



Clip Book

(October 17, 2023)

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Cork event shows realities of life in a wheelchair

RUGBY player CJ Stander was among the attendees who took part in a recent event aimed at highlighting the difficulties that people using a wheelchair experience on a daily basis.

The [Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland's event, [A Day in my wheels](#), took place at Cork's County Hall.

It was attended by businesses and individuals who contributed €5,000 to take part — either fundraised or donated through company corporate social responsibility budgets — which will directly support the 2,300+ individuals in Ireland with [Spinal Cord Injury](#) and their families.

Attendees on the day heard from Kevin Dempsey, Development Manager of the Disability Federation of Ireland who explained that there are 650,000 people in Ireland living with a disability, and 1.1 million or 22% of the population have at least one long-lasting condition, according to the most recent census.

Despite this high figure, people with disabilities are the “largest untapped source of labour”, he said, adding that despite studies showing the benefits of having a diverse workforce, many businesses are not accessible enough to hire people with disabilities.

Participants were then invited to borrow a wheelchair and try to navigate various tasks, such as moving around cones, then doing it in reverse, getting up and down a ramp, and even crossing the busy main road.

The aim of the event was to encourage companies to think about accessibility, and to then return to their workplace and make changes.

Several ambassadors from [Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland were on hand to advise the participants about how to navigate their way around in wheelchairs.

Among those in attendance was Richard Murray, or Rich as he is known, who was born able-bodied, but had to relearn everything after he fell on his back during a boat trip with his friends in 2021.

After a week at The Mater, where he underwent surgery, Rich spent three months in Cork University Hospital, before being transferred to the National Rehabilitation Hospital (NRH), where he first met the [Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland team, who have been in “constant contact” with him since.

Rich said that he “got lucky” as he could keep his job, which allows him to work from home. He said that because he and his fiancé had just put down the foundation of their house, they were able to redesign it to be more accessible.

Despite these positives, he says there are a huge amount of things that he can't do now, due to the world not being set up for people who use a wheelchair.

He explained that though now his eye is trained to immediately register whether or not a place is accessible, it was something he'd never paid any attention to before.

“Almost every home is not accessible in some way — if there's two stories I can't get upstairs.

“A few friends moved into new houses and we'd go to visit, I'd have to ask my partner to go upstairs and tell me what it was like.”

Speaking about the [A Day in my wheels](#) event, he said: “It's always nice to be around other people in my situation, they know what you're going through without even having to tell them.

“In the NRH especially you're surrounded by people like that, but then you're back out in the real world and you're the only one in your environment in a wheelchair.”

He said that he had observed people having to navigate and think differently about their access for the first time about things he considers on a daily basis and that he could relate to them.

“If you sat me in a chair three years ago I would have struggled,” he said. “When we were crossing the road, there was a curb and even CJ Stander had to think twice about how to get over it properly — that curb was about an inch high and it slowed everybody down.”

He commented that he noticed people who weren't part of the event staring as participants crossed the road in wheelchairs, and says this is part of his daily life.

“If you're in a chair and you're the only one, everybody looks at you — man, woman, child, dog they'll all stop and look at you.

“It's another thing you don't get until you're in a chair, you can hear cars slowing down when they pass to look at

you, like me walking the dog at night is a fairly unique sight.”

Rich said that places in Cork have “very varying degrees of accessibility”, but said it makes a big difference when they make changes in that regard.

“There’s a drive-through coffee shop in Little Island called Crush Coffee that I always go to, and I noticed that they’d replaced a gravel sitting area with tiles”, he said, adding that he spoke to the owner who said he is also planning to put a ramp in over a curb.

Rich said it gave him hope to see this improvement from when he first became a wheelchair user, saying: “even in my length of time in a wheelchair I see a spot making these changes.”

But it continues to be a source of stress for Rich and others like him, as he explains: “I’m going on honeymoon in two weeks and the worry that it might be inaccessible is huge - but we’re just going to stay positive.”

