



The Irish Wheelchair Association

Improving the lives of people with physical disabilities in Ireland

THEN



In 1960

Ireland was a very different place for those with physical disabilities and mobility challenges. Getting around in Dublin city was a challenge and those in rural areas often faced even greater difficulties. But a small group of dedicated wheelchair users came together to found the Irish Wheelchair Association to ensure that the quality of life for those with mobility issues would improve and services could increase.

Today, the Irish Wheelchair Association has 20,000 members with limited mobility and is one of Ireland's leading social enterprises. They provide over 2 million hours of service a year to people with disabilities in their homes and communities throughout Ireland.

The reach of the organization is impressive. Services range from assisted living, transport, housing, employment and rehabilitative training for independence. Active in every county of Ireland, they also provide youth services, recreational opportunities, and accessible holidays for carers and people with physical disabilities and their families.

"We have a role, not just to provide services, but also to be a voice," explains CEO Kathleen McLoughlin. "We will never give up on insisting that those with disabilities have a right to live a full life the same as anyone else."

Kathleen is passionate about the benefits of inclusion and what that means in terms of access. "To exclude people with disabilities is to exclude a whole piece of Ireland. There is a business case around including people with disabilities. It showed that 12-15% of the population with a disability also have money in their pockets to spend. It's simple: if your restaurant or hotel is accessible, people will come and do business with you. Many people who have a disability are well-educated. They are fantastic workers and contributors in every way. But if there are structural issues, such as they can't get to work, or they can't get on a bus, or they can't have minimal support in their homes to get them out and about, they're lost. But really, that is Ireland's loss."

The Irish Wheelchair Association is committed to ensuring that Ireland does not have a loss, but has a gain from the numerous contributions that their members bring. "We are excited to not only provide services to our members, but educate the Irish public around the fact that these are people with lots of talent, lots of energy, lots of creativity, and lots to contribute," explains Kathleen. "We don't see limits. We see everyone having that capacity to live a very full life, and whatever it takes to allow them to do that, we're prepared to explore that with them. It's as simple as that, we change lives."

The Ireland Funds have supported the work of the Irish Wheelchair Association with a grant for their work in Limerick. A recently opened center in that area is now serving the community and bringing services from sport to job training under a single roof whereas members previously had to travel to different locations for the same services.

"The Ireland Funds grant was the difference in the end that allowed us to open the center," says Kathleen. "Because we would have had to wait several months until we could raise that money somewhere else. This is not the kind of thing that we necessarily get state funding for anymore. We have ambitious plans. It is the support of those like The Ireland Funds that allows us to achieve them."

