



EVERY night before I go to bed I thank the Lord that I am the father of a 14-year-old boy.

I'm so very grateful to be in this position because having a son at this stage of his teenage development is an ongoing educational experience

I'm constantly learning new things about myself, my child and, indeed, the world at large.

Anybody else who is the parent of an adolescent will know what I'm talking about but for those who don't, here's a brief summary of what my son has taught me so far.

I have learned that I don't know anything about the way the world works today. Any knowledge I have is about a distant era that has no relevance to the way things are today.

I'm very fortunate he has made me realise I'm a dinosaur from another age and that the harsh lessons I learned in my own boyhood cannot be applied in any way possible to his upbringing in 21st century America. If he hadn't told me this, I'd be wasting all my time trying to pass on stuff I discovered the hard way in my own life.

I have learned that my son is infallible. Nothing he does wrong is ever his fault. It is, in fact, usually the fault of his parents or his siblings or his friends.

If the blame cannot be attributed to one or sometimes all three of those groups, it can be put down to the world at large being a terrible place that has done him wrong. To suggest otherwise is to impugn upon his character in a way that is unjust, unfair and just plain incorrect.

I have learned there is a condition called selective deafness that affects teenage boys who have been asked to perform a chore. A crippling condition, it can strike at any time, usually just when one of their parents has requested them to take out the trash or clean up their room.

This is a very difficult affliction for them to deal with and it's really about time parents acknowledged how much suffering it can cause.

I used to think he was ignoring me when I asked him to do things. Now I know he was physically unable to hear.

I have also learned that taking away a teenager's mobile phone is the most unjust punishment out there. It's a contemporary war crime.

To remove that rectangular gem from his hands just because I (mistakenly) believed he behaved badly is to impinge on his human rights and to strip away his dignity as a person.

Moreover, scrolling down through the same phone to read text messages he sent and received is to commit an offence so bad that it could and perhaps should be reported to the United Nations.

Under teenage law, paying for the said phone does not entitle the parent to ever touch it.

I have learned that my son is the centre of the universe and the only show in town. Nothing matters more than what he needs or wants in the next few minutes.

Again, it took me time to figure this out but now that I know it, life is a lot easier.

A four-year-old son should never have his dinner made for him before a 14-year-old gets dropped to the mall or the cinema. An eight-year-old son can't be helped with his homework if the teenager urgently needs batteries for the Xbox.

As you can imagine, life is a lot simpler now that my eldest has shared this knowledge with me.

I have learned that taking away a teenager's mobile phone is the most unjust punishment, a contemporary war crime. To remove it just because I (mistakenly) believed he behaved badly is to impinge on his human rights and to strip away his dignity as a person.

I've the best job in world...



Raymond Burke

Active Connections

WORKING MAN: Ray Burke of Active Connections with with Annalisa O'Carroll, Head of Impact at Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, CEO of DCC plc, Tommy Breen, and Tony Griffin of Soar, receiving the 2014 Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Elevator Award worth €30,000.

CHRIS DUNNE talks to a man behind a company aimed at helping kids with behavioural problems, who won €30,000 for his venture

WHEN Ray Burke was a carefree, twenty-something young man, living the life in the USA and working in a leadership role at an adventure based therapy company for youths, the world was his oyster.

He never envisaged, a decade later, that as a thirtysomething dad, he would be running his own business in the same field, for which he has just picked up a prestigious award worth €30,000.

The company, Active Connections was borne out of his experiences in the USA and is aimed at helping youngsters with behavioural problems.

Ray, who lives in Killeagh, explains: "I saw first-hand how young people who got involved in useful challenges found in nature, like rock climbing, white water activities and backpacking, that this provided them with the growth experiences that helped them make fundamental changes in their lives.

"I spent nine months in the wilderness with young people who had the choice of doing that or else go to jail. And I also worked with high achievers, who wanted to test themselves further and push themselves to the limit. When they were removed from their environment and had no other influences, it worked brilliantly," says Ray.

"The experience of personal ownership lends the youngsters the skills to give back to their environment and to their community.

"Learning in the field can be interpreted into real world learning for the young person. And when they return to the influences of normal life, they have can employ the experience."

Ray was keen to translate his vast experience into academics and returned to Ireland to study for a degree in Applied Social Studies in Waterford.

"I grew up in Tallaght," says the 32-year-old. "I saw a lot of troubled youngsters in the area where I grew up.

"My parents followed their dream when they returned to my mother's native Cogh in 2002. I instantly fell in love with it."

He instantly fell in love with his wife Rebecca too, whom he met in Youghal when she was

visiting the area. The couple have a seven-month-old daughter, Ava.

"I worked with residential houses in North Cork and Tipperary," says Ray. "The age group of the residents ranged from 14 to 18 and they were typically males. I found it rewarding when I made connections with them. But I was disillusioned when I saw individuals leaving residential care with two plastic bags and left to their own devices. I thought there was another way."

Ray had met people in his field who were of the same mind. He sat down with them with a view to developing his own company based on his experiences in dealing with children who were compromised because of their various circumstances.

He totally believed in the concept of Active Connections.

He saw the opportunity of stepping away from the distractions of daily life and allowing space for inward reflection whilst enjoying an activity as a huge benefit for youngsters who would not normally get that chance.

"I worked two jobs to fund it," says Ray. "And the firm was set up in April 2011.

"We now work with the HSE and its service users as well as with clients from the private sector."

