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HEADLINE: I'm finished with politics, but I'm looking forward to a new life down on the farm;
EXCLUSIVE Former MP Jimmy Wray reveals why he's selling his GBP1M home to start a new life in the country

BYLINE: SHEILA HAMILTON

HIGHLIGHT:

Jimmy Wray welcomes Prince Charles and French President Jacques Chirac to Easterhouse in 1996
Jimmy and Laura Wray plan a new life in the country Pictures:

Mark Gibson Jimmy and Laura with son Frankie, 7

BODY:

JIMMY WRAY, former Gorbals barrow boy and retired MP for one of Glasgow's poorest areas, has put his home on the market with a GBP1 million price tag. As he recovers from a stroke, he tells SHEILA HAMILTON about his next career move - as a farmer

IT was at this same kitchen table 21 months ago that Labour MP Jimmy Wray sat weeping. But he could not tell his advocate wife, Laura, what was wrong . . . because he had lost the power of speech.

And he couldn't move because he was paralysed down one side.

Laura had suspected something was wrong that morning when they first woke up and Jimmy was oddly uncommunicative.

She frowned at the memory. "I said 'what's the matter, Jimmy?'" I thought maybe he was in a bad mood.

"But when I came downstairs, he couldn't explain himself. He seemed to be almost frozen to the spot. He was in a terrible state."

In panic, she phoned NHS24. "It was so useless, " she said scathingly.

"While the woman was taking my details, I had to say 'look, for all I know my husband might be lying dead on the floor next door' and she said 'would you like to go and check. . .'" Easy to laugh at the remark now that the pair of them are sitting happily at that same kitchen table in their luxury home in Mearnskirch and it all seems like a nightmare.

Each in their own way, they are a dynamic pair, but oddly-matched; the man his constituents in Baillieston knew as a rough and ready Glasgow politician and the serene and attractive blonde lawyer more than a quarter of a century his junior.

Jimmy, who is also a diabetic, has made an amazing recovery but at the time it was terrifying, for Laura realised her husband, then 68, had had a stroke.

With the help of Jimmy's daughter, Jackie - he has two daughters and a son from his first marriage - she managed to get him into the car and take him to casualty.

"Then he lay for hours in a trolley in a corridor in the Victoria Infirmary.

"His treatment at the Victoria wasn't very great from the start, " she says.

Jimmy admits: "When I had the stroke, I couldn't speak. That left me so frustrated.

"Laura used to have to tie my tie and my laces. I couldn't handle a phone. If I lifted it, I couldn't take down a phone number.

"Laura had to put up with a lot. She had her father to look after and Frankie too, as well as me."

Laura's father, a retired lawyer, lives with them and Frankie, now seven, suffers from what they think is Angelman's Syndrome, although it has never been officially diagnosed.

He can't speak, he can't walk very well, his co-ordination is poor and he has no sense of danger.

LOOKING back, Laura is not quite sure how she coped. She had her job as an advocate specialising in personal injuries - she was called to the Bar two years ago.

She had Frankie to worry about. She was running back and forward to hospital and also took on the organisation of the events that Jimmy had on his plate - like the auction for the Prime Minister's dinner and a Christmas treat for east end children.

"Luckily, Jimmy is a very robust character and he quickly made quite a good recovery, " says Laura.

For Jimmy, it's been a hard road back, but he has never been afraid of hard work. He chuckled: "They tend to think that with a stroke you're finished. But not me.

"My memory was wiped, but I've got it back. I got my voice back and I followed the doctors' instructions to the letter.

"I got a bike and pedalled away in the corner and I did weights to get the power back in my arm."

"Really, " Laura confides, "the only long-term problem is that Jimmy can get a bit tetchy from time to time.

"He can be awkward. Before he was always very good-natured and full of fun."

Jimmy, voicing what so many stroke victims must feel. , says: "The thing is the frustration.

"I might get mixed up when I say something and Laura will say 'what do you mean?' and that annoys me.

"And I say 'I say never mind what I mean' and I can't be bothered explaining myself. But I am 99-per cent better."

Not better enough to return to Westminster though.

Eventually, he came to terms with that and the boundary changes that came about this year made the decision to retire easier after he lost a selection battle.

He had been MP for Bailleston for 18 years and before that a councillor with Glasgow City Council and Strathclyde Regional Council. "I'm not missing politics, " he says.

"He is really, " Laura says in an aside.

But Jimmy insists: "I'm not, because I couldn't do the job any more. I could speak without notes and I knew everything about everything.

