

EMBARGO TO TIME OF DELIVERY - CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT McALEESE AT THE IRELAND INVOLVED
AWARDS CEREMONY
ROYAL HOSPITAL KILMAINHAM, DUBLIN**

THURSDAY 5TH NOVEMBER 2009

Tá an-áthas orm bheith anseo i bhur measc inniu. Go raibh míle maith agaibh as ucht bhur bhfáilte chaoin agus cneasta.

It is Ireland's volunteers who put help, heart and hope into everyday life. Nothing they do is done for recognition or reward but through these awards we can let them know how appreciated they are and we can remind ourselves how necessary they are to our nation's wellbeing. So thank you Volunteering Ireland, and in particular Elaine Bradley, for the invitation to be here for the second year of the Ireland Involved Awards and thanks to Fergus Finlay for his kind introduction. Congratulations to you, Elaine, your team at Volunteering Ireland, the sponsors and all those who have contributed to this awards ceremony.

There is a saying that "You'll never plough a field by turning it over in your mind." There are many fields of one sort or another that need to be ploughed and there are many who see the work that needs to be done but volunteers are the people who roll up their sleeves, get organised, get out and just do it. Their generosity, ingenuity and imagination are astonishing for they take on tasks that seem at first to be impossible and then they make them possible. Their work spans every form of endeavour, sports, respite care, children and youth associations, senior citizens clubs, networks of friendship, support groups, self-help groups, environmental protection, charities, community development groups, regeneration groups, disease related groups which offer advice and support and fund medical research, aid for developing countries, choirs, drama groups, social entrepreneurship, action groups, advocacy groups, organisations that look out for the homeless, the lonely, the newcomers, the asylum seekers, the abused, those who live with disability, those who live abroad and want to come home - the list is endless and the work is never-ending. No volunteer is likely to be made redundant there is so much work to be done. But many of those who are unemployed or redundant are now the backbone of volunteering organisations, showing their spirit, their mettle and their determination to be problem solvers in our society.

All those nominated for awards have invested hundreds of unpaid hours in the service of others, in strengthening us as a society, in deepening our understanding of what it means to be community to one another and especially to be a caring community.

As the old Irish saying puts it, “*is ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine,*” we live in one another’s shelter and the success of our society as a whole depends on all stakeholders acting with responsibility and integrity, all pulling together in the direction of a better, fairer Ireland. As President, I get to see volunteers in action most days of the week and all over the country, indeed wherever the Irish are gathered in the world. I have over the past twelve years seen the results of their relentless push to make things better and how they have flourished in a new climate of partnership with local communities, business, local and central government and state agencies. Year on year the voluntary sector grows more professional, more demanding of itself and more successful. Mostly their successes go unremarked at the national level but in the place they operate, a can-do spirit prevails because they are there.

Sometimes they change things in small places, sometimes they rock very large boats and sometimes they change the course of history. Tonight we salute their courage, fidelity and their investment in our communities.

Tonight’s overall award winner, Christine Buckley represents a constituency of men, women and children whose lives were cruelly and appallingly skewed out of shape because of their experience of institutional abuse. Over a long and difficult struggle, those stories were brought to the surface of Irish society and we now face into their consequences and their legacy, chastened, humbled and determined that such things must never be allowed to occur again here. We should also be determined that story of Ireland’s abused who won their own vindication, who insisted and still insist on full accountability, will be an encouragement to those abused elsewhere in the world who continue to suffer in silence. I want to wish Christine all the very best in representing Ireland on the European stage at the December celebration of Volunteers in the European Parliament. To all those who are part of tonight’s celebration and to the hundreds of thousands of volunteers whom you represent, you make Ireland strong, you make us proud. This is your special night. You are truly inspirational. Enjoy this wonderful evening of celebration agus go raibh míle maith agaibh.