Spinal Injuries Ireland
Support at every stage

SPINAL NEWS

WINTER 2025

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With our Specialist Nurse Debbie

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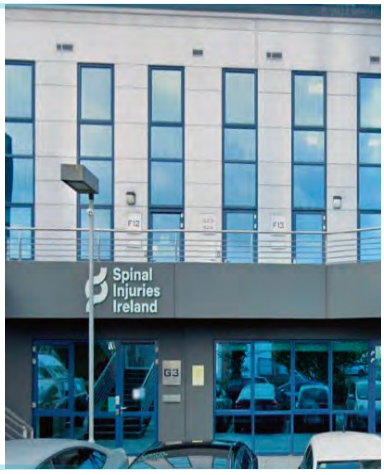
Phone: 01 9190192 or Email: nurseteam@coloplast.com

Please contact us to enquire about regional clinics in Drogheda, Cork and Waterford

Clinic Location:
G3 The Pottery, Bakers Point, Pottery Road, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin



Ostomy Care / Continence Care / Wound & Skin Care / Interventional Urology

Coloplast

WELCOME

CONTENTS

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This magazine contains real life features and SII does not endorse any products or services listed within.

Welcome to our winter edition of Spinal News

What an exciting and eventful year it has been. It's hard to believe Christmas is already approaching. We've loved connecting with so many service users through various activities and events.

Our 2025 Angkor Wat Adventure Challenge was a truly unforgettable and inspiring experience, with fantastic feedback from all involved. If you'd like to be part of next year's challenge, please get in touch. We'd love to have you join.

A special thank you goes to the incredible adventurers from the Micras2Mongolia crew, who took on the Mongol Rally, the adventure of a lifetime in aid of Spinal Injuries Ireland. Also, this year, we welcomed several new team members, bringing fresh expertise and enthusiasm to support people living with spinal cord injuries.

Recent months have been full of activity, and we're grateful to share these achievements with our SII community. Yet, this season also brings moments of reflection and sorrow. We mourn the untimely passing of three of our SII friends. Our dear colleague Robert Kenny, Robert was the longest working employee of SII. He was an outstanding peer supporter and fundraiser; he is always in our thoughts; we miss him. Also, our outstanding volunteers David Sparrow and Ollie Murphy. Their dedication, warmth and humour touched so many lives. Their legacy lives on in every act of support we offer.

I'm pleased to announce that our 2026 Conference will be held on Saturday, 21st March at the Curragh Racecourse. Our Christmas campaign has also launched, raising funds for vital counselling services in 2026. Any contribution helps us continue providing essential emotional and psychological support to those who need it most.

I would like to wish you all a very Happy Christmas and to thank you for your ongoing support. Wishing you good health and happiness in 2026.

Warm regards,

Fiona Bolger CEO

FROM RECOVERY TO RENEWAL: HOW ART HELPED ME FIND MY VOICE AGAIN

By Carol Ahern, Contemporary Visual Artist, Co. Limerick

On the 11th of February 2016, my life changed in an instant. I sustained a spinal cord injury known as Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES) — a rare and serious condition that affects the bundle of nerves at the base of the spine.

That morning, I was at my local GP at 8:30am, sent to A&E by 10am, and by 2pm I was in an ambulance on my way to Dublin for emergency spinal surgery at 6pm. Time is of the essence with Cauda Equina Syndrome — it is so critical that treatment happens immediately to prevent further irreparable damage. I often think how incredibly lucky I was that everything moved so quickly.

While I'm grateful every day that I can walk, it's the hidden issues that continue behind the scenes that are often the most challenging.

At the time, life was busy and full. I was working full-time, completing the final year of my degree, and raising three young children — James was just ten months old; Maurice was four, and Mary Kate was nine. My husband Seamus, a dairy farmer, was in the middle of calving season — the busiest time of the year on the farm. Overnight, everything changed. Instead of juggling work, study, and family life, I found myself recovering while also facing hospitals, rehabilitation, and uncertainty about what the future would look like.

I spent two months in the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire, surrounded by people who were navigating their own new realities. It was there, one quiet evening, that a small but powerful moment set my life on a new path. A group of volunteers came around the wards, asking if anyone would like to join an art class. I hesitated at first, but something drew me to say yes. Sitting down at that table, paintbrush in hand, I was instantly brought back to my secondary school art days — to the joy, curiosity, and calm I used to feel when creating. That evening was my light-bulb moment.

Painting gave me a sense of relief and release that I hadn't realised I needed. It became more than an activity — it became a lifeline. Over time, art evolved into a way for me to process my experience and express hope, strength, and gratitude.

When I returned home to County Limerick, I continued painting from my kitchen table, gradually turning creativity into my daily rhythm. Living on a dairy farm beneath Knockfierna — "the Hill of the Fairies" — I found inspiration all around me. The rural landscape, the changing light, and the quiet resilience of nature all began to appear on my canvases. My paintings are now a reflection of rural Ireland's heart and spirit, filled with colour, texture, and emotion.

Through it all, my family were an incredible support, along with our neighbours and friends who helped us in every way imaginable — from childcare to simply being there when we needed them most. Their kindness and strength carried us through the toughest days, and I'll always be grateful for that circle of care that surrounded us.

As I began to rebuild my life, Spinal Injuries Ireland became an important source of connection, encouragement, and guidance. Their peer support network helped me realise that I wasn't alone — that others understood the daily challenges, the small victories, and the quiet moments of doubt that come with a spinal cord injury.

Through both online chats and in-person meet-ups, I found a sense of community and friendship that reminded me of what's possible when we support one another. The support from the Spinal Injuries Ireland team has been truly invaluable — always linking in with you, listening, and gently sending you in the right direction when you need it most.

Over the years, their services have helped me not only in my recovery but also in building confidence around my art business. From Spinal Art initiatives that encouraged creativity, to counselling sessions, peer support check-ins, pain management training, community outreach visits, Zoom catch-ups, and informative webinars, every touchpoint made a difference.

Each service, big or small, played its part in helping me rebuild a sense of independence and purpose. Their team has an amazing ability to meet you where you are — to check in, offer advice, and remind you that progress takes many forms.

Today, I'm proud to call myself a contemporary visual artist. My work celebrates Ireland's rural landscape — its colours, skies, and textures — while also holding space for healing, renewal, and gratitude. I've had the opportunity to exhibit in Limerick and beyond, and I now share my work through my website and social media.

Carol Aherne, Contemporary Visual Artist

To anyone who is newly injured or feeling unsure about what comes next, I would say this: be open to small moments of inspiration. Sometimes healing begins with something as simple as a conversation, a shared story, or a paintbrush dipped in colour.

The journey after a spinal cord injury is not one you must take alone. The community, compassion, and practical support offered by Spinal Injuries Ireland can truly make all the difference — as it did for me.

Art has given me not just a new purpose, but a new way of seeing the world. It's been my relief, my release, and my renewal. You can see my work and follow my ongoing creative journey at **www.carolahernart.com**

and @carolahernart on Instagram.

NEW HIRES: WELCOME TO THE TEAM

We are delighted to officially welcome five new members to the Spinal Injuries Ireland team; Cyril Sullivan, Kathryn Maher, Eoghan O'Gorman, Stephen Tierney, and Jonathan Ranson.

Cyril Sullivan joined the team in January as Finance Manager, bringing with him a wealth of knowledge and experience. His impressive career includes serving as CEO of the ISPCA, Director of the European Consumer Centre, and Head of Finance at the National Library of Ireland, among many other notable roles.

Eoghan O'Gorman joins the team as a Peer Mentor, offering lived experience, empathy, and guidance to individuals adjusting to life after a spinal cord injury. His role will be instrumental in providing meaningful peer support to our community.

Stephen Tierney has come on board as a Fundraising Officer, focused on building lasting relationships with committed donors. His energy and enthusiasm will help strengthen our fundraising efforts and deepen our engagement with our incredible community of supporters.

Jonathan Ranson joins as Communications Officer, responsible for enhancing SII's public presence through compelling storytelling, digital engagement, and media outreach.

