

American Finds a Release in Ireland 19

BY APRIL DREW

SINCE moving to Ireland, an Irish American woman has made her mark in Irish society by pioneering a new form of speech and language therapy for Irish children.

Tara Cunningham, daughter of John Liston, a Limerick export, has been instrumental in establishing and advancing the resources necessary to aid Irish children, several with disabilities, in developing their language effectively.

Cunningham, who graduated from Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1996 and worked in international marketing for an architecture firm, traveled to Ireland in 1998, fell in love with her father's country, and she never went home.

Cunningham, who grew up in New Jersey, met her husband Mark in 2000 (whom she now has two children with) and with Mark's help, she set up Release Communication Ltd., a not for profit speech and language therapy school in two locations in Dublin.

"We train parents with the skills they need to work with their children through weekly group speech and language therapy sessions," Cunningham told the *Irish Voice* from her home in Offaly.

To date, Release has worked with almost 1,000 children and have many children originally diagnosed as "non verbal" now speaking. Prior to the existence of Release, Irish children

were only entitled to six sessions or 12 hours of speech and language therapy annually.

"Could you imagine that happening in the U.S.? It just wouldn't," she said.

Cunningham, who was steeped in Irish traditions growing up, credits her "motivation and drive" to her Irish upbringing in New Jersey.

"My dad, who went to America in 1958, managed to bring seven of his brothers and sisters over to New York City in four years. Not many people were able to do that. My parents are amazing and that is exactly how we were raised," said Cunningham proudly. "The proof is in the pudding with them."

While working as a fundraiser for Down Syndrome Ireland in 2003, Cunningham quickly came up against the lack of speech therapy for children in Ireland.

"Kids were being thrown out of mainstream schools in Ireland and put into special needs schools not because they weren't smart enough, but because they couldn't communicate," said Cunningham passionately.

After listening to countless parent's grievances with the system, Cunningham took a leap and was successful.

"I spoke to Mark about

wanting to do something, but not sure what it was I could do," recalls Cunningham.

After some additional

filled.

"There was no qualified therapists out there," she said.

Faced with a dilemma

communicate in a way their parents never thought possible.

There are currently five U.S.-born therapists

received its name after a mother told Cunningham it was like her daughter's voice was in jail and she just wished she could

release it, recently completed cutting edge research on the program with George Washington University. The research proved that the program was hugely successful.

Cunningham is also looking at ways for more children and parents to avail of Release programs.

"We are always trying to get a person to sponsor a child's therapy. If you have €850 (\$1,100) it would pay for one child to get 11-week session with Release. We call it giving the gift of communication," she added.

Cunningham looks to expand the school across the pond and into New Jersey, and as part of that plan Release will present as Ireland's first emerging best practice in speech and language therapy provision at the American Speech Language Hearing Association's Convention this November.

In order to bring Release to the global stage, it must raise \$600,000 in order to replicate the research.

"Release is truly a product of the best Irish and American ingenuity," said Cunningham.

To find out more about Release, log onto www.Release.ie



Tara Cunningham & her little friend Allie

research and a lot of love from her family, Cunningham decided to finish up her job with Down Syndrome Ireland and devote her time in finding a solution to the lack of speech and language therapy for Irish children.

The ideas were flowing. "I thought if we could teach the parents how to do the therapy themselves and put the kids in groups by their disability and their age it would be a great help," said the Jersey girl.

After further investigation, Cunningham was appalled to discover that 72% of speech and language vacancies in Ireland had not been

filled — how to move forward without qualified personnel on board — Cunningham sought help from her homeland.

"I wanted to see if it was possible to bring over American trained speech and language therapists," she said.

Cunningham met with the American Speech and Hearing Association while on a trip to the U.S to see if her idea would have legs. She was in luck, it was possible.

So possible, in fact, that Release Communications was off the ground in a matter of months and helping countless kids com-

working in Release's two schools in Dublin — one on the North Side and one on the South Side. In coming years, Release will be hiring Irish born therapists.

"There are now four schools in Ireland teaching the course," Cunningham said.

Cunningham has received funding from the American Ireland Fund, the Irish American Partnership and from Irish billionaire Denis O'Brien, as well as numerous organizations based in Ireland.


"All the money we make goes back into the program," said Cunningham.

Release, which

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