles northwest of Dublin.

Gallagher's office is a small, white stucco cottage that looks like a stage set left over from the Hollywood classic "The Quiet Man." The cottage smelled of a peat fire and a pot of tea. A flickering red glow emanated from a neon candle that illuminated a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Inside a waiting room, hundreds of newspaper clippings from around the world chronicled Gallagher's "gift" and an endlessly running promotional video featured him on countless television talk shows throughout the years.

The earliest account came in 1971, when the British and Irish press wrote a host of stories about a paralyzed girl from County Der-

ry said to have been healed by Gallagher, who drove an ice cream truck back then. In 1976, there were more big headlines about a young woman who was legally blind and found her sight restored after Gallagher treated her. Her white walking stick is mounted on the wall next to her photograph.

Seeing a visiting reporter eyeing the yellowed newspaper clips with suspicion, Gallagher said, "I feel it's a gift from God, and I respect it as such. I don't know how it happens."

A sign stated his fee: 35 euros (about \$40) for each of three expected appointments.

"People are always suspicious," Gallagher said. "They think you are taking a fortune. But I charge as little as I can — enough to pay for my family, a car, and to continue in business."

Gallagher said he has just returned from London, where he

"Now I can walk. Not fast, but I can walk. If not for Danny, I believe I would still be in a chair."

MARY MULLAN 58,
confined to a wheelchair
before meeting
Gallagher.

had set up at a local hotel and treated as many as 1,000 people over several days.

Earlier this year, Gallagher said he was invited to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center by the Kerry-born mother of a corporal who lost both hands in Iraq when his convoy came under attack.

"I couldn't do anything for the wounded boys, but I sat with as many of them as I could. I put my hands on them and prayed for them," he said, sharing photographs of his trip.

Closer to home, word was spreading in County Cavan that Gallagher was receiving patients in his small office in the village of Murmod, which he opened to serve those who live closer to Dublin. Most of the time, he says, he's hundreds of miles to the northwest in his native County Derry in Northern Ireland.

Among those who traveled here was James Reilly, 80, of near-



PHOTO: SEAMUS MURPHY

Faith healer Danny Gallagher (below), standing in front of his office in the village of Murmod, Ireland, relies on his own Catholic faith and uses a small crucifix as part of his ritual treatment.



by Ballyjamesduff. He said he was healthy for his age except for an almost complete loss of hearing.

Gallagher lit a candle and put it in Reilly's hands to hold while Gallagher held a small crucifix and passed it three times over Reilly's ears and murmured a prayer. Gallagher put his hands over Reilly's head and closed his eyes for a moment. And that was it. The treat-

ment was over, and Reilly was handed a small prayer card with the date of his next appointment the following week.

Contacted by telephone two weeks later, after his third and final visit, Reilly was still unable to speak on the phone because of his impaired hearing. But Reilly's friend, Oliver Harton, who had just returned from driving him to

the appointment, said, "There's a slight improvement. Danny said it will take time, and we'll see. But most definitely he can hear a bit better."

Others treated that day were less impressed.

Therese Rooney, 52, has suffered for more than 10 years with eczema and went to Gallagher for the first time on the suggestion of her daughter, who begged her to go. "I have to say there's no difference," Rooney said by phone two weeks after her visit. "I thought it was a waste of time. I went because my daughter begged me, but I didn't feel anything, and so I never went back for another visit."

Gallagher is the first to admit that he cannot heal everyone, saying, "Even our Lord, the greatest healer of all time, couldn't heal everyone."

'He's helped so many'

Gallagher was born and raised in County Derry in the small vil-

lage of Maghera, where he still lives with his wife and children and where almost all of his brothers and sisters still live as well. The patriarch of the family was Michael, a devout Catholic and a laborer who died when Danny was 4 years old. At age 8, Danny says a dream came to him that he would have the ability to heal.

His older brother, Francis Gallagher, one of five surviving brothers and two surviving sisters, said, "When he was very young, it came to him. He's always had it. It's hard for a lot of people to believe, but he's helped so many. You should just ask them."

One of "them" is Mary Mullan, 58, who was confined to a wheelchair before she met with Gallagher. Mullan said she suffered a degenerative spinal condition that suddenly left her unable to walk in 1992. For the next 10 years, she used a wheelchair to get around while raising four children. But in 2002, Mullan said her brother encouraged her to go see Gallagher at a conference at the Silver Birches Hotel in Omagh, Northern Ireland.

"At first, I had no time for it. I didn't believe in this kind of thing at all," she said in a telephone interview from her home in Bristol, England. After three treatments over three weeks, Gallagher encouraged her to stand and try to walk. She began to take steps without the excruciating pain she had felt for so many years. Now she no longer relies on the wheelchair and attributes her recovery to Gallagher.

"Now I can walk. Not fast, but I can walk," she says. "If not for Danny, I believe I would still be in a chair. How do you thank a man for something like that?"

For all the highs and lows that come with being a faith healer, Gallagher says, "If I could start all over and choose my way, I wouldn't do it. It is very hard work and very hard when you can't always help those who need the help. You go on the road that God sends you on. I'm just glad I've helped a few along the way."