Kathryn Maher joins us as Head of Strategic Philanthropy, bringing a wealth of experience in developing partnerships and securing impactful funding opportunities that will help drive our mission forward. Her strategic insight and passion for making a difference will be invaluable as we continue to grow and expand our services nationwide.

Together, they bring fresh ideas, expertise, and dedication; strengthening our shared commitment to supporting and empowering people living with spinal cord injuries across Ireland.

SPINALART AUTUMN SERIES 2025: CREATIVITY WITHOUT LIMITS

This autumn, the SpinalArt Series is back both online and in-person—bringing creativity and connection to people living with spinal cord injuries across Ireland. Designed to make visual art accessible, inspiring, and fun, the programme celebrates expression in all its for participants from the comfort of their own homes.

The latest series started in October with a refreshed online programme and an inspiring in-person event at The Model Arts Centre in Sligo on October 17th. The team in the Model Arts Centre gave us a tour giving us some insight into the Niland Collection, with lots of Jack B. Yeats as well as their current exhibition 'Inheritance' which formed the inspiration for the workshop. A similar tour took place at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Kilmainham, Dublin in early November. The journey continues later in the month with a final in-person event at the Highlanes Gallery in Drogheda on Thursday, November 27th, where participants will once again gather to create, connect, and be inspired.

Each workshop offers a unique setting to bring out the best of our creative spirit and also gives an opportunity for participants to connect with others who share their passion for art and self-expression.

Our online SpinalArt workshops, which began in October, are very popular and the feedback so far is very positive —and there's still time to join in. The next sessions will take place on November 17th and 24th, followed by a final festive workshop on December 1st. Open to both newcomers and returning participants, this year's programme offers fresh themes and content designed to inspire. Even if you've joined before, each class promises something new—no repetition, just creativity that keeps evolving.

No prior art experience is required. To ensure accessibility, we'll send a free art kit worth €50 to anyone joining for the first time—everything you need to get started, delivered straight to your door.

Participants have already been sharing wonderful feedback from the first workshops. One attendee from The Model Arts Centre in Sligo said: "The SpinalArt workshop inspired by The Inheritance exhibition was fantastic. We had a fabulous tour led by The Model's Lorna Kavanagh, and the session with the brilliant Susan Farrelly left us buzzing with inspiration. ***I'll be back for sure!"***

Contact: info@spinalinjuries.ie

What is (NASS)

The National Ability Supports System (NASS) is a national database that records information about disability-funded services provided or needed by people with disabilities in Ireland. It is managed by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Health Research Board (HRB), who ensure all data is collected and used safely and in line with data protection law.

NASS helps the HSE and other agencies plan, develop, and improve disability services such as day and residential supports, respite care, personal assistance, and specialist therapies. It also highlights where funding is needed and supports research to improve services.

If you use or are waiting for a disability-funded service, your service provider will collect and securely record some personal details (e.g., name, date of birth, contact information, and type of disability). Only authorised staff can access identifiable data, and research data is anonymised. Information is stored securely and reviewed annually, remaining on NASS for up to eight years after service use.

NAAS follows strict data protection rules under GDPR and the Irish Statistical Code of Practice:

- No names or addresses are used in research or reporting.
- PPS numbers are not collected.
- Data is stored securely and only accessible to authorised personnel.
- You have the right to access your data and request corrections through a https://www.hse.ie/eng/gdpr/sarsform.pdf

What Kind of Data Is Collected?

NAAS collects:

- Demographic info (age, gender, etc.)
- Type of disability
- Services received or needed
- Socioeconomic and living situation details

You have rights over your data, including the right to see it, correct it, or ask how it's being used. For questions or concerns, you can contact your service provider or email **nass@hrb.ie.**

REGIONAL ROADSHOWS

Throughout the past year, we have had the pleasure of hosting a series of regional meetings across the country, connecting with our community in Athlone, Galway, Kilkenny, Cork, Cavan, Castlebar, Limerick, and Letterkenny.

These gatherings have provided a valuable opportunity for people living with spinal cord injuries, their families, and supporters to come together, share experiences, and build a stronger network of mutual understanding and encouragement.

Each meeting offers a warm, welcoming environment where participants can reconnect with familiar faces and meet new ones, fostering a real sense of community. These events are not only social; they also serve as a vital platform for learning and information sharing. Attendees have benefited from a range of insightful presentations by local Sports Partnerships, who have shared details on accessible sporting and physical activities available in their regions. These sessions have inspired many to explore new ways to stay active and engaged in their communities.

We've also been fortunate to welcome guest speakers from HSE Social Prescribers, Embrace Farm, Galway City Partnership, and Lavelle Partners Solicitors. Each of these organisations has provided valuable insights and practical information; from health and wellbeing supports to social connection opportunities and legal guidance. Their contributions have helped attendees better navigate the various services and resources available both locally and nationally.

Our valued partners at Coloplast have continued to be a consistent and supportive presence at each meeting, offering expert advice on bowel and bladder management. Their commitment to helping people manage these essential aspects of daily living has been greatly appreciated by everyone in attendance.

These regional meetups truly highlight the importance of connection — whether that's learning about new community supports, discussing challenges and solutions with peers, or simply enjoying lunch and conversation in a relaxed and understanding environment. For many, these gatherings have become a highlight of the year, offering not only practical knowledge but also friendship, empathy, and renewed motivation.

Looking ahead, we're delighted to share the remaining regional meeting dates for 2025:

- Wednesday, 13th November – City North Hotel, Gormanston
- Thursday, 4th December – Killarney Oaks Hotel, Killarney
- Monday, 9th December – Spinal Injuries Ireland Resource Centre, Dún Laoghaire

We invite all our members, families, and supporters to attend one of these upcoming sessions. Whether you're joining us for the first time or returning to reconnect, these events are a fantastic opportunity to meet others, learn something new, and be part of the growing Spinal Injuries Ireland community.

For more information on any of the upcoming regional meetings, please don't hesitate to contact your Outreach Officer or reach out to the SII office directly; we'd love to see you there!

Contact us: info@spinalinjuries.ie

Athlone Regional Meeting, Hodson Bay Hotel

Cavan Regional Meeting, Hotel Kilmore

SERVICES

Jack Shannon Cole, Peer Officer, NRH Pizza Night


Peer Support

Peer Catch Ups

Our most recent online peer support catch-ups took place in October and November, bringing together people from across Ireland to share experiences, advice, and encouragement in a relaxed and understanding space. These virtual sessions have become a valued part of our community, offering a safe and supportive environment where participants can connect with others who truly understand life with a spinal cord injury.

Our online peer chats take place every three months and are open to anyone with lived experience of a spinal cord injury. Whether you want to share your story, ask a question, or simply listen in, these sessions are designed to help you feel connected and supported; no matter where you are.

There's no pressure to have your camera on or to speak if you'd rather just observe. If you'd like to raise a topic or question but prefer not to do so live, you can also email it to us in advance and we'll include it in the discussion.

Stay tuned to our Events page and social media channels for details of the next Peer Catch-Up; we'd love for you to join us and be part of the conversation!

Peer Support

If you'd prefer to talk one-on-one with someone who has lived experience of a spinal cord injury, please contact your Community Outreach Officer to be referred to our Peer Support Service. We'll do our best to match you with a trained Peer Support Volunteer who has been living with their injury for some time and can share personal insights, experiences, and practical advice.

We know that some of the most meaningful support comes from connecting with peers who truly understand. We've recently welcomed several newly trained volunteers who are ready and well-equipped to speak with anyone seeking support.

NRH Pizza Nights

We continue to host monthly pizza evenings at the NRH for patients on the spinal floor. They take place on the third Monday of each month and are always a warm, social gathering for patients and any visiting family members. SII staff and Peer Support Volunteers are there to chat, offer support, and share a relaxed evening with everyone who joins.

Chronic Pain Management

Join Chronic Pain Ireland's Winter Online Course on Self-Managing Chronic Pain. Our next 5-week interactive course begins on Monday, 17th November, from 2–4 pm, running weekly until 15th December. The sessions provide a supportive space to explore practical strategies for managing chronic pain, coping with daily challenges, and improving wellbeing.

Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions, share experiences, and learn self-management tools covering key areas such as understanding pain, managing stress, improving sleep and relaxation, and understanding emotions.

To find out more or register, please email hilary@spinalinjuries.ie.

RIB TRIPS

This summer marked our busiest RIB season yet; with ***63 patients from the NRH*** taking to the water! Thanks to the great weather, we only had to cancel one week. These trips give service users the opportunity to enjoy the sea in a ***safe, supportive, and fully accessible environment,*** guided by our team of trained volunteers.

Our RIB is specially adapted for people living with spinal cord injuries, including ***full wheelchair accessibility,*** so everyone can enjoy the freedom and relaxation of being out on the water. Whether it's soaking in the coastal scenery or simply feeling the sea breeze, each outing offers a refreshing and empowering experience.

We're already counting down the days until we can set sail again next spring and summer!

A huge thank you to our incredible RIB volunteers; ***Sue, Dave, Frank, Damien, Sean, and Glenn*** for making every trip possible. **For more information, contact our team at info@spinalinjuries.ie**

Finding Strength in a New Kind of Normal - By Nicola Newport

I know now, which took me a long time to realise, that life is never going to be "the same" as it once was!

Being told that it would be a 2-year post op recovery and unknown whether I would walk again or not, was an arduous deliverance. Two major spinal surgeries and nine long months of hospitalisation and rehab later, I'm thrilled to say that I am walking again, slowly but surely, thanks to the incredible teams at St. Patrick's Hospital in Waterford, the NRH in Dún Laoghaire, and Cork University Hospital.

HOWEVER, the pain I continue to go through daily is still debilitating.

I may look almost "normal" on the outside, however inside I feel far from it. My torso feels heavy and numb — like dragging a sack of spuds. So, when I carry a plate of dinner or a carton of milk, it feels like the weight of the item plus the weight of a sack of spuds! Life after a spinal cord injury isn't without daily challenges.

During my time in rehab, friends and family often told me how amazed they were by my good humour and positivity. The truth is, I had hope — and much of that came from an incredible woman, Nadia Dempsey, who shared my ward when I first went into hospital (though for very different reasons). Nadia's calmness, positivity and easy-going nature left a lasting impression on me. She inspired me to not let things get on top of me, no matter how hard it gets. Rest in peace, Nadz — you'll never be forgotten.

SII has helped me so much! I first met them at their pizza night in the NRH, followed by phone calls of support once I was discharged. I completed a 6 week online chronic pain management course which SII arranged. The course helped me significantly not only with pain management but also with my mindset. One example being that before the course I used to feel frustrated when people told me, "You look well." I'd think, if only you knew what's really going on inside. Even looking in the mirror frustrated me as I saw the old me.

The facilitator asked me ***"would you prefer to look as bad on the outside as you do on the inside?"*** To which I speedily replied with: ***"No way! If I did, I'd never leave the house!"*** Now, I smile and accept the compliment!

Another highlight with SII was a trip to Mondello Park which was a huge mood and adrenaline booster & a great lesson, that even with pain, I can still do exciting, joyful things. I'll never forget the look on my sister Naomi's face when the car I was in hit top speed — she was terrified, and I was loving every second!

I still have a little more recovery time left and I'm staying positive. Whether my pain eases or not, I know there's always someone at SII I can call for support or a friendly chat. Knowing there'll be future events to go to and meet others who truly understand what it means to rebuild life — not as it was, but as it is now!"

SII TEAM VISIT TO THE WAYFINDING CENTRE

In September, members of the SII team had the opportunity to visit the WayFinding Centre in Glasnevin, Dublin — a pioneering space dedicated to advancing inclusive mobility and accessibility. The visit offered a valuable insight into how innovation, collaboration, and user-centred design can transform transport systems for people with disabilities.

The WayFinding Centre's vision is to be a global leader in providing innovative and sustainable solutions for transport and mobility challenges experienced by people with disabilities. It serves as a collaborative hub where individuals with lived experience, transport staff, designers, built environment professionals, academics, and policy makers work together to accelerate the inclusive mobility agenda.

During the visit, the SII team explored a range of interactive demonstrations and research projects focused on improving wayfinding, orientation, and travel confidence for all users. From tactile mapping and assistive navigation technologies to real-world simulations of transport environments, the Centre showcased how evidence-based design can create safer and more intuitive public spaces.

The team also engaged in discussions about the importance of co-design, ensuring that people with disabilities are actively involved in shaping the solutions that impact their daily lives. This collaborative model resonated strongly with SII's own commitment to inclusion, innovation, and social impact.

Overall, the visit to the WayFinding Centre was both inspiring and informative, reinforcing the shared goal of creating a world where mobility is accessible to everyone.

To arrange a visit or tour, contact the WayFinding Centre or visit www.thewayfindingcentre.ie.

NRH 14th Annual Ladies Day

On September 20th, the NRH held its annual Ladies Day, celebrating this year's theme: ***"Caring for Ourselves from the Inside Out."***

The event centred on wellness and connection, featuring inspiring talks on sustainable fitness, nutritional awareness, and a rejuvenating Pilates session.

We're already looking forward to next year's event; open to everyone, whether you're an in-patient or an outpatient!

Counselling Services

Our counselling service has experienced remarkable growth of **114% since last year, with over 300 sessions** delivered and demand continues to rise.

We provide funded counselling support for individuals who have sustained spinal cord injuries, as well as for their families. Our psychotherapy team, specialising in trauma therapy, offers counselling for individuals, couples, and families. Sessions are available online, by phone, or in person, depending on what best suits each person's needs.

CAOIMHE CAMPBELL

In February 2018, when I was 13, I went to school on a regular Tuesday morning—just like any other day. I was a healthy, active teenager who loved Irish dancing, swimming, and lots of other sports activities.

During my first class, I suddenly felt an awful pain in my back that lasted for about half an hour. The pain was so severe that I decided to go home and rest, hoping it would ease. When I woke up, I was completely paralysed from my waist down. I was rushed to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda. After an MRI scan, I was diagnosed with a spinal cord stroke from T7 to T12—a condition that accounts for just 1% of all strokes and is extremely rare in children. It was an incredibly frightening experience for my family and me. What made it even harder was not knowing anyone who had gone through something similar and facing so much uncertainty about what lay ahead. I was told I had a very low chance of ever walking again.

Against all odds, I regained motor function in my legs, and as soon as that happened, I began intensive physiotherapy to learn how to walk again. I spent three months in Temple Street Children's Hospital, where my recovery began. My parents were, and always have been, my rock. They took turns staying with me each week, even while caring for my three younger siblings at home. Their dedication and positivity throughout my recovery continue to inspire me every day. They taught me the true meaning of perseverance— something that I will carry with me always—and it has made us so much closer as a family.

I was placed on the waiting list for the National Rehabilitation Hospital (NRH) in Dún Laoghaire, but I was told I could be waiting months due to the limited places for children. I was extremely lucky to be offered a place just four months after my injury, in June 2018. I spent two months there, and the care and rehabilitation I received were truly life changing. The staff at the NRH were phenomenal. I really hope that someday there will be enough resources to increase their intake of paediatric patients.

Today, I'm 20 years old and in my third year of Medicine at the University of Galway. It feels incredible to say that, and I'm so proud and grateful for everything that has brought me to this point. I knew I wanted to study medicine from the moment I left Temple Street. My consultant at the time was a huge inspiration to me, and I aspire to help my future patients in the same way he helped me. I am hoping to specialise in spinal injuries or rehabilitation in hopes of contributing to improving care for those living with spinal injuries. Spinal cord strokes are extremely under-researched and often misdiagnosed, particularly in paediatric cases. There is still so much that is not understood about why they occur, how best to

Caoimhe Campbell aged 13, NRH, 2018

Caoimhe Campbell walking with aids, 2018

treat them, and how to support recovery afterwards. That lack of awareness and research made my experience even more isolating—I didn't know anyone else who had gone through something similar, and even many healthcare professionals I met had never encountered a case like mine.

