

St Mary of the Angels is 50 years old this year. Aidan O'Connor visited there to meet Thomas Bambury - the New York-born resident who has made Beaufort his home for the last 25 years.

My home at Saint Mary of the Angels

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS after moving to St Mary of the Angels in Beaufort, 41-year-old Thomas Bambury still has a distinct, broad New York accent. He's still known as 'the Yank' inside St Mary of the Angels.

Thomas puts on his best shirt for the interview and photograph. He loves smiling for the camera.

St Mary of the Angels is 50 years in existence this year. It's been home for Thomas for the last 25. He was 16 when the family decided to leave New York and return to Kerry - the birthplace of Thomas' late dad, Jerry.

Thomas has an incredible memory. He recalls sleeping in a cot in the apartment in Queens overhead the bar managed by his dad. He recalls the public schools he attended in the Big Apple, and the happy times he had visiting bakeries to buy French Toast and syrup.

By the time Thomas was 16, the options in New York were limited. The nearest residential facility was 200 miles away. So the family moved to Ireland in 1992 and St Mary of the Angels and the St Brendan's Unit became part of Bambury family life.

Joyce, Thomas' sister, joins us for coffee in the canteen. She taught in St Francis Special school on the campus of St Mary of the Angels. Now she's principal in the Black Valley National School.

"It's been a tough year for Thomas since Dad passed away," Joyce says. "He misses him a lot. They were extremely close and Dad spent most of his

time here in St Brendan's with Thomas."

Jerry was 68 when he passed away one year ago this month. He died suddenly doing what he loved to do - out fishing on the Killarney Lakes. He was a trojan fundraiser for St Mary of the Angels. In fact, he was instrumental in raising funds for the red bus that takes Thomas and his friends on day trips.

People like Joyce and other family members are fighting hard. Their first major battle began two years ago when St John of Gods - who run the service in Beaufort - began to implement HSE policy of moving the residents out of 'congregated settings' like St Mary of the Angels into the 'community'.

There was mass resistance and a local and national media campaign. Families argued that many of the residents do not want to move. And many of them with high-dependency simply wouldn't survive in a house in rural Kerry with no guarantee of proper supports.

Their argument was clear: St Mary of the Angels is NOT a congregated setting - it's a community. More importantly, it's home to people like Thomas.

"I'm not against community living," Joyce says, "but one brush can't be used to paint all."



"This is home. I understand people who haven't been here thinking that people are locked inside rooms. Thomas has less access in my own house than he has here. He knows every code in this place," Joyce says.

"There's a church, a school, different houses, a pool, beautiful grounds. St Brendan's has a giant living room, a kitchen, dining room, several toilets and loads of space. There's more here than in many so-called communities in rural parts of Kerry."

"So what music do you like?" I ask Thomas.

No Ed Sheeran for Thomas - he's an '80s man and launches into a few lines from Cyndi Lauper's 1984 classic hit *Time After Time*.

For my sister Debbie's wedding, two staff brought Thomas along. Even at Dad's funeral, two staff brought him to the Funeral Mass and the dinner afterwards.

There was a time when Thomas would not have sat for a chat or a bar of a song. His behaviour has improved immensely since he came to Beaufort, according to Joyce.

"He's got so much more space here. In some parts of the US, people with challenging behaviour are still arrested. They don't have a culture of care in the US like we do here," Joyce says.

"The care and love here is just unbelievable. It's like a big family. For my sister Debbie's wedding, two staff brought Thomas along. Even at Dad's funeral, two staff brought him to the Funeral Mass and the dinner afterwards. They'd do anything for you.

"Everything is so safe here.



Thomas Bambury

Everything is so safe here. The grounds are beautiful and Thomas can go cycling around the grounds; on with his helmet and off he goes.

The grounds are beautiful and Thomas can go cycling around the grounds; on with his helmet and off he goes. Home can be a stressful place at the best of times. The world isn't designed for people with autism. Here, Thomas is comfortable."

Thomas was asked by the authorities if he'd like to leave St Mary of the Angels. He told them in no uncertain terms that he wanted to stay. He knows exactly what he wants - and has no problem letting it be known.

Inspectors from the health watchdog HIQA commented in their most recent report on the many improvements that have taken place inside St Mary of the Angels. But inspectors, residents and family members know there's more to be done.

Families are trying to fund-

raise over €300,000 for a series of refurbishments. One of the big goals is to get single rooms for all the residents inside the St Fidelis Unit. They're one of the chosen charities for this year's Ring of Kerry Charity Cycle. It won't be enough to cover all the costs - but it'll be a big help.

Over an hour has passed and Thomas is getting tired of all the questions and chat. More pressing issues need his time. It's treat day with his sister Joyce and they're off to get Apache pizza. Driving home, Cyndi Lauper and *Time After Time* is playing in my head.

I'll forever more associate that song with Thomas Bambury - one of the most beautiful and contented souls I've met in a long, long time.