

Title: The importance of collective community spirit

Despite the economic events of recent years, Irish people's caring nature towards others has continued to shine like a beacon in the dark. I have witnessed this first hand, and have seen local communities grow stronger. The strong Irish community spirit lends itself to public service professions, private sector professions, and charitable organisations all working in unison to help other people.

In my opinion, this is seen nowhere more clearly than in the North West. I am from a rural, disadvantaged area in Donegal and was born with a cleft lip and palate. This meant that, along with my parents, I spent many years dealing with the public health service in Donegal and Sligo. The early years for babies born with a cleft lip and palate or similar birth defects can be a traumatising and confusing time for the whole family, and it is with care and support from local health care professionals in the community that they overcome these hurdles. This support is also crucial for developing a child's confidence as they go through primary and secondary school and become young adults. In turn, this is crucial to helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds compete in the labour market.

In my case, early intervention was key. Although there wasn't the same level of knowledge as there is now, my parents did everything they could to find out how to help me progress in life. They read widely about the topic, got in contact with anybody they could find who had experience of this situation, and participated in any research groups investigating its cause. They relied hugely on the expertise and care of doctors, nurses, and other health professionals. This is the same for many families.

It is important for us all to recognise and champion these real local heroes for the long hours and dedication they put into their charitable work or careers on a daily basis. This is particularly the case for the many doctors, nurses, and hospital staff throughout the North West and, from my own experience, the staff of the public orthodontics clinic in Sligo led by Mr Rahilly. Unfortunately, over recent years, I've seen that many people don't give enough credit where it is due, and although the HSE has many issues to yet be addressed in terms of bureaucracy, long waiting lists, and funding to help as many people as they possibly can, there is a real failure to differentiate between service issues and the good work carried out by many staff. This must change.

Although now living and working in Dublin, I still have a strong bond with home. I recently became a trustee of the Cleft Lip and Palate Association of Ireland (CLAPAI) where I have learned in a real way the value the public health service and local charity groups give to disadvantaged families with children with birth defects. Also, it is really important that young adults have the tools and the confidence to compete in third level education or the workplace. This can only be achieved through ongoing positive support.

So, as Ireland returns to growth and hopefully prosperity it is important to remember the real heroes in our society, to say a simple 'thank you' to them more often, and help to change the Irish health care system in a more positive and dynamic way.

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