Hopefully, through my future career, I will be able to contribute to improving understanding, diagnosis, and treatment of spinal strokes and other underrecognised conditions. I reached out to Spinal Injuries Ireland in the hopes of connecting with others who had experienced spinal injuries. One of the biggest challenges I faced was living with an invisible disability—most people couldn't see what I had been through, and it was difficult to explain the physical and emotional impact of my injury. I still experience significant weakness in my right leg and sensory issues in both of my legs, which restrict me in certain aspects of life. Connecting with others who shared similar experiences helped me feel less isolated and gave me a sense of community and understanding that I hadn't had before. When I first left the hospital and couldn't do any of the things I loved before—like Irish dancing, swimming, or even simple things like running with my friends—it was incredibly difficult. But through this journey, I have discovered who I truly am. I wouldn't change anything that happened, because without these experiences, I wouldn't be the person I am today. It has taught me resilience and the ability to appreciate even the smallest things in life.

This perspective has also shaped my approach to studying medicine. Even on long, exhausting days, I am motivated by the opportunity to help others and make a meaningful difference—a privilege I would never have appreciated without what I went through. I think the most important part of emotional recovery and building resilience after a spinal injury is finding new experiences and activities that bring joy and purpose to your life. For me, a huge part of this has been travel. My recovery has reminded me how much there is to experience in the world — exploring new places, meeting new people, and opening my mind to different perspectives and ways of life. Last summer, I travelled to Mexico and had the incredible experience of climbing Calakmul, one of the largest pyramids located on the border of Mexico and Guatemala. Experiencing such an amazing site was a powerful reminder of how far I've come and marked a significant milestone in my recovery.

Caoimhe Campbell, now aged 20 climbing Calakmul, Mexico-Guatemala, summer 2025

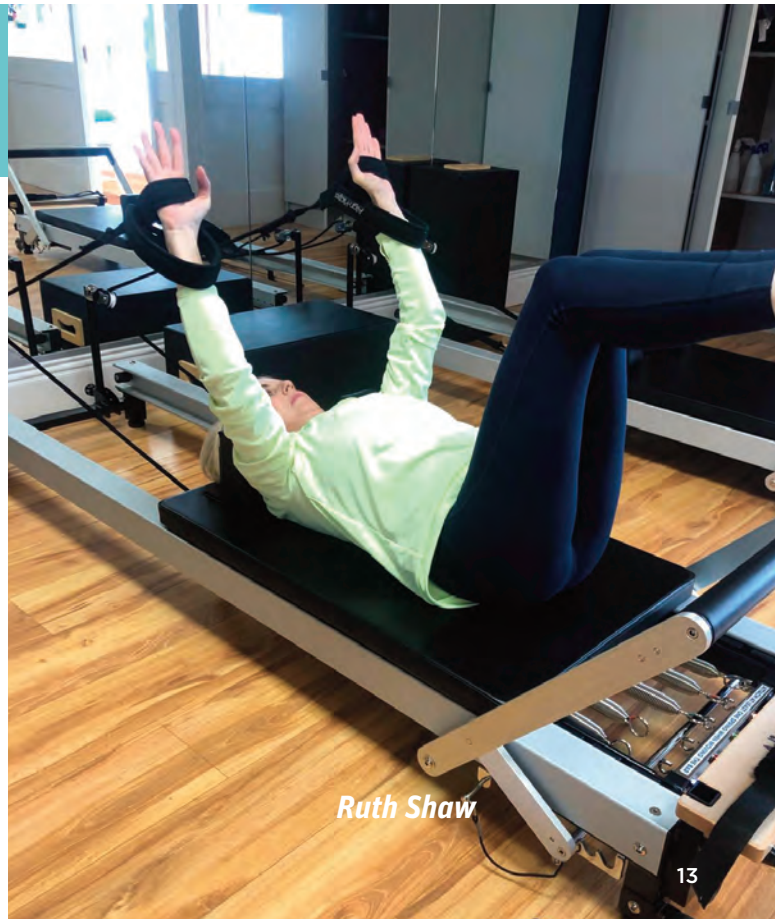
MY STORY BY RUTH SHAW

Following my spinal cord injury, I've worked hard to rebuild my strength, mobility and confidence.

The recovery process has been challenging, but the support I received from SII, and the HSF grant made a huge difference. Through the physiotherapy funded by the grant, I've been able to improve my balance, manage ongoing muscle tightness and regain confidence in my movement.

Each session has helped me make steady progress and continue towards greater independence.

I'm very grateful for the assistance provided so far and hopeful of continuing the progress with further support next year.



Ruth Shaw

CES Seminar

Sponsored by Lavelle Partners Solicitors

Niamh Walsh, Hilary Keppel, Grace Molloy, Avril Scally, Paula Keane, Bairbre O'Sullivan, Debbie Rooney

We had a very informative and supportive afternoon and evening in the Radisson Blu hotel in Athlone on August 21st with people with Cauda Equina Syndrome and their family members. This is the second time we have held this event in the Midlands and hope to make it a biennial event.

Niamh Walsh, psychotherapist, and Chronic Pain Ireland Board member spoke on understanding chronic pain and dealing with an invisible disability which is common to so many people with CES. Niamh shared her experience of living with chronic pain and how complex that can be.

Paula Keane, NRH Advanced Nurse Practitioner, shared her expertise on managing neurogenic bowel and bladder issues. This is an ever-relevant topic for many people with spinal cord injuries.

Avril Scally and Grace Molloy from Lavelle Partners solicitors spoke about the legal aspects that can be pertinent when dealing with the causes of a CES diagnosis, particularly around the importance of starting legal proceedings within 2 years of diagnosis. This event was sponsored by Lavelle solicitors

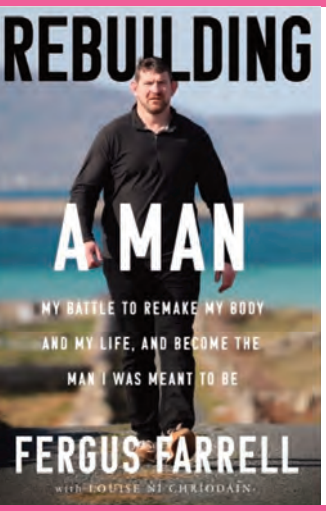
We were also joined by Debbie Rooney, Senior nurse from Coloplast who was on hand to answer any queries related to bowel and bladder issues and showcase products.

Those who stayed overnight enjoyed dinner and spending time with others who understand the complex world that is Cauda Equina Syndrome.

"Great event nice to meet fellow suffers that understand my pain"

CES Seminar, Radisson Blu Hotel, Athlone

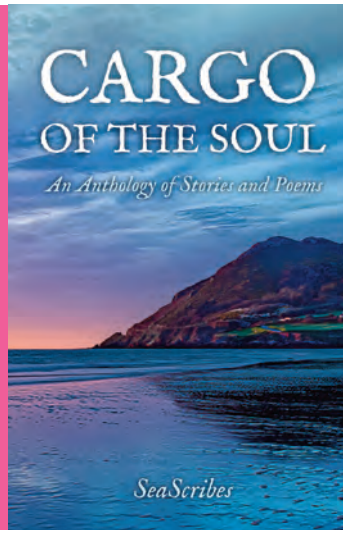
STOCKING FILLERS



Rebuilding a Man- Fergus Farrell with Louise Ní Chríodáin

When Fergus Farrell suffered a spinal cord injury in October 2018, doctors gave him a zero per cent chance of walking again. What followed was a journey marked by an overwhelming sense of failure and unimaginable lows – including battling depression, losing his marriage and losing his business. But Fergus refused to give up. And slowly he began to rebuild his body, his life and his concept of what it means to be a man. One year after his injury, Fergus walked 206km across Ireland – a milestone that was just the beginning. From his attempted row across the wild north Atlantic to raising awareness for spinal cord injury research, Fergus turned pain into purpose and setbacks into inspiration. Fergus's story is more than one of recovery; it's about rediscovering who you are when everything is stripped away. Rebuilding a Man is a powerful reminder that even life's toughest challenges can lead to its greatest victories.

