

# Pádraig Schaler's parents thought, 'he'll wake in a few days'

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*By Caroline O'Doherty*

The devastated parents of a brain injured student plan to set up a rehabilitation unit here, writes Caroline O'Doherty

THE parents of a student forced to relocate to Germany for medical treatment following a devastating brain injury have vowed to set up a rehabilitation unit here for other young people in the same position.

Today marks the one-year anniversary of the road accident that almost killed Pádraig Schaler, who is now fighting for recovery in the Hamburg hospital where he transferred last November.

It is a date his father, Reinhard Schaler, a lecturer at University of Limerick, has been dreading. "It will be terrible. I've been thinking about that day coming for weeks now," he says.

Pádraig, who turned 24 a few weeks ago, was in the US on a J1 working holiday visa last summer when the accident happened.

He was cycling to work at The Bramble Inn guesthouse in the beachside town of Brewster in Cape Cod at 10am when he was in collision with a van driven by a local plumber.

Police believe he turned left to come off the main road without realising that the van behind him had also pulled out to the left with the intention of overtaking him.

In the collision, Pádraig was propelled from his bike and suffered a severe brain injury. Doctors were not sure he would survive and the question of organ donation was raised.

"When we heard about it, it was unreal; when we travelled there it was unreal, when we saw him it was unreal," Reinhard recalls of the immediate aftermath, when he and Pádraig's mother, Pat, and their two daughters rushed to the US to be by Pádraig's side.

“And then we thought ‘he’ll wake up in a few days’ and he didn’t. And then we thought ‘we’ll bring him home and he’ll have the support of his friends and of his family and of our friends and even if it takes a few weeks or a few months, it will be fine’. And now here we are almost one year later.”

Given how precariously Pádraig clung to life in the early days, his progress has been impressive.

He was in a coma for months but gradually began to waken and respond to people around him, although when he squeezed the hands placed into his, it wasn’t clear at first if it was an instinctive reaction or a deliberate act.

“One of the really brilliant things — brilliant in the grand scheme of things — was that we saw that he was moving his feet and a few weeks ago Pat told him, ‘your right foot is yes and your left foot is no’, and then asked him questions.

“We asked ‘do you have a brother?’ and up went the left foot, and we asked ‘do you have sisters?’ and up went the right foot.

“So he was able to hear, to understand, to process the question, to make up his mind and then do something about it. It’s something that we do every day but for him it was really, really important.”

In the few weeks since, Pádraig — who is also moving his tongue right and left to indicate yes and no — has spent more time sitting in his wheelchair, breathing unaided and using a speech valve to practice making sounds. It is also now clear that he has retained his multi-lingual skills, responding to English, German, and his particular passion, Irish.

However, he has endured a collapsed lung, surgery, and just last week, what doctors fear may have been an epileptic fit.

“His picture is on the wall here and you can’t help comparing it with how he is now,” Reinhard says, remembering the 6ft 7in athletic, vivacious son he waved goodbye to when he left for the US.

Pádraig’s parents were horrified to discover that he would have to wait a year in an acute hospital in Dublin before getting one of the three high-dependency beds in the National Rehabilitation Hospital and that then his care there would be limited to three months.

“It has nothing to do with the needs of the patient and nothing to do with their condition,” said Reinhard. “It has to do with there are three beds and everybody gets three months and that’s it. So there are young people in nursing homes where most of the people are in their 80s because there is nowhere else for them. It makes your blood boil.”

Reinhard and Pat decided to move Pádraig to Germany where, as a citizen through his German father, he can have unlimited care in a public hospital on payment of that country’s universal healthcare insurance.

Luckily, Reinhard is director of a postgraduate course in advanced computing which was converted to an online distance learning programme a couple of years ago. It means Reinhard can work remotely from Limerick most of the time, so he has rented an apartment in Hamburg and is able to see Pádraig almost every day.

Pat, a Spanish lecturer at Dublin City University, is facing commuting between Ireland and Germany for as long as Pádraig remains there. Meanwhile, Pádraig's sisters, Laura, 26, and Maria, 19, remain in Dublin, missing their brother and the norms of family life.

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"One of the things that we want to do is to open up a house for young people with brain injuries who are waiting for a place in the NRH, or are coming out of the NRH and have nowhere to go," says their father.

Reinhard envisages setting up a unit with high-dependency capability and specialist medical staff but with the atmosphere of home.

"The best example that comes to my mind is from when I used to volunteer to drive people to Raheny Hospice [St Francis' Hospice]," he says. "It was a real eye-opener because I thought it was going to be really depressing and it wasn't. It was fabulous."

Reinhard got a hint of what it could be like when one of Pádraig's friends, musician Maitiú Ó Casaide, brought his uilleann pipes to the hospital in Hamburg, delighting Pádraig and other patients with his playing.

Maitiú has written a song for Pádraig which his friends will be recording and releasing this summer to raise funds for his care. It's just one of many fundraisers that family friends and acquaintances have held over the past year for Pádraig whose €6m insurance policy was declared invalid because he wasn't wearing a helmet at the time of his accident.

Reinhard and Pat are taking legal advice but feel strongly that insurers should be more transparent about their policies and not leave key details to the small print. They are also preparing a civil case against the driver of the van.

Long-term, Reinhard wants to help Pádraig fulfil what he has learnt was one of his son's dreams — to travel to Alaska. In the meantime, he just wants to have a row with Pádraig about why his father should be allowed tag along.

"When the yes/no breakthrough happened, one of the friend's mothers wrote and said, 'isn't that great — I'm sure you're looking forward to a real argument now?' says Reinhard.

"That's what we always had — everything that I said was always rubbish. I'll be happy to hear that again." Reinhard Schaler blogs daily on [www.hospi-tales.com](http://www.hospi-tales.com) and details of the fundraising for Pádraig are on [www.caringforpadraig.org](http://www.caringforpadraig.org) © Irish Examiner Ltd. All rights reserved