

This Legacy Month, Danielle Byrne, daughter of Hugh Leonard, one of Ireland’s most beloved playwrights, talks about how and why she set up a fund in his name



Graham Clifford

Perspective is everything. It can be a point of view based on impulse or a gut feeling or, as in the case of Danielle Byrne, something more logical and considered.

Byrne, the daughter of Hugh Leonard, arguably Ireland’s greatest playwright and dramatist of the modern age, is taking the long-term view to establish the Hugh Leonard Fund, thereby ensuring that young playwrights and theatre companies in Ireland will benefit from her father’s massive library of work for most of the 21st century.

A researcher at the Trinity Centre for Social Innovation, she has devised a legacy agreement with the Community Foundation for Ireland to ensure the financial resources she leaves behind can be given, in real time, to issues which most need urgent attention and help.

Logic and consideration brought her to this point.

“In terms of dad’s fund, it took a while before I hit on this as the solution. You know, most authors just leave their literary estate to their children and in time what’s left is passed further down the line. The most interesting ones, of course, are those who die childless,” she said.

“The royalties of George Bernard Shaw’s literary estate are split three equal ways as I understand it, one-third to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (Rada), one-third to the National Gallery of Ireland, and one-third



Hugh Leonard: Ireland will benefit from his library of work for most of the 21st century  
Getty

shared between the British Museum and the British Library.

“In our case I wanted to do something which meant dad’s work could help others who needed it when they needed it as well. I don’t have any children myself, so the solution is perfect as far as I can see it, in that even

if I died penniless, the estate has an income-generating value. The literary estate will last for 70 years, until 2079.”

Even before the pandemic, things were tough for aspiring playwrights, Byrne said.

“A yawning void exists for those trying to get a play on in Dublin city

centre – the options are very limited. There is an immediate gap there. Even to pay for rights or to rent a premises can be so difficult,” she said.

Byrne, who spent many years working in community enterprise in Britain, has tasked the Community Foundation for Ireland with using the fund bearing her father’s name to target support where it’s most needed.

“I had to come up with a solution which would last long after my lifetime. To find a body which would be prepared to keep an eye on the estate as well – and exercise judgment over it,” she said.

**A living thing**

“And you know, plays are strange in terms of generating income. Writers, previously dead and buried in terms of their popularity, are suddenly back in vogue when someone revives their work or buys the rights for a television series – then suddenly the estate is worth a lot more. It’s a living thing.”

Why not just leave the money in her will?

“I’m hoping not to die for some time. If I write campaign groups, charities or causes into my will now, the reality is they may not even be around in ten years,” she said.

“Whether it’s funding the things that are important to me, the performing arts or environmental issues, I can’t predict where the need will be after I’m gone, but I am content that the Community Foundation will. They are the literary executors of the will, in essence, and that gives me great peace of mind. I’m not now painting my estate into a corner.”

Keen to highlight the importance of planning for the future during Legacy Month in Ireland, when groups and charities explain how wills can be used to benefit good causes long after a person has died, Byrne said that setting up a donor-advised fund means she can have still have some element of control over her estate.

“I’ve highlighted the areas in which I’d like funding to be given after I die. If I’d designated a particular organisation, I’d be constantly twitching every time they’d feature in the news – every time they’d change a director or take a major decision I’d be on edge,” she said.

“Some organisations don’t maximise what they’ve been given. That would be unsettling for me personally as someone who has worked in the area of social enterprise for many years.”

Byrne has always been one for methodology and comparative analysis, a person who likes to delve into the impacts of one activity on another. Her multi-To-

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Danielle Byrne: wants her father’s work to help others who need it when they need it  
Naosie Culhane



my Award-winning father, however, would not allow his mind to drift to the future in quite the same way. His perspective was different to that of his daughter.

“I couldn’t get him to talk about [what would happen with his own literary estate]. I was just left to my own devices, really,” she said.

In terms of philanthropy and giving, she said her father was something of a traditionalist.

“He would have given to the dogs and cats home. For my parents, that worked, and they felt they were helping. Actually, my dad was a patron of the anti-blood sports league and my mother was a regular placard-holding protester at hare-course meetings across the country,” she said.

“And to his friends my father would have been very generous. He also gave an awful lot of his time to up-and-coming writers who needed a steer and some advice.”

**Vitally important**

That’s a fact celebrated in the Joe O’Connor poem In Memoriam Hugh Leonard, in which O’Connor writes from the perspective of his 11-year-old self: “Your postcard was kindly; hesitantly wise. ‘Remember the audience. Be accurate with words. Write sketches of your friends, your family – and teachers. And learn to love your craft, I mean loving the words themselves. And never be discouraged. It’s hard’.”

I ask Byrne what she thinks her father would have made of the fund she has set up in his name.

“I think he’d be happy with it, yes. Mind you, I also imagine him saying, in a rather grumpy way, ‘That didn’t exist when I was young!’ That was his way.”

Eager to share her belief with others that making a will is so vitally important, Byrne said people often see wills as being one-dimensional, but that in truth they evolve and change.

“I was in my 30s when I made my first will. Some of my friends thought I was mad, but actually I felt there was great sense to it. A will is not necessarily just about the money but also, very crucially, about who is going to be the executor of that will when you die,” she said.

“It answers the key questions like who looks after your kids, your estate, or the money for your kids should something happen to you tomorrow. The executor aspect is crucial – they are the stewards of your will; they make sure your wishes are carried out.”

There’s another reason why legacy-giving through the likes of the Community Foundation for Ireland makes so much sense.

“It’s really a cost-effective way to make a donation. Setting up a separate trust would consume so much. This way it’s a trust within a wider portfolio,” Byrne said.

“Money isn’t sucked up in legal fees, and overheads are more contained. That was a big consideration for me. It ticked all those useful, important boxes from my perspective.”

Many families will face impossible choices this Christmas.

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