Tadg Paul – Cargo for the Soul



Cargo of the Soul, published this June by Bray-based writers collective SeaScribes, brings together eight distinctive voices in an anthology of poetry and prose. At its heart is a sequence of visual poems by Taḋg Paul, blending word and image to explore relationships, bereavement, queer identity, mortality, and the lingering echoes of war. The result is a compelling debut for SeaScribes and a vivid showcase of creative resilience and diversity.

Cargo of the Soul is available via Amazon and seascribes.ie. Taḋg's poetry appears on tadg.ie and his artwork on tigger.gallery.

Tracy Martin – So Not Me

It's hard to explain how it feels to wake up in a body that no longer responds as it once did, isn't it?

When I sustained a spinal cord injury at 18, my world shifted—and so did the person I thought I was. Writing So Not Me, a semi-autobiographical story, became a way for me to give shape to what words could barely hold: the grief, the fear, the ache of rebuilding a life from shattered pieces. 36 years later, I still believe that whether it's through writing, art, music, or sport, there isn't just one way—but there is always a way, —to rewrite the next chapter of your story into one that you truly love.

https://www.buythebook.ie/product/so-not-me/

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FROM HOSPITAL BED TO WORLD NO. 1:
MY JOURNEY THROUGH CANCER, PARALYSIS, AND GOLF - IAN ST. JOHN

When you're faced with no choice, it can, in a sense, be liberating.

There is a singular path, and you cannot deviate from it. Cancer. Paralysis. Chemotherapy. Weeks confined to bed. A wheelchair. Incontinence. Rehabilitation. These become inevitable. You have no choice.

In the immediate aftermath of a spinal cancer diagnosis in August 2016, your body floods with questions: Will I live or will I die? My wife Orla, who has multiple sclerosis, was eight months pregnant with our second child. What will happen to her if I die? How will she raise our children? Have I destined my beautiful girls to a life not only without a father, but in poverty?

"Thankfully," I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I say thankfully because the oncologist said, "With the treatment plan, you have a better chance of living than dying." Those words were all I needed to hear. From that point forward, I was determined to give myself the best possible chance of surviving. I would throw myself into every bit of horror that lay ahead.

The height of that horror came during my third round of chemotherapy. The nausea was so severe that an anti-nausea pump had to be inserted into my stomach. I vividly remember the morning the final drop of chemotherapy finished—nurses entering my room to detach me from the bags and the pump.

Almost immediately, something changed. My breathing, my emotions. Sweat poured down my face. I felt uncomfortable, anxious, terrified. The nurses reassured me: "This is normal." But it wasn't normal—it was horrific. The feeling lasted three days. Or rather, I lasted three days in that state.

Eventually, a psychiatrist was called. After a brief chat, she prescribed Trazodone. The oncologists had created a plan to save my body; the psychiatrist created one to save my mind. I've said many times that I would take a two-week chemotherapy infusion over those three continuous days of panic.

Before my diagnosis, I lived in Rush, Co. Dublin, where I was the Head PGA Professional at Rush Links Golf Club. I ran the golf shop, taught players of all ages and abilities, managed the club's daily operations, and competed in professional tournaments to a decent standard.

All of that was destroyed by cancer. I had to resign from a very supportive club. Orla and our two girls had to leave Dublin and move back down south for family support—frightened and uncertain of what lay ahead.

Many of you may recall The Shawshank Redemption. There's a scene where prisoners become institutionalised. After eight months in Beaumont Hospital and four more in the National Rehabilitation Hospital, I was terrified to leave. I remember sitting in a family meeting, practically begging to stay longer. I was institutionalised.

There was also a practical reason—I had no accessible home to go to. My father converted his bathroom into a wet room so I could stay there. Orla and the girls stayed with her parents in Piltown, 30 minutes away. Each morning my father drove me there, and each evening he drove me back.

Fast forward nine years. I'm now packing my suitcase, my shower chair, my paragolfer machine, and my golf clubs for a flight from Dublin to Johannesburg to compete in the South African Open for golfers with disabilities.

This will be my seventh international event this year. Disability golf has brought me to Portugal, Paris, Florida, England, Sweden, and—just two weeks ago—Madrid.

I compete in the seated category, mostly made up of paralysed golfers. This is my third year competing. You might think, as a former PGA professional, that adapting would be easy. Quite the opposite. I had to completely re-learn the game. I'm still learning. I've had to adjust expectations, endure frustration, and shed tears. But this year has been my best yet.

I rose to World No. 3 (Nett division) on the back of top-three finishes in Florida at the USDGA Championship and the G4D Open at Woburn, England. This year also marks my third representing Ireland at the European Championships—an incredible honour.

Never did I imagine, lying in that hospital bed in 2016, that I would be here today.

I'm writing this now just days after returning from South Africa—still on a high. I have just won the South African Open, my first tour victory.

Psychology, emotion, and mental health play huge roles in my life. The practice of separating what I believe to be truefrom what is actually true has been transformative. It started as a conscious mental exercise but now happens instinctively, every day.

A sports psychologist first taught me this when I was a touring pro. He handed me a pen and an A4 sheet, told me to draw a line down the middle. On the left, write what I believed; on the right, what was actually true. Then rate each out of ten.

For example:

- *I am a terrible putter (8/10) | I do hole some putts (6/10)*

It was simple but powerful.

After cancer, I applied the same approach to my new reality:

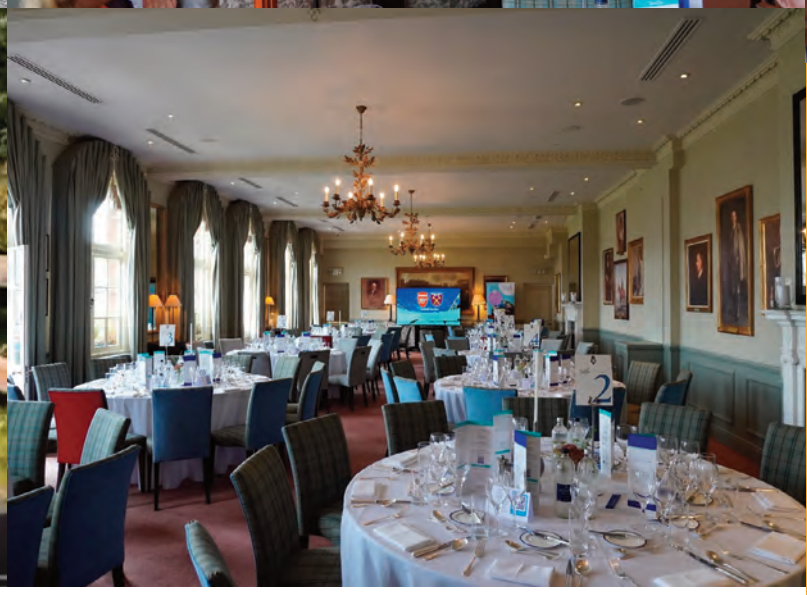
- *I'm going to die (8/10) | Not necessarily—doctors are confident (6/10)*
- *I will never have a happy life (10/10) | I do laugh. I love my family (5/10)*

Over time, the scores shifted:

- *I'm going to die (1/10) | I've been in remission eight years (10/10)*
- *I will never have a happy life (1/10) | I have an amazing life (10/10)*

Today, my reality is one of joy. I've just returned from South Africa as the South African Open Nett Champion and am now World No. 1.

FUNDRAISING NEWS



Summer BBQ at Merrion Cricket Club Raises Nearly €40,000!

Despite a few summer showers, spirits were anything but dampened at our Annual Summer BBQ on Saturday, 14th June, where service users, their families, and friends came together for a fantastic evening. The event raised just under €40,000, a tremendous achievement that reflects the incredible generosity and community spirit of everyone involved.

The evening featured a captivating talk from our peer support officer, Eoghan Gorman, who shared his inspiring words with the crowd, setting up the tone for a night of celebration. Live music from Kyla and the Boys of Summer kept everyone dancing long into the evening, proving that a little rain couldn't dampen the festive mood.

