

MEN

A continent away, he sees the value of literacy

■ An Irishman's sad tale won't be forgotten

By DAVID LA HUTA

To this day, I still can't remember the first time I was able to read. I bet my mother remembers. I was probably 3 or 4, sitting around my kitchen table, slowly stuttering over my own speech. D-d-d-dog. C-c-c-cat. I was a kid in middle-class America, where reading is fundamental. What I didn't realize then was that my world was slowly getting bigger and a little easier to understand. But that was just me, and not everyone is that lucky.

Nearly 20 years later, my world grew to epic proportions. Reading became second nature — something I didn't even think about doing anymore. It was just that easy. What I never realized was that not everyone was like me. Not all of us could read.

This great epiphany first came to me while hitchhiking across the Emerald Isle. I had 18 days to spend in Ireland and I intended to see as much as I could — every rolling green hill and every black pint of stout. Determination and my golden thumb would not let me down. My trip began in Dublin.

It was a Saturday afternoon when I was walking down the street in Dublin's Temple Bar district. There was a light rain but no one goes to Ireland for the weather. As the Irish say, there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing. While I continued my search for another pint of Guinness, a man came up to me and asked me the time. I would later know him as Al.

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Immediately recognizing my accent, Al started talking to me about his own travels to the States. He had just returned from San Francisco and loved more than anything to share his own experiences abroad. After chatting for awhile, Al invited me to share a pint with him at his favorite pub. I happily agreed as we made our way into Flannery's just a couple of blocks down.

From the onset, Al seemed like a very interesting guy. A man of average height, he had a small wrinkled face and wore a knit cap.

Al was a trucker who delivered medical supplies to hospitals across Ireland. The deal was this: If I occasionally helped him unload his truck, he would pay for my food and accommodations and give me a lift halfway across the country for the next three days. It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

As we ordered another round, Al attempted to show me where we would be going on a map I had provided, but he had a bit of trouble. Maybe it was just too dark in the pub.

The next day I met Al again, this time complete with my backpack and ready to roll. That Sunday the two of us boarded his truck and headed south to Cashel. For a little over three hours we sat in his truck, listened to the Dubliners and smoked Carroll's brand cigarettes. I was in Ireland for nearly four days and already I had a new friend.

Things went like this for as long as I was with Al.

Passing through four cities in three days, we finally ended up in Tralee on the West Coast of Ireland.

That day it was Al's 47 birthday and we celebrated in grand Irish fashion. After visiting several pubs, we retreated back to the hotel.

So Al and I stayed up late, celebrated, and continued to talk. Al cried as he confessed his illiteracy.

It was a shocking blow and something I just couldn't understand. How could this man of 47 not know how to read? Al told me that aside from my company, it was the reason why he needed me to come along. He couldn't read the docketts for the supplies he delivered.

As I sat in the hotel room completely befuddled, Al showed me a Christmas card that he received in the mail from the friends he had met in San Francisco. It was March and he still didn't know what it said. As I read to him what was written, he wept with joy from the warm greetings of old friends. My heart bled.

Writing in *Ireland Today*, Sharon Geoghegan reported that 23 percent of the Irish adult population experienced difficulties with reading and writing. According to the Rotary Press Center, an estimated

900 million people — about a quarter of the world's population — cannot read or write in any language.

That night, I attempted to do my best to teach Al the alphabet. To make it easier, I used words he already knew — I was for Ireland, G was for Guinness, and J was for Jameson's, to name a few. I told him the importance of learning how to read and he assured me he would try. We exchanged addresses that night, but a year later I still haven't heard from my friend Al.

It's hard for me to picture my life not having the ability to read. I've taken it for granted for so long. Although I'm sure it's even harder for Al to picture his life having that ability. I don't know where Al is anymore or even if he's still driving his truck. I just hope that his world is slowly getting bigger and a little easier to understand.

David LaHuta is a Bay Terrace resident. The Men's Forum appears in Wednesdays. If you would like to submit an article to be considered for publication, address your correspondence to the Men's Forum, Staten Island Advance, 950 Fingerboard Rd., Staten Island, N.Y. 10305.