

Putting fun into kids' fitness proves child's play for Aidan

CITY LIVES

Denise McNamara meets **Aidan Rafferty**, the founder of HipKidz, an interactive sports and activity centre for children

JUST how did an accountant become so passionate about improving the health and fitness of youngsters?

And passionate Aidan Rafferty certainly is. If he has his way every primary school child in Galway will be making a trip to HipKidz as part of their physical education programme – at no cost to parents.

Whatever about making a few quid in a business, there are not too many people who would have pursued this idea to the nth degree in the face of so many obstacles.

HipKidz is described as being like a giant play station except the person normally sitting down twiddling the controls is actually inside the game.

In their purpose-built centre in the Briarhill Business Park, HipKidz is the first arena of its kind in the country where the emphasis is on sports, athletics, activities – and plain old fun.

Back in 2004 Aidan, who hails from Armagh, and his wife Rita, a solicitor originally from Leenane in Connemara, were sitting down in their home outside Kinnegad watching the RTÉ talent contest *You're A Star*. They noticed that almost all the kids on the show were overweight.

Rita suggested there should be gyms specially for children to help combat obesity – Ireland's youth have the second highest level of obesity in Europe.

It's a worldwide problem. In Japan they now have treadmills aimed at kids as young as three years old.

But Aidan thought the idea of a gym would never entice kids as it would be too much like hard work.

He got to thinking of his own childhood during the Troubles when play space was extremely limited. He recalled how one friend who came from a wealthier family than most on the street had a decent size back garden. The youngsters used to set up an obstacle course in it and spend hours and hours running up and down in an attempt to improve their scores.

From there the idea germinated. He started researching companies that might be able to realise the design he had in mind.

He came across a firm in Milan which manufactured the padded structures, which had steel inside. He then found another company in the UK which specialised in interactive electronics. He found another company in Canada which made some of the specialised equipment. He married the lot together until he had the concept he really wanted.

The next task was finding the right location.



Aidan Rafferty: 'We're not selling this as being anti-obesity. We're selling this as something to do that's healthy.' PHOTO: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY.

Immediately he focused on Galway, which had a deficit of children's facilities but also had the football.

He found a new warehouse in Briarhill which satisfied the 10,000 sq ft requirement he had for size. He wanted space for an adult gym and a cafe to relax afterwards.

He settled on a women-only gym to cater to that all-important female market.

He got planning permission for the complex in July 2006. After securing a bank loan for €650,000 he finally realised his dream in February 2007.

'The idea is to encourage healthy living and if kids enjoy it they will want to keep at it. If they start being healthy and fit when they are young, they'll be fit and healthy for life'

HipKidz features four zones, which are designed to test and challenge ages four to 12 of all abilities and levels of fitness.

Zone A is all about fun and activities – it features a climbing wall, dance mats, electronic basketball hoops and a 'wackit wall'.

Zone B is all about athletics – with a long jump, high jump and race track – an obstacle course and bicycles. All performances are measurable which helps motivates greater intensity.

Zone C is the sports zone – an interactive arena for gaelic games, 'cyper' ball, basketball, dodgeball, parachute

games, soccer, rugby and what they call a 'laser quest'.

Zone D is the Wii room – an interactive gaming room with large plasmas for multiple players and teams.

Instructors take kids through each zone, which are fitted with laser beams, breakbeams, projectile timers, push buttons and sensor padding laserbeams, sensors.

The whole Arena is fitted with an audio response mechanism which gives the feel of a natural stadium.

"For smaller kids it helps with motor skills and coordination. For the older ones it really helps with their fitness levels. The whole idea is to encourage healthy living and if kids enjoy it they will want to keep at it. And if they start being healthy and fit when they are young, they'll be fit and healthy for life," enthuses Aidan.

Initially the complex was geared at birthday parties, which is still the mainstay of business. It hosts an average of 12 parties over the weekends, which cost between €10 and €15 a head, depending on the package chosen.

But it was branching out into the schools that Aidan was most passionate about.

Most schools in the city have no formal PE class because of the lack of facilities and space. Indeed in some schools, students are prohibited from even running around at break time due to insurance concerns.

After consulting with 20 school principals around the city with his initial designs for HipKidz, he then approached them about a 12-week programme which satisfied the Department of Education's PE curriculum and was tailored at all levels, from junior infants to sixth class.

Four city schools responded and they attended the facility over the winter months until the recession hit with a vengeance in late 2008.

The reaction to the programme was overwhelmingly positive.

