

Co-operation Ireland cyclists riding high in Nepal.



BY FIONA AUDLEY

PEACE-DRIVEN cycle challenges are a vital tool for one of Ireland's leading cross-community charities in their ongoing bid to build harmony across the island.

Since 1979 Co-operation Ireland has been striving to forge better relations between the two jurisdictions in Ireland, and bolster the efforts of the peace process on the ground — work largely made possible through the many fundraising challenges undertaken by its staff and supporters over the years.

Their next challenge takes place in February — where they hope to gather up to 30 cyclists to embark on a mighty bike ride across Vietnam and Cambodia to raise money for the cause.

Those who sign up for the aspirational adventure must raise £3,500 to take part.

Co-operation Ireland (formerly Co-operation North) was formed in 1979 by business leaders and academics from the North and the Republic of Ireland, in an attempt to address the endemic political strife.

Five years later they organised their first fundraising challenge: a 'Maracycle' between Belfast

and Dublin in July 1984.

More than 1,200 supporters mounted their bicycles on the day, instigating a challenge which has become a yearly event.

"On that first challenge they cycled all day to arrive in the opposite capital by late afternoon, passing each other on the road before turning around early next morning and making the tough return journey to their

home city," a Co-operation Ireland spokesperson said. "Little did they realise that their pioneering cycle in 1984, undertaken with little or no preparation on often totally unsuitable steeds, would lead to one of the most popular challenges ever to be undertaken in aid of a charity in Ireland."

As registration opens for their Vietnam to Cambodia Cycle

Challenge — which takes place over February 4-13, 2011 — the organisation is keen to get as many members of the Irish community in Britain signed up as possible.

The Irish Post met Co-operation Ireland's Berkshire-based executive director Mike Murphy, something of a fundraising guru himself, to learn more.

Mike will have completed three challenges for the charity in just five months following the South East Asia cycle; he returned from their Trek to Kilimanjaro challenge in October, and ran the New York Marathon for the charity in November.

As he prepares for the February hat-trick, he said: "This will be a fantastic challenge and it's open to everyone, but we are very keen to see as many from the Irish community in Britain joining us."

"The Vietnam to Cambodia Bike Ride is not only a tremendous opportunity for participants to experience the trip of a lifetime, but also by raising funds through sponsorship they will be helping the charity in its very important work with young people in securing a peaceful future for everyone."



Two members of Co-operation Ireland meet the locals in Nepal.

and IMC Director John Gradwell for an update on the concept.

"We started with 10 members 12 months ago, this has already more than doubled and is going to hit 400 commercial members by the end of December.

"It's a recession busting service, which is community driven. For that reason it has gone from strength to strength," they explained.

The IMC was set up in a bid to harness the purchasing power of many to reduce costs for utilities and everyday services used by all.

Mr Gradwell, who represents the Federation of Irish Societies on the IMC board, explained:

"There are four main areas where members are securing the best deals — insurance, gas, electricity and telephones. We aim to get the best prices."

Members benefiting from the unique organisation include Leeds Irish Centre who have already seen a massive return on their subscription.

The centre's Liam Thompson said: "As a result of being a member of IMC we have saved £12,000 a year on the market price for our electricity."

Basingstoke Irish Centre has saved £10,000 a year on running costs through membership, and Tyneside Irish Centre has saved £3,500 on the cost of insurance

for their venue.

The IMC is gearing up for another successful year. Chairman Patrick Howley said: "From the outset we have made it clear that we will not go down the route of taking money from the banks and getting stuck in that trap of borrowing money to extend our organisation."

"We are here to help our Irish organisations get through the next three or four years, so we're going to concentrate 100 per cent in the next year on expanding our membership — which is how we support the work we are doing and provide better deals for our members."

"We will continue to do this

Achievements

Co-operation Ireland cycle challenges: Achievements to date

- 50,000 participants
- Over 10 million miles of cycling
- Millions raised for Co-operation Ireland and other worthwhile causes
- Tens of thousands of bed nights
- National recognition as being as important to the development of cycling in Ireland as the incredible achievements of cycling heroes Sean Kelly and Stephen Roche
- A comprehensive human resource network developed to ensure high quality event management and route safety planning and delivery

The Vietnam to Cambodia Challenge: February 4-13

The challenge starts in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City, and finishes at Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

Cyclists will follow a 427km route over five days of cycling, the route takes in the world-famous Cu Chi tunnels, an underground network which was excavated by the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. The bike ride finishes in Angkor Wat at the Boeng Mealeah Temple

The trip is open to anyone over 18 years of age who can commit to raising a minimum of £3,500 for Co-operation Ireland's peace building work.

The organisation will take approximately 20-30 cyclists on the tour.

Those interested must register and send a £350 deposit — after which they will receive a fundraising pack and full itinerary.

To register or for further details contact Winnie Orr on worr@cooperationireland.org or 028 9089 1004, or visit www.cooperationireland.org

Irish club scoops two awards

BY FIONA AUDLEY

ST. KENTIGERN'S Irish club in Manchester continued its winning streak by scooping two industry awards at the city's Palace Hotel.

The Fallowfield venue, managed by Fermanagh-born Kevin Fitzpatrick, fought off strong competition to take Irish Club and Charity Club of the year at the annual Club Mirror Awards ceremony on Wednesday, November 10.

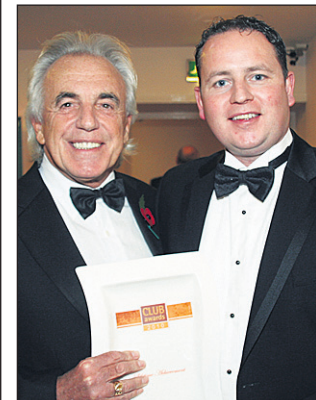
The awards bring their Club Mirror wins to five; after gaining a Community Club gong in 2008 and King of Clubs and Manager of the Year titles in 2009.

Their Charity Club of the Year recognition follows a 12-month period in which St. Kentigern's raised more than £55,000 for good causes.

Mr Fitzpatrick said: "This award is very special to us because it rewards the work of everyone that has used the club to hold a charity function."

"I have a great team here and everyone that helps sell tickets or comes and supports it deserves the credit for winning such a prestigious award."

The St. Kentigern's team joined a range of winners at the event, including strip-club tycoon Peter Stringfellow — who took home a lifetime achievement award!



St. Kentigern's manager Kevin Fitzpatrick, right, is pictured with Peter Stringfellow.

Cork annual dinner dance

THE annual Cork Association Dinner Dance will take place on Saturday, December 4 at the London Irish Centre in Camden. This year's special guests are Cork's football manager Conor Coughlin, full-back Michael Shields and wing-back Noel O'Leary.

Also on the guest list is GAA President Christy Cooney among others. The association has been in existence since 1953 bringing together Cork people from all parts of the county for social and fundraising events to help keep the profile of the organisation alive. Entertainment on the night is provided by The Tom Healy Band from Kilworth. Tickets for the banquet are priced at £35 and available from Mary Wood on 020 8803 8339.

Irish centres reap benefits from clubbing together

BY FIONA AUDLEY

AN ORGANISATION established to provide financial savings for Irish clubs and centres across the country has more than doubled in size in its first year and saved thousands of pounds for its members along the way.

The Irish Management Consortium (IMC) celebrates its first anniversary this month, marking a year in which members, including Tyneside, Basingstoke and Bradford Irish centres, have availed of valuable discounts when purchasing vital services for their venues.

The Irish Post met co-founder and chairman Patrick Howley