Even with the unpredictable Irish weather, the night was a roaring success. Thank you to everyone who attended and contributed to making the Summer BBQ at Merrion Cricket Club an unforgettable evening for a great cause!

3rd Annual Greenway Challenge Shines Bright in Waterford

The sun was shining, spirits were high as participants took part in our 3rd Annual Greenway Challenge along the stunning Waterford Greenway, travelling the scenic route from Dungarvan to Waterford. This year's event was another huge success, with our incredible group of mixed-ability participants completing the challenge while raising an outstanding €15,000.

The Greenway Challenge has quickly become one of our most popular annual events, bringing together people of all abilities. Participants cycled, wheeled, and walked their way through Ireland's Sunny South-East, showcasing the power of community and determination.

A huge thank you to everyone who took part, volunteered, or donated — your enthusiasm and generosity make this event so special each year. Feeling inspired? We're already planning the 2026 Greenway Challenge! If you'd like to join us next year, get in touch and we'll add you to our mailing list for updates.

Annual Queen's Club Lunch Raises €40,000

A huge thank you to everyone who joined us for our annual London Lunch at the prestigious Queen's Club on September 20th — an unforgettable afternoon that brought together friends, supporters, and members of the Spinal Injuries Ireland community. Through the incredible generosity of all who attended, we are thrilled to share that the event raised an outstanding €40,000.

The highlight of the afternoon was an inspiring address from our guest speaker, Ciaran Pollard, who shared his powerful insights and reflections. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Nicola Kelly, who generously supplied the wine and champagne, helping to make the celebration even more special.

The Queen's Club Lunch in London has become a cherished annual tradition, providing an opportunity for our supporters abroad to come together in solidarity with our mission — to support and empower those living with spinal cord injuries and their families.

Thank you to everyone who attended, donated, and helped make the event such a success.

Save the Date: The Cork Jazz Ball 2025

The Annual Cork Jazz Ball is set to return this year on Saturday, 15th November at the Rochestown Park Hotel, Cork. The evening promises live music from The Swing Cats, along with dinner, dancing, and a chance to enjoy a glamorous night out.

The night kicks off with a drink reception at 7:00pm, followed by dinner at 8:00pm. Guests are invited to dress in jazz-inspired attire or black tie to make the evening truly special.

Join us for a memorable night of music, dining, and dancing, while helping to support vital services for people living with spinal cord injuries. Tickets are limited, so secure your place early and be part of this unforgettable event.

CYCLING THE DANUBE:
A JOURNEY OF CHALLENGE, CONNECTION, AND ADVENTURE

Adventure has always been part of my DNA. Before sustaining a spinal cord injury in 2012, I lived for the adrenaline rush: rugby, running, surfing, and windsurfing were my world.

After my injury, finding ways to challenge myself physically and reconnect with the outdoors took time. But once I discovered handcycling, a whole new horizon opened up.

This September, my dad and I joined a group of adaptive cyclists to take on a remarkable journey: cycling 380 kilometres along the Danube River from Passau, Germany to Vienna, Austria. The trip was organised by Adaptive Expeditions, a UK-based social enterprise that creates life-changing outdoor adventures for people with disabilities. Nick and Luke from the organisation led the charge, providing navigation, camping gear, endless good humour, and logistical support from Nick's dad, Bob (the unsung hero of the trip), who drove our equipment from campsite to campsite and met us en route with snacks and drinks.

We were a diverse and international crew: two hand cyclists, Nadine and I, and another cyclist with a vision impairment, incidentally, also called Jack, riding tandem with James. The camaraderie was instant. Laughter and shared purpose make for fast friendships.

For me, the challenge went beyond the distance. My spinal cord injury at the C5/C6 level means I can use my shoulders, biceps, and wrists, but not my fingers, triceps, or chest muscles. My hand bike attaches to my wheelchair and includes battery assistance, though I ride on the lowest setting to make sure I'm working hard throughout. Planning to take on five consecutive 80 km days would be a test of endurance, both physical and mental.

Dad and I used the trip as our motivation through the summer. We only had nine weeks to train, so we had to make every session count. With a tailored program from my friend Sean, we built gradually, mixing long endurance rides, interval sessions, and tempo training. We spent countless hours on Ireland's growing greenway network: from the Navan Greenway close to home to two-day sessions on the Waterford and Mullingar–Athlone Greenways, clocking up to 92 km in a day towards the end. Training together was a gift in itself, time in nature, growing stronger, feeling alive.

When September arrived, we flew to Munich and made our way to Passau, where our bikes awaited us. After assembling the gear and meeting the group, we were set to roll, though I was quietly battling a urinary tract infection that had started a few days earlier. I hoped it would ease up. Adventures rarely go fully to plan.

Day one was a baptism of fire: tricky navigation through Passau, several wrong turns, and far more hills than expected. Then came the kicker. We discovered the daily

distances had been calculated in miles but written as kilometres. What we thought was an 80 km day turned into a 106 km epic. By the time we rolled into our campsite in darkness, having missed the last ferry and rerouted via a distant bridge, we were exhausted but elated. Pizza never tasted so good.

By day two, I gave in and started taking antibiotics. The group began to find its rhythm: long, sunlit stretches by the river, conversations flowing, and the spectacular Danube scenery lifting everyone's spirits. My body ached from the first day's marathon, but it's remarkable how the body adapts once the wheels start turning. That evening we arrived at my favourite campsite of the week, tents pitched, dinner ready, and smiles all around thanks to Nick's hard work.

As the days rolled on, Luke took over route navigation, and we all settled into the flow of life on the road. There were moments of solitude, laughter, and deep conversation. The camp routine became second nature, though accessibility brought its own challenges. Getting changed, showering, and transferring at times required creativity and help. Still, the sense of freedom on the road and connection to nature outweighed inconveniences.

By day four, fatigue set in. My back spasmed more frequently, my neck stiffened, and the occasional rough forest paths pushed my setup to the limit. If I do it again, and I will, I'd bring a bike better suited for mixed terrain. Still, cycling into Vienna after nearly 350 km was a great sense of achievement.

There was only one problem. We'd fallen 32 km short of the full 380 km I'd promised

donors for my Spinal Injuries Ireland fundraiser, which had already raised over €21,700 thanks to incredible generosity from friends, family, and supporters. So, while the others slept in the next morning, Dad, Nick, and I took to Vienna's streets for one final spin. Back at camp, with just two kilometres to go, I couldn't resist. I did laps of the car park until my odometer hit 380 km exactly. Only then could I rest, knowing I'd kept my word.

Completing this journey reminded me that adventure is still possible after injury. Adaptive equipment opens doors, but what truly makes it possible are the people you share it with: the encouragement, the laughs, and the shared belief that limits are there to be tested.

Here's to many more adventures on the road ahead.

MONGOL RALLY: AN EPIC JOURNEY

Micras2mongolia

This summer, a brave group of adventurers — Fergal Keane, Jimmy Flynn, Paul Reilly, and Cian Reilly, better known as the @Micras2Mongolia crew — completed the adventure of a lifetime as part of the Mongol Rally 2025.

Setting off in July and travelling for six weeks through to August, the team drove all the way from Dublin to Ulan-Ude, Siberia, covering an astonishing 13,700 kms across Europe and Asia along the ancient Silk Road.

Their mode of transport? Two trusty, if slightly battered, circa 2000 Nissan Micras — proving that determination and teamwork can take you a very long way. The Mongol Rally, often called "the greatest motoring adventure on the planet," offers no set route, no support crew, and no guarantee of making it to the finish line. Yet the Micras2Mongolia team persevered through challenges, breakdowns, and border crossings to reach their destination.

Most importantly, the journey wasn't just about adventure — it was about making a difference. The team undertook the rally to raise funds for Spinal Injuries Ireland, supporting people living with spinal cord injuries. Thanks to their efforts and the generosity of their supporters, they raised an incredible €23,350, an outstanding achievement that will have a lasting impact.