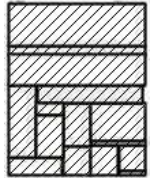
He added: “There’s a long way to go in that regard, but 50 or 100 years ago what chance would you have to a life? Now there’s progress being made all the time.”

For more information on the work of [Spinal Injuries Ireland](https://spinalinjuries.ie/) see <https://spinalinjuries.ie/>

Caption: Caption:

Cork event shows realities of life in a wheelchair Amy Campbell attended a unique event to highlight the daily accessibility difficulties experienced by wheelchair users in Cork where attendees navigated County Hall and its surrounds in a wheelchair. She also spoke with Richard Murray about his experiences and the accessibility challenges he faces.

Participants following [SII](#) ambassador Lester Cassidy at [A Day in my wheels](#) event.



Event shows realities of life in a wheelchair



Amy Campbell attended a unique event to highlight the daily accessibility difficulties experienced by wheelchair users in Cork where attendees navigated County Hall and its surrounds in a wheelchair. She also spoke with Richard Murray about his experiences and the accessibility challenges he faces

RUGBY player CJ Stander was among the attendees who took part in a recent event aimed at highlighting the difficulties that people who use wheelchairs experience on a daily basis.

The Spinal Injuries Ireland's event, *A Day in My Wheels*, took place at Cork's County Hall.

It was attended by individuals and representatives of businesses who contributed €5,000 to take part — either fundraised or donated through company corporate social responsibility budgets — which will directly support the 2,300+ individuals in Ireland with spinal cord injuries, as well as their families.

Attendees on the day heard from Kevin Dempsey, development manager of the Disability Federation of Ireland, who explained that there are 650,000 people in Ireland living with a disability, and that 1.1m people, or 22% of the population, have at least one long-lasting condition, according to the most recent census.

Despite this high figure, people with disabilities are the "largest untapped source of labour", he said, adding that despite studies showing the benefits of having a diverse workforce, many businesses are not accessible enough to hire people with disabilities.

Participants were then invited to borrow a wheelchair and try to navigate various tasks, such as moving around cones, then doing it in reverse, getting up and down a ramp, and even crossing the busy main road.

The aim of the event was to encourage companies to think about accessibility, and to then return to their workplace and make changes.

Several ambassadors from Spinal Injuries Ireland were on hand to advise the participants about how to navigate their way around in wheelchairs.

Among those in attendance was Richard Murray, or 'Rich' as he is known, who was born able-bodied,

but had to relearn everything after he fell on his back during a boat trip with his friends in 2021.

After a week at the Mater Hospital, where he underwent surgery, Rich spent three months in Cork University Hospital, before being transferred to the National Rehabilitation Hospital (NRH), where he first met the Spinal Injuries Ireland team, who have been in "constant contact" with him since.

Rich said that he "got lucky" as he could keep his job, which allows him to work from home. He said that because he and his fiancée had just put down the foundation of their house, they were able to redesign it to be more accessible.

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it was something he had never paid any attention to before.

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"A few friends moved into new houses and we'd go to visit, I'd have to ask my partner to go upstairs and tell me what it was like."

Speaking about the A Day In My Wheels event, he said: "It's always nice to be around other people in my situation, they know what you're going through without even having to tell them.

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he said. "When we were crossing the road, there was a curb, and even CJ Stander had to think twice about how to get over it properly — that curb was about an inch high, and it slowed everybody down."

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He added: "There's a long way to go in that regard, but 50 or 100 years ago, what chance would you have to a life?"

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■ For more information on the work

of Spinal Injuries Ireland, see
spinalinjuries.ie

“When we were crossing the road, there was a curb, and even CJ Stander had to think twice about how to get over it properly



Spinal Injuries Ireland ambassadors Mark Dalton, CJ Stander, and Richard Murray at the A Day In My Wheels event.



Participants at the recent A Day In My Wheels event at Cork County Hall. The aim of the event was to encourage companies to think about accessibility, and to then return to their workplace and make changes.