"A lot of kids don't like swimming so they found this much more enjoyable. Teachers liked it because we totally supervised it and picked them up and dropped them off. It was like having their own gym but without having to go out and spend all that money on it."

Aidan has met with successive education and health ministers trying to get

'The IDA are giving backing to companies like the Boston Scientifics and the Medtronics. If some of that flowed into a venture like this it would reduce a range of health problems'

The Government to throw its weight behind the concept, which would after all save money as it would mean less money spent on building facilities or PE teachers.

However as yet he has failed to secure any public money for investment. "They all loved the whole thing but it's like hitting your head off a brick wall."

He can host school children at the facility for as little as €6.50 a head including transport but schools are reluctant to ask parents for any money in the current difficult climate.

Aidan believes if companies in Galway would provide sponsorship,

children could receive their one-hour PE class for free.

"The IDA are giving backing to companies like the Boston Scientifics and the Medtronics. If some of that flowed into a venture like this it would reduce a whole range of health problems. The programme is just so beneficial," he insisted.

He pitched the idea of franchising HipKidz on the RTÉ version of *Dragon's Den* in January 2009, offering 20% of the company for an investment of €200,000. While he got great feedback from the dragons, he was unsuccessful in securing any money.

Without further investment, the company will remain a Galway phenomenon.

The women's gym is managed by Anna Zukower and has 120 members, who for their annual membership of €325, can leave their offspring downstairs to be supervised in the play zones while they work out upstairs.

Run by Patricia Faherty, the Wild Nettle Cafe is included in the Bridgestone Irish Food Guide.

HipKidz has become extremely popular with school tours and holiday camps. The next one in early January costs €100 for a week. They also attract sports clubs such as football and soccer clubs, who come for a training camp to improve their skills.

The centre also has an after-school club for kids who live in the area.

As the father of an eight-year-old boy, Aidan is acutely aware of how easy it is for kids to be sedentary as they sit transfixed with the latest X-box game.

"We're not selling this as being anti-obesity. We're selling this as something to do that's healthy and fit and fun. It all about structural motivation."

Arrest of WikiLeaks' main man raises hard questions

SOME people dismiss the allegations against Julian Assange as trivial. I find that hard to tolerate – any act of making someone do something sexual that they didn't want to do is not trivial. The idea that he is wanted over a broken condom exists only in the minds of commentators who have lost themselves in rhetoric. On the other hand, we should be clear that he has not been charged with rape. He has not been charged, in fact, with anything. He was wanted for questioning. There is some confusion about what this is in relation to, but this is for a good reason: Swedish law is not as forthcoming as ours about the details of sexual crime allegations.

This has led to unfortunate speculation, but it is pretty clear that the allegations do not amount to rape in Swedish law. Then again, it seems that rape in Swedish law is defined exclusively as sexual assault with violence. If rumours are to be believed – and I should emphasise the 'if' – the main allegation concerns him continuing to have sex even though he knew a condom had broken. To my mind, yes, that is morally a form of rape. A lesser form perhaps, not quite up there with sex obtained by threats or by drugging someone or taking advantage of their being too drunk to know what they are doing, but still a form of making someone do something sexually that they didn't want to do.

Whether it is something you could conceivably get a criminal conviction for is another question. So it's true that some circumstances of this investigation look peculiar. But if the Swedish authorities really are pursuing him with an unusual level of dili-

MICRO COSMOPOLITAN



RICHARD CHAPMAN

gence, one can hope this is because it's unusual to have such allegations made against someone so in the public eye. Perhaps they have some other charge it is possible to apply.

Nothing too serious, for preference. Firstly on general principles of course – one hopes nothing too bad actually happened. But also because Assange is running a pretty important organisation, and while WikiLeaks may be able to get by without him in the short term it does presumably benefit from his leadership. Whatever you think of some of the decisions they have taken about what to release to the media, it does nothing illegal itself. If anyone is committing any crime – and again, that is another very big if and another difficult moral question – it is the insiders who leaked the material. Oh, and any American who reads it even after it's been published. Somewhat ludicrously, that is illegal under US law. So the Airforce has blocked its personnel from accessing the websites of *The Guardian*, students have been warned that reading the cables could damage their careers. It seems to me that if WikiLeaks is bringing about this sort of imbecilic institutional reaction, it is definitely doing something right.

But as I say, I hope Assange is guilty of something. Why? Because the alternative – that sexual crime charges have been falsified against him in order to suppress a threat to US interests – would mean that what's left of Western civilisation would not be worth pissing on if it were on fire.