Congratulations to and thank you to Fergal, Jimmy, Paul, and Cian on completing this remarkable journey — an inspiring blend of courage, camaraderie, and compassion. You can check out photos and videos from their journey @micras2mongolia on Instagram.

Blackstairs Vintage Club Supports Spinal Injuries Ireland

In August, our Peer Outreach Officer, Gemma Willis, together with service user, Rebecca Bayley, proudly accepted a generous €2,500 donation from the Blackstairs Vintage Club following their incredible Charity Run. The event brought together vintage vehicle enthusiasts from across the region for a day of fun, community spirit, and fundraising — all in support of Spinal Injuries Ireland.

Gemma and Rebecca were delighted to attend the presentation and to thank Adele Bayley, the organisers and participants for their kindness and commitment. The funds raised will go directly toward supporting people living with spinal cord injuries and their families through vital services and outreach programmes.

A huge thank you to the Blackstairs Vintage Club for their wonderful generosity and continued support — making a real difference to lives across Ireland.

Gemma Willis & Rebecca Bayley

COMMUNITY FUNDRAISING

A massive thank you to Ger Dargan and Marie Fitzpatrick for once again putting together the amazing Old Belvedere BBQ! It was an incredible evening with a great turnout, delicious food, and music and dancing that went on late into the night. On top of that, Ger and Marie raised an incredible €26,000 for Spinal Injuries Ireland! We're so grateful to you both for all the hard work and dedication that made the night such a huge success.

Old Belvedere BBQ

A huge thank you to Team CAM for taking on the Clew Bay 10km! Carmel, Alex, and Marie not only completed the race but also raised a phenomenal €10,000 in the process. A special shoutout to Myles O'Brien for his fantastic support, and to Sean and everyone else who helped make it happen. We're so grateful for your efforts; your support means so much and makes a real difference!

Carmel, Alex and Marie from Team CAM, Clew Bay 10km

A big thank you to all our Cambodia Adventurers for the fantastic fundraising efforts so far! We'd like to give a special shoutout to Shane Murtagh and George O'Hara for their incredibly creative fundraiser; a 24-hour golf-a-thon at Mullingar Golf Club! The lads played over seven rounds of golf straight, including through the night, using LED golf balls and a caddy car with its lights on to guide them (though they weren't allowed to sit in it!). A genius fundraiser; and raising €11,000 in the process is the cherry on top. Well done, Shane and George, and thanks again from all of us!

Shane Murtagh & George O'Hara, Mullingar Golf Club, 24-hour Golf-a-Thon

A massive thank you from all of us at Spinal Injuries Ireland to Elaine Kelly and her team for taking part in the Women's Mini Marathon on our behalf last June. The event is always such an important fundraiser for us, and we were thrilled that Elaine chose to support us this year. She raised over €2,650; an amazing achievement that will make a real difference in the lives of those who depend on our services.

Huge thanks to John Boothman for organising Spinapalooza in Naas, Co. Kildare this September. A fantastic evening showcasing some of Kildare's finest underground artists and raising much-needed funds for us in the process.

ANGKOR WAT ADVENTURE 2025

Our Cambodian Adventure Challenge has officially come to an end, concluding an unforgettable 7-day journey through Siem Reap.

Throughout the week, we made lifelong memories as we explored some of Cambodia's most breathtaking landmarks; including Angkor Wat, Ta Prohm Temple, Banteay Srei, and the Rolous Group. The adventure continued with visits to the stunning West Baray Reservoir, the Angkor Night Market where local crafts were on sale, a behind-the-scenes look at a Golden Silk Farm, the Royal Residence and Gardens, the Angkor National Museum, and Artisans Angkor — where we witnessed extraordinary craftsmanship that supports rural youth and preserves traditional Khmer art.

With the support of our dedicated team, we had the opportunity to experience these world wonders up close in an accessible and empowering way, while also taking time to learn about Cambodia's history, including the moving stories of the Cambodian Genocide at Wat Thmei Killing Field.

We are already looking forward to next year's challenge, which is open to all abilities and disabilities! For anyone that is interested in signing up for it, discover what Paddy had to say about his experience in Cambodia and what he would say to anyone thinking about going on next year's challenge.

'It can be daunting, but my advice is that the experience completely outweighs the anxiety of going on a trip. The whole exposure, camaraderie and fun element, once you get involved, you'll really find that it's both rewarding and just really good fun for everyone'

JONATHAN TAKES FUNDRAISING TO NEW HEIGHTS

In September, our Communications Officer and service user, Jonathan Ranson, quite literally took fundraising to the skies, joining his mother, uncle, and two cousins for a thrilling Skydive at the Irish Parachute Club from over 13,000 feet above the beautiful fields of Clonad, Co. Offaly. They took the leap in support of Spinal Injuries Ireland, raising vital funds to help those living with spinal cord injuries and their families.

This wasn't Jonathan's first challenge of the year. Back in May, he completed an incredible 46km handcycle challenge along the Waterford Greenway, cycling from Dungarvan to Kilmacthomas and back again with two close friends, Marco and Oran. Between both challenges, Jonathan raised an impressive €6,565, while his mother Deborah added €1,080 through her own fundraising efforts; a remarkable family achievement.

Jonathan raised the funds to take part in our 'Angkor Wat Adventure'. 'What an incredible experience entering the main chamber of Angkor Wat, visiting the iconic Ta Prohm Temple from Tomb Raider, exploring a Golden Silk Farm, and learning about Cambodia's history and culture at the Angkor National Museum and Wat Thmei Killing Field. It was truly remarkable. The camaraderie and craic within the group made it one of the best trips I've ever been on, here's hoping next year's adventure can top it!'

Hannah Devine, Deborah Ranson, Jonathan Ranson, Matthew Devine, David Devine, Irish Parachute Club

Jonathan Ranson, Skydiving at the Irish Parachute Club

MONTHLY PRIZE DRAW

Our Monthly Prize Draw continues to grow from strength to strength, with more than €1,750 worth of prizes awarded every month to our supporters. Thanks to the dedicated work of our Fundraising Officer, Stephen Tierney, we have welcomed a steady stream of new donors, consistently surpassing fundraising expectations.

Rather than making a once-off contribution, we are asking supporters to join our Monthly Prize Draw by committing a donation of just €7 per month. Regular monthly contributions allow us to plan ahead and ensure long-term sustainability. Most importantly, they enable us to guarantee that we will be there for every person who needs our support; not just today, but into the future.

If you haven't signed up yet, enter now and we could be calling you next month: Scan the QR code or visit https://spinalinjuries.ie/raffle/

SCAN HERE

FROM ADVENTURE TO AWARENESS: FINDING STRENGTH IN A RARE DIAGNOSIS

By Michael Chestnutt, Adventure Photographer and Outdoor Enthusiast

In July 2023, my life changed forever. After years of unexplained symptoms, clumsiness, and countless medical appointments, I was finally diagnosed with Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia Type 7 — or HSP7 for short. It's a progressive and incurable neurological condition that slowly weakens the muscles in my legs, affecting balance, coordination, and speech.

The news hit hard. For years, I had brushed off the stumbles, the fatigue, and the awkward jokes about being accident-prone. I had even convinced myself that maybe I was just a bit uncoordinated. But deep down, I knew something wasn't right. When the neurologist confirmed the diagnosis, I remember leaving the hospital in a daze — part of me desperate to tell the world, to finally have an explanation for everything that had haunted me since childhood.

Growing up, I was the kid who couldn't quite catch the ball. As a teenager, I was constantly tripping or knocking things over. Later, in social settings, unexplained falls or bed-wetting episodes were often put down to having one drink too many. It was embarrassing and isolating, and I became good at hiding it behind humour or excuses. Looking back, those years make more sense now — but the diagnosis brought both relief and heartbreak.

HSP is ultra-rare, only officially recognised in 2011, and affects everyone differently. Some people experience mild mobility issues; others eventually rely on wheelchairs. There's no cure — only symptom management through physiotherapy, medication, and adaptive aids. For me, it has meant learning to pace myself, to accept fatigue as part of daily life, and to adapt to the tremors that make even simple tasks — holding a cup of tea or typing a message — unexpectedly difficult.

