

IRISH WHEELCHAIR ASSOCIATION

Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) works with, and on behalf of, people with physical disabilities to drive positive change in Ireland through the influencing of public policy, the provision of quality services and enabling accessibility to all aspects of society. With 2,000 registered volunteers and 2,221 dedicated staff, the Association provides over 2 million hours of service annually to people with disabilities in their homes and communities throughout Ireland. The Ireland Funds has supported the far-reaching work of IWA for over a decade. Most recently the organization was given an Ireland Funds Flagship grant in 2015 to support a new Sports Development Officer positive serving the southeast part of Ireland. Connect magazine sat down with Joanne Wall, who has been appointed to that position to learn about the positive improvements that grant has brought to counties Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford and Waterford.

Joanne Wall, Irish Wheelchair Association's Sports Development Officer. Her role is made possible by a grant from The Ireland Funds.

IRISH WHEELCHAIR ASSOCIATION (IWA) WAS FOUNDED IN 1960.

It has a vision of an Ireland where people with disabilities enjoy equal rights, choices and opportunities in how they live their lives, and where the country is a model worldwide for a truly inclusive society.



"This is the first sport Niamh felt able to participate as part of the team. While it was for keeping fit she has made lots of friends who are also wheelchair users and this has really helped build her confidence. She loves the fact that **SHE IS THE SAME AS EVERYONE ELSE AND IS NOT TREATED DIFFERENTLY.**" – Denise, mother of Niamh who is involved in the wheelchair basketball program



"I have 3 very different children, Jack physically disabled, Joseph is intellectually disabled and Daisy has no disability, **IT'S GREAT FOR THEIR CONFIDENCE BUILDING TO SEE EVERYONE IS DIFFERENT YET THERE ARE NO LIMITS.** We really appreciate all the different activities out there for them. It is great to be involved." – Sarah, a mother of 3 young children

“I love being on the basketball team because **IT’S THE ONLY PLACE WHERE I REALLY FEEL LIKE I BELONG**, and when Joanne came to my school to do wheelchair basketball it was the best PE of my life because I was really good at it.” – Jake, age 15

Q. Tell us more about this new position and what it is helping IWA achieve

A. So my role is to set up multi-sport clubs in southeast counties so that children with a physical disability would have the opportunity to take part in sport and to experience a number of different sports. The great thing is, they are set up in collaboration with families of kids with a disability so they ultimately aren’t completely reliant on my role. They are sustainable by the local community.

Q. What is the age range of the children you’re working with?

A. Ages 4-18. We have had a number of 4 year olds and we’d be keen to get them involved as well. Early intervention is really important.

Q. The model of sustainability is a unique aspect of the IWA multi-sport clubs. How do you get communities involved?

A. In Waterford alone we have 35 children who came along to a ‘come and try’ day. So that meant we had their 35 parents doing leadership training on how to become leaders of a club and how to run a club efficiently. We run a number of different sports for 6 week periods. So for example we’ll do wheelchair basketball for 6 weeks and then they get to try another 6 weeks of judo. Most importantly, it is whatever sports the kids would like to try. At the same time, parents are trained in those sports as well.

Q. Would you say the multi-sport approach is something most communities would not have had access to before IWA brought it to their county?

A. I would confidently say they haven’t had access before our arrival, and there’s a been great ripple effect. There are teachers now coming to us and saying ‘could you come into our class? We want to include this

little girl or little boy in our PE class and we don’t want them sitting with a whistle on the sidelines.’ Now we’re going into the schools and working with teachers on how they can make their physical education more accessible to a child with a physical disability.

Q. What would be an example of how a teacher or a local school would do that. What are the things that you would teach them?

A. I show them simple things like what they need to do to adapt. Maybe they just need to change the equipment slightly, maybe they need more space. We’ve brought wheelchairs for the teachers to see what it’s like to be in a chair and to do what they’re asking the child to do.

Q. Are you battling misperceptions about people using wheelchairs?

A. Often teachers find they have been over-thinking it, or they think a child is going to break. Last week the PE teacher of one of the kids that plays wheelchair basketball asked if we could come to her school to show wheelchair basketball to the other students. So I went along and we showed the other kids what she does.

Q. What came out of that experience?

A. Her mother rang me later that evening and said it’s the best she’s felt in so long. It was something I had forgotten, that something small can have a really big impact. This child is now seen as equal. Before the other students would have thought ‘she’s not going to be involved in this.’ Last week she pushed against everybody else. It was the first time she got to be the best. The Ireland Funds are helping us do this for so many children, one sport at a time.



“It’s been **A GREAT WAY TO GET EXERCISE**, keep fit and make new friends.” – Sophie, age 15