

Brendan provides a Speedy solution to getting to grips with the Internet

CITY LIVES

Michelle McDonagh meets **Brendan Smith**, Community and Educational Outreach Officer with the Digital Enterprise Research Institute at NUIG.

From selling computers and running pubs in Ireland and Iceland to teaching Internet courses to people from all walks of life, the career path of Brendan Smith has certainly been varied, to say the very least.

The self-professed technology advocate, educationalist, Irish cultural enthusiast, republican, socialist, environmentalist, wildlife campaigner and community activist wears so many hats that it's difficult to keep up with him. The nickname that was bestowed upon him during his student years in Galway, 'Speedy' certainly still fits him amply today.

As Community and Educational Outreach Officer with the Digital Enterprise Research Institute (DERI) at his alma mater NUI Galway, Brendan provides a range of Internet courses which are designed to show people from all walks of life how the World Wide Web can improve their quality of life.

As well as business people, artists, community activists and so forth, he teaches socially disadvantaged individuals and groups including the disabled, the Brazilian community in Gort and senior citizens.

Brendan is passionate about spreading the word of the Internet: "The power of the Internet is remarkable. Not only is it a source of so much knowledge, the new web tools now available allow lay persons to make free international phone calls, develop and maintain their own personal websites, compile an online photo gallery or produce regular online newsletters for their organisations."

"The Internet is truly a liberating and democratic force and there is an explosion of communications between people worldwide."

However, Brendan is concerned that unless all sectors are provided with opportunities to embrace the new technology of our rapidly changing world, then a 'knowledge gap' will exist that will create a divisive society.

In his other role as an educational consultant, Brendan works with the Galway Education Centre and DERI to promote the beneficial use of science and technology.

"My main objectives are to promote the use of science and technology amongst young people, particularly at



Brendan Smith: The human race should be the guardians of Earth, not its destroyers.

Primary Level, in order to try to overcome the serious drop in people taking these subjects at Third Level in science graduates at Third Level, a trend which if it continues will ultimately impact on Ireland's economy."

With the Galway Education Centre, Brendan coordinates the Medtronic-funded 'Scientist of the Future' Primary Schools' programme. He previously managed the highly successful four year (2001-2004) 'Fionn' Galway Primary School Science project that helped in the recent introduction of science onto the Primary school curriculum.

Born in Dublin, Brendan moved with his family to Monaghan at the age of 12 and in 1975 he came to Galway for the first time, like many others as a student. He graduated from the

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then UCG with a BA and a hDip and during his time there, he was probably the most radical Students' Union President in the history of the university, as he admits himself.

"It was a great era to be in university in the 1970s with people like Padraic Breathnach and Ollie Jennings. The college was a hive of artistic, cultural and political activity and it spawned a lot of other activities, most notably the Arts Festival."

In 1980, Brendan was involved in opening the first college bar at UCG, a development that was met with much hostility from local publicans. The pub had to be run as a members' club and the Gardaí paid regular visits to ensure that all patrons were properly registered.

On St. Valentine's Day in 1981, Brendan historically introduced condoms to the college for the first time

and during his term as SU President, he organised the Ballot Box Campaign (BBC) to fight for students to be allowed to register as voters in the constituency of their college.

After graduating, Brendan worked in an incubator computer company at UCG before setting up software engineering company, TGT in Spiddal with two partners in the early 1980s, at the beginning of the computer revolution.

He was keen to stay in Galway at this stage because he had fallen in love with Monivea woman Cepta Mannion who worked in the USIT travel office and in 1984 the couple married.

Having stayed in the computer business until the 1990s, Brendan then went for a complete change in career taking on the lease of Monroe's Pub in Dominick Street with partners.

"My pubs did more than just sell drink, they actively promoted the Irish language, Irish music, drama, dancing, art and cuisine. Monroe's under my stewardship in the early 1990s was the city's first seven day live music venue. It acted as a catalyst for young 'up and coming' Galway bands, provided a venue for the beginnings of the experimental fusion of Irish music with other musical strands, was the city's premier set-dancing club and popularised Sunday music brunch. In an era when acceptable 'safe' Irish music tended to 'instrumental' only, I helped re-introduce traditional Irish ballads back into the mainstream by providing weekly residencies for musicians such as Sean Tyrrell," he says.

On a progressive social level, Monroe's was the first venue in the city to install baby changing facilities in both male and female toilets and Brendan was the only publican in Galway to break the law by installing condom dispensing machines in the toilets on St. Valentine's Day 1992.

As well as being regularly raided by the Gardaí, receiving much hate-mail and having people standing outside the pub praying for his soul, Brendan was condemned in an encyclical by Bishop Eamon Casey for corrupting the morality of youth by advocating

sex outside marriage and for purposes other than procreation!

Despite this, he remarks: "I really admired Bishop Casey and respected his long years of work of many issues of social justice, including the Irish homeless in Britain and his outspoken views on US involvement with the oppressive regimes of Central America. But on condoms, we fundamentally disagreed. I was not prepared to back down on the sale of condoms and was prepared to go to jail, but just prior to a court appearance on the issue, Haughey's Government changed the law to allow their sale over the pub counter."

