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**FILM INDUSTRY IRISH MOVIE
SECTOR FRAME BY FRAME** (P.40)

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Awarding social innovation

Irish social entrepreneur Tara Cunningham receives an international award for her revolutionary work in speech and language therapy.



From left: Johannes Hengstenberg, Said Hammouche, Tara Cunningham, Paul O'Hara, Jean Daniel Muller and Jean-Michel Ricard

Irish social entrepreneur Tara Cunningham was inducted to the Ashoka-SEI fellowship at Dublin's City Hall on March 31st. Along with three other international social entrepreneurs, Tara Cunningham was presented with the prestigious Ashoka fellowship for her work as founder of Release Communication Intervention, an organisation revolutionising the field of speech therapy.

Cunningham has developed an approach that has increased the therapy time available to children by putting parents and teachers in charge of helping them overcome their speech problems. Ashoka CEO and founder Bill Drayton, who was present in Ireland for the event, commended Tara Cunningham for her work, which is transforming a field that had been hampered by huge waiting lists – not just in Ireland, but internationally.

Release conducts weekly group sessions, where parents, caregivers, and children are taught the practical skills and techniques they need to overcome communication difficulties that range from stammering to severe autism. Sean Coughlan, managing director of Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI), said the Ashoka-SEI fellowship would provide a powerful platform for Cunningham to expand her impact beyond Ireland.

Tara Cunningham commented on the fellowship, "Being an Ashoka fellow means that children not yet born in countries I will never visit should benefit from the approach I have developed."

Also presented with Ashoka fellowships were Said Hammouche, France, founder of the first recruitment agency aimed at reversing patterns of discrimination in the recruitment industry; Johannes Hengstenberg, Germany, whose work provides online tools and easy incentives for everyone to track and reduce their energy consumption; and Jean-Michel Ricard, France, who has developed an holistic, preventative healthcare model that promotes the physical and psychological wellbeing of elderly people.

Paul O'Hara, director of Ashoka, said: "The only way to resolve the social problems that persist in Ireland is by multiplying the number of social entrepreneurs in our society. These innovators have the vision, the energy, the creativity, and the determination to mend our broken social systems. In Ireland, it is essential that we put in place the infrastructure in our schools, universities, communities, businesses and in our Government, to support and accelerate this movement."



From left: Bill Drayton, CEO, Ashoka, Paul O'Hara, Director, Ashoka Ireland, and Minister Eamon Ryan



From left: Maria Zapala, Oliver Kayssr and Andres Duggan

Ashoka is an international organisation founded on the premise that the most effective way to promote positive social change is to invest in social entrepreneurs with innovative solutions that are sustainable and replicable, both nationally and globally. Each year, Ashoka awards fellowships to those entrepreneurs whose innovative ideas have the greatest potential for international social impact. From its inception over 25 years ago, Ashoka's annual budget has grown from \$30,000 to over \$30 million in 2007. Internationally, Ashoka is backed by eBay founders Pierre Omidyar and Jeff Skoll as well as the Bill Gates Foundation. In Ireland, it is supported by business entrepreneurs such as Denis O'Brien. The organisation launched in Ireland in 2007.

In a similar line of thought, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland supports the idea that new and innovative solutions exist to the myriad of social and environmental challenges we face today, and that these solutions are most effective when driven by social entrepreneurs rather than organisations. ■