

## **Ireland's top Silver Surfers are named**

**A 95-year-old great grandmother from Co. Tyrone has been named as Ireland's Silver Surfer of the Year in an awards ceremony which matched the People of the Year Awards in terms of tension and excitement.**



Marguerite Faulkner, from Cookstown, has become a wizard with technology since receiving a computer from her family for Christmas. She uses it for sending emails and to surf the net, and uses Skype to talk to her seven grandchildren and two great grandchildren. She has recently completed a digital photography course (including use of Photoshop). When she is not on the computer she is fond of her Nintendo DS, which she uses for “brain training”.

Marguerite beat off stiff competition from two other finalists – Mabel Gargan (87) a self-taught computer user who surfs the net every day, and Tom Crotty, a 75 year old who records his own songs using Garageband, a Mac editing software.

Ms Faulkner received her award from the Minister for Older People, Aine Brady, and O2 senior executive for corporate social responsibility, Sinead Smith, at the IMAGINE IT! Conference – a celebration of older people and information technology organised by Age Action as part of Positive Ageing Week. This is Ireland's first conference, IT expo and awards for older people.

Ms Faulkner was one of five award winners announced at the Croke Park event today. Other awards went to:

### **IT Volunteer of the Year**

Stella Connor, Drogheda, Co. Louth has provided free ICT and mobile phone training to 200 members of her community in the Lourdes recreation centre. She knows every trainee by name and makes call to each individual to encourage them to join in. She talks about how she overcame her own fears when she started. She has discretely sourced literacy classes for others who confided with her about needing assistance with reading and writing skills.

### **Most Dedicated IT Learner**

Marie O’Gorman (75), Walkinstown, Dublin, began from scratch to learn about technology five years ago when her daughter moved to Armenia with her husband and young family to do humanitarian work. She could not visit them due to a medical condition which prevents air travel. She enrolled in a local computer course to enable her keep contact with them and grandchildren in other parts of the world. She now emails them daily with news of home and also uses Skype to see them as they chat. She takes digital pictures of her garden and emails them to family, asking them to pick the plants or flowers they want “slips” from – she then emails them when they are ready for collection. She has also taught other older family members how to use computers. She is a volunteer in the local school, teaching the children to knit and sew – she downloads patterns from the internet and prints them off for her weekly classes.

### **Group Communicator**

Charlie Byrne, Donnybrook, Dublin, voluntarily runs the website and electronic newsletter for RTE pensioners and received a huge number of nominations. Nominators spoke of how much they looked forward to the newsletters, especially those who now live abroad. It provides them with essential news of how former colleagues were getting on, the various charities supported by colleagues and spreads the word promptly about people who have had died. One described the service as a “life-enhancing social network”. Others noted the importance of the weekly newsletter and website in making them still feel part of a community that they had spend so much of their working life with.

### **Passionate Hobbyist**

John O’Toole (86), originally from Santry, has been living at the Care of the Older Person Unit at the hospice since 2007. He has Parkinson ’s disease and this effects his use of computers, but it does not stop him. He began learning about computers in October, 2008, and now loves receiving and replying to emails using a “Bigkeys LX keyboard”. A former Dublin Board of Works employee, he has a lot of knowledge of buildings in the capital and enjoys reading about these on the internet. He has a keen interest in local history and can spend a whole computer session looking up historical articles. Each week he arrives with a list of things he wants to look up and learn about. John also loves music (especially Daniel O’Donnell) and loves to read about the lives of his favourite musicians and watch them perform on You Tube. John is quoted in the nomination: “it gives me knowledge of things I didn’t know before...places I had hear of before but never visit – I can get to these on the computer.”

The winners received prizes of IT products sponsored by O2, Microsoft, Canon, Peats Electronics and Dublin City Community Forum.

The conference, which attracted 300 people was attended by older people who are new users as well as experienced users of information technology, and those involved in teaching these skills. It was organised by Age Action’s Getting Started computer training programme which expects to have trained over 5,000 older people in computer and mobile phone usage by the end of this year.

The day started with the TRY IT! Expo where more than 20 exhibitors show cased the latest in hardware, software, internet applications and prototype technologies for independent living. Exhibitors included Google, O2, RTE, Microsoft, The Irish Times, the National Library, Apple, Canon, Eircom and the TRIL Centre. Primary school pupils from St.Paul’s national school demonstrated how much fun could be had using simple software for animation, voice recording and film making.

The event also reflected on whether we are doing the best we can to ensure that older people have the opportunities and skills to keep up with the latest advances in technology. Nancy Johnson, technology and digital inclusion manager, Age Concern and Help the Aged, UK, told the conference that older people have key roles to play in the knowledge society.

Calls for a “smart economy” are empty if they are not backed by political and financial commitments to ensure that all older people have an opportunity to

familiarise themselves and develop skills to use new technologies, she said. The internet offers new ways to keep in touch, helps people develop new interests and for most, contributes to their well being and social connectedness. Ms Johnson stressed that the internet is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity, and should be considered a basic right and service for older people, along with housing, health care and transport.

Advocating for digital inclusion for older people for over ten years, Age Concern has learnt that organisations must work together to promote the broad benefits of new technologies for older people, and ensure that older people's needs are better understood.

Similar thoughts were expressed by presentations from some of the most innovative IT programmes in Ireland. Speakers included Ina McCrumlish, Louth Leader Partnership Company, Michael Meely and Maura O'Keefe from the Summerhill Third Age Foundation, Elaine Doyle, Limerick City Community ICT Group, John Magee, Mayo Co. Council and Trudy Corrigan, DCU Intergenerational Project.

All the speakers stressed how ICT can be life enhancing for older people and called for a concerted effort in Ireland to encourage and support over 70% of over 65s, who have not yet had the opportunity to learn what have now become basic life skills. They called for more events around the country showcasing new technologies to older people.

[Silver Surfer Awards Shortlisted Candidates](#)