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# SPOKE OUT

## DONE & DUSTED

Sisters triumph on  
Camino trail

Lifestyle magazine published by the  
Irish Wheelchair Association



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## Editor's intro

**O**ur cover this issue features sisters Maura and Kyra McMahon, who returned to Ireland on a high after successfully trekking 100km of the Camino de Santiago this October (p4). Continuing the outdoors theme, we learn about an innovative wheelchair featured on BBC's *Dragons' Den* (p17), and champion sailor John Twomey tells us about the recent World Championships in Kinsale (p61).

On p9 IWA CEO Kathleen McLoughlin reflects on her career path and recovery from spinal surgery; on p32 Aine McDonnell explains how regular escapes to IWA's Carmel Fallon Holiday Centre have enriched her life; and on p43 we introduce a new recipe section with celebrity chef Kevin Dundon.

For the second year running, *SpokeOut* is delighted to have been shortlisted at the Irish Magazine Awards – this time for 'Customer Magazine of the Year'. It's great to receive this recognition, and credit is due not only to the *SpokeOut* production team, but also to the many readers who have shared their personal stories.

With good wishes for Christmas and the New Year.



Joanna Marsden, Editor



## MEET SOME OF OUR CONTRIBUTORS....



### Kiara Lynch

Having recently returned from her dream honeymoon to Hawaii (see p37), regular *SpokeOut* contributor Kiara Lynch is finding it tough to adjust to the cold wind and rain. However, the arrival of her gorgeous new nephew Fiachra has given her lots to smile about, and she is also looking forward to a trip to her in-laws in England for Christmas.



### Jane Fennessey

Jane Fennessey, who reflects on her changing attitude to physiotherapy on p58, comes from Navan in Co Meath. A member of IWA's Youth Media Group, Jane describes herself as 'always up for a challenge' and loves concerts and meeting new people. She is the second youngest of seven and will be spending Christmas Day at her mum's house and New Year with her sister.



### Jennifer Brown

Jennifer Brown, who explores the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (p25), is currently doing a PhD in the area of mental health and disability law in Dublin City University. She also lectures human rights law and delivers talks on disability law. In her spare time she likes to try her hand at photography – St Anne's Park and the Botanic Gardens are her favourite haunts at this time of year.



### Tom Caulfield

Tom Caulfield from Athlone was one of the winners in the recent IWA Motoring Rally, and on p51 he reviews three cars likely to appeal to motorists with disabilities. Tom is currently completing an honours degree in business and is about to start a TEFL course. Aside from motoring, his hobbies include fishing and pool. He's looking forward to a relaxing Christmas with friends and family.

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# Done & Dusted

After eight months of planning, sisters **Maura and Kyra McMahon** successfully trekked 100 kilometres of difficult terrain on the Camino de Santiago in Spain. They tell us about their shared triumph, and Kyra's joy at re-discovering a sense of freedom and strength she hadn't felt since her accident



Kyra trekking uphill on the Camino de Santiago

If you are a regular *SpokeOut* reader, you may have already heard our story. My sister Kyra was in a car crash 23 years ago in Canada and fought her way back from the brink of death to find herself with a stretched spinal cord. That means she has been in a wheelchair ever since and battles a myriad of health issues as a result. From my perspective, she has always been extremely brave about it, but there is no doubt in my mind that the constant challenges and prejudices have worn her down over time, particularly in the past few years.

In February of this year, sensing an uncharacteristic lowness in her, I challenged her to do something extraordinary with me: walk/roll the last section of the Camino de Santiago. At that time, the Camino was just something I had heard of from my Irish mates, and I wasn't even really aware of what that would mean other than travelling along an age-old trail somewhere in Spain. I contacted a number of organisations that advocate for accessibility-related issues, and found there was no real information available to help us plan our journey. Fortunately, I was able to send out a call for help in the spring 2013 issue of the *SpokeOut*. The response I received from people across Ireland and Spain was incredible and provided the impetus and, more importantly, the information to allow us to plan our trek for October of this year.

Well, thank you readers, because WE DID IT! On 10th October, 2013, we returned to Dublin from Santiago with our compostela (pilgrim) credentials in hand and our hearts filled with an incredible joy. In the rest of this article, we will attempt to share with you some of the highs and lows we faced as we trekked 100 km in six days. We hope that our experience will inspire some of you to challenge yourself beyond your regular comfort zone – whether this means planning your own Camino trip

or setting yourself a completely different goal. Like us, you may discover a strength in yourself that you never knew existed.

## THE JOURNEY

### Starting the trek (Maura's perspective)

On day one of our trip we took a wheelchair accessible taxi to a place one hundred kilometres from Santiago. We stopped the taxi en route to drop our bags into an accessible albergue that we had booked for the night, and then continued on through winding roads that got narrower and narrower as they headed uphill towards our starting point. That morning, it had dawned on me that this might be the biggest mistake of my life. What if we failed? A setback to my sister after coming so far would be something I could never forgive myself for.

Up one final hill, past lush farmers' fields filled with grazing cows, and the taxi driver finally stopped. It was as if he has just realised what we are about to attempt, and he looked gravely at us, shaking his head to firmly indicate "no". Kyra and I both pointed to her FreeWheel wheelchair attachment, as though this sole piece of equipment could solve all our problems.

An old woman standing in a doorway took a photo of us and we set out along the desolate road, down a steep hill and past the cows we had seen earlier. Two women pilgrims emerged from behind and overtook us. We followed them to find a marker pointing in the direction of a stony tree-lined pathway indicating 96 kilometres to go. We quickly posed again for a picture before heading into the first of many uneven rocky trails that we would struggle with as we headed towards Santiago.

