

The advantage of adventure for young people with difficulties

New series Solutions for social problems

This week sees the start of a new series in 'Health & Family' in which we profile social entrepreneurs in Ireland who are building ideas to tackle health-related issues.

"Social entrepreneurs develop new solutions to social problems," explains Darren Ryan, chief executive of Social Entrepreneurs Ireland.

"They come up with new ideas and test new approaches, often showing that by taking a different approach to a problem we can improve outcomes and be more cost-effective. Social entrepreneurs then work to scale the impact of their work."

The ideas are often simple—at least on the surface. They might involve new ways of engaging with young people to help them tackle behavioural difficulties or bullying, or bringing local communities together to support health services or empower patients.



Claire O'Connell

Social entrepreneur Ray Burke uses adventure activities to push young people out of their comfort zone and help them address negative behaviours

For Ray Burke, a day at the "office" can mean abseiling down a cliff, wading through streams or building a shelter in a forest before lighting a campfire to cook dinner. But he's not there just for the fun of it: there's method to the adrenaline fix.

Burke guides young people with social and behavioural difficulties through the adventure activities to get them out of their comfort zones so they can think and talk about their challenges more openly. "We work with young people who have behavioural and mental health issues," explains Burke, who founded Active Connections in 2011.

"A lot of the young people we work with might have anger-management issues, or decision-making difficulties, anxieties or self-confidence issues, and we use both psychologically and physically testing activities to help the young person confront and address the issues that they may be facing.

"We take them out of that comfort zone, both physically and emotionally, and guide them through activities and encourage reflection to see how what we have done can be translated into real-world learning."

Small steps to start

Referrals come in from agencies or social workers, and step one is to get to know the young person and their family and see what adventures might suit, says Burke.

"A simple thing such as putting on a wet-suit could be a major challenge for one person; for another, it could be abseiling down

Scaling those ideas in a sustainable way is the key to making them work, and organisations such as Social Entrepreneurs Ireland and Ashoka Ireland have supported many of the entrepreneurs profiled in this series.

According to Ryan, social entrepreneurship can make a big difference in the health sector, which is designed to deliver at scale rather than to constantly test and develop new solutions.

"[Social entrepreneurs] not only come up with new ideas; they take action to turn these ideas into impact on the ground," he says. "[They] tackle the root causes of problems and seek to work in a preventative manner to reduce the burden on the health system.

"Ultimately, the goal of social entrepreneurs is to improve outcomes for patients and reduce the costs of healthcare provision."

a cliff," he says. So, rather than jumping in at the deep end, Burke and his colleagues start slowly with each young person and get a sense of what might work. "The young people who come to us may have real difficulties in working with other people, and we start off with a low-level activity, maybe a walk in a forest or a visit to a swimming pool, and we gauge what they are up for," he says.

That might ultimately be "coasteering", kayaking, rock climbing or practising survival skills, he says.

"A lot of the activities that we go on to do lead young people to achieve things, both physically and emotionally, that they had probably never done in the past, and when they get that endorphin rush and start feeling better about themselves, it has a knock-on effect. We have also found that when you are doing those activities, it helps build up the relationship. I will have kids grabbing me and holding on because they are terrified; they are out of that comfort zone and they are more tactile than they usually allow."

Burke and his colleagues in Active Connections have already worked with about 30 young people, and they typically engage with each of them over the course of a few months. But he recalls one pre-teen whom he guided for much longer until a breakthrough moment.

"Often we will do an activity, then we will make lunch over a camp fire and have a discussion very much about the reflection," he recalls. "This child just turned to me with a little bit of a glint in his eye and said, 'You won't be working with me next month.' It was an affirmation that he had made so much progress. It was a really nice moment."

Burke's own journey into this line of work was a gradual one, and he traces it back to his teens, when he worked on peer programmes to counteract drug addiction. "I was involved in an initiative where young people designed an education programme about drugs, and it meant having real straight-talking conversations about drugs with my peers," he says. "That kicked it off on the social care side of things, but I never thought I would fully end up in it."

He went on to qualify as an outdoor sports instructor and became interested in adventure-based therapy when he worked in the US, before returning to Ireland and earning a degree in applied social studies.



■ Ray Burke of Active Connections in Farran Woods, Cork: One of the big challenges is finding staff with the right mix of training and interests.

PHOTOGRAPH: DARAGH MC SWEENEY/PROVISION

Burke is now keen to grow the social enterprise, but stresses that it needs to happen organically.

"We started out doing this at weekends and in our spare time; then, when it became obvious there were levels of referral, I went full-time," he says. "We started in the southeast and we are expanding into Cork and Dublin. We have been growing it in a very organic way and we don't push things beyond what we think is possible."

Big challenges

One of the big challenges is finding staff with the right mix of training and interests: "We know what we do works – we are starting to get good evidence of that – but getting the staff with the hard and soft skills

and who also believe in what we are doing and our value system will be the real trick to it." Burke is also hoping to grow the social enterprise by running leadership courses for young people who are keen to push themselves a little farther.

"We have designed a leadership and communications module that we want to roll out with schools and youth clubs," he says. "We have also developed an expeditionary personal development programme and with luck we are going to have young people sign up for days of backpacking and developing team and leadership skills.

"And ultimately, we hope that will build up our funds for the work with young people with social and behavioural difficulties."