



When the best reward is change

The new social entrepreneur is flourishing, despite the economic climate, writes Sandra O'Connell

When David Egan, an exercise physiologist, was invited into his children's school to talk about his job, little did he know it would lead to a whole new life. The health and nutrition expert, who worked with Ireland's top athletes at the University of Limerick, learnt far more than the children that day.

"I thought that all kids were pretty much like mine, that they ate a reasonably healthy diet and got lots of exercise. It was a rude awakening to find out that was really not so," said Egan. A lot of children live on highly processed junk food and "by far the most common leisure pursuit is to sit on the sofa watching TV", he discovered.

He began to visit other schools on a voluntary basis to talk about the need for good food and exercise.

"I found children who had been hospitalised with scurvy. I found eight-year-olds who could not identify an onion," he said.

In the end, he gave up the day job and set up RedBranch, a not-for-profit organisation focused on promoting health among schoolchildren. He now devotes all his time to childhood health.

Egan developed partnerships with food companies around the country, supplying healthy snacks such as fruit and pasta to schools to replace the sugary snacks and fizzy drinks sold in vending machines.

RedBranch raises money by taking a commission on the healthy foods sold.

The challenges Egan faces as a social entrepreneur are very similar to those of a commercial entrepreneur, he believes.

"Giving up the day job was a big leap and it scared the daylight out of me at first," he said. "I have taken a pay cut of about 50% to do this and while that is manageable — foreign holidays are few and far between — it was the financial insecurity that I found hardest to get my head around."

"Entrepreneurial friends who run commercial businesses are in the same boat. Now I see myself as just as much an entre-

preneur as them; the only difference is that my bottom line is not financial, it is making social change."

One of the first ports of call for anybody looking to set up a social enterprise is The Wheel (thewheel.ie), a national support group for community organisations. It provides information and advice on everything from corporate governance issues for charities to potential sources of funding, says Ivan Cooper, director of advocacy at The Wheel, which has about 800 member organisations.

Cooper says that there has been a significant increase in the number of people seeking to use their skills in a socially entrepreneurial way over the past three years.

"One of the first questions we ask is whether or not setting up an organisation from scratch is really the right way to go," said Cooper. "Very often the individual would be better off finding someone else who is already operating and helping them." In his experience, there are differences in the traits required of a commercial and a social entrepreneur.

"You need empathy and patience, which are not typically found in commercial entrepreneurs," said Cooper. "Equally, you can't have a bull-headed approach."

"In a social enterprise, you are dealing with people and the key to success is to build constituencies of support."

As for financial support, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (socialentrepreneurs.ie) is the place to go. Through its annual awards programme, this organisation provides direct, financial support to emerging social entrepreneurs to help them get their ideas off the ground.

It offers an investment of €6,000 plus training over a 12-month period. It also offers second-round support of €80,000, as well as a training, mentoring and coaching package over two years.

Since its foundation in 2005, the organisation has made awards to 113 social entrepreneurs, directly investing €2.8m.

Activities now being funded include those that involve childcare, older people and those with disabilities.

This year the organisation saw a record 200 applicants for its awards, up from 120 last year and from just 20 four years ago, said Sean Coughlan, chief executive of Social Entrepreneurs Ireland.

"We are witnessing the crest of a wave that was already building before the downturn took hold," he said. "But while commercial start-ups have a battery of resources open to them, we try to plug the gap in the social enterprise space, whether it is in terms of funding or mentoring."

Ashoka, a global association of social entrepreneurs (ashoka.ie), focuses on supporting second-stage social enterprises, providing a suite of finance and other support totalling €1.25m annually. "What we look to fund are ideas that have moved beyond idea stage, where the person is already involved in new, system-changing activities," said Paul O'Hara, director of Ashoka.

"The people we are looking to support are those who have the same drive, ambition and creativity of the traditional entrepreneur. For the commercial entrepreneur, the first step is to spot an opportunity. With social enterprises, the first step is to identify a need. Other than that, the skill sets required are the same."

He, too, believes there is growing interest in social entrepreneurship and cites the fact that Harvard Business School now sees more students taking social enterprise than finance as an elective course as evidence of this.

"You can make a living out of social enterprise and it's not about choosing a life of poverty. There's nothing wrong with doing well while doing good," said O'Hara.

Irish universities also offer courses in social enterprise. The Centre for Nonprofit Management at Trinity College Dublin (cnm.tcd.ie) runs courses in fundraising, in association with the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.

For Shane Downer, chief executive of the International Adoption Association, the downturn should help spawn a number of social enterprises.