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RTE 2FM @ 11-Oct-2023 10:14 - (spinal)

Buses and so long and so for one be accessible if you showed up at the bus stop, it's about making a phone call, London. Now, a look at the get the bus, and so on. So far, and given 24 hours notice with the Dart in Dublin and then when it comes down to the city centres like Galway in court saying issues that you would see in Dublin. It's just we happened from an infrastructure standpoint, we haven't progressed over the last tree for decades, like our European counterparts, S and where we are not only behind but we're continuously falling behind in terms of accessibility and I think that really impact the quality of individuals with this bill. It is in this country. I think you're dead right. Tell us about this campaign so Spinal Injuries Ireland run a day and my Wales campaign, which I think is a great initiative that they run where they take people from all walks of life and they think she said the man shares and just tell them to go about their day as if they would, you know what, I began to work collect the kids from still to go and do whatever it is you deal God go home like transport, whatever. Yeah, exactly. And it's just about sort of exposing those who wouldn't have exposure to people with this bill. It is always very is a sort of and like them and and put them in are wheels a few women so virtuous and just to show them a first-hand experience how difficult it can be to do very small, you know, task sure if they because of our infrastructural so the like things that you were OK and can you tell me how many people in Ireland are living with spinal injury. So at the moment we have about 20 to wonder and people living with spinal cord injury and they can vary from individuals who it was you power to do it. Here's walking mobility aid and those who walk alone. The injuries can vary but at the moment we have about 22 100 people in the country and that has spinal cord injuries okay and if people want to find a more support the campaign. Where do they go. So yeah we ran my Wales campaign on the 27th in Dublin and the Fort October down in Cork. It's the first time that we've ran did you jewel event and we get great feedback from those who are involved in that event and spinal injuries Ireland Donnelly would asks gives me spinal injuries. Daly would be where we post them of lot of information about what exactly the charter organization those we support service users in multiple aspects of their lives and we advocate on behalf of people with spinal cord injuries amazing stuff. It's going to see as an ambassador, doing such great working and get the word out there. Hopefully, business owners, as well as the people they need to hear this are listening and will make changes and be aware that this is a huge, huge issue. It's quite frightening to think that we're so far behind. Although your European countries when we have the money to make change. You know, it is quite sad. Jack, thank you so much for coming on and speaking with us this morning, I wish you the very best look in everything you do. Cheers. Thank you very much. Have a lovely that you too. There we go. That was Jack Shannon Cole wheelchair user and an ambassador for spinal injuries Ireland a day my Wales campaign just highlighting with us the accessibility issues. Many wheelchair users face daily and we'll be back with more after this again. The Hurley a with Laya Healthcare, be seen within 60 minutes, with Ireland Fatah are you care visit Lei healthcare that I Amazon Prime big deal days are here with

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'I spent a day in a wheelchair for spinal injury awareness and was amazed by how hard it is to just get some coffee'

The national '[A Day in my wheels](#)' campaign raises funds for Spinal Injury Ireland and awareness for the day-to-day issues faced by Irish wheelchair users in a world not designed for them

Video Loading

Across Ireland, thousands of people live with a [Spinal Cord Injury](#). Many lived completely able-bodied lives for years, decades even, before their life-changing injury.

Every year, the national '[A Day in my wheels](#)' campaign raises funds for Spinal Injury Ireland, the only charity dedicated to helping those living with [Spinal Injuries](#) across the country.

Events this year raised upwards of €180,000 nationwide, as members of the public (and a few famous faces) got a chance to experience the life and struggles of a wheelchair user - raising awareness for the day-to-day issues faced by Irish wheelchair users in a world not designed for them.

CorkBeo reporter Eoin Shortiss writes:

I was invited to take part in the '[A Day in my wheels](#)' fundraising campaign today, which invited able-bodied people to experience the life and daily struggles of a wheelchair user.

This year's Cork event was hosted by [Spinal Injuries Ireland \(SII\)](#) at Cork County Hall, which opened its doors to [SII](#) ambassadors and members of the public to talk about disability in Ireland and learn first-hand what life is like after injury.

