



A Walk in the GARDEN

The *Promising Ireland* Campaign helps WALK create a community garden where the harvest includes self-esteem, life lessons, and independence for those with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues.



WALK is an innovative organization that supports people with intellectual disabilities from marginalised communities across Ireland. From employment and skills training to education and living support, WALK takes a “person-centred” approach to ensuring that people have the chance to flourish and contribute to Irish society.

“We see the whole person. We focus on supporting people to reach their full potential as contributing members of their community”

– Joe Mason, CEO of WALK



“WALK uses innovative methods to connect people who are marginalised into the life of the community,” says Catherine Devine. “We provide individualised supports to enable people with complex needs take more control over their lives. Many of these people have spent long periods of time in institutional care and need support in rebuilding family and community connections.”

When clients come to WALK they are often leaving institutional life for the first time. Multi-disciplinary teams work one-on-one for up to two years with people who are coming out of institutions. “WALK helps them rebuild relationships with family, with the community,” explains Catherine. “Those two years can be very hard, but we know from our experience that the improvements in their lives can be phenomenal.”

Other people are referred to WALK to ensure they can gain the skills and support to stay out of the institutional system entirely. The organization which was established in 1967 has received national recognition and quality awards for their management and approach. “It’s not just about helping people with tactical skills,” explains Catherine. “It’s about helping those people to find their heart and their dreams. We have a 90% success rate of reducing what is considered ‘challenging behavior’ and helping individuals integrate into everyday life.”

Joe Mason, CEO of WALK elaborated on the philosophy of the organization. “We see the whole person. We focus on supporting people to reach their full potential as contributing members of their community. The two years is the intensive engagement but we are committed to these people for the rest of their lives. When they reach a milestone we say, ‘What more can be achieved? What next?’”

Thanks to WALK, hundreds of service users have moved from reliance on hospital services and institutional life to employment, independent living, and a richer life with recreational and community benefits.

HOW HAS THE PROMISING IRELAND CAMPAIGN HELPED?



One of the many offerings of WALK is their community Garden Program. “Several years ago some of our clients expressed frustration that they were not seen as full contributors to their community,” explained Joe Mason. “The Garden Program came about because these folks wanted to do something positive with their skills while helping others in the community. What we had were the people and the skills, but what we didn’t have was the funding. We had heard of other programs that had been supported by The Ireland Funds and so we decided to apply for a grant.”

WALK submitted their application to The Ireland Funds annual Grant Round—made possible by The Ireland Funds *Promising Ireland* Campaign. Over 900 applications were received and WALK was one of the organizations that stood out for their innovative approach of using gardening to empower people with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues.

“When we got the call to say we’d been approved, it was very exciting,” says Joe. “The Ireland Funds have now given us funding for equipment on two occasions. Shovels, spades, lawnmowers, a greenhouse....and you can see the fruits of this labor all around you.”

The community garden we visited is an impressive space on the grounds of Scoil Colm, a local primary school. The school children also participate in the upkeep of the garden which not only teaches them gardening skills alongside the service users, but imparts lessons of acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities. School children and service users work side by side in a supervised space learning how to make compost, grow vegetables from seeds, and the importance and pride of responsibility. The vegetables and fruits harvested from the garden go to local community.

The gardening services extend beyond their own community garden. Service users have won awards for their plant flower display stands, window boxes and hanging baskets located in local villages in Dublin. WALK also provides

outreach gardening services to older members of the community who may not be able to maintain their own home gardens. During 2012, WALK was recognised at the Dublin City Council Annual Community Awards Programme as a leader in providing community based initiatives. The organisation has won a number of awards for its community gardening project over the years and these awards help place a tangible value on the work carried out by all those involved.

POTATOES, ONIONS, AND PRIDE



To see something from beginning to end is important. And for people with intellectual disabilities to have the pride of bringing something from seed to table is extremely important. “We see people have improved health and well-being from working on a project like this,” says Joe. “That sense of self-worth and achievement is powerful.”

“We love having the chance to show supporters that it doesn’t take a large amount of money to be engaged with one’s community. If we contribute in a meaningful way to where we live, we give to the entire country. The ingenuity shown by the nonprofit sector in Ireland is second to none. It’s bringing a sense of vitality and community back to Ireland that was perhaps lost before.”







“Beetroot, lovely potatoes, cabbage, peppers, onions, we grow it all! I love this garden. It’s great to be outside.” —Andrew, a service user of WALK