

# The catalyst

## McLaughlin forges Ireland-Philly links

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Bill McLaughlin has always been interested in the business of doing business.

That's just one of the reasons why he has been the ideal person to guide Philadelphia's Irish American Business Chamber & Network through the 10 years of its existence.

Another is his instinct for cooperation. It's something he's always had. When he was a youngster, McLaughlin knew he didn't have the natural athletic ability of some of his friends, so he worked hard to develop those basketball skills such as passing that helped the unit. At teamwork, he was a natural.

"When I started the chamber, I knew from the get-go that I was going to build a team," he said. "So, I reached out to people I knew who had interest in things Irish, and I continue to do that."

Inevitably, the affable McLaughlin developed superior networking skills over the years. The chamber's more than 400 members, both individual and corporate, and the almost 1,800 names on its database are testaments to that.

He did some networking on his first trip to Ireland in 1968 during a hitchhiking trip around Europe. In Counties Mayo, Kildare and Meath, he met cousins in person for the first time. He felt he already knew most of them well.

"I grew up living with a Irish grandmother, who died at age 90 in 1959 when I was 13, and an Irish-American mother, who was terrific at remembering all the family history," he said about a parent who died when she was 95.

Mary Murtagh set out for Philadelphia from her family homestead near Kiltamagh, Co. Mayo, in 1889 at the age of 19. She met her future husband Tom Byrne for the first time in America, though his home place was just two miles away, in the neighboring parish of Swinford.

One of their children, Helen Byrne, married Bill McLaughlin Sr., a pro football star whose forbears came from Donegal's Inishowen Peninsula at the time of the Famine. They raised a family of five children on a factory, and later government, worker's wage.

Their only son rediscovered his roots first through the canon of Irish literature. Later as a businessman he became the catalyst for the forging of all sorts of connections between Philadelphia and Ireland.

In 1987, when his wife, Natalie Morgan, was pregnant with their third child, they established McLaughlin & Morgan, which specializes in helping American companies set up in Ireland and Europe.

On that first summer trip to Ire-

land, however, McLaughlin was a year out of college and working as a teacher. It was something of an accidental career, as he'd studied marketing and industrial relations at La Salle University.

In his third and fourth year at La Salle, he and five other students got jobs as house fathers in a nearby home for 600 deaf children. "I made the grand total of \$135 a month, which paid for my gas money, my beer money and my pizza money," he recalled.

He ran after-school programs for the children there who had multiple disabilities and that experience led to several job offers after graduation. Eventually, though, he taught history in a regular school for four years. He enjoyed it, but he had to tend bar several nights a week to help pay his bills.

McLaughlin made the switch before he turned 30.

"In 1975, I got a chance to get into the advertising and marketing business, and knew immediately that this was a great area for me," he remembered. "It fit in with my natural promotional abilities and instincts."

He worked for several more agencies before the McLaughlins struck out on their own. Then, in 1991, they made another important move when they bought part of his great-grandfather's farm - specifically the homestead that Mary Murtagh left 102 years before. They renovated their Irish home over the next several years, staying for extended periods there with their three children. The couple now spends about a month in Mayo annually during the summer.

The Philadelphia chamber, founded in 1999, represented another commitment that demanded investment in money and time.

"I think we're the best Irish chamber in America," he said. "I know we're the best chamber in Philadelphia."

The latter category, which is about 14 strong, includes groups that promote trade with Chile, Italy, France, Russia, Japan and Israel among other places. When it's inward investment, the groups work together, when it's outward, they compete.

"We established the pattern that a lot of the other chambers are following and that is bringing in major CEOs to speak," he said.

"We've taken trade missions to Ireland twice; we've entertained trade missions here. About five years ago we have 15 people from Dublin for three days. And we're talking about doing this again," McLaughlin said.

"We had an all-day symposium on Northern Ireland. We invited 10 start-up companies from there," he said. "We set up a situation where the companies all had a 15-20 minute window to present in front of the entire group what they did."