A common misconception is that most wheelchair users are born with their disability - but this isn't true. Many people can lose mobility late in life as a result of workplace accidents, car crashes, or medical conditions.

I met a number of people who were born able-bodied and became wheelchair users well into adulthood - after getting married, having children and spending decades in their careers.

[SII](#) ambassador Rich Murray is a wheelchair user from Cork who had lived most of his life with full mobility before suffering a life-changing injury after a fall.

He stressed the importance of widespread accessibility. He said that since suffering his [Spinal Cord Injury \(SCI\)](#), he can't leave home without googling whether a venue is wheelchair-friendly or not. And when he enters a new building, the first thing he does is look for accessibility signs.

Until he spots an elevator and bathroom that he can use, he can't fully relax.

[SII](#) ambassadors say that many non-wheelchair users may not even realise some of the issues faced, including dealing with a wheel puncture, problems with taking their chairs apart, or quick fixes for elbow pains that come from pushing yourself around all day.

It was the first time I realised how ignorant many of us are of their experiences. We all know about the wider problems, like a lack of wheelchair-accessible facilities - but most people never hear about the little annoyances that these people deal with on a daily basis.

Cork Mayor Cllr. Frank O'Flynn and Munster sporting legend CJ Stander also took part in the awareness campaign as around 20 participants began our wheelchair training class.

We were coached by a very patient [SII](#) ambassador named Lester Cassidy, who gave each participant some tips as we started off by weaving our way around a line of cones.

After a bit of trial and error, most of us started getting the hang of things, though I couldn't quite figure out how to turn left and right while moving.

Our next task was to head onto the hall's podium using a wheelchair-accessible ramp. This is something that everyone struggled with - even our resident rugby veteran.

While I eventually made my way up unassisted, I was amazed by how much effort it took to get over such a small slope. It didn't look like much when I saw other people do it, but that one quick exercise had my muscles aching.

Little did I know that the biggest challenge was yet to come. We were then instructed to leave the building in our chairs and head across to the Kingsley Hotel to get some coffee - a simple everyday task, right?

As soon as we left the smooth and level floors of the County Hall, I realised it was a lot harder to push my chair around outside. And turning was even more difficult when travelling on uneven footpaths.

Crossing the road was another hurdle. The organisers let three participants go across every time traffic stopped, which usually ended in a frantic scramble to speed up whenever the green man started to flash.

It was tough even making it across to the Kingsley's car park. I hadn't even travelled 100m, but my arms were already tired and my fingers were starting to get friction burn from the tyres.

Thankfully, it was a little easier to move inside and I got a short break while we each took turns using the accessible lift to get up to the restaurant area.

Passing by other customers while in a wheelchair was a very strange experience. In one way, I felt embarrassed - I was perfectly able to walk and could stand up at any time.

But it also felt like I was the centre of attention - a feeling that ambassador and Cork mother Mary McGrath was able to put into words perfectly.

She said: "Having a wheelchair isn't a problem for me - it's a problem for others. It's people's perception of you. There are some people who talk while looking above you, some who always assume you need help.

"Having independence is very important for me. It's always fine to ask someone if they need a hand - they might. But I don't like it when people assume that I can't carry something, or think I need someone to push me along.

"I only get pushed in my chair once a year, and it's for my annual shopping trip with my daughter in Dublin."

After a quick cup of coffee and another chat, we ventured back to the County Hall.

When I finally stood back up, I felt a bit guilty. I'd spent the past few hours with people of all ages whose disabilities are likely to last for many more years, if not for the rest of their lives. It didn't seem fair that I could call it quits after spending such a short time in their shoes.

But the ambassadors were nothing but grateful that we had taken the time to talk to them and experience just a little of what they go through every day as wheelchair users.

There are around 2,300 people with a [Spinal Cord Injury](#) in Ireland, with an average of three spinal cord injuries changing the lives of people around the country every week.

[Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland is the only support and service agency in Ireland for people who suffer an [SCI](#), and their mission goal is to create a world with equal opportunities for those with disabilities.