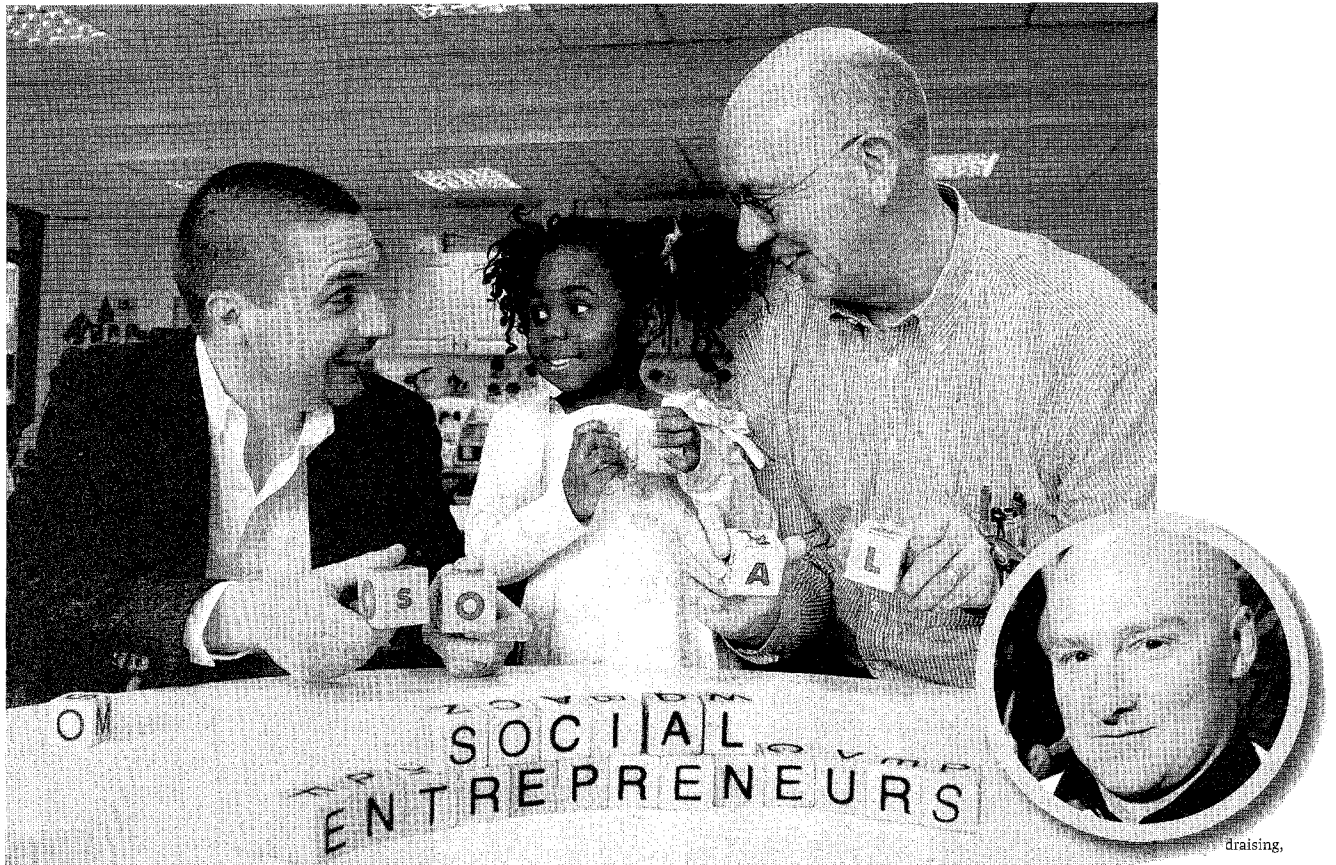
"This is an opportune time for people in the social entrepreneurship space," he said.

"As services are cut centrally, not-for-profit organisations have an opportunity to develop sustainable services and solutions."

He recently attended Trinity College's course in fun- with good results. "As a result of it, we now have a strategic plan, a key element of which is resource acquisition," said Downer.

Rachel Collier, chief executive of Young Social Innovators, which aims to promote social awareness and active citizenship among teenagers, agrees. She set up her not-for-profit organisation in 2001 and today employs five people full-time and an army of volunteers. "We have to create value and convince people of the value of what we do in order to get them to invest in us," she said.

And although she might never be rich, there are enormous fringe benefits for social entrepreneurs. "In our case, to see 5,000 young people all out there doing good in their community, as we have this year, you couldn't buy that."



Coughlan, left, pictured with Dara Hogan, of social enterprise Fledglings Childcare, has witnessed a record number of applications for awards. Inset, Egan