Government must be elected rather than picked off a wish list

YOU must always be careful what you wish for – that's a warning we'd do well to heed in the midst of this growing clamour for specialists to be appointed to run specific Government departments.

The idea is well intentioned – if you want someone to run the Department of Finance, bring in a financial expert, or if you want an individual for the health portfolio, get yourself a medical expert.

The problem arises when it comes to putting names on doors – for two reasons.

First up is the long history of clientelism and cronyism when it comes to state or semi-state appointments, and we've paid a heavy price for that in the past.

We've seen massive tracts of land and dilapidated buildings bought by state bodies for a multiple of their real worth, and we've seen plush trips to far-flung places that were utterly unnecessary – not to mention millions paid out in expenses by way of remuneration as opposed to compensation for costs incurred.

And we've been subjected to big Christmas parties and gold watch ceremonies

HERE'S A THOUGHT



DAVE O'CONNELL

all paid for by the taxpayer as a little gesture to political supporters who have been rewarded for their loyalty with a place on a state board or two.

But the bigger problem here is just who will decide who the best person to run the Department of Finance or Health or Social Welfare is – and if these individuals don't stand for election, what power have the people to influence that decision?

Take for example this regular call to make Michael O'Leary the Minister for Finance – do we want Ireland Inc run by a

man who would effectively shut down the public sector if he could?

Which of the many economists who grace the airwaves and the small screen would we like to see in charge? David MacWilliams who would default on the bail-out repayments? Constantin Gurdjev and his right-wing rhetoric? Fintan O'Toole? One of the 'experts' from the financial institutions who brought us to this situation in the first place?

Who would be put to sort out our health crisis? Not a doctor, for a start – although James Reilly might end up there anyway, but at least he'll have to come through the democratic process.

But we had a doctor in charge of the HSE when Brendan Drumm came in in a blaze of glory – and how much had changed before he quietly departed again?

Garret FitzGerald broke the mould by nominating Jim Dooge to the Seanad in 1981 and then making him Minister for Foreign Affairs. But Professor Dooge had previously been an elected Senator of long standing – and anyway, Foreign Affairs isn't the Angola that health or finance might be.

Would you put a farmer in charge or agriculture, a teacher in education (in fairness, Mary Hanafin was and was removed far too quickly), a bus driver in transport, or a soldier in defence?

You might – but then you get someone who comes to the table with a specific view or agenda – and there are far more layers to any portfolio than this.

Equally if you go for an outsider who has no experience of that particular sector, you might as well stick with the current practice of having a barrister in charge of finance and a teacher in charge of tourism and sport.

The people don't get the chance to vote in a specific Taoiseach or Minister but at least we are almost certain to be represented by Cabinet members who were voted into the Dáil by the people.

The real reform here should be to aim to attract better people into the current democratic process – not try to establish a parallel one.

We could do that by decreasing the number of public representatives – but, even in the current climate, we should then pay

them more. It is only by paying them the sort of salaries enjoyed by a chief executive of a massive company that we get the brightest and the best to sign up.

Last week's cuts to political salaries was all about the optics, sharing the pain so to speak – although on €200,000 pain sharing is a relative term – so that the cuts to the minimum wage don't seem so discriminatory.

The fact is that our problem with politicians is not their pay – it's their ability to make a difference. And if we paid them more, we might attract individuals who are able to run multi-national corporations as opposed to wide boys who are only there to secure a small hospital or a casino for their constituency.

The people must retain the right to decide who will make up a Government, but if we want a better choice, let's look for quality over quantity.

Let's halve the number of TDs, get rid of the Seanad, and empower local government once again to deal with local issues as opposed to wasting the time and energy of our parliament in parish pump politics.

YOU wonder how much people are paid to carry out surveys like this – but psychologists in Pennsylvania have come up with a new path to weight loss... just imagine you're eating something nice instead of actually eating it.

Carey Morewedge is assistant Professor of Social and Decision Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University and he was behind a survey of more than 300 volunteers who imagined they were eating chocolate before they were actually given it to eat.

In other words, your mind started eating before you did and therefore you were full sooner than you thought!

So two M&Ms did the job of five before you'd only imagined the first three – in general terms, the volunteers ate half of what they'd imagined.

People may think the New Year is a good time to try this psychological approach but I'm planning to try it in reverse this Christmas.

I'm going to imagine I only have to eat two Brussels sprouts when a plate with eight of them is put down before me.