Before my diagnosis, I worked for many years as an adventure instructor in Ireland, the USA, Canada, and Australia. I guided people through white-water rapids, mountain hikes, and kayaking trips — jobs that demanded both strength and coordination. Those experiences shaped my love of the outdoors and filled my life with purpose and unforgettable memories. But as my symptoms progressed, I had to accept that the career I loved was no longer possible.

Letting go of that identity was painful. My kayak and surfboard now gather dust in the shed, a reminder of a life once lived at full speed. But with time, I realised that adventure doesn't disappear — it just changes shape.

While researching HSP online one night, I found social media groups for people living with the condition. Suddenly, I wasn't alone. Reading others' stories helped me to understand that a diagnosis doesn't have to be the end of adventure — it can be the start of a new kind of journey.

Determined to keep moving, I began setting myself achievable challenges. In 2024, I walked sections of The Wicklow Way, a beautiful 127-kilometre route from Dublin to south Wicklow, taking it one step at a time. It wasn't easy — fatigue and pain made each stage unpredictable — but finishing each stretch brought a quiet sense of victory. I started

building a "bucket list," not as a countdown, but as a celebration of what's still possible.

Then, in September 2025, I joined a group of 20 walkers on The West Highland Way in Scotland — a 155-kilometre trail from Milngavie, near Glasgow, to Fort William beneath Ben Nevis. The event, known as The Walk for Jock, is held annually in memory of John Patterson from Linlithgow. I walked in memory of my uncle, Gerry Keating, who lived in Linlithgow for over fifty years and loved this very trail. Sharing the journey with his daughter, Jane, made it even more meaningful.

The trek was both exhilarating and exhausting. My legs felt heavy; my balance faltered, and fatigue shadowed every mile — but with determination and the support of the group, I completed part of the route. As always, my camera came along, helping me capture every step, every view, every moment of strength that overcame doubt.

My chosen charity for the walk was Spinal Injuries Ireland, an organisation that has supported both me and my family since my diagnosis. They provide essential front-line services to people living with spinal cord and neurological conditions — from counselling and peer support to community outreach. Through the generosity of friends, family, and supporters, I raised €3,562 to help them continue their incredible work. Knowing that my efforts would help others living with life-changing conditions made every step worthwhile.

Living with an invisible disability is unpredictable, but it has taught me resilience, patience, and perspective. I may not move as fast as I once did, but I've learned that progress isn't always measured in distance — sometimes it's simply about standing up, showing up, and moving forward in your own way.

To anyone facing a new diagnosis or uncertain future, I'd say this: don't give up on what brings you joy. It might take a new form, but it's still there waiting to be rediscovered. For me, that's found in storytelling, photography, and the quiet rhythm of walking trails — one careful step at a time.

You can follow my journey and photography at my Facebook page - Chestnuttphotography.

A DAY IN MY WHEELS

Continued success and the importance of safety.

A Day in My Wheels has continued to be a strong focus from a fundraising perspective but most importantly a session that highlights the value of creating more allies for disability issues. Another aspect that has come into the sessions is safety. We have had several sessions hosted by construction companies around Ireland who have safety as their absolute priority on sites.

Since our last issue we have run A Day in My Wheels for The Institute of Education. The young minds of today will be the designers and leaders of tomorrow. Giving them an experience and understanding of accessibility challenges now means they carry that with them long into their lives ahead. The students experienced their school and the surrounding area. They learned that surfaces and areas that are easy for able-bodied people might not be as accessible for wheelchair users or people with mobility issues.

From schools to construction sites. Definitely not where we thought we would be spending so much of our time! We have had some brilliant sessions this year on building sites around Ireland. This activity ramped up a gear when we partnered with the Construction Industry Federation and the Health and Safety Authority as part of the Construction Safety Campaign in October. Over two weeks we visited sites and companies including, Walls, Designer Group, Elliott Group, BAM, Kirby and we have more plans and companies for beyond just this campaign. Safety and accessibility are key to building the future of Ireland and we hope this campaign brings both to the top of the agenda.

In October, we also engaged with Salesforce, who have an incredibly accessible building on the North Quays in Dublin. One of the reasons they wanted to run A Day in My Wheels was to see if they could improve their building and facilities even further. It was fantastic to work with a company that truly is committed to improving accessibility and continuing to learn. The collaboration between our two organisations meant we both learnt a lot from the session.

We'll be rounding out the year with some more sessions with some great companies. We look forward to writing about them in our next issue.

Jack Shannon Cole

As always, if you have any questions or you know of a company that would like to host A Day in My Wheels for their staff please reach out to me at oisin@spinalinjuries.ie

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EXCITING IMPROVEMENTS AHEAD: ACCESSIBILITY UPGRADES

We're delighted to announce that we have been awarded a Capital Grant from the Health Service Executive (HSE), enabling us to make significant improvements to our Resource Centre facilities.

This funding will support essential upgrades that enhance accessibility and comfort for our team and service users.

The planned works include the installation of an accessible kitchen and toilet area, ensuring compliance with standards and that everyone can use these spaces safely. We'll also be replacing our entrance door with an accessible lock model to improve ease of entry and exit. In addition, new electronic blinds will be fitted throughout the premises, making them accessible to all.

These upgrades reflect our ongoing commitment to creating an inclusive, welcoming work and meeting environment. Work is scheduled to begin shortly, and we'll keep you updated throughout the process. There will be no disruption to the services we provide.

We're grateful to HSE Technical Services for their support and look forward to unveiling these improvements soon. Thank you for your continued patience and support as we work to make our space better for everyone.

Leave a Legacy of Independence

Your legacy can help change lives.

By remembering Spinal Injuries Ireland in your Will, you can ensure that people living with spinal cord injuries continue to receive the support, resources, and opportunities they need — today, tomorrow, and for generations to come.

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Every legacy gift, large or small, helps us provide:

✓ Personal outreach and counselling for newly injured individuals

✓ Peer mentoring and lifelong support services

✓ Advocacy for accessibility and inclusion across Ireland

Your compassion can make a lasting difference; empowering people to live full, independent, and meaningful lives after injury.

To learn more about leaving a gift in your Will, contact **info@spinalinjuries.ie** for a confidential chat.

Your kindness today can change someone's tomorrow.

Launching our next Conference!

EmpowerAbility - Unlocking the Future

Saturday 21st March 2026 • Curragh Racecourse, Co. Kildare

Join thought leaders and experts across psychotherapy, healthcare, technology, fitness, disability advocacy, occupational therapy, and accessible travel.

Full speaker announcements coming soon – follow Spinal Injuries Ireland for updates and be part of the conversation shaping the future of accessibility.

Check us out on social media

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If you would like to donate and sign up to our monthly prize draw please scan the QR code or visit spinalinjuries.ie/raffle

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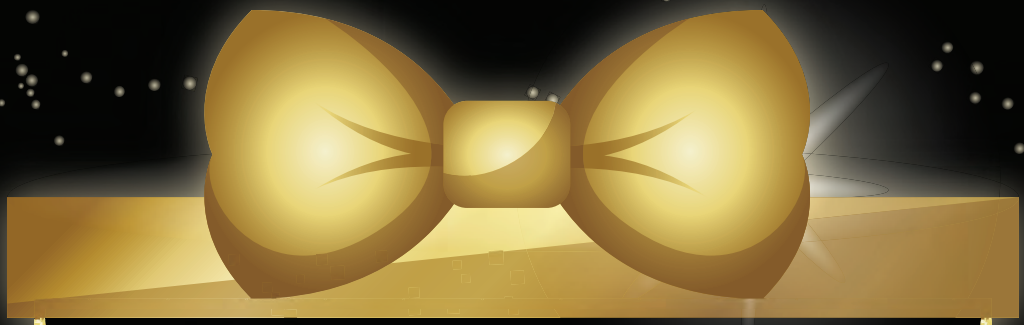
Spinal Injuries Ireland
Support at every stage

Give the Gift of Wellbeing this Christmas

Demand for our counselling services has more than doubled over the last year



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