

SOCIAL MEDIA *star*

Paddy Smyth has made a name for himself on social media and is now a brand ambassador & TV personality, known to many for his appearance on *First Dates*. When *Joanna Marsden* asked him about the motivation for sharing his life on social media, he was endearingly open about his deep-rooted desire for acceptance



Paddy recently launched IWA's Angels Campaign (see p16 for details)

I've arranged to meet Paddy Smyth at trendy eatery *Industry* on Drury Street, Dublin 2. When I arrive I find him jostling for position in the busy lunchtime queue. He's instantly recognisable in pink dungarees and as we sit down with our bowls of soup he tells me he bought the dungarees in Penneys. "I used to be snobby about labels but I've come to really like Penneys. A few weeks ago I did an advertising campaign for them. I was thrilled to do it because when I was growing up I never saw anyone disabled in media or promoting fashion brands. That absence gave me a strong message about how society viewed people with disabilities."

Twenty-nine-year-old Paddy was born with cerebral palsy and uses crutches to walk. Brought up in Sutton, Dublin, he explains that he is part of a "complicated family" in that he has older siblings from his dad's first marriage and much younger siblings from his dad's third marriage. "I'm the middle one in a round sort of way. My mum was my dad's second wife and she died when I was five years old." Paddy shows me a tattoo on his left collarbone saying 'Summertime'. "That's in honour of my mum. *Summertime* [the Ella Fitzgerald version] was her favourite song. She had cancer when she was pregnant with me but she kept going until I was five. If she's up there somewhere I want her to know that even though I get on with life and love my stepmum, I haven't forgotten her."

As a child, Paddy craved attention. "There was something about performing that made me feel gratified.

I wanted to belong, to be accepted. Perhaps it was partly because my mum had died and my family unit felt fragmented. I remember one time when I was about six, we were going on a family holiday and on the plane I insisted on going to the toilet on my own. Once I got up there, I asked the air hostess if I could sing a song. She turned on the sound system and there I was, this little boy singing *Molly Malone* from the top of the plane!"

He continues, "Like lots of young people, I felt my family didn't get me and I wanted to escape into the world of film and music. My dad would ask me what I was going to be when I grew up and I would say that I wanted to be famous. 'Famous for what, though?' Dad would

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say. I didn't have an answer but his reaction gave me an anger, a drive. I was angry because in some ways he was right. I didn't have any one particular talent. I just knew I wanted to live a 'larger than life' life."

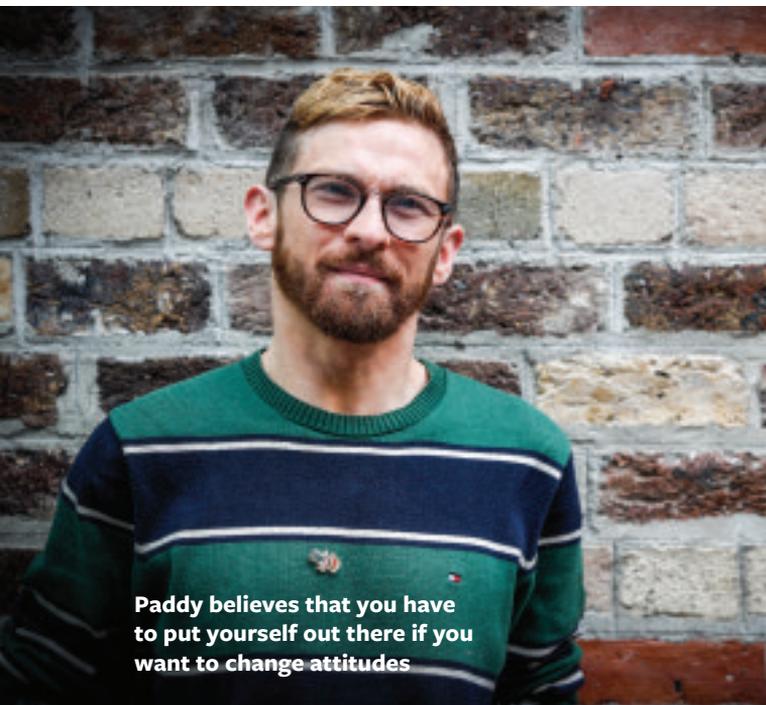
Paddy describes his dad as an older father with a traditional outlook. "He didn't understand disability – and he definitely didn't understand being gay. I was a soft,

emotional little boy and he was a man's man. Although I got mollycoddled in small ways, like making sure I won board games, he believed a father's job was to make sure his kids could stand on their own two feet. When I moved from the CRC School to an all boys secondary school, I was constantly bullied, and my dad would say, 'You have to learn how to fight for yourself. I'm not going to be here forever.' Eventually, I started to learn ways of using humour to deflect the harassment. In the end it



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Paddy on Fleet Street in Dublin’s City Centre



worked so well that I actually became popular.”

