
New Horizons – Re-energizing the Disability Movement in Ireland

On the 23rd of September 2017 I, along with approximately 200 people with disabilities and their advocates, attended an event in the Round Room at the Mansion House in Dublin to celebrate the lives and achievements of a number of disabled activists who recently passed away and to explore the possibility of re-igniting a disability-lead movement in Ireland. The event was spearheaded by a group of disability activists, including Eileen Daly who for many years has been a strong advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. After the celebration I had the pleasure of meeting with Eileen to discuss the event in more detail and what it hoped to achieve. Eileen outlined the purpose of the event was twofold. Firstly, it was a chance to meet in friendship and affection – both in memory of those disabled activists who have died in recent times:

1. Martin Naughton
2. Donal Toolan
3. Joe T Mooney
4. Florence Dougall
5. Ursula Hegarty
6. Michael Corbett
7. Dermot Walsh

Recognising the achievements of these individuals whose legacy will live on, **and** to bring consciousness to our responsibilities both to ourselves and each other as we endeavour to reawaken a people's disability movement suited to current times. It was hoped that the experience of meeting in this manner might spark a new form of dialogue and relationship across the disability spectrum.

Secondly, it was to recognise that despite the introduction of the various legislative Acts over the last decade or so purporting to protect the rights of people with disabilities, as a community many people with disabilities are still largely unseen, poorly organised and poorly represented at all levels of Irish life and not least within the formal disability sector. The result is that the human rights and living circumstances of people with disabilities are a cause of deep concern. Daly argues, that the core challenge is

How do people with disabilities overcome discrimination and achieve full equality as citizens, when the Irish State continually fails to respect and work with us to recognise our rights as human beings to live our lives as we choose in the same way as other Irish citizens?

Daly asserts

We have our history to consider and our current reality that Ireland was the last country in the EU to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as recently as March

Although the event in the Mansion House was in part to reinvigorate the disability movement here in Ireland, Eileen stresses it was very much a stand-alone event. Activists Donal Toolan and Martin Naughton and others have left hugely influential legacies. Eileen together with her peers and fellow activists will bring her own ideas, approach and style to the table. Everyone has a highly valuable contribution to make. We also need to guide and most importantly learn from the next generation of disabled activists.

Moving forward Eileen says there needs to be a two pronged approach, the first one being **activism** and for many that involves building capacity through training and peer support. There is also a need to understand the political process and how to bring about policy change. In Ireland when an individual has a problem they tend to go to their local TD and then get referred back to the relevant department. This might solve a problem for an individual but it doesn't bring about change for everyone. It's about understanding change takes time, through working with others and Eileen feels we are in many ways only at the beginning of this process. There needs to be a strategy around effective lobbying with a revitalised peer support network. There might even be opportunities to develop a course where people can get an accreditation in activism and peer support.

The second approach, which is only in its infancy, has been the **setting up of a disability-lead organisation - Disabled People of Ireland (DPol)** which will reach across impairment types, not just focused on the needs of one particular group but rather a driving force for change for all people with disabilities. This means recognising people with disabilities and their advocates as the experts so that we stop working in silos, competing for funding. There has been an entire industry built up around disability in which, Daly argues, people with disabilities have had little or no say on how services are developed, managed and delivered. Daly argues that there's a need to look beyond the requirements of the individual and become part of the collective.

DPol is currently in the final stages of becoming incorporated, and a management group is in place. During the planning for the development of the group, it was decided to invite a group of people from across all types of impairments, who have been activists promoting rights for disabled people, to become an Advisory Group. Organisations who wish to become involved must have 50%+ members who are people with disabilities, and be managed and directed by people with disabilities. Individuals will be able to join the organisation but this process still has to be scoped out. **As a movement, people with disabilities are now tasked with the responsibility of regenerating a new form of leadership capable of advancing our call for true equality in 21st century Ireland.**

For more information about DPol <https://www.dpoi.ie/>



Eileen Daly

Disability Rights Activist

Eileen lives and works in Dublin. A graduate of UCD, Eileen is a career guidance practitioner and career coach and a passionate disability rights activist. She currently works with the Rehab Group in a partnership service with the City of Dublin Education & Training Board supporting people with disabilities in Further Education. She has also worked in Trinity College on the Career Pathways project which supported students & graduates with disabilities to prepare for the transition to the workplace. She is chairperson of Greater Dublin Independent Living. GDIL is part of the wider independent living movement in Ireland and it aims to ensure that all people with disabilities have the right to experience independent living and have maximum choice and control in their lives.



Lorraine Gallagher

Information and Training Officer, AHEAD

[@aheadireland](https://twitter.com/aheadireland)

Lorraine Gallagher has a Masters in Fine Art. She has worked in the area of disability equality for many years and is currently the Information & Training Officer for AHEAD. Prior to working for AHEAD Lorraine worked as research assistant and co-facilitator to Peter Kearns at The Workhouse. She also worked as the disability equality trainer on Music Map, a music management course run by the City Arts Centre.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