"We go to the young person's environment and use their environment to carry out adventure therapy programmes," he explains.

"In Mallow for example, we would use the river, in Youghal we would use the cliffs around

the town and if we are in North Cork, we'd use the Galtée Mountains.

Ray says the adrenalin that drugs and alcohol may have provided for his clients in the past, is now replaced by the natural high that the participants enjoy when engaging in the various outdoor activities.

"The youngsters find it challenging and fun too," he says. "Their needs are met in a different way and they are outside of their comfort zone."

"We build a relationship and the anger begins to dissipate as we begin to communicate and connect.

"Obviously, if we are walking through a forest, they have to listen and take notice," says Ray.

"We can explore options and discuss alternatives to behaviour issues. When their own options are aired, then they feel empowered. Progress is made and I can see the process working."

He is proud of the success rate of Active Connections.

"To date we have helped 32 youngsters and we can claim a 92% rate, which is very satisfying," says Ray.

"Yes, when I was working day and night to buy a car and the equipment and had to work two jobs, I thought: I might pack it in or go back to residential care work.

"A 9 to 5 job might suit me a lot better. But now I am so glad that I didn't. I find the job hugely satisfying seeing how it impacts on lives."

"When I revisit a kid a year later and they are doing OK, it makes everything worthwhile."

Active Connections is a once off. "It is the only dedicated adventure programme in Ireland," says Ray.

"It is all about pushing the young person and look at decisions that they can make in taking their own responsibility, and come to a solution to change it."

So if 'my Timmy' is heading off with Ray tomorrow, what will the twosome be doing?

"I will pick him up in the morning," responds Ray. "We might go for a swim in the pool or in the sea – depending on the weather. I have



FAMILY MAN: Ray Burke with his wife Rebecca and daughter Ava at their home near Killeagh. Picture: Eddie O'Hare

all the gear, so weather is never an issue. Later we might play ball in the park and I will ask Timmy about his week, whether it was positive or negative. Later we might cook together and connect. Timmy can be six years old or older. If you catch them before they get involved is tuff, then all the better," says Ray.

"The sessions can be up to five or seven hours long, so it can be quite time-consuming."

Ray and his colleagues liaise with a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist who they can link into throughout the day.

And they keep the parents in the loop if they are present.

"Seeing the youngsters change their own lives is wonderful," says Ray. "I often think when I was in school I could have been seen as having a touch of AHD, and maybe I have. But my job suits my personality I like being on the go. "When kids say to me, I have ADHD, or I have this, or I have that, I say: but having that didn't make you take drugs did it? And they think about that."

"I have to say though, my favourite time is when Ava falls asleep in my arms. That is probably the best part of the day when I can chill out. It is precious. And I am often reminded about all the kids that I come in contact with, and what they have been through. Some of them shouldn't even be alive today."

Ray was climbing the walls though

when he was waiting for The Call. The call that was to acknowledge the wonderful, successful therapy idea that became Active Connections.

"A pal who in Waterford encouraged me to enter the Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Elevator Award," says Ray. "He himself had won the Arthur Guinness Award. I thought it was incredible when we made the final 12. So yes, I waited in anticipation for the call."

And it came. Ray and his proud father made their way to Christchurch Cathedral in Dublin, leaving the womenfolk to celebrate back in Killeagh.

"My dad is laminating and storing cuttings as we speak," says Ray. "The €30,000 prize will help us no end. We plan to roll out three new programmes

early next year and we hope to make a big impact in the Cork region.

"The programmes will include the disability sector. Community and school groups and an expediency type programme, incorporating personal development," says Ray.

"We will approach school principals and inquire if our programme, including team building and leadership skills would prove useful in the school environment. We are also looking at a five-day wilderness course in Mayo, dealing with the same principals and the setting of specific tasks. So yes. It's all onwards and upwards."

And in a nutshell? "I have the best job in the world," says the Corkman.

REVIEW

Silent fear at heart of play

Hoods
Graffiti Theatre Co.

THERE'S a lot of crash, bang and wallop going on in Graffiti's latest production but the play is all about the silent fear at the centre of it.

One of the issues going on here is abandonment. A brother and sister and their baby brother are left by their mother to fend for themselves on the streets.

Such a scenario could be unbearable to watch over the course of a piece of theatre so the challenge is to find a way of presenting it that engages us without alienating us or cutting us adrift on a raft of overwhelming misery.

After the success of *Where in the World is Frank Sparrow?* director Emelie FitzGibbon has gone for another interesting work by the Australian playwright, Angela Betzien. Set in a car wreck yard the story is told of the three kids from a family beset by domestic violence.

The trick of the play is to tap into the sense of a teenager with a mountain of trouble who weds himself to his X-box. The style of the play has a kind of psychic blur of human fears at one level and the hyper-reality of computer games at another.

Sonya O'Donoghue gives us that sense of a wounded person battling courageously to survive.

Tadhg Hickey as her brother tips more into the manic world of game technology, which is used both to represent what is happening and also to blot it out.

Cormac O'Connor's soundscape is an aural blitzkrieg that powers through the production and Ronan Fitzgibbon's cage set with clanging trappings and ladders is also an assault on the senses.

The high voltage production will certainly blow the teenage school audience back in their chairs this week and demand their attention.

More significantly in dramatic terms all of the frantic activity forms a counterpoint to the human pain of abandonment at the centre of the drama and it suggests how young people can both survive pain but also seek ways to blind and deafen themselves to sorrows within.

Liam Heylin