



Stephen Cluskey

# GOING PLACES

Stephen Cluskey, accessible transport campaigner and founder of Wheelchairtaxi.ie and GoAccessible365.com, recently won 'Emerging Social Entrepreneur' at the prestigious David Manley Entrepreneur Awards. He talks to *Joanna Marsden* about his attitude to life and business

**T**hirty-year-old Stephen Cluskey describes himself as naturally entrepreneurial. "Obviously there are practical benefits to being self-employed when you have a disability, but if I hadn't had my accident I'm sure I would have still ended up setting up my own business. My objective was always to develop something myself from scratch, and I know I have the work ethic to sustain it."

Stephen, who lives in the rural area of Leas Cross in North County Dublin, was 18 and in sixth year at Belvedere College when an accident resulted in a spinal injury. "I was messing on a hay bale when I fell. I ended up spending three weeks in traction, followed by over a year in the

NRH in Dun Laoghaire – during which time I managed to complete my Leaving Certificate."

Despite many tough periods during his rehabilitation Stephen says, "I'm a naturally optimistic person and I never felt really depressed. I've always been positive about the future, because in recent years there have been many new developments and trials that give real hope to people with spinal injuries."

Before his accident, Stephen had been a disciplined, sporty person – "I was out training everyday, playing rugby, soccer, and a high level of tennis with the Leinster Squad." When he left the NRH, he was confident that he could take the next stage of his physical rehabilitation into his own

hands. “I made the decision to dedicate the first six years of my life post-accident to maximising my recovery through a strict physio and exercise regime.”

Stephen’s first step was to spend several months at the John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. “While there, I consulted with doctors involved in cutting-edge rehabilitation, including Christopher Reeve’s doctor, and I developed a personalised programme of intensive rehabilitation.” When Stephen got home, he recruited a physiotherapist from Columbia to come to Ireland and work with him, four-hours-a-day, five-days-a-week. He also bought specialist exercise equipment, including an electro-stimulation bike, which uses electrical stimulation to regenerate leg muscles.

Stephen was pleased with his progress in the five years following his accident, but in 2008 he experienced a setback when a cyst on his spine caused dangerous fluid build-up. He found himself weighing up a number of complex treatment options and again decided to take matters into his own hands, opting to travel to Lisbon for an operation. “I wanted to have the cyst removed, but I also wanted to make sue that the operation wasn’t one that would disqualify me from any future clinical trials. It was very important to me to leave that door open.” The operation resulted in some further loss of mobility to Stephen’s right arm but slight improvements to mobility on his left side.

In 2009, Stephen says he reached a point where his physical rehabilitation had plateaued. “With no obvious gains being made, I decided it was time to take it down a notch. I felt like I’d been so focused on my physio regime that I wasn’t really living.” Since then, Stephen has continued using a standing frame and doing physiotherapy once a week but he says, “It’s no longer all-consuming.”

Freeing up his time in this way has enabled Stephen to focus on his education, and he has undertaken courses in Economics at UCD and in History & Psychology at DCU,

## “Regular taxi after regular taxi passed me as I waited on the street. I tell you, that night really made me feel ‘different’”

as well as completing an Honours Degree in Business with the Open University. “I’ve always had an instinct for economics and commercial business – growing up I learnt a lot watching my father who was a farmer – but through my studies, I’ve also become interested in the social impact of business, and the growing sense that companies have a moral responsibility to improve the society in which they operate.”

A personal experience became the catalyst for Stephen’s first business idea. “Like lots of wheelchair users, I was finding it hard to access suitable transport. I was particularly aware of the challenges in getting a wheelchair accessible taxi – and in the aftermath of the recession, the situation was clearly getting worse. I hit an all-time low one night in 2012 when I went into town for a friend’s birthday and literally spent five hours trying to get a wheelchair accessible taxi to bring me home. Regular taxi after regular taxi passed me as I waited on the street. I tell you, that night really made me feel ‘different’. In the end, I had to ring Mam and Dad, wake them up, and get them to come in to town to collect me.

“When I was reflecting on that experience it crossed my mind that taxi drivers themselves were generally pretty helpful on the occasions I tracked them down, but the problem was getting hold of them via the taxi companies. I started to think: if only I could cut out the middle man and put passengers with disabilities in direct contact with drivers...”

This idea led to the creation of Stephen’s website, Wheelchairtaxi.ie. “As well as linking taxi drivers up with passengers, the site includes details on the taxis listed, such as model of vehicle, a photo of the entry system, driver working times and feedback from passengers.”

Stephen adds, “While I viewed the site as a business, I wasn’t expecting to make much income from it in the early years – and so far any money made has been reinvested in the project. The site has been consistently supported by advertising and a number of sponsors, including Bluebird Care, who have been particularly generous.”

Advocating for social change in relation to accessible transport was always a key motivator for Stephen. “As I began to understand the underlying issues better, I started working with IWA’s Transport Manager Tony Maher, lobbying Government Ministers on measures to increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis in Ireland.”

