

CRUSADING FLANNERY'S

We wish to pay a special tribute to the driving force behind a remarkable community effort in Counties Clare and Kerry. It is a tale of passion, tragedy and sheer determination, buttressed by the natural warmth and support of a community of friends and neighbours.

Health services in Ireland, like many other countries, have evolved on a supply and demand basis. The bulk of the services are concentrated in densely populated areas, typically the largest cities, leaving rural areas under-resourced. Most rural citizens resign themselves to long treks to Dublin for treatment, but one couple in County Clare decided that this wasn't fair and decided to do something revolutionary about it.

Howard and Gráinne Flannery of Ennis, County Clare, grew increasingly frustrated by the lack of services for their young son. The health care services for children with cerebral palsy, autism and Down's syndrome were many miles away in Dublin, and the long treks across the country were a heavy burden for the young family. So, in 2005, Howard marshalled a small group of friends to raise funds to help the local children with special needs. The group, styled the **Clare Crusaders**, embarked on an epic fund-raising journey.

Supported by friends and neighbours, the small group of crusaders donned bright orange vests and took to the streets to train in all weather conditions for a sponsored run: the Dublin City Marathon. Backed by local press and radio, word soon spread of the worthy cause and there was great support and encouragement for the noble cause. The regime of walking, jogging and running transformed them, and their numbers grew as onlookers noted their commitment and improving fitness. Rising before dawn to train before breakfast, the morning runs grew progressively longer until the group were finally ready.



[photo: Clare Crusaders]

Howard Flannery

The Dublin City Marathon was held on 1st November 2005 in the teeming rain. The Clare Crusaders comprised thirty men and women on the day, and acquitted themselves with distinction. The fund-raising was so successful that they committed to training for the next year's marathon, and the event became a regular annual fixture.

Tragically, on 3rd June 2007, Howard was training with a fellow cyclist for a fund-raising triathlon in Kilkee when he was accidentally struck by a car near Newmarket-on-Fergus and killed. It was a cruel blow to his family and friends, and to the community, but his energy and enthusiasm had created sufficient momentum for the crusade to continue and flourish, and his enduring legacy is the continued success of the Clare Crusaders.

The efforts of the Clare Crusaders have established a children's clinic in Barefield. The clinic is staffed by 6 therapists who provide speech therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy to 160 children in the Clare region free of charge. All funds are raised through volunteers and there is no government funding.

Today, the Clare Crusaders Running Club is a well-oiled machine with members ranging from novice to seasoned veteran. Annual training starts on the first Tuesday

in March and tackles a broad spectrum of races of various lengths for both walkers and runners. The event programme includes a number of half-marathons and the spectacular Dingle Marathon, and culminates in the Dublin City Marathon held on the October bank holiday weekend.

In 2009, Howard's brother Gordon founded the **Kerry Crusaders** as a sister organisation to help families of children with special needs in County Kerry - specifically the Nano Nagle School in Listowel. The distinctive bright yellow shirts of the Kerry Crusaders are a regular feature on the streets of Listowel, and join the bright orange shirts of the Clare Crusaders on big race days in a unique spirit of fellowship.

The Clare Crusaders Cycling Club was also formed in 2009, and the number of fund-raising activities has now developed beyond sport to provide numerous opportunities for members of the community to participate. All in all, the crusaders have provided a spectacular example of self help, and deserve our support and admiration.



Man of Action!



[photo: Kerry Crusaders]

Gordon Flannery

We would like to encourage our members in Ireland and abroad to support the crusaders in their worthwhile endeavours. Donations may be accepted online; visiting walkers, runners and cyclists may join them on the streets; and members may help by simply spreading the word. Please visit the websites of the Clare Crusaders and Kerry Crusaders:

www.clarecrusaders.ie

www.kerrycrusaders.ie



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