Their services support families across the country by providing counselling and physio sessions, setting up community outreach programs, and organising fun and accessible activities for wheelchair users.

Learn more about [Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland on their website [here](#).

Caption: Caption:

[Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland Chairperson John Twomey (left) and ambassador Lester Cassidy (centre) with CorkBeo's Eoin Shortiss

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Munster Rugby legend to spend day in wheelchair on Leaside for vital fundraiser

Irishman and Munster sporting hero CJ Stander is taking part in the "A Day in My Wheels" fundraiser on Leaside to help the thousands of people suffering from [Spinal Injuries](#) nationwide.

Kicking off at 9am at the County Hall, this event will see local businesses coming together to raise awareness of the life-changing effects that can come from a [Spinal Cord Injury \(SCI\)](#).

The campaign is run by the national support service [Spinal Injuries Ireland \(SII\)](#), and will see locals 'buddy up' with wheelchair users to experience the accessibility issues they face every day first-hand.

In a new social media post, CJ Stander has announced he'll be taking part and is urging locals to join him as the deadline for sign-ups has recently been extended.

The South African native said: "I'm asking all Cork business, change-makers and leaders to sign up for this event. Every single cent raised will go directly to [SII](#)."

"Your participation and support can truly change lives. Let's make 'A Day in my Wheels' an unforgettable day for all the right reasons."

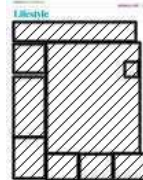
Cork businesses can join with up to 4 per team, and all donations will directly impact the lives of [SII](#) service users and their families.

The day will start with talks and a wheelchair training session before participants are let out and about to explore Cork city on wheels and experience the life that thousands face on daily basis.

There are currently 2,300 people with an [SCI](#) in Ireland, with an average of three people sustaining new injuries every week.

A contribution of €5,000 will directly impact the lives of [SII](#) service users and their families, and would cover:

Anyone interested in taking part in the event is asked to email phil@spinalinjuries.ie or call 087 3821182.



‘How can I call this city mine if I can’t access so many parts of it?’

Jack Shannon Cole is an ambassador for A Day In My Wheels, a campaign aiming to help people understand what it’s like to experience places such as Dublin and Cork from a wheelchair, writes *Azmia Riaz*

I was out with friends in a pub over the weekend. It was grand but they didn’t have a disabled toilet, so anytime I needed to use the bathroom between pints, I had to push five minutes down the street to a McDonald’s and then I’d come back, have a pint or two and go back again,” says Jack Shannon Cole.

Cole (25) is pursuing a degree at the Institute of Banking in Dublin, represents Ireland in wheelchair basketball and works as a peer officer at Spinal Injuries Ireland (SII). After sustaining a spinal cord injury at the age of 15, he’s been working towards making life easier for others who are going through the same.

This year, he is one of the ambassadors for SII’s A Day In My Wheels campaign. Organised in Dublin on September 27 and Cork on October 4, the campaign aims to raise €100,000 to provide essential support to 2,300 people in Ireland living with spinal cord injuries. On the day, people can team up with an ambassador to experience the challenges wheelchair users face, like returning to work with a spinal cord injury, mental health struggles and medical expenses.

“The environment around us isn’t tailored for us, so we just have to make do,” says Cole. “There’s a lot of problem-solving and planning ahead — whether it’s going to get groceries, going down curbs or making your way into tiny bathrooms — it can be quite a push. It’s hard to show people what we deal with. But maybe this campaign can give people some idea.”

“Those are the type of things that are invisible when you’re not on the chair. But once you’re on

it, you’ll never not see them again. I’ve been on both sides. It’s only when you have sat on it and experienced it for yourself that you know. My friends have carried me up and down enough steps to know when a place isn’t disability friendly — we’re only asking for that level of understanding.”

Navigating Dublin city on a wheelchair has not been easy for Cole.

