

Rosemary Smith

(7th August 1937 - 5th December 2023)



On 5th December 2023, our dear friend Rosemary Smith sadly passed away after a battle with cancer in Beacon Hospital, Dublin. Unfortunately this was one race she could not win.

Rosemary was born in Dublin on 7th August 1937. The youngest of three children, she was smart but hated her strict convent school education. Rosemary learned to drive when she was 11. Her father, who had a car dealership and was an amateur racer himself, taught her on country roads. She obtained her driving licence at 16 by pretending she was a year older.

Shortly after this she had entered the Grafton Academy of Design. She left after six months, despite winning the first prize in the school's annual design contest, to join the Miriam Woodburn Model Agency. She modelled for Dior and also opened up a boutique with her mother where she worked as a dressmaker as well.

One day in 1959, one of her customers, Delphine Biggar (husband of Monte Carlo winner Frank Biggar) came into the boutique. She asked Rosemary would she be her navigator for a rally in Kilkenny. Rosemary agreed but showed little skill as a navigator, but had a natural aptitude for rally driving which led to a pivotal role change to driver, catching the attention of the Rootes Group's Competition Department, who offered her a coveted works drive.

After clinching the Ladies prize at the Circuit of Ireland Rally in 1964, 1965 marked a significant milestone in her career, winning outright, the four-day Tulip Rally alongside co-driver Valerie Domleo.

Despite facing controversy and disqualification in the 1966 Monte Carlo Rally, Rosemary remained unperturbed, leading to a series of triumphs including an outright win in the 1969 Cork 20 Rally and multiple victories on renowned stages like the Scottish Rally, the Alpine Rally, the Canadian Shell 4000, the 1968 London to Sydney Marathon and the 1970 London to Mexico World Cup Rally.

Rosemary not only drove for Rootes, she also went on to drive for many of the leading motor manufacturers of the time, including Ford, British Leyland, Porsche, Opel, Lancia and Chrysler Talbot among others, showcasing her driving prowess but also as a trailblazer for Irish motorsport.

In 1978, Rosemary set a new land speed record of 150.101mph on the Carrigrohane Straight in Cork driving a 7-litre Jaguar XJ6.

In the 1990s, Rosemary expanded her influence by founding a driving school, sharing her wealth of knowledge to aspiring young drivers.

At the age of 79, Rosemary received an invitation from Renault Sport to test drive their F1 car at the Paul Ricard circuit in France. On 10th March 2017 she became the oldest person ever to drive a F1 car with 800 horsepower. Rosemary was an ambassador for Ford Ireland and then for Renault Ireland for many years.

In 2018, Rosemary published her autobiography, *Driven*. The book reveals the story of her amazing life, recounting many memorable adventures and exploits both on and off the track. She also starred in various TV and radio shows throughout Ireland.

In 2022, Rosemary was inducted into the prestigious FIVA Heritage Hall of Fame, the first Irish person to be nominated and inducted.

Rosemary Smith's legacy will continue to inspire generations, her remarkable journey stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of an Irish motorsport legend. In short, Rosemary is a true legend.

Joanne Gillespie, P.R.O., Imp Club in Ireland

The Funeral – 11th December 2023, Dublin

It is with a heavy heart I write this article. On Monday 11th December, 23 members of the Imp Club in Ireland made the sad journey to Dublin from all over Ireland to say our final goodbyes to our beloved friend Rosemary Smith (Rosie, as she was known to us). We all met at 12 noon in Sandyford House – Rosemary's 'local' – for lunch, before lining up close to Rosemary's home to join the funeral cortège which included seven Imps with Andy Hennessey's rally Imp (which Rosemary previously rallied) leading the hearse to Mount Jerome Crematorium.

As we passed through her village of Sandyford, many of the locals lined the roads to pay their final respects. As we passed Sandyford House a waiter was outside the pub holding a tray bearing a glass of red wine – Rosemary's favourite tippie.

Rosemary's funeral was held in the Victorian Chapel at Mount Jerome Crematorium in Dublin. She requested that black attire was not essential, instead mourners should wear a splash of pink – Rosemary's favourite colour.

As the procession entered the chapel, *The Toreador's Song* from Bizet's *Carmen* was



Andy Hennessey's rally Imp leads the cortège past Sandyford House – Rosemary's 'local'
Photo: Michael Chester

played. The Very Reverend Dermot Dunne, Dean of the Christ Church Cathedral opened the service with a few words and a prayer. This was followed by readings from two of her good friends. The first was from the book of Wisdom 3:1-6 read by Janet Taylor and the second was from John 14:1-6 read by Nola Martini. In between the reading we listened to the *Ave Maria*.

Following the readings we had the pleasure of listening to tributes from various people.

The first was from Keane Harley (driving school colleague and good friend). He said, "To say that Rosemary is a legend is an understatement. She broke through many barriers and tore down many taboos, not only here in Ireland but also on the world stage.

"She was well loved and multi-talented. A soloist in a choir, a promising tennis player, a skilled seamstress, dressmaker and one of Ireland's first international models, not to mention a mean poker player, a popular TV presenter and a fashion icon.

"Rosemary was a role model and a big part of her legacy is the ten thousand or more youngsters who she instructed in driver safety."

A tribute was read out on behalf of her personal friend JD Murphy – who ran Belgard Motors with his brother: "Rosemary once helped him and his team prank a visiting Porsche manager from Germany. They told him she was an elderly aunt of a staff member who had never driven a car and she nervously sat in a Porsche at the Mondello racetrack with the visiting manager beside her, who instructed her how to use the controls. She shot off down the track zig-zagging the car at breakneck speed doing laps of the track that she knew like the back of her hand. When they got out, the visiting manager from Porsche said, 'Madam, I think it is quite obvious that you have already driven a fast car!'"

Rosemary's cousin Barry Kavanagh said, "Rosemary never forgot her roots, and her family were all immensely impressed by this gorgeous blonde bombshell that would enter the house on occasions and bring style, elegance and a great sense of humour and joy for life with her.

"As we grew up, we were entertained by stories of Rosemary's adventures and indeed the dangers that she encountered through the years and of course, the countries that she travelled to, describing the friends she brought home and cars she drove.

"Aside from being that celebrity – which she was, of course, and we all knew it – she was kind and generous with her time."

After the tributes we heard the songs, *You'll Never Walk Alone* and *It's Time To Say Goodbye* with the Reverend saying the Committal between the songs. Finally, as we watched the curtains close for the very last time for our dear friend Rosie, we listened to *You Raised Me Up*. I don't think there was a dry eye in the chapel after this one.

Afterwards everyone was invited back to one of Rosemary favourite restaurants, The Goat, for refreshments.

On the back of the Order of Service Rosemary had one final thing to say to everyone: "I would like to be remembered for trying to be a nice person who tried to help people whenever I could. When I was younger I was very shy and was sometimes mistakenly thought of as standoffish. I really wasn't. I literally was so shy I couldn't talk to people. It is only in recent years that I have had the confidence to go anywhere, meet people and make friends."

Joanne Gillespie, P.R.O., Imp Club in Ireland



**Rosemary's 85th birthday celebrations
at The Snail Box, Co. Meath, August 2021**
Photo supplied by Joanne Gillespie