"Now I have to force myself to force the words out. I really miss being able to stand up and speak and if I couldn't do that, I wouldn't want to work as an MP."

With his job as MP for Baillieston and on the Council of Europe in the Western Europe Union, he could be away from home for three weeks at a time and often back for just a couple of days.

He concedes he never would have retired. "I expected one day to be found dead in a train, " he said.

But Jimmy can't seem to stop. He has re-invented himself more times than he's changed houses. Or do I mean the other way round?

Hard to say. But now the former Gorbals barrow-boy turned boxer, turned lorry driver, turned property developer, turned MP has set his sights on being a farmer.

So the sprawling five-bedroom house that Jimmy built overlooking the countryside near Mearnskirik, the house he thought he'd live in for the rest of his life, is up for sale and he and Laura have bought a farmhouse with magnificent views over the Lake of Menteith.

And that's while they're also selling their holiday home in Cannes to fund a home in Italy.

Not bad, Jimmy reminds me, for a Gorbals boy who was one of a family of eight brought up in a room and kitchen.

They're both excited about the move to the farm. "Some people think it's a completely crazy thing to do but we will only be an hour from Glasgow and we just think it's going to be lovely for Frankie," says Laura.

"We are really creating a little world for him where he'll have chickens and ducks and a little pony and cats and dogs and maybe alpacas."

They plan to build an extension for him with, perhaps, a therapy room.

Frankie is seven now, a beautiful boy with huge blue eyes and a wide smile.

"It's hard to tell what he understands because he can't speak," says his mother. "Sometimes, he gets very frustrated that he's not being understood. But, generally, he is a very contented wee boy."

"Obviously, I worry very much about his future and one reason for going back to work was to try to make sure I could make Frankie secure for the rest of his life."

Jimmy had problems in the beginning accepting there was anything wrong with his son, but his face lights up with affection when he talks about him. Now that Laura is the sole breadwinner, he's going to be looking after Frankie more.

"When Frankie was born, I said 'I'm a happy man, but not a nappy man'.

That's all changed now.

"I don't think anything of changing Frankie before he goes off to school in the morning and we sit and talk. He's a great boy."

It seems a shame to leave their present home in a secluded street in Mearnskirik though, but if you have considerably over GBP1m this blend of the modern and traditional could be yours.

You could be in the country here although the M77 just round the corner takes you into Glasgow city centre in 13 minutes, Laura calculates.

(Maybe if you have a Mercedes it does.) The views around open countryside are spectacular and the gardens are spacious.

Jimmy and Laura know what they're doing and their home wouldn't be out of place in the pages of Hello magazine. Not that they need to encourage the curse of Hello.

WHEN I first met Laura five years ago, I asked if she'd broken a mirror because the fates seemed to have it in for them.

They were in the midst of a libel battle with a Sunday newspaper over accusations by Jimmy's second wife that he had been a foul-mouthed wife-beater.

Jimmy won damages of GBP60,000. But it was a stressful period.

Laura was pregnant when the whole thing first blew up and although she'll never know, she will always wonder if the stress caused Frankie's problems.

As it was, she almost died when he was born.

Laura has help with Frankie because her job means that she could be anywhere from Edinburgh, Perth or Inverness.

And they're happy, they're optimistic, there's not the slightest trace of self-pity, although just once Laura's guard drops.

"When people ask what it's like, I say it's like a kind of lingering grief.

For a while, everything is fine and then suddenly something will happen which makes you feel the grieving process again.

"You see friends or relatives who have lovely children and you think 'my boy's never going to be able to do that. . . he's always going to be a little Peter Pan."

TIMES FILE

JIMMY WRAY, born in 1935 and brought up in the Gorbals, was one of a family of eight.

Before entering politics, he had been a barrow boy, a boxer, a chimney sweep and a lorry driver, graduating to owning his own fleet of lorries. He also became a property developer.

Married three times with four children, he won GBP60,000 damages in 2000 in a high profile libel case against a Sunday newspaper which printed a story claiming he was a wife beater.

He was Labour MP for Glasgow Provan from 1987 to 1997 and for Glasgow Baillieston from 1997 to 2005.

He piloted the Knives Act in the mid 90s and also campaigned against fluoridisation of milk and water. In 2002, he denounced the Scottish Parliament as a place for "odds and sods" and claimed MSPs didn't work as hard as MPs.

He suffered a stroke in December, 2003 and retired from politics this spring after he lost a selection battle.