

## **EXTRAORDINARY LIVES** Celebrating 50 years of the Irish Wheelchair Association

**23<sup>rd</sup> March 2011:** Irish Wheelchair Association book records and celebrates how life has changed for people with disabilities in Ireland over the past fifty years.

In November 2010, the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. To mark this occasion, IWA has produced a commemorative book which celebrates not only the history of the organisation, but the story of a changing Ireland, in which many people with disabilities have gone from living 'behind closed doors' to enjoying full and independent lives in their communities.

The first part of the book tells the individual stories of IWA's eight founder members, including Fr Leo Close, an influential figure who became the first wheelchair user in the world to be ordained as a priest; Jack Kerrigan, a charismatic man who was paralysed in a diving accident and became a determined advocate for the Association; and Oliver Murphy, the only surviving founder, whose lifelong commitment to the principles on which the Association was founded continues to inspire. These stories offer insight into what it was like to live with a disability prior to the establishment of IWA, and provide a sense of the energy and vision of these individuals as they endeavoured to change life for people with disabilities in Ireland.

The second part of the book looks at the five decades from 1960-2010, with an overview of developments within IWA and the disability movement, and interviews with members and volunteers whose lives reflect some of the changes of that decade. Those interviewed include Lord Dunraven, who survived the Cork polio epidemic in 1956 and devoted much of his life to raising awareness of disability; activists Martin Naughton and Donal Toolan, who led campaigns for services and rights legislation; and Cllr Terry O'Brien, who was paralysed as a young man and went on to become an influential local politician and Mayor of Tralee.

While many of the interviewees have made significant contributions to the development of services and supports for people with disabilities, it is their personal journeys that are at the heart of the book. They talk openly about experiences like growing up in a children's home, adjusting to life in a wheelchair, tackling spoken and unspoken stigmas, and finding the determination to overcome obstacles.

Commenting on the publication of the book, IWA's Chief Executive Officer Kathleen Mc Loughlin said, "Many of IWA's older members remember disability as a very different phenomenon fifty years ago. We commissioned this book because we believe it's vitally important to record their experiences as part of our social history, to celebrate how far we have come as a society, and to acknowledge the people that helped bring about change."

**The book is available to purchase from Eason Stores nationwide and directly from the Association by logging onto [www.iwa.ie/book](http://www.iwa.ie/book)**

**Ends:**

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**Notes to editor:**

*Extraordinary Lives* is written by Dublin-based freelance writer Joanna Marsden with contemporary photography by Paul Sherwood, and IWA archive research by Mairead Farquharson and Anita Matthews. Published by IWA in partnership with Dyflin Media, the book is available for 24.99 from Easons stores nationwide and from [www.iwa.ie](http://www.iwa.ie). All proceeds go to IWA.

*The author and many of the individuals featured in the book are available for interview.*