McLaughlin and the symposium organizers also arranged meetings for

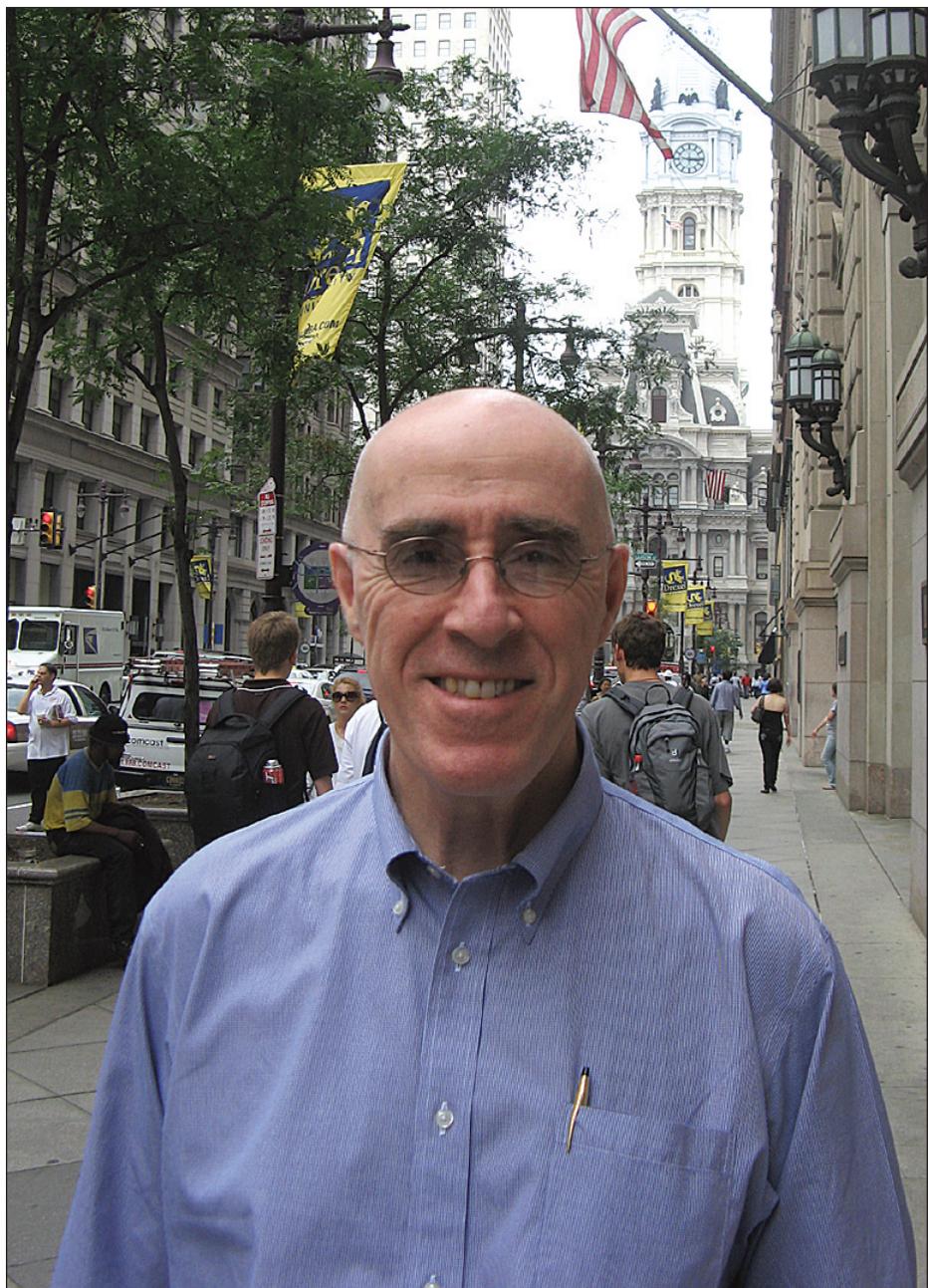


PHOTO BY PETER MCDERMOTT

Bill McLaughlin is founder and chairman of the Philadelphia-based Irish American Business Chamber & Network.

the company representatives to meet with the relevant business people in Philadelphia over subsequent days.

"We're a boon to IDA, Udaras na Gaeltacha, Enterprise Ireland," he said, adding that those are impressive and successful organizations.

People associated with the Irish American Business Chamber and Network have been instrumental in numerous companies setting up in Ireland, doing, McLaughlin said, "what the guys in the IDA get paid to do."

The chamber is also often asked to help when Irish ministers and leading officials visit the city.

McLaughlin believes that he has had a policy impact during his own visits to his ancestral homeland. Officially, he explained, Ireland emphasized its support for its IT sector first and its biopharma sector second. But he stressed in meetings with people such as Mary Harney — at the time minister for enterprise, trade and employment — that biopharma had become far more important to Ireland in the creation of jobs and wealth than IT.

He couldn't but be aware of it living where he does. Eighty-two percent of the world's biopharma companies have a presence — whether in the form of headquarters, a laboratory, or a production facility — somewhere in the 40-mile radius around Philadelphia.

"It's been a fantastic boon for this

region. We have a much steadier economy than other parts of the country.

"So Ireland should keep pushing that," he said.

He recalled that Harney told him that the government had made an initial €650 million investment into Science Foundation Ireland.

"I said 'Mary, that's fantastic, but let me tell you something: the University of Pennsylvania alone gets \$700 million a year from the National Institutes of Health,'" he said.

And the NIH, he added, pours similar amounts of money into numerous institutions, such as MIT and Harvard.

The intelligence gathered, though, is not just about the top officials and the big ideas.

"Being in the business world for 35 plus years gives me the experience to be able to say: 'I know who you should talk to,'" he said.

McLaughlin has no plans to quit. He had an uncle who kept going well into his 80s, which seems to him like a good model to follow.

That's a long way off for the Philadelphian, but he likes the idea of sailing his boat on the Chesapeake, equipped with his iPhone and laptop.

"I don't think I'll ever necessarily retire," McLaughlin said.

For more about the Philadelphia-based Irish American Business Chamber & Network go to [www.iabcn.org](http://www.iabcn.org).