

FREEDOM DRIVER

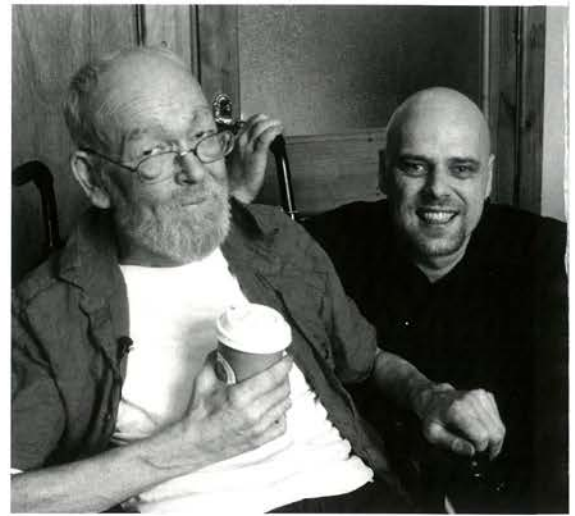
ICCL Human Rights Film Awards:
Winner 2nd Prize

Dara Gallagher

IT'S ONE THING to be born with a disability but entirely another to become disabled in adulthood, I imagine. Because disability snuck up on me when in my mid-forties I found it hard to deal with. Like many men, I tried to ignore it. It seems to have begun with a funny tingling in the skin of my hands—as if my skin was too tight. I had been sailing and acting as bowman, with hands constantly in seawater and so I tried hand cream. It didn't work. Then I started losing weight; I began to have difficulty walking; and my hands became less responsive. I now needed to hold or pick up a glass with both hands. It was not easy. Finally I was coerced into seeing a neurologist. On the 20th April 2000 I shuffled into Beaumont and was put into a bed.

(Memo to men: don't be dumb. See your doctor if you suspect anything is going wrong with your body. Had I taken myself to see a neurologist early rather than waiting, there's a greater than 50% chance I would not be writing this in a wheelchair).

It was the last time I walked. I left hospital in September and watched the Olympics in the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dun Laoghaire. I still couldn't walk, but I was well trained in independent living by the splendid Occupational Therapist. I found it tough to take and I still find it hard that spontaneity has absented itself from my life. Now every trip needs as much planning as a small war. I found out the hard way that disabled people are still marginalised, that building codes have been ignored and that many of the buildings which got planning permission in the recent boom still have no access or ramps. As for accessible toilets and bathrooms—I have always to check ahead. Often they are used as store rooms and



Above: Dara Gallagher & Fran Cassidy

Below: 2011 ICCL Human Rights Film Awards Jury and Shortlistees
Back: Peter O'Doherty (Cameraman, Freedom Driver); Patrick Tierney (Director, Election of Discontent); Hilary Fennell (Director, Hearing Silence); Fran Cassidy (Director, Freedom Driver), James Morris (Jury Member and Chair of Irish Film Board); Jury Member and Director Ken Wardrop; Grainne Humphreys (Jury member and Director of JDIFF); Barry O'Donoghue (Producer, Head Space).
Front: Jury Members John Kelleher, Stephen Rea, Brenda Fricker, Senator David Norris with Dara Gallagher (star of Freedom Driver) & Elizabeth Petcu (star of Hearing Silence)



I have to compete with spare bar stools, buckets and mops. The same applies to travel—I can't just get online and book a flight or hotel. I have to contact the airline by phone 48 hour before flying in order that they can get organised. I have to phone the hotel to double-check about the room being truly accessible, as often they lack roll in showers or even a shower seat (Improvising, I have had quite a few showers in plastic patio chairs). I have been in some bathrooms where a well-meaning hotelier has spent good money only to end up with something useless and possibly dangerous, all because of a bad architect.

It didn't take me long to discover that people with disabilities are represented by a bewildering array of charitable organizations, and some are now effectively huge businesses. They have done great work down the years but many of them seem to accept the medical model of disability, which regards disability as a medical problem. This turns us into a problem, to be solved and dealt with by service-providers, rather than as fully human members of society, with the same hopes, desires and wishes as everyone else.

I am a member of several organisations but in particular the Centre for Independent Living (the spelling is because the movement began in the US. What is Independent Living? An American definition states: *Essentially, it is living just like everyone else—having opportunities to make decisions that affect one's life, able to pursue activities of one's own*

choosing—limited only in the same ways that one's non disabled neighbors are limited.

Independent living should not be defined in terms of living on one's own, being employed in a job fitting one's capabilities and interests, or having an active social life. These are aspects of living independently. Independent living has to do with self-determination. It is having the right and the opportunity to pursue a course of action. And, it is having the freedom to fail—and to learn from one's failures, just as non disabled people do. There are, of course, individuals who have certain cognitive impairments which may affect their abilities to make complicated decisions or pursue complex activities. For these individuals, Independent Living means having every opportunity to be as self-sufficient as possible.

Independent living. It isn't easy, and it can be risky. But millions of people with disabilities rate it higher than a life of dependency, narrow opportunities and unfulfilled expectations.

Every two years disabled people from all over the EU travel to Strasbourg to lobby our MEPS and the EU itself for Disability Rights. In 2009, Fran Cassidy and I made a film around the Strasbourg Freedom Drive, and about my life as a disabled man. Many films on disability are 'worthy', and frankly, can be dull and preachy. I hope you won't find 'Freedom Driver' to be one of those, and that you can laugh along with me.

We were stunned when 'Freedom Driver' not only was shortlisted but came second in the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) Human Rights Film Awards presented at the Irish Film Institute. Ours was the only totally independent film, as we begged, blagged and borrowed the minuscule budget. All the others had professional crews and State funding. Freedom Driver is available to view free of charge on Vimeo at:

<http://vimeo.com/24526248>

As a fledgling filmmaker I knew that I needed a strong well-told story to make up for my relative lack of technical experience and resources. My hope was to reach the minimal technical standard necessary for a cinema showing and rely on the strength of my character and story to make it compelling. Dara seemed the obvious choice. He is intelligent, likeable and interesting and has an appealing subversive wit. Both prior and subsequent to acquiring his disability he has led a spirited and interesting life. He also has the ability to be entertaining about a deeply serious issue."

Fran Cassidy, Director of 'Freedom Driver'

"Film is a powerful craft, capable in a few shots to give insights into the most complex of issues. The aim of the ICCL Human Rights Film Awards is to encourage filmmakers to apply their craft to casting a light on human rights. 'Freedom Driver', by first time director Fran Cassidy did this extremely effectively by capturing through the humorous, engaging and inspiring voice of Dara Gallagher the work of the ILM, and the challenges faced by those with disabilities in Ireland and around the world."

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