“I’d go out on a limb and say that 70pc of the buildings in Dublin city centre are not accessible... Temple bar is a nightmare — it’s like World War III for wheelchair users with all the cobblestones. I understand the need to protect heritage buildings, but why do I not factor into this collective heritage? They put electricity, heating and water in because it’s necessary for able-bodied people, but a lift would be too much. It’s your heritage then, it’s not my heritage. If I can’t even access so many parts of it, then how can I call this city mine?”

Six months ago, Cole learnt to drive and it dramatically changed his life. But he points out that other wheelchair users who choose to use

public transport or other basic amenities struggle to lead a normal life.

“Even in Grafton Street, you may make it to the first level of the shops, but none of them have a lift. If you can only access 25pc of a building, I doubt that it classifies as ‘accessible’. On the bus, there’s only space for one wheelchair, so if I have a friend who uses a wheelchair, we could not travel together. There are 120 spots on the bus, but only one person with a wheelchair can get into it. I have had experiences where I had to wait for a second bus because there was already a wheelchair user on the first.

“On the Dart, you need to give 24-hour notice

if you need to take the train. And the lifts are always broken or out of order at the stations. Who plans their life — something like a simple train journey — 24 hours in advance? Why shouldn’t I be allowed to just hop on a train as I need to, like anyone else? Businesses feel like they’re doing us a favour by making things ‘accessible’. But we’re either all equal or none of us are equal.”

SII’s CEO Fiona Bolger points out that not enough people are aware of what a spinal cord injury is and how it can impact a person’s life.

“Your spinal cord runs from the base of your skull right down to your bottom,” she says. “Depending on where along that level you sustain

the injury dictates how severe your injury is. A spinal cord injury is described by the WHO as one of the most devastating and life-changing injuries that person can endure.”

SII offers advocacy, educational programmes and counselling services to the community.

“An awful lot of businesses around the country would claim to have accessibility, but in reality, accessibility is a spectrum,” says Bolger. “And a lot of people think it’s just about fulfilling some criteria — it’s just ticking a box. A restaurant might tell you they have accessible toilets and

Continued on next page

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when you get there, it’s being used as a storage room.”

This year, the organisation is pushing for an automatic provision for medical cards for people with spinal cord injuries.

“People with a spinal cord injury are not automatically entitled a medical card,” says Cole. “It’s all means-tested — where your benefits are routinely evaluated. I have been reviewed on a few occasions. Every year, I’m ‘randomly selected’ — that’s the term that they use — and I have to submit documents proving my income and living arrangements to prove that I deserve what I’m getting.

“Without a medical card, the financial impact of having a spinal injury on an individual can be astronomical. It can really impact somebody’s quality of life.

“I don’t think that’s too much to ask — it’s actually the bare minimum. People with spinal cord injuries shouldn’t have to feel the financial burden based on the fact that they have a disability — that could happen to anyone.”

Cole fractured a part of his vertebrae after he fell off a wall nearly 10 years ago. He was rushed to St Vincent’s University Hospital and then to Temple Street children’s hospital where he had reconstructive back surgery. Over 10 hours, doctors placed rods in his back to help support him. After recovering over four weeks, he returned home in a wheelchair.

“To an extent, I’m glad I was so young when I had my injury, I believe it’s that much easier for children. At 15 years of age, being in a hospital environment for that long, missing school and all those normal teenage things can be physically and emotionally draining.

“We moved to a new home because my house couldn’t be renovated for my needs. After I went home, I went back

to school and I had some really good friends who helped me get back into normal life.

“It is a big adjustment going from being able-bodied to having a disability and being a wheelchair user, but it really depends on your willingness to adapt. If you break your arm, that’s a couple of weeks. But this is such a traumatic injury, your body can take years to adapt. My body took four years before it began to accept my injury. Then there’s the emotional side. The only thing that happens overnight is the injury. The recovering and getting back to your life takes so much longer.”

Cole finds that speaking to people who have had the same experiences can help the process of accepting the injury. He uses his role as a peer to help younger people feel a sense of community and to show them that their injury doesn’t have to define who they are.