After finishing school, Paddy studied Media & Communications at Colaiste Dhulaigh, and then went to London to look for a job. “I was too young though. My dad had always told me it wouldn’t be easy but I wasn’t ready for the letter after letter of rejections. I eventually got an internship but I couldn’t afford the rent and I remember one night I slept in the office. I just couldn’t face asking my dad for help. I was scared he was right. I was nothing. I wasn’t able for it. I came back from London with my tail between my legs.”

Paddy is emotional as he remembers this tough period. “I was lost. I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. I knew I could make people laugh. I knew I was open and I wasn’t afraid to be vulnerable. But that was about it.”

To make ends meet, Paddy started working as a charity fundraiser in shopping centres. He soon discovered that he was a natural salesman. “I could see that people responded to my openness and humour.”

Around that time a couple of Paddy’s closest friends had started to build profiles on social media, and they encouraged him to follow suit. “Disability is only a tiny part of who I am, but I thought, why can’t I turn it into an advantage? It gets people’s attention. Yes, people want to put you in a box and make your life about disability, but when they follow me they see I’m like everyone else. I want to party, get drunk, make mistakes. Sometimes I’ll be fun, sometimes I get upset.”

Paddy has become known as a ‘disabled influencer’ on Snapchat, Twitter & Instagram. He says he sees social media as “a real window” into his life. “I suppose in a way I’m making my life the art. Social media has given me a forum to express myself. I’m not scared about letting

people in. I’m happy to talk about everything – my family, dating, my sexual escapades!”

Paddy calls his followers on social media his ‘disablers’. “I don’t see the word ‘disability’ as negative. At least it gets a reaction. “I’d rather use words people love or hate. The word ‘enabled’ on the other hand is a word I’m a bit ‘blah’ about!”

Amongst other things, Paddy describes himself as a disability activist. “I don’t think changing attitudes to disability is about shouting from the roof tops. It’s about educating people, and if we don’t socialise with people, hang out together, how is that going to happen? If you are giving out, put yourself out there! Make them see what things are like! My goal is not to change policy or law. I don’t have visions of myself shaking hands with officials in some big building in Brussels. I just want to say we can have a life, get a job, live a full life. We can even work in fashion!”

Being on social media has led to numerous career opportunities. “It can be a fantastic ‘in’. I got headhunted for a tech sales job. I took the job and my life did a 360. I’ve ended up working for a cool tech company. And I got my TV break when RTE’s *Two Tube* asked me to come in and talk about my Snapchat and rise on social media.”

Paddy was selected to appear on TV3’s *First Dates* in late 2016, and won viewers’ hearts with his frankness about the challenges of dating as a gay man with a disability. The morning after the show aired, he was trending on Twitter and a celebrity agent called and signed him. Since then he has appeared on shows such as *The Six O’Clock Show* and *The Ray D’Arcy Show* and has participated in promotional campaigns for brands such as Centra, HTC, Lidl and Penneys. He says, “I saw getting picked for the Penneys campaign as a sign that doors are finally opening in the fashion world for disabled people.”

Despite his media success, he has kept up his day job in the technology company. “I have time to follow my passions but it gives me balance and a safety net. And you do need to take a break from Snapchat and Instagram at times. You feel conscious that you are selling who you are, trying to be authentic. Social media is a double-edged sword. It can build you up, open doors and be a real platform – but it can also make you feel empty and one-dimensional. I want to be loved, but I’m not silly; I know the feedback you get on social media is not real love.”

Paddy says he thinks with his emotions. “I know who I am and I have a lot of ambition. I’d love to present a chat show one day. I now appreciate that my dad gave me a core strength and determination. I still worry about failure, about the harshness of the media world, and I know we all have a sell-by date in the glam stakes, but the last thing I want to be is boring. Right now, I’m having a fun ride. If I was giving anyone advice, I’d ask them, how do you see yourself, and I’d say, don’t be afraid to be that person.” ■

For more: #DisabledLife or @paddy Smyth