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victim Danny McIlhone yesterday finally laid him to rest.

After 27 years, two failed searches and painful waiting, friends, family and loved ones gathered in west Belfast to finally say goodbye to the 19-year-old.

Around 500 mourners stood outside the McIlhone family home in Bernagh Drive in what was described as a day of "mixed emotions". They watched as the coffin, carrying the remains of the teenager who was shot dead and secretly buried by the IRA in 1981, was brought slowly out into the street.

Mourners heard how Danny — who had a twin brother John — belonged

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not only to the McIlhone family “but also to his relatives and friends.”

And among the many faces of neighbours and family who gathered to pay their last respects was former Police Ombudsman Nuala O’Loan, Victims’ Commissioners Mike Nesbitt and Brendan McAllister and Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, Commissioner for the Location of Victims’ Remains.

Sinn Fein MLA Paul Maskey, the SDLP’s Alex and Tim Attwood and former IRA leading figure Bobby Storey also attended the funeral.

His surviving brothers and sisters, as well as his daughter Sarah and granddaughter Sadie, led mourners the short distance away for Requiem Mass at St Teresa’s Church.

Father Darach MacGiolla Cathain, who delivered the homily, paid tribute to the family’s determination to find their loved one.

“You never gave up hope when people told you there wasn’t any. You never backed down when people said you were wasting your time,” he said.

“You never grew tired of waiting when people said there was no point waiting. Today is your reward, today is your answer and the result of your faithfulness and persistence. Today is your vindication.”

Last Friday, DNA tests carried out on remains which were dug up from a remote hillside in Co Wicklow, in the Republic, confirmed it was the teenager.

In 1999, almost two decades after Mr McIlhone vanished, the IRA admitted he had been shot in 1981. They claimed he was being questioned about stealing weapons from an arms dump when he was killed in a struggle with a gunman who was guarding him.

But the 11 weeks of searches at the forest-surrounded bogland close to Blessington Lakes in 1999 and 2000, proved fruitless.

However last month, on November 10, investigators using new techniques made a breakthrough in an isolated mountain area of Co Wicklow.

Fr MacGiolla Cathain also spoke of how the candles that have been burning in Bernagh Drive and in the church have represented light in the midst of darkness.

“They’ve been the light of love wanting to have Danny’s body back at least so as to grieve more fully,” he said.

“You will now have a cemetery to visit, a place to lay your flowers, a grave to stand and pray. This was the deepest longing among the family, to have him back to be able to bury him.”

The names of other Disappeared victims — Seamus Wright, Kevin McKee, Columba McVeigh, Brendan Megraw, Gerry Evens, Charlie Armstrong and Seamus Ruddy — were mentioned during the service.

Fr MacGiolla Cathain added: “What is clear in these circumstances is that time doesn’t heal. Truth heals, justice heals, righting a wrong heals.

“We are still a society that is still coming to terms to with the past. But what happened to Danny is in the past for the McIlhone family. It has been very much in the present, which they have had to deal with every single day since Danny was taken from them.

“Today affords you the opportunity to step into the future where you can begin to reconcile some things and lay some of the things of the past aside.”

Members of the family described Danny as: “always full of mischief and he lived life to the full”.

“His big brown eyes and slight stammer melted many a heart and broke a few along the way. Danny belonged not only to the McIlhone family but also to his relatives and friends.”

Mr McIlhone was laid to rest beside his late parents, Dan and Lily, in the nearby Milltown cemetery.

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