Through his links with IWA, Stephen was appointed in December 2013 to the Government’s Taxi Advisory Committee, which advises Government on taxi issues. “At



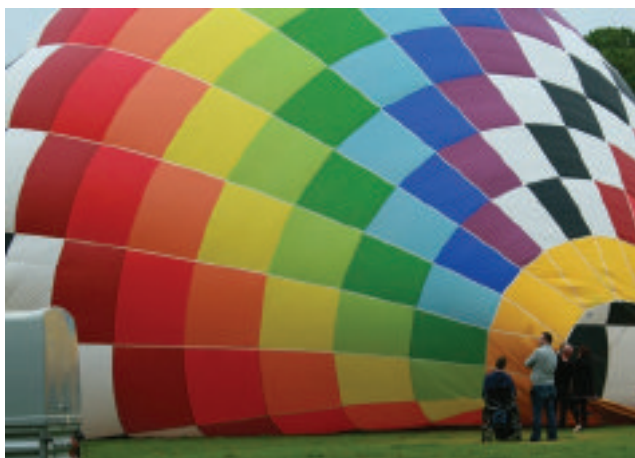
The homepage of Stephen’s new website, GoAccessible365.com, due to be launched very soon!

Photos courtesy of Aidan Murphy

“As the ground got further away, it felt like we were the only people in the world – there was an incredible serenity and peacefulness”

Stephen and pilot Aidan Murphy take off from Bellinter House Hotel for the 1,000ft flight over Co Meath. They landed one hour later in the Higgins family farm near Trim





As he awaits the flight, Stephen admires the 90,000 cubic feet balloon, manufactured in Bristol, UK, by Cameron Balloons

that stage a new Taxi Regulation Bill was on the way, and we were specifically looking at ways in which we could make it more affordable for taxi drivers to purchase an accessible vehicle.”

After the bill was published in April 2014, Stephen and others involved in the process were then successful in achieving the introduction of a €1 million grant scheme from the National Transport Authority, designed to subsidise the purchase of wheelchair accessible taxis. “I am fairly pleased with the results. In 2013 only 16 new wheelchair taxis came on the road, but in the six months following the publication of the bill, another 130 came on stream. We’re still not back to the levels of five years ago, but this is significant progress and I also think a lot of the new accessible taxis are of a higher standard.”

Stephen says that as a person with a disability he feels a responsibility to do what he can to improve the transport situation for others in similar situations, particularly those in the early stages of rehabilitation. “There is so much to learn when you have a new injury – I’ve been there – so I’m glad if anything I can do now can help make life easier for others starting out.”

He adds, “When it comes to advocacy, I feel I can be more impactful if I focus on one particular issue – in my case transport – rather than skimming the surface of lots of different issues.”

Since its creation, Stephen has broadened the scope of the listings on Wheelchairtaxi.ie to include car hire, coach hire, community transport organisations, and even boats. He is currently working on plans to add accessible tourism attractions and hotels. As part of this expansion, Wheelchairtaxi.ie will eventually be incorporated into a larger site called GoAccessible365.com, which Stephen describes as “a web and mobile-based search facility to quickly and easily source all forms of wheelchair accessible transport, accommodation and attractions throughout

Ireland.” He also emphasises that as a social enterprise, the new site will focus on “raising standards, promoting independence and pushing social change.”

Wheelchairtaxi.ie was nominated for ‘Best Listing Site’ at the Eircom Spiders in both 2012 and 2013, and in February 2015, Stephen’s success was further recognised when he won ‘Emerging Social Entrepreneur’ at the prestigious David Manley Social Entrepreneur Awards. The award prize includes €1,000 in cash plus a mentoring package. “With competition so tough, just getting down to the final three in the ‘Social’ category was a great honour, so finding out I’d won my category felt absolutely brilliant.”

In addition to his advocacy and business projects, Stephen has also recently designed and built his own house to very high accessibility specifications without compromising on aesthetics (a project so impressive that it will be profiled in a separate article in *SpokeOut* later this year), and has even found time for a little travel and adventure along the way. “One recent highlight was a hot air balloon ride in an amazing wheelchair accessible balloon owned by a local guy called Aidan Murphy. It was something I’d always wanted to do, but it took months of waiting and planning because weather conditions have to be absolutely perfect. One day last September we finally took off from the front lawn of Bellinter House Hotel in Co Meath. As the ground got further away, it felt like we were the only people in the world – there was an incredible serenity and peacefulness. About an hour later, we came down in a random farmer’s field on the banks of the river Boyne near Trim. Cows and goats were grazing around us, and we watched as the children ran out of the farmhouse towards us, screeching with delight. The whole experience reminded me that accessible transport is not just a practical thing, it can also be magical sometimes...”

To find out more, visit [www.Wheelchairtaxi.ie](http://www.Wheelchairtaxi.ie) and [www.Goaccessible365.com](http://www.Goaccessible365.com)



Stephen looks up in anticipation as owner and pilot Aidan Murphy prepares for take off