The heavens opened 20 minutes later, and we both struggled to put on our ponchos and rain gear as fast as possible. I was scared because, as we had started late in the day, I knew it was likely there wouldn't be any pilgrims



Kyra and Maura were joyful and relieved to arrive in Santiago de Compostela

following behind us, and at points the rocks made it impossible for Kyra to navigate the chair on her own. I helped to twist and turn and tip the chair around the large stones that littered our pathway and were becoming increasingly wet and dangerous. I couldn't help thinking that we had been remiss in not bringing helmets because if either of us were to lose our 'footing' and fall backwards on the stones, it would undoubtedly result in serious injury.

But we kept going and luck was on our side. The rain stopped and we made it through the stones and slowly down a rocky precipice to another paved road. We navigated carefully over and around and through paths and stones for the next six hours, and eventually our exhausting and exhilarating trek brought us down a series of hills into beautiful Portomarin. Somehow we had silently agreed on a secret pact that first day – we could do this and we wouldn't accept help from the many pilgrims that offered unless we absolutely had to.

The days that followed are like a haze now. It was a constant struggle but a beautiful one. The landscape was stunning but the physical challenges cannot be underestimated. It took every bit of strength and courage we had to start and finish each day of our journey. The people we met along the way gave us inspiration for every step and roll we took. The stories we heard were sad and captivating and motivating; stories I will never forget and that still bring a tear to my

eye. Everyone was there for a reason, and the weight of those reasons filled the air around us with a comfort I had never known. Each morning we rose early and made our way back on the trail, seeing many of the people we had befriended. We summoned every bit of power we could find within ourselves and gain from others to keep ourselves moving forward. 'Trek, eat, sleep' became our daily mantra, which we punctuated with laughter, encouragement and chat with everyone along the way.

### **Ending the trek (Kyra's perspective)**

As the alarm shattered the silence of the dark hotel room on day six of our trek, I instantly became aware of the gnawing anxiety that had plagued me for the previous five mornings. It was the last day, the final leg of our Camino Trail adventure – a crazy idea hatched by my sister Maura that had morphed into an insane reality. Hours of research and an abundance of determination had brought us to this moment. Behind us was five consecutive days of rolling up mountains, through forests, across stream beds, down mountains and along highways, with an average time per day of 5-7.5 hours of continual movement (apart from brief lunch and washroom stops).

Maura and I had traversed 80 km at this point and every morning of the trek I had awoken to feel the pull of Santiago but the worry of not knowing if I could

physically follow the original pilgrimage trail by wheelchair. Taking each step as it came had been paramount to getting through the terrain. Often times, my sister and I would pick a point not too far ahead, strategise how best to get there and then, once accomplished, we would rest and begin the process all over again.

There were some definite advantages, for me especially, when the down-hills occurred. The steep descents required a zigzag motion in order to slow myself down but, if it wasn't too extreme, I was off! Unfortunately, these portions of the trail likely only amounted to about three percent of the entire journey – but they were fun.

It was the rock streambeds on slow uphill inclines that were the most arduous. Day three was by far the most difficult, taking us five hours without stops to travel 15 kms. It was a beautiful scene but hazardous and nearly impossible to navigate for anyone on four wheels.

But we survived day three, and I was determined that day six would be no different. So, as per our routine, we had a hearty breakfast and set off in the darkness to follow the rest of our path. That day, I was infused with energy or adrenaline or sheer excitement – whatever it was, I felt light and fast and strong. I didn't want to stop for lunch and took a washroom break only out of necessity. It almost felt as if a magnet was drawing me to Santiago. We breezed through hamlets, across pastures, up hills and along the road. Even the dreaded Monte De Gozo was no match for the adrenaline pumping through my veins. There was a goal in mind and nothing could distract me.

When, six hours later, I crested the hill and looked down upon the city of Santiago de Compostela, my heart leapt. Maura and I had won, we had conquered our fears and physical limitations. We had broken our own barriers and we had accomplished what we had set out to do – no matter what the odds. At that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of freedom, the most I have ever experienced since losing the use of my limbs 23 years ago. I wanted to cry, I wanted to laugh, and literally felt like I could fly the rest of the way to the cathedral. The training, the fear, the planning – everything was worth that moment of glory. I have my sister to thank for encouraging me to fully realise my potential, and be it her or St James who was at my back helping me along, I am forever grateful.

*We would like to say a special thank you to friends who never seemed to doubt we could break down boundaries, and SpokeOut reader Diarmuid O'Connor whose tips were key to our success. Thanks also to the kind staff at Andaspain ([www.andaspain.com](http://www.andaspain.com)), Caminoways ([www.caminoways.com](http://www.caminoways.com)) and the Spanish Tourism office in Dublin ([www.spain.info/en\\_IE/](http://www.spain.info/en_IE/)), all of whom went out of their way to provide much useful planning advice.*



Kyra and Maura proudly display their 'compostela' certificates, given only to those who complete a minimum of 100 km

#### KYRA'S EMERGENCY SUPPLY KIT

For serious trekking, Kyra recommends bringing emergency supplies in a lightweight, water-resistant backpack. Her personal kit includes:

- 2 pairs of full finger gloves
- 1 tyre tube
- Oil
- Portable pump
- Fleece
- Water-resistant jacket
- Patches
- Medical supplies
- Medication
- Allen keys
- Neck warmer or scarf
- Merino sweater
- Reflectors
- Flexible water bottle