“During my days at the hospital, I met another person with a spinal cord injury who worked full-time. He had a nice wheelchair, a wife and kids, and it was the first time that it seemed possible that I too could have a normal life. That’s why I decided to become a peer. We come to lean on each other so much because nobody else truly understands.”

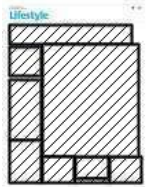
To sign up for *A Day In My Wheels* email phil@spinalinjuries.ie or call 087 3821182. See spinalinjuries.ie

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**Jack Shannon
Cole sustained
a spinal cord
injury at age 15.**

Photo: Gerry Mooney





‘How can I call this city mine if I can’t access so many parts of it?’

Jack Shannon Cole is an ambassador for A Day In My Wheels, a campaign aiming to help people understand what it’s like to experience places such as Dublin and Cork from a wheelchair, writes *Azmia Riaz*

I was out with friends in a pub over the weekend. It was grand but they didn’t have a disabled toilet, so anytime I needed to use the bathroom between pints, I had to push five minutes down the street to a McDonald’s and then I’d come back, have a pint or two and go back again,” says Jack Shannon Cole.

Cole (25) is pursuing a degree at the Institute of Banking in Dublin, represents Ireland in wheelchair basketball and works as a peer officer at Spinal Injuries Ireland (SII). After sustaining a spinal cord injury at the age of 15, he’s been working towards making life easier for others who are going through the same.

This year, he is one of the ambassadors for SII’s A Day In My Wheels campaign. Organised in Dublin on September 27 and Cork on October 4, the campaign aims to raise €100,000 to provide essential support to 2,300 people in Ireland living with spinal cord injuries. On the day, people can team up with an ambassador to experience the challenges wheelchair users face, like returning to work with a spinal cord injury, mental health struggles and medical expenses.

“The environment around us isn’t tailored for us, so we just have to make do,” says Cole. “There’s a lot of problem-solving and planning ahead — whether it’s going to get groceries, going down curbs or making your way into tiny bathrooms — it can be quite a push. It’s hard to show people what we deal with. But maybe this campaign can give people some idea.”

“Those are the type of things that are invisible when you’re not on the chair. But once you’re on

it, you’ll never not see them again. I’ve been on both sides. It’s only when you have sat on it and experienced it for yourself that you know. My friends have carried me up and down enough steps to know when a place isn’t disability friendly — we’re only asking for that level of understanding.”

Navigating Dublin city on a wheelchair has not been easy for Cole.

“I’d go out on a limb and say that 70pc of the buildings in Dublin city centre are not accessible... Temple bar is a nightmare — it’s like World War III for wheelchair users with all the cobblestones. I understand the need to protect heritage buildings, but why do I not factor into this collective heritage? They put electricity, heating and water in because it’s necessary for able-bodied people, but a lift would be too much. It’s your heritage then, it’s not my heritage. If I can’t even access so many parts of it, then how can I call this city mine?”

Six months ago, Cole learnt to drive and it dramatically changed his life. But he points out that other wheelchair users who choose to use public transport or other basic amenities struggle to lead a normal life.

“Even in Grafton Street, you may make it to the first level of the shops, but none of them have a lift. If you can only access 25pc of a building, I doubt that it classifies as ‘accessible’. On the bus, there’s only space for one wheelchair, so if I have a friend who uses a wheelchair, we could not travel together. There are 120 spots on the bus, but only one person with a wheelchair can get into it. I have had experiences where I had to wait for a second bus because there was already a wheelchair user on the first.

“On the Dart, you need to give 24-hour notice if you need to take the train. And the lifts are always broken or out of order at the stations. Who plans their life — something like a simple train journey — 24 hours in advance? Why shouldn’t I be allowed to just hop on a train as I need to, like anyone else? Businesses feel like they’re doing us a favour by making things ‘accessible’. But we’re either all equal or none of us are equal.”

SII’s CEO Fiona Bolger points out that not enough people are aware of what a spinal cord injury is and how it can impact a person’s life.