Brendan believes that one of his biggest mistakes in life was allowing himself to be persuaded by to take a lease on Salthill club Setanta when the lease ran out on Monroe's because the move out of town was a total disaster.

After the failure of Setanta's, he decided to move abroad – to Iceland, of all places – where he managed the first Irish bar in Reykjavik. Pubs had only been legalised in 1989 in Iceland and Brendan was witness to a culture change in the psyche of the people there – they learnt patience while waiting for a pint of Guinness to settle!

Brendan's wife and son Shane (now 14) had stayed in Ireland while he commuted back and forth every four months or so, but in 1999, he returned home for good. His second son, Dáire (now 6) was born after he came home.

"The most important thing in my life is my beautiful wife, Cepta and our two sons Shane and Dáire. As a family, we have been through the hard times and good times together. Cepta had to raise our oldest son, Shane, by herself for the years that I worked abroad. Even now, she has to put up with my absence from the house for too many nights due to my activities. She is a living angel."

After returning from Iceland, Brendan managed a holiday village in Renville before taking up his current role with DERI and the Galway Education Centre.

As an enthusiastic environmental

and wildlife campaigner, Brendan says he is guided by the principle that "mankind should be the guardian of the planet and not its destroyer."

"I passionately believe that each individual should personally make a commitment to do something positive to protect biodiversity. It is mankind that is, knowingly and increasingly, squeezing the very essence of life from the world's oceans, lands and airways via forest clearances, urban sprawl, habitat destruction, over-fishing, burning fossil fuels and pollution," he states.

In early 1996, Brendan led a residents' campaign for the preservation of a large area east of the Sandy River that finally developed into the Terryland Forest Park project in early 2000. It is planned to plant 500,000 native trees in land of some 120 acres in what is one of Europe's largest urban forest park schemes.

Through his role in Galway for a Safe Environment, Brendan organised many of its mass public protests as well as the petition that was signed by over 22,000 Galwegians that forced

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the City Council to vote against building an incineration in the region.

Wearing yet another of his many caps, Brendan has been actively involved in community issues in Galway since the late 1980s as he believes that ordinary citizens should participate fully in shaping their futures, particularly at a local level. He was recently presented with a Mayor's Award for the significant work he does in this area.

"I recognise that the 'urban sprawl'

phenomena that characterised so much of Irish and global development over the last four decades has led to alienation and a loss of community identity which previously was so associated with our former village-based rural society."

Brendan highlights the need to transform our urban sprawl into urban villages if we are not to destroy the very soul of our people and create soulless ghettos.

The publication of the Galway City Development Board's 10 year Strategy in 2002 was an important step in 'humanising' the city, according to Brendan who is a community representative on the Board.

"Included among its keys provisions was the sustainable development of the city's waterways (Galway is the 'Venice of Ireland'), the creation of 'wildlife corridors' and the establishment of a 'Child-friendly, Disability-friendly, Cyclist-friendly and Pedestrian-friendly City'. These commitments may seem pipe-dreams to many at present but the first tentative steps in achieving these objectives have already been taken."

Brendan was also one of the founding committee members of the Government-initiated RAPID programme in the greater Ballinfolie area where he lives, a suburb that he feels has suffered more than most as a result of bad design and planning.

He is looking forward to final approval being granted by Galway City Council for a major community neighbourhood project for the area that is the result of years of negotiations between a partnership committee of City Hall officials, the St. Columba's Credit Union, Government departments and the local community.

"If this is signed off, Ballinfolie residents could enjoy within a few years the benefits of a major sports hall, a medical centre, coffee house, meeting rooms, and youth facilities in a 'neighbourhood heartland' that will have direct pedestrian and cyclist access into an expanded Terryland Forest Park."

Affordability fuelling the housing crisis, not availability

For many people in Ireland, especially young families, there is a housing crisis. However, it is not a crisis of availability, it is a crisis of affordability.

A recent survey by Threshold showed that around one in ten houses in Galway were actually empty. At the same time we have a waiting list for council houses in some parts of Galway city that stretches to around seven years.

Many young couples stare at houses in estate agents windows costing many hundreds of thousands of euro in disbelief. Perfectly ordinary houses cost around €500,000, which a person earning an average income of around €30,000 is never going to afford.

We are currently facing a situation where single income families earning the average industrial wage will never be able to buy a house, unless prices come down dramatically or incomes go up dramatically or a bit of both.

Clearly if we had a real market and all the empty houses were put up for sale, prices would crash. Investors appear to be holding on to a significant number of empty houses purely as investments in order to keep the market stable.

Some people believe that house prices are going to continue to increase for many years to come. Perhaps they

ON OUR DOORSTEP



NIALL Ó BROLCHÁIN

will. I remember hearing in the '80s about a building in Tokyo that was theoretically worth more than Dublin. Obviously things have changed a bit since then in both directions.

Nowadays, I regularly hear people talking about ordinary enough houses that cost €1million or more without batting an eyelid. Perhaps in a few years time houses in Galway will be worth €1billion each. This will be fine for those who own lots of houses. It will be difficult enough for first time buyers earning salaries of €40,000 or €50,000.

