

Beautiful world

Bogdan Negomireanu came to Ireland from Romania in 2013, believing Ireland could offer him a better life.

Joanna Marsden met him recently in his adopted hometown of Athlone to find out whether this country has lived up to his expectations



Bogdan Negomireanu

Bogdan enjoys a relaxing art class at IWA's Clonbrusk Centre in Athlone



"Athlone is a beautiful place," Bogdan Negomireanu tells me, as he welcomes me to IWA's Clonbrusk Centre. "It's peaceful and quiet, and actually, it looks a bit like my home city of Targu in Romania. Being close to nature is important to me because where I come from we have mountains, plains, the Black Sea, the Danube River. Most Irish people don't realise it, but Romania is one of the most beautiful places in Europe."

Born in 1976, from the beginning Bogdan's life was shaped by the strict communist regime in Romania. "When I was four-months-old, I was given an overdose of the polio vaccine and I contracted polio. The Government had a controlling, dictatorial attitude to all areas of medicine, and I was one of many children to suffer."

For the first 14 years of his childhood, Bogdan's life was structured around a rehabilitation programme that consisted of three-month stints of intensive physiotherapy in a residential institution, with three-month breaks in-between where he could live at home with his parents and brother.

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Despite the disruption to his education, Bogdan was naturally academic and went on to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in Law, and later a Masters in European Affairs. "I left university at the age of 26 and, once I had passed all the professional exams, I set up practice as a lawyer."

It was an auspicious start but Bogdan soon began to struggle with his career. "It became clear that all the clerks, and even the judges, were trying to avoid me. Clients didn't call me. Because of my disability, nobody wanted to work with me. I hadn't expected it to be so bad."

Bogdan realised it would be impossible to make a living in law, and instead he turned his hand to various other types

of self-employment. “Over the years, I tried many different things – importing second-hand cars from Germany, selling computer parts & phones, and selling watches.”

All the time he was self-employed, Bogdan kept applying for jobs but, apart from a temporary post as a web designer in 2008, he was unsuccessful. “I must explain that in Romania there is almost zero percent physical accessibility to the built environment. This makes it very hard for people to give you a job, even if they want to. Over the years, there were a few good people who really wanted to take me on, but the practical obstacles were too great.”

The recession made a bad situation even worse. “The ex-communist countries have terrible problems with discrimination, and the recession seemed to bring out the worst in people. I began to feel that I’d had enough. Life was too hard, and something had to change...”

In 2012, an old friend of Bogdan’s called to his home. “This friend (also called Bogdan) had moved to Ireland the year before and he was back in Romania for a holiday. He said, ‘Listen Bogdan, Ireland’s a beautiful country. It’s wheelchair accessible. The weather’s shit, but the people are wonderful. Come back with me.’”

Bogdan didn’t need time to think. “I knew this was a huge opportunity. Disabled people are completely marginalised in Romania. Ireland sounded like a place with less discrimination and more opportunities.”

Bogdan’s brother Razuan decided to come with him. “It was very hard for my parents, as you can imagine. My mother was crying for days. They understood perfectly why we had to go, but there was a conflict between their hearts and minds.”

In the end, Bogdan’s parents not only supported the decision to move, they even helped Bogdan and Razuan get the money together for the journey. “They did it because they wanted what was best for me.”

When Bogdan and his brother arrived in Athlone in March 2013, it was relatively easy to find a wheelchair accessible private rental, but the next priority was finding work. “My brother got a job in the hotel sector, as our friend had done before. I hoped I would be the same.”

Since then Bogdan has sent out over 100 CVs, and so far has only been invited to two interviews. “I’m not giving up, but this experience has given me the impression that although there is no overt discrimination in Ireland, there may still be some beneath the service.”

Bogdan’s application for Disability Allowance was also rejected. “They rejected my first application for DA because I didn’t meet the criteria for habitual residency, but I recently re-applied and I hope I will get it this time around.”

Currently Bogdan’s brother and his friend support him financially. “They both have huge hearts and they have been providing for me for over a year and a half now. They are amazing, but I don’t want to continue to depend on them.”

Talking about Disability Allowance is clearly upsetting for Bogdan. “It’s not just about getting the benefit. What

I want to say to anyone reading this is that I didn’t come here to beg the Irish State for money. I don’t want to live on ‘social’. I want to earn my money. I hope Disability Allowance will be a temporary way of living. I am still planning to find a job as soon as possible.”

Despite the challenges Bogdan has faced in relation to Disability Allowance and employment, he says moving to Ireland has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for him. “One of the best things happened when, after I’d been in Ireland just a few weeks, I decided to look on the

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Bogdan in the computer room at IWA’s Clonbrusk Centre, where he puts his IT skills to good use teaching other members

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internet to see if there were any support groups for disabled people. That's how I found out about my local IWA. I called down to meet staff members Monica McGowan-Hughes and Richard Ross here, and I asked them, 'Can I be a member?' The answer was immediate. 'Yes of course you can. Next Wednesday, the IWA bus will come and pick you up.'

Bogdan has been coming to the centre two days a week ever since. "The most important thing in my life at the moment is being a member of IWA. I have lots of friends here. Monica is an amazing person – so warm, and always looking out for me. When I arrived I only had a manual chair and IWA helped me organise a power chair."

Another IWA staff member, John Tynan, drops in during our interview to see how Bogdan is getting on. "John is always looking out for me," Bogdan tells me. "He is my closest Irish friend, and like a big brother. We talk for hours about our lives and have a lot of respect for each other."

On his days in the centre, Bogdan uses his IT skills to support other members. "When I'm here, I volunteer to teach computers to the other members – I like to help others as much as I can."

This summer, Bogdan's parents visited Ireland for the first time to see where their sons had settled. "They both love to travel, so it was very exciting for them. I brought my mum into IWA to meet everyone here, and she was amazed. We don't have places like this in Romania. The centre is

in a wonderful new building, with a computer room and a beautiful garden. Now my mother has seen it here, she's at peace. She knows I'm having a good life. She feels relief for me."

Bogdan adds, "I love my life and I love being part of a community here – it feels like home now. I like the way everyone in Athlone says hello in the street, even if they don't know you. Irish people are really friendly with immigrants – that's a fact. I like to talk to people – one of my rules in life is to try to make people smile."

Naturally Bogdan still misses his family in Romania. "I talk to my mum on skype all the time, but it's harder for my grandmother. When I ring and she recognises my voice, she just asks, 'When are you coming home?' It breaks my heart because I love her so much. When this article is published, I'll send her a copy and I hope it will make her happy."

One of Bogdan's favourite places is the community garden at the Clonbrusk Centre, which was created in 2014 by members and volunteers. Before I leave, he takes me on a tour of the garden, showing me the statues, beds, and a tiled picnic table that includes the names of all the members who helped build it, including Bogdan. "I spend a lot of time here, I love the fresh air. I call myself as 'an observer of life and people'. I like to find a hidden corner and just watch people, butterflies and birds, or the sky. I love the beauty in the world – in the smallest things like a flower, a stone, a drop of rain. Nature makes me feel good. When I'm sitting here, I feel very positive. I'm not a churchgoer, but I have a strong faith. I know I'll get a job in the end. I am focused on that objective. It will happen."

As we prepare to go to press, we've just had an update from Bogdan. His application for Disability Allowance has finally been approved. This is a great relief for Bogdan, although he emphasises that his job hunt will continue!



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Bogdan in Clonbrusk Community Garden

Bogdan tending the raised beds with volunteer Lorna Folan. Being close to nature in the Clonbrusk Community Garden is one of Bogdan's greatest pleasures