“Your spinal cord runs from the base of your

skull right down to your bottom,” she says. “Depending on where along that level you sustain

the injury dictates how severe your injury is. A spinal cord injury is described by the WHO as one of the most devastating and life-changing injuries that person can endure.”

SII offers advocacy, educational programmes and counselling services to the community.

“An awful lot of businesses around the country would claim to have accessibility, but in reality, accessibility is a spectrum,” says Bolger. “And a lot of people think it’s just about fulfilling some criteria — it’s just ticking a box. A restaurant might tell you they have accessible toilets and

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This year, the organisation is pushing for an automatic provision for medical cards for people with spinal cord injuries.

“People with a spinal cord injury are not automatically entitled a medical card,” says Cole. “It’s all means-tested — where your benefits are routinely evaluated. I have been reviewed on a few occasions. Every year, I’m ‘randomly selected’ — that’s the term that they use — and I have to submit documents proving my income and living arrangements to prove that I deserve what I’m getting.”

“Without a medical card, the financial impact of having a spinal injury on an individual can be astronomical. It can really impact somebody’s quality of life.

“I don’t think that’s too much to ask — it’s actually the bare minimum. People with spinal cord injuries shouldn’t have to feel the financial burden based on the fact that they have a disability — that could happen to anyone.”

Cole fractured a part of his vertebrae after he fell off a wall nearly 10 years ago. He was rushed to St Vincent’s University Hospital and then to Temple Street children’s hospital where he had reconstructive back surgery. Over 10 hours, doctors placed rods in his back to help support him. After recovering over four weeks, he returned home in a wheelchair.

“To an extent, I’m glad I was so young when I had my injury. I believe it’s that much easier for children. At 15 years of age, being in a hospital environment for that long, missing school and all those normal teenage things can be physically and emotionally draining.

“We moved to a new home because my house couldn’t be renovated for my needs. After I went home, I went back to school and I had some really good friends who helped me get back into normal life.

“It is a big adjustment going from being able-bodied to having a disability and being a wheelchair user, but it really depends on your willingness to adapt. If you break your arm, that’s a couple of weeks. But this is such a traumatic injury, your body can take years to adapt. My body took four years before it began to accept my injury. Then there’s the emotional side. The only thing that happens overnight is the injury. The recovering and getting back to your life takes so much longer.”

Cole finds that speaking to people who have had the same experiences can help the process of accepting the injury. He uses his role as a peer to help younger people feel a sense of community and to show them that their injury doesn’t have to define who they are.

“During my days at the hospital, I met another person with a spinal cord injury who worked full-time. He had a nice wheelchair, a wife and kids, and it was the first time that it seemed possible that I too could have a normal life. That’s why I decided to become a peer. We come to lean on each other so much because nobody else truly understands.”

To sign up for A Day In My Wheels email phil@spinalinjuries.ie or call 087 3821182. See spinalinjuries.ie

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**Jack Shannon
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Photo: Gerry Mooney

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‘How can I call this city mine if I can't access so many parts of it?’ — what it's like to get around Dublin as a wheelchair user

Jack Shannon Cole is an ambassador for A Day In My Wheels, a campaign which aims to help people understand what wheelchair users go through when trying to get around cities like Dublin and Cork
Azmi Riaz

‘I was out with friends in a pub over the weekend. It was grand but they didn't have a disabled toilet, so anytime I needed to use the bathroom between pints, I had to push five minutes down the street to a McDonald's and then I'd come back, have a pint or two and go back again,’ says Jack Shannon Cole.

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A Day In My Wheels will take place in Dublin on September 27 and in Cork on October 4. To sign up email phil@spinalinjuries.ie or call 087 3821182. For more on [Spinal Injuries](#) Ireland and the services it provides, see spinalinjuries.ie.

Caption:

The 'A Day in My Wheels' campaign aims to raise €100,000 to provide essential support to 2,300 people in Ireland living with [Spinal Cord Injury \(SCI\)](#) Photo: Gerry Mooney