Two Hearts Beat as One

Retracing and reinvigorating the spirit of civil rights and disability activism in Ireland and the USA

Martin Naughton – born in 1954 in Connemara, on the west coast of Ireland, and a native Irish speaker – has lived all his life with spinal muscular atrophy, a progressive, genetic condition which denies a person their physical strength by causing muscle weakness and continuing loss of movement.

Aged just seventeen, he was told he would not survive the year. Yet, more than forty years on, in March 2015, he is now setting out on a most purposeful journey - traversing the east coast of the United States of America, in a deeply personal and symbolic act to connect and celebrate the civil and disability rights movements of both countries.

America holds a special importance for Martin, for it was during a visit there in the early 1980s that he first encountered the nascent Independent Living (IL) movement through which he became engaged in a passionate dialogue that was to have a profound and enduring impact on his thinking and future life.

Martin – like most Irish children born with a profound physical disability – had been removed from his family and community, and placed in an institutional care environment in the mid-1960s; a situation which, over time, he came to recognise as being unnecessarily restrictive and ultimately damaging to the psyche and confidence of generations of young people.

His subsequent experiences in America, and the demonstrable evidence of alternative and complimentary ways of empowering people with disabilities, spurred him to action and, on his return, he established the first Centre for Independent Living in Ireland.

Since then, Martin has been singularly dedicated to campaigning and advocacy work, and the advancement of new, innovative programmes and services for and with people with disabilities.

His leadership in the field over the past thirty years has been characterised by a relentless focus on developing the capacities, resilience and creativity of people with disabilities, underpinned by a simple personal philosophy centred on the dogged belief and insistence of optimising the rights of people to make properly informed and self-directed choices.

This practical philosophy has been exemplified by the setting up of 25 Centres for Independent Living and the origination of Personal Assistant (PA) schemes, transport initiatives and new housing projects, among others that have seen Martin being recognised as a unique citizen and a recipient of the Person of the Year, National Cú Chulainn and inaugural Equality Awards in Ireland, while also acting as a long-serving Director of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL).
Now, he is going back to America to connect directly with those people who launched the IL movement, and to honour the campaigns for equal rights and civil liberties which not only influenced him, but helped shape the way all of us live today.

For 2015 marks the anniversary of two seminal events in disability and civil rights history in the United States.

This year has focussed world attention on the 50th anniversary of the decisive Selma to Montgomery march by the Reverend Martin Luther King that catalysed the civil rights movement in America, while it also heralds the 25th anniversary of the Capitol Crawl in Washington DC, where disability activists abandoned their wheelchairs and mobility aids to climb the steps of the Capitol Building, demanding and successfully securing the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

These two related powerful acts of struggle are at the heart of Martin’s impending journey. As such it involves a month-long overland expedition from New York City to Washington DC and onwards to the State of Alabama and back; incorporating both a physical retracing of the famous march routes and events from times past, along with personal and formal meetings with leading civil rights, disability leaders and politicians – including the family and peers of the Reverend Martin Luther King.

The purpose of the expedition is two fold – as it will satisfy a long-held desire on Martin’s part to pay respect to the courage and sacrifices of people that he was inspired by in his youth and, in another way, also deepen the mutual sense of admiration and friendship that threads the history and peoples of America and Ireland.

Martin’s intention is to help reinforce this distinct relationship by promoting a contemporary sense of solidarity that will connect to a new era in the life of the IL movement in Ireland.

Shortly after his return, Martin will address a major gathering of upwards of a thousand disability activists and delegates from throughout the country, assembled in the National Indoor Athletics Arena in Athlone, whereupon a new manifesto for positive change and advancements in civil society will be proffered and deliberated upon by everyone present.

It is Martin’s hope, and that of those he represents and his co-travellers, that this imminent engagement in America will prove to be a landmark occasion. Any assistance that may be forthcoming in this respect will be greatly appreciated and duly acknowledged in the context of all relevant organisational, media and communications work, both during and after the period of the journey.

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