On the social housing front, the Government recently tried to carry out a survey of all people on the waiting list. Naturally enough, many people did not fill it in. To get on to the waiting list you have to have a very low income. With a waiting time of seven years, many incomes improve over time thus disqualifying some of those people who have been on the waiting list the longest.

This social housing system discourages people from seeking higher incomes for fear that they will have to come off the housing list. Obviously it also encourages people to misrepresent their circumstances. Once a tenant is given a social house they can earn as much as they like.

These days we also have these things called affordable houses. These are houses that are somewhat subsidised and only sold to people with relatively low incomes. They are not really that cheap and nothing more than a stopgap measure to give people some hope in a crazy situation.

The current housing situation is a mess. There is a very real fear that it will all end in tears. Surely it is long past time that we stopped looking at houses as investments and once again started looking at them as homes.

What we do in our own homes can affect people far away

While Central and East Africa are parched and people and their stock are in urgent need of water to survive, parts of South Africa have very heavy rains which are causing dangerous floods.

In the last few weeks, many people have drowned in the process of crossing streams that, up to then, had been shallow and acting as roads; now, in the heavy downpour, the streams have turned to fast moving lethal traps that have claimed the lives of some school-children, mothers and babies.

Parts of the outskirts of Johannesburg, where many people live in do-it-yourself homes made out of corrugated iron, plastic sheeting and many other products, people are wading in rain water and have long days of living in rather damp conditions.

A month or so before this, there were complaints of drought. Now that the rains have come in this rather heavy

VIEW OF THE WORLD



ROSE TUELO BROCK

manner, people are praying for the rain to stop. It tends to be like that in these areas. You either spend days praying for rain and then, when it comes with lightning and destructiveness, you find yourselves praying for the rain to stop.

In Zambia, Malawi and East Africa, it is a different story altogether. Wide-

spread drought conditions are affecting not only the people and their stock, but also the wild animals, some of which are forced to raid settled areas for food and water. Pictures of living skeletons of cattle and sheep are heart rending. Such conditions are dangerous not only in leading to famine but also in the disease that can be caused by the rotting of bodies lying around in such large numbers. It can be so bad that even the vultures may not be able to keep up with devouring the various dead and dying animals around.

A long time ago when I was a little girl I recall such a drought in our area. At the beginning, when it started, I recall being excited by the availability of meat resulting from animals dying. However, it soon became a nuisance as the meat was so lean that not only was it tough but that it had little taste and was just of no use to anybody. There was no refrigeration, but even if there had been, the poor quality of the meat would not have

encouraged anybody to freeze the meat then.

In another part of the world in the Philippines, it is another story altogether. A whole village has been buried,

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alive, under a mudslide resulting from a tremor and collapse of a hillside. It is so horrendous to watch people trying to dig out for survivors. The village of Guisyaug has borne the brunt of this horror with 1,800 of its 2,000 inhabitants still missing and feared dead.

Under such conditions, people are rendered helpless. Efforts to dig for sur-

vivors should be such that the digging is done carefully. But, at the same time, there is that urgency of working quickly in case there are survivors, so heavy earth diggers must not be used. It must be difficult to give up and accept that there are no survivors and therefore abandon the rescue effort and concentrate instead on the welfare of the few survivors. As if that was not enough, another part of the Philippines is also reported to have had a tremor resulting in many deaths.

Early last year, parts of Central America, and Guatemala in particular, were also plagued by floods following hurricanes. There was evidence that these parts had floods mainly because of deforestation. In these regions, the deforestation has been done to accommodate cattle ranches of the rich who do not live in the areas where they keep the ranches.

It seems to be the same story in parts of Leyte, the island in the Philippines

where these floods have just happened. In fact, it seems that all of the islands in this area are plagued by deforestation. Perhaps the main cause has to do with population expansion and the need for land to settle on. However, in most of such areas in the tropical forests, deforestation is encouraged by the readiness of companies to buy such wood at very low prices in order to sell it for bigger profits.

So, while the locals might be selling it to make a livelihood, those they sell it to make far higher profits and therefore encourage this illegal logging of precious wood. Deforestation does not only lead to soil erosion and therefore floods and similar devastation, but it also affects the whole ecology of the area leading to destruction of animal and bird life and therefore, in the end, impoverishing the whole area.

Of course, if there was no ready market for such illegal logging, there would be some control. While faraway com-

panies and individuals make the profit, it is left to the local to bear the brunt of such greed. To buy wood such as teak cheaply only to make toilet seats out of it, is the ultimate in irresponsibility and waste of world resources.

It is difficult, when one is not close to the problem, to understand what it means to be in areas struck by such disasters. However, most of what happens around the world can be influenced by how we ourselves, as members of the world population, behave with world resources. It is no longer up to a few people to think green in everyday living. It is up to all to not only think green but also try, as much as possible, to live green. Unfortunately, whatever we do in our own homes can affect people far away.

In the meantime, this latest area adds to those that have to join the list for aid agencies to collect cash and clothing and food to alleviate the suffering, if only temporarily.