

Gaisce

THE PRESIDENT'S AWARD

With Help From The Ireland Funds,
Ireland's Traveler Community
Raises the Bar of Achievement



Across Ireland, young people age 15 – 25 have a unique opportunity to push their boundaries, challenge themselves and serve their community. Gaisce is the President's Award, a prestigious honor achieved by young people who complete a series of challenges in the four areas of community involvement, personal skills, physical recreation and a journey or residential project.

Gaisce

is a self-development program, not a competition. Each young person constructs their own experience under the guidance of Gaisce and an adult mentor, often from a community service organization. Participants engage in activities that range from volunteering overseas with a nonprofit organization to training for a marathon. A Gaisce award level of Bronze, Silver or Gold is given based on the length of time a young person commits to the program. Bronze and Silver encompass the four key challenge areas and take 26 and 52 weeks to complete, respectively. The Gold program is an intense commitment of 78 weeks with five key challenge areas. In all instances, a participant commits at least 1 hour a week to the program.

The Ireland Funds has been a long-time supporter of Gaisce and its aim to provide self-growth opportunities for Ireland's youth. Most recently, a grant was made to assist a community often at a disadvantage in Ireland: young members of the Traveler community.

"We are a community of Irish people who are indigenous to Ireland," explains Willie McDonagh, Children and Young People's Service Manager, a resource for the Traveler community. "We have our own culture, our own heritage, our own history. There are around 45,000 people in Ireland who identify as Travelers. Some would use the term 'gypsies' but we have a deep history here in Ireland."

Past generations of Travelers in Ireland often struggled with traditional education as they did not stay in one location for extended amounts of time. Today's young Travelers at times still struggle with educational advancement despite the fact that their families no longer legally have the

freedom to move across Ireland at-will. Exchange House is helping the Traveler community see the value of education and programs like Gaisce. "This generation sees the value of education because we need educated and articulate Travelers to go out there into the community and take a stand on the same level playing field as their peers in the 'settled' community," says Willie. "We need them to be working side-by-side. We need to get rid of the stigma, to show them that education is the way forward."

Young Travelers from Exchange House's youth outreach participated in the Gaisce program with help from The Ireland Funds. The Personal Skills portion of their Bronze level was a focus on mental health skills development.

Mental health is a major concern within the community. It is also a topic fraught with stigma and silence which has contributed to an epidemic of suicides for Travelers.

"The rate of suicide within the Traveler community is eight times higher than the general population," explains John Paul Collins, a Youth Worker at Exchange House who led the workshop as part of the Gaisce program. "Some of our members have had issues with mental health and this was a chance to work with them."

For 13 weeks, a group of Traveler teens met on Tuesdays for "Walk the Walk." For most of the young men, it was the first time they had ever talked openly about mental health and suicide. In a safe space they explored the effect it had on their families, their community, and the resources available to them.

"It was good because we learned about some of the services that are available, says Martin McDonagh a young Traveler who went on to achieve his Bronze Gaisce level.

"Gaisce was a great experience and learning opportunity for me and a journey which I enjoyed. I finished with a better outlook on life."

The group continued to fulfill the Gaisce challenges by traveling to Romania to volunteer at an orphanage that is home to 80 orphans. For many of the young Travelers it was their first time outside of Ireland and an eye-opening experience on the impact of volunteerism.

"It was full of mixed emotions because you didn't know what to expect when you went over there," says Tom, another participant. "It was fulfilling doing activities with these little kids. The smallest thing you did for them, they appreciated. Between that and the mental health portion, it gave me a better understanding of myself."

The young men's achievement of the President's Award was a proud and important moment for the Traveler community. "It is changing perception and accessibility," says Willie. "There are a lot of people who firmly believe that Gaisce is only for the good kids, the kids who are motivated, who are well-supported, and that it isn't for our Traveler kids. We have really worked hard to change that perception. It was support from The Ireland Funds that facilitated this."

Comfort with mental health conversation will take time. The small group of teenage Travelers are pioneers in this area and are an example for other young people in the community.

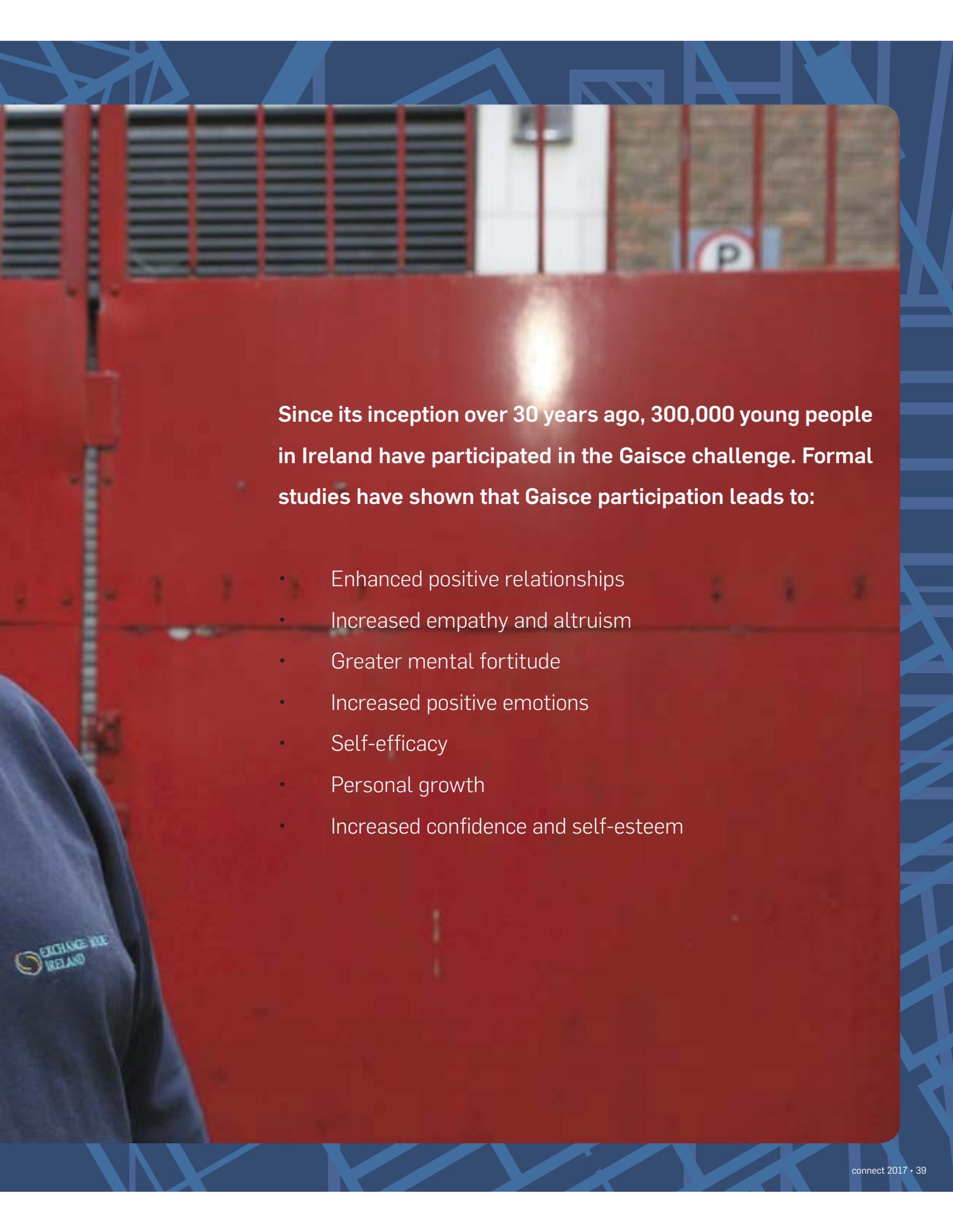
"Maybe The Ireland Funds should take a pat on the back for saving someone's life," says Willie. "I could nearly say you did through the funding. Some of our young people have now come forward for more help and they mightn't have had the chance without that."

As for the Gaisce challenges? Willie knows the investment will pay returns for years to come. "We hope to see more young Travelers doing Gaisce and you have to start somewhere" he says with a smile. "To go for the Gold? You start with the Bronze."

A man with short, light brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue hoodie, is looking directly at the camera. He is standing in front of a red wall with a window that has a white frame and a black grate. The background is slightly out of focus.

“To actually see our young people doing Gaisce and to see young Travelers actually taking pride in who they are is amazing. The Ireland Funds has given us something that can be built on.”

—*Willie McDonagh, Children and Young People's Service Manager*



Since its inception over 30 years ago, 300,000 young people in Ireland have participated in the Gaisce challenge. Formal studies have shown that Gaisce participation leads to:

- Enhanced positive relationships
- Increased empathy and altruism
- Greater mental fortitude
- Increased positive emotions
- Self-efficacy
- Personal growth